

**SOCIALIST HISTORY**  
The Journal of the Socialist History Society

This issue of *Socialist History* seeks to further demystify the concept of 'people's history' or 'history from below' by broadening our current understanding of the European working-class's role in the making and study of history. Hanno Balz opens by exploring how those elements of European society who would emerge as the modern working class gradually instigated a 'hostile takeover' of the red flag as a symbol of historic power. The nineteenth-century French and German revolutions in particular, transformed what had once been a symbol of aristocratic dominance into the ensign of international revolutionary socialism.

Liam Ryan's considers how the British Left's 'Right to Work' campaigns immediately prior to the First War, were influenced by state-funded initiatives in France stemming from the Revolution of 1848. Key to this were ideas of the social reformer Louis Blanc and the 'National Workshops' set up during the revolution. The workshops' reputation as a short-lived failure was seized upon by the Left's opponents order to undermine these campaigns.

Pushpa Kumbhat's study focuses on the movement for working-class adult education in early twentieth-century Britain and its impact on the evolving labour movement. Key to its development were the ostensibly non-political 'Workers' Educational Association' and the more radical 'National Council of Labour Colleges', both of which strove to broaden working-class access to higher education.

John Callaghan discusses the novelist Doris Lessing's early association with anti-colonialism and the Communist Party of Great Britain. Although she later distanced herself from her earlier communist convictions, Callaghan shows that they had a profound and lasting impact on her later work.

  
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Socialist History 59

## Socialist History 59

### People's History?

#### Hostile Take-Over – A Political History of the Red Flag – Hanno Balz



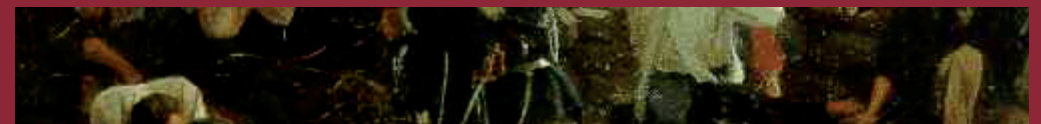
#### British Socialism and European History – The Right to Work, 1880-1914 – Liam Ryans



#### 'Education for Democracy', 'Education for Emancipation' – Pushpa Kumbhat



#### Doris Lessing – A Person of Interest – Jon Callaghan



#### Reviews



# People's History?

## Socialist History 59

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## Notes on contributors

**Hanno Balz** is a DAAD Lecturer at the University of Cambridge where he teaches Modern German and European History. He has previously taught at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore and the universities of Lüneburg and Bremen in Germany. His research focuses on the history of social movements, cultural and media history, the history of anti-communism and the Holocaust and legacies of Nazi rule. Hanno has published extensively on media and terrorism in West Germany and is currently working on his next book exploring the roots of German anti-communism and the political history of the red flag.

**Pushpa Kumbhat** completed her PhD thesis entitled ‘Working Class Adult Education in Yorkshire 1918-1939’ at the University of Leeds in 2018. She currently works in adult education and has published articles in the *History of Education*, *Urban History*, *the Women’s History Review* and the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

**Liam Ryan** received a PhD in History from the University of Bristol in 2019 where he is now an Honorary Research Fellow. He is currently writing a book on the history of anti-socialism in Britain between 1900 and 1940, under contract with Manchester University Press, and has previously published aspects of his work in *Historical Research* and *Twentieth Century British History*. He has also taught history at the University of Bristol and Cardiff University.

**John Callaghan** is the author of *The Retreat of Social Democracy* (Manchester 2000); *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB, 1951-68* (London 2003); *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy* (London 2007); *Ideologies of American Foreign Policy* (London 2019), with Brendon O’Connor and Mark Phythian; and other books.

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## Editorial

While far from a being an empty slogan, the concept of ‘people’s history’ or ‘history from below’ is certainly not without ambiguity. The term itself is attributed to Lucien Febvre, a French social historian who had helped establish the *Annales* school of history from 1929. For Febvre, the study of the past was less about empirically cataloguing events and influential personalities, traditionally slanted towards war, statecraft and the interests of elites, than a means through which scholars could develop an understanding of the cultural, political and socio-economic currents which shape the human experience.

It should, therefore, come as little surprise that the notion of history from below has tended to attract those working from a Marxist or other left-wing perspective. A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (1938), discussed at length by Christian Høgsbjerg in the previous issue of *Socialist History*, pioneered its use as historical practice, being one of the earliest attempts to provide a full social and political narrative of British history from the point of the view of the working class. It was only after the publication of E.P. Thompson’s 1966 essay, *History from Below*, however, that this approach entered more mainstream English-language historiography. It is no less surprising that the concept of people’s history has invariably drawn criticism from scholars across the political spectrum – including those on the Left. Among these objections, a common accusation has been its alleged propensity to overgeneralise the attitudes and values of the working class in a manner that risks minimising both its innate complexity and agency as a historic force for collective change.

Three of the articles featured in issue 59 of *Socialist History* therefore seek to further demystify the concept by broadening our current understanding of how different elements of the European working class engaged with, and contributed to, the making and study of history. These contributions were originally presented as papers at *Socialist History*’s fifth biannual conference ‘People’s History?’, that took place in Norwich in February 2020. Hanno Balz begins with a *longue durée* analysis of the changing symbolic political meaning of the red flag and its evolution as the internationally recognised banner of revolutionary socialism. Although originally employed by the Roman

legions as a mark of military dominance, and subsequently used by medieval European nobility to denote their own prowess on the battlefield, the flag, and the colour red itself, were gradually appropriated as a symbol of open defiance by those who would eventually come to identify as the working class. As Balz demonstrates, this was mostly facilitated by the French and German revolutionary traditions of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, by 1900, the red flag has been completely transformed into the international ensign of the radical left.

Shifting focus to Britain, Liam Ryan considers the extent to which British socialists operated within a broader web of European influences and domestic traditions prior to the First World War. Central to this was the question of unemployment and the 'Right to Work' campaigns advocated for by socialist groups and then the nascent Labour Party throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. This drew inspiration from earlier initiatives in France, specifically the ideas of the social reformer Louis Blanc and the 'National Workshops' set up during the French Revolution of 1848 as an early model of a state-funded employment scheme. However, the workshops' historical reputation as a short-lived, economic failure was routinely seized upon by the British Left's Conservative and Liberal opponents in order to undermine the wider campaign.

Pushpa Kumbhat considers the role of historical agency from the perspective of the movement for working-class adult education, which shaped much of the British left at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1914, this had mostly coalesced around two key formations: the ostensibly non-political 'Workers' Educational Association' and the more radical 'National Council of Labour Colleges'. While differing considerably in their approaches and philosophies, both organisations sought to adapt the pre-existing systems and structures of British adult education to meet the diverse demands of the evolving labour movement from 1900 to 1920.

John Callaghan concludes the issue with a discussion on the novelist Doris Lessing, specifically her earlier association with the Communist Party of Great Britain and subsequently the New Left movement that emerged from it in the 1960s. Much of this stemmed from her own experiences of, and opposition to, British settler colonialism and racial injustice in Rhodesia, along with the excesses of the Second World War. At the height of this affiliation, Lessing would strongly identify with the Soviet Union, viewing it as essential to communism's ultimate

victory. Although Lessing later came to distance herself from these stances, this youthful engagement, as Callaghan shows, exerted a profound and lasting impact on her later literary works.

*Samuel Foster*



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# 'Hostile take-over'

## A political history of the red flag

Hanno Balz

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### Abstract

Today, no one would doubt that the colour red and the red flag symbolise socialism, communism and revolution. However, that we all agree on these symbolic qualities is a rather recent historical phenomenon, since for thousands of years the colour red (and even more so: purple) had been reserved for the ruling elites or members of the clergy in different parts of the world. This article examines how the red flag emerged as a revolutionary symbol, with particular attention given to the transcultural transfer of knowledge and argues that this eventually became a fierce struggle for recognition.

**Key words:** red flag, symbolism, recognition, political colours

*Something red can be destroyed, but red cannot be destroyed, and that is why the meaning of the word 'red' is independent of the existence of a red thing.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

For much of human history red has been the most symbolic and political of all colours. As the Alliance of Red Front Fighters in Germany declared in 1925: 'Red is the historical colour of international class struggle and international solidarity. Red is therefore the flag and colours of the Alliance of Red-Front Fighters'.<sup>1</sup> That red has become the signifier for revolution and the proletariat was in fact the result of long-lasting social struggle and the contestation of *symbolic power*. With this article I want to look at the contentious history of this *symbolic social order* and the unsettling experience of the dispossession of the traditional colour of the ruling classes.

This history is, for the most part, that of a prolonged struggle across the West, but for the events of taking possession of the red flag in the eighteenth and nineteenth century I will focus mainly on Germany and France, since it was here that the impact of revolutionary upheaval and of an organised working class were most evident. Although there have been a vast number of publications on the cultural and historical role of colours within societies over the last two centuries, a more focused examination of the *longue durée* of the colour red as a political symbol has yet to be written. Recently, Michel Pastoureau published his seminal work on the history of the colour red, but this only partially covers its political aspects.<sup>2</sup> There is still no extensive study in English on the history of the red flag while only two older books in French and German touch on the issue.<sup>3</sup> This article will therefore shed new light on the transnational transformation of the symbolic meaning of the red flag, while also exemplifying how much of a lasting social and political impact these struggles have had over time.

In terms of the colour's symbolic value, let us first look at some basics of human biology: for most people, red literally pushes itself into the field of vision. Since the crystalline lens of the human eye shows some chromatic aberration, we are actually seeing 'wrongly', as red objects appear to be closer to us than, for example, blue ones. The colour red therefore triggers a much greater stimulus – with its effect being more intuitive.<sup>4</sup> Red is the essence of colour – it appears to come out of the human itself. Close your eyes while facing towards a bright light, and you will see red.

The immediate impressions of the colour red become apparent if we look at two fundamental anthropological experiences which have shaped the human subconscious since its early history: blood and fire. In most cultures since the Stone Age, red was connected with a mythical, religious or mystical and finally power-representing symbolism. Moreover, in most cultures red is typically considered the most beautiful and appealing of all colours with the terms 'red' and 'beautiful' often having the same semantic roots or even being identical. The ancient Hebrew word *ādām*, for example, meant 'human' as well as 'red'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, from the very beginning of human culture colours have been used as 'semiotic devices', as Umberto Eco has pointed out: 'Human societies do not only speak of colours, but also with colours'.<sup>6</sup> This specific history is about the transformations and struggles within symbolic representations, which are at the core of the political. These material foundations are central to political conflicts, as can be seen, for instance, in iconoclastic acts where throughout history, especially during revolutions or regime change, the artefacts of symbolic power have been repeatedly destroyed.

## State of emergency and capital punishment

In ancient Rome, not only did the Roman emperor wear crimson or purple red, but his legions used the colour for their military insignia. The field sign, called *Vexillum*, an early version of a banner, was itself made of red cloth as well as the red streamers of the Roman cavalry, which were therefore called *flammulae*.<sup>7</sup> It was also a signal for the god of war, Mars, that was used to initiate the attack during battle – symbolically announcing that blood would flow. In this regard the red banner developed into a proclamation of general danger (war and *tumultus*) and ultimately into the sign for a state of emergency.<sup>8</sup> During classical antiquity, however, red also began to signify something more abstract, more detached from the human body – beyond a reddish paint on skin or vestimentary expressions like the toga.

Besides its influence on the power of the Catholic Church, ancient Roman symbolism had an impact on secular and legal authority during the Middle Ages as well. The red banner remained the sign of the state of emergency and military attack formations, and it lived on in different regions of Europe. In the Holy Roman Empire, and later the Italian states, the red banner prevailed as the flag of the empire and the flag of blood (*vexillum imperiale sive sanguineum*). It served as the emblem of Imperial judgement over life and death, the highest-ranking Imperial symbol, and therefore divine jurisdiction under which the blood court was held with traditional places of trial being termed ‘red trench’ or ‘red tower’.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the headsman would mostly wear a red hood. The emperor, accordingly, handed the blood banner to his lieges who would feature a red field or banner in their coat of arms: the *Regalienfeld* or blood panel.<sup>10</sup> Whenever the red banner was on display, so it was believed, fear and terror would spread.

In its significance the simple red banner, called the firebanner, stood even above the imperial banner with its black eagle.<sup>11</sup> The mythical *Oriflamme* (Golden Flame), which was introduced by Charlemagne and later served as the battle standard of the French kings, could be regarded as a model for this.<sup>12</sup> Besides functioning as a signifier of power, the red war banner had another meaning. During the Hundred Years’ War in particular, the *Oriflamme* would be set up to indicate a *guerre mortelle*. In this case, no prisoners would be taken, with the colour red, in heraldry, coming to symbolise ferocity and mercilessness in battle.<sup>13</sup>

The powers of the old European order, secular or ecclesiastical, chose to present themselves as a punishing tribunal and, where necessary, would

rely on the dissemination of fear to shore up their claim to power. No other sign for the threat of punishment would evoke their subjects' fears like the red banner of martial law and the state of emergency. Out of this tradition, red also became the colour of High Justice, as can be observed today when we look at the robes worn by supreme court justices across most of Europe.

### **A revolutionary symbol emerges**

Following the crises and social revolts of the late medieval and early modern eras, it was not only the foundations of aristocratic rule that were shaken, but also those of the symbolic social order at large. Throughout these times, we find reports of revolts and upheavals in which the angry masses took possession of a makeshift red flag or pennant. On several occasions during urban revolts from the fourteenth century onwards, also known as 'guild revolutions', unruly guild members would march on the town halls behind their hallowed guild banners.<sup>14</sup> During one such uprising in 1403, guildsmen in the Hanseatic City of Lübeck reportedly marched through its alleys behind a red flag.<sup>15</sup> Even more common were upheavals in the Italian city-states, where guild revolts and popular upheaval occurred regularly. When Florence and other cities went to war against Pope Gregory XI in 1375, the rebels marched under a banner they called the 'large flag' that showed *LIBERTAS* in golden letters on a red background.<sup>16</sup> Such sneering and hateful appropriations of the authorities' symbol of punishment could only be regarded as a tremendous provocation.

What had happened? After the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe and the 'discovery' of the Americas, a new, alternative, world now seemed possible – a world beyond the Atlantic as well as beyond existing Catholic orthodoxy and the old order of European feudalism. Another world was possible – a utopian thought with heretical power.

In these tumultuous times, the red banner first appeared as a formal revolutionary symbol during the German peasant war of 1524-25, when the 10,000-strong peasant army of Baltringen marched on Ulm under 'the red pennant'.<sup>17</sup> At this point the red flag was by no means the universal sign of revolt, but was seen as the traditional symbol of divine justice and, in this capacity, was used to lend legitimacy to the demands of pre-modern rebels. It had never served as a territorial flag but represented the old order that had been executed by the liege lord. This made it universally transferable, as Ernst Pffleging observed: "The ancient Blood-and Firebanner, the sign of God's sovereignty and the "freedoms" and

personal affiliations under his protection could therefore become the banner of social revolution'.<sup>18</sup>

On a more global scale, around the beginning of the early modern era, the red flag began to not only be viewed as a military sign, but a symbol which could also be appropriated and 'turned over': pirates operating in the Caribbean, for example, flew the red flag to announce they would not take any prisoners.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, before the eighteenth century, the red flag remained in common usage within Caribbean piracy. Even the term 'Jolly Roger' is believed to have originally been a corruption of the French *Joli rouge* (Pretty Red Flag). Furthermore, the growing number of mutinies within the eighteenth-century British fleet meant that the conventional red naval flag was also frequently displayed, acquiring a very different meaning. By the 1775 sailors' strike in Liverpool, thousands marched under a red ship's banner towards the city's stock exchange demanding the release of their imprisoned comrades.<sup>20</sup> In general, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the red banner increasingly came to symbolise revolt.

### **'A bas le drapeau rouge!'**

It was not until the French Revolution, however, that the red Phrygian cap and the red flag became synonymous with revolution, the latter as an expression of anti-bourgeois radicalisation. Here the cultural transfer from Britain's former American Colonies to France should not be underestimated. Revolutionary symbolism, as a learned tradition, crossed the Atlantic in both directions, but in this case the liberty cap was brought back to Europe, newly charged with subversive meaning. The artist, Augustin Dupré, who had designed the first *Libertas Americana* medal at the behest of Benjamin Franklin six years prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution, was mostly responsible for this development. Back in Paris, Dupré used a similar image showing the lady of liberty holding a Phrygian cap on top of a stick on a medal that he designed in the summer of 1789.<sup>21</sup> What happened after can be seen as a process of sacralising the *bonnet rouge* into the canon of revolutionary symbolism. This reached its culmination in August 1792 when a Parisian mob stormed the Tuileries palace and forced King Louis XVI to don the red cap they brought for him – symbolically displacing the crown.<sup>22</sup>

Already a year earlier, social unrest had broken out along Paris's Champ de Mars on 17 July 1791, when the angry masses and republican leaders rallied against the National Assembly's decision to keep Louis

XVI as a constitutional monarch.<sup>23</sup> In reaction to this large demonstration, the city council raised the red flag outside the town hall to declare a state of emergency. The Parisian civil commotion law of 1789 stated that the National Guard, if it was called to quell riots, had to display a red flag. As a warning that armed force would be used, a red flag was to also be shown at the town hall's main window and only replaced with a white flag once the unrest had been quelled.<sup>24</sup> In reaction to the disturbances, the city's mayor, Jean Sylvain Bailly, eventually ordered the troops to open fire as the crowd shouted angrily: 'Down with the red flag – down with the bayonets!'.<sup>25</sup> The dozens of casualties resulting from the Champ de Mars massacre became part of the mythology of the French Revolution, as well as the so-called 'Blood Banner', exemplifying how far the bourgeoisie had set itself apart from the revolutionary masses. The flag itself was eventually immortalised a year later in the Marseillaise:

*Contre nous de la tyrannie,  
L'étendard sanglant est levé.*

From 1792 onwards, the red flag was carried through the streets of Paris as a much-despised symbol of the bourgeois state of emergency and therefore served as a *negative* icon. Indeed, when Bailly himself was later sentenced to death, the executioner's cart that brought him to the scaffold was adorned with red flags.<sup>26</sup>

As the years passed, however, the meaning of the red flag gradually began to change with the chant of 'Down with the red flag' being replaced with 'Raise the red flag!'. Control of the state of emergency and its standard had by then been taken over by the revolutionary masses, demonstrating the sovereignty of the people. As a consequence, the Jacobins decided to make a red flag the official symbol of the popular movement, bearing the inscription 'The people's martial law against the revolt of the court'.<sup>27</sup> The red flag truly had been appropriated by this stage, becoming more than a symbol for mere vengeance. The *Ancien Régime* had been toppled and with it the old symbolic social order. Revolutions, unlike mere changes of regime, involve the replacement of founding myths and the institutionalising of new ones in order to legitimise one's rule. The political symbolism and the representations of the new order were therefore transmogrified. As Lynn Hunt notes: 'Political symbols and rituals were not metaphors of power; they were the means and ends of power itself'.<sup>28</sup> By decree of the Constituent Assembly, any 'signs of feudalism' had to go and in the following period Paris saw a festival of iconoclasm.<sup>29</sup>

The French Revolution with its powerful symbols such as the red flag and the red Phrygian cap, established revolutionary codes, discourse and icons all over Europe – a whole narrative of unrest. As George L. Mosse observed: ‘Though the cults of the revolution dominated Paris for barely one year, they provided a dress rehearsal for the new politics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany’.<sup>30</sup> In the German states in particular, the events and ideals of the French Revolution left a great impression and inspired intellectuals as well as craftsmen. The struggle for democracy, imagined as a great revolution, was by now seen as the struggle for a *red republic*. One example of this was the *Rothe Blatt* published in Koblenz by Joseph Görres, an early admirer of the revolution, between 1796 and 1798.<sup>31</sup>

Of even greater concern for the *Ancien Régime* were the mutinies in 1797 of British Royal Navy sailors at Spithead and the Nore, who had run up red flags on board to demonstrate their intent. As one of the observers recalled at the trial of the mutineers, ‘[t]here was a band of musick playing, and they paraded through the town of Sheerness, with a red flag’.<sup>32</sup> Another witness, the surgeon serving aboard the mutineers’ ship, added: ‘When I saw the red flag flying, it struck me as the most daring outrage I had ever seen in the course of my life’.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the authorities saw this rebellious act as an expression of sympathies with Jacobin ideas that came from the other side of the English Channel.<sup>34</sup> But looking at the court records, it remains doubtful if the mutineers knew anything about Jacobin ideology at all.

Like the Liverpool revolts twenty years earlier, the red nautical flags were once more appropriated to indicate mutiny, or, more generally, defiance. By the late eighteenth century, the rising number of attacks on the European symbolic social order was the result of a specific cultural transfer; a transfer of knowledge and growing transnational developments with mutual influences at all levels of society.<sup>35</sup> The red flag then became a historical and geographical-spatial hybrid. Practices and codes of a specific time combine and epitomise older practices and codes, rather than simply being a product of a modernising process.

Nonetheless, in the opening years of the nineteenth century, during a political climate of restoration after the Congress of Vienna, revolutionary symbols lost their appeal for some time. But the expression of secular and ecclesiastical domination through the colour red was also in a state of crisis, and the elites seemed thoroughly traumatised by the misappropriation of the symbolic colour red. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his *Theory of Colours* observed: ‘History relates many instances of the jealousy of

sovereigns with regard to the quality of red. Surrounding accompaniments of this colour always have a grave and magnificent effect'.<sup>36</sup>

### **Mass organisations and the red flag**

Following the French revolution and the beginning of industrialisation, the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of mass organisations. Here symbols and signs played a defining role for social, cultural and political articulation, although they were still of a rather spontaneous and unorganised nature. Mosse linked this new prominence of the symbolic to mythical romanticism, especially in the German case, and the newly developing nationalist ideology: 'Symbols, the objectification of popular myths, give a people their identity [...] Nationalism, which at its beginning coincided with romanticism, made symbols the essence of its style of politics'.<sup>37</sup> While this was the case for the plethora of mass organisations like the gymnasts, shooter associations and a range of patriotic choirs, it was equally true for the emerging working class associations. By the turn of the nineteenth century, modern class-based society developed competing political symbolic actions through mass organisations. At first these were episodic, such as public festivals and rallies, but then became more permanent through the formation of associations and clubs.<sup>38</sup> This rapidly changing society had, for many, become increasingly complex, alien and incomprehensible, culturally and politically. As a consequence, political symbols provided a useful form of social orientation. As Gottfried Korff remarks, they satisfied 'a need not only for building political identities and transmitting ideology, but also for clarity, security and conformation [...] Symbols satisfy the individual's need for non-rational identification in mass society'.<sup>39</sup>

The red flag as a political symbol first appeared in the German states during the early decades of the nineteenth century. When textile workers in Prussian-ruled Aachen, inspired by the July Revolution in France, rebelled in 1830, someone attached a red tablecloth to a poker and waved it amid the rioting crowd. At the subsequent trial of the 74 Aachen 'rabble rousers', held in Cologne, the judge couldn't conceal his disdain: 'Now a banner is flying in front of the mutineers and the red flag symbolically reveals the meaning of the revolt and its dreadful aims'.<sup>40</sup> A year later, during the Merthyr Rising in Wales, a similar makeshift red banner was used to protest working and living conditions among the pauperised masses. To reaffirm the people's demand, a loaf of bread had also been impaled on the banner's staff.<sup>41</sup> These were the first two incidents where



the red flag was flown as a deliberate symbol for workers' revolt.

The red flag gradually became associated with older traditions relating to the late medieval guilds that had emerged as the material standard bearers for merchant and workers' pride. By the nineteenth century, the *Arbeitervereine* (Friendly Societies), labour unions and workers' cultural associations emerged out of the old guild organisations, expressing working class association under banners that often depicted the handshake of workers' solidarity. Eventually, however, more socialist-proletarian iconography replaced these older symbols of guilds and their tools.<sup>42</sup> The working class was ready to adopt new icons as well as a new flag.

This harking back to the revolutionary symbolism of the previous generation was much in evidence when, in June 1832, another uprising broke out in Paris. A funeral procession honouring the republican general Jean Maximilien Lamarque, turned into a mass rally that saw the red flag once again fluttering above the heads of the crowd, this time bearing the motto of the first revolution: *La Liberté ou la Mort*.<sup>43</sup> In the subsequent clashes with the authorities, both the barricade and the red flag merged to form a collective symbol of which the German visitor Heinrich Heine wrote enthusiastically:

There is something mystical about this red banner with the black fringe, on which were written in black the words 'la liberté ou la mort!', and which, like a banner of consecration unto death, rose above all the heads on the Pont d'Austerlitz.<sup>44</sup>

### The quest for recognition

The Paris insurrections, which were carried out by the lower and the working classes, finally transformed the red flag into a collective symbol of the political left. Yet its birth as a symbol had always been spontaneous, resulting from violent confrontations during periods of social upheaval. Subsequently, during the Silesian 'Weavers' Uprising' in 1844, 300 protesters marched behind a red flag that had been improvised out of an old curtain, as the local authorities looked on in horror.<sup>45</sup> However, it was the year of revolutions, 1848, that firmly established the red flag as *the* sign of revolution, especially within France and the German Confederation. This, to a certain extent, vindicates Hegel's notion of quantitative change becoming qualitative: throughout history, the red flag had repeatedly, and notoriously, been displayed in the midst of an unruly crowd demanding

a republic and social rights until it became associated with this symbolic quality.<sup>46</sup>

In February 1848, revolutionaries in Paris ripped the red cloth from the luxury sofas inside the Hôtel de Ville building, the centre of the city's local administration, and displayed them in the windows. Soon after, they insisted that the red banner, rather than the *tricolore*, be made the national flag. This request was refused by Alphonse de Lamartine, a member of the provisional government, and later famously depicted, in a suitably dramatic fashion, by the artist Henri Phillippoteaux.<sup>47</sup> Lamartine replied to the demands of the revolutionary minded flag-bearers that it was 'the banner of terror' and expressed 'the rivers of blood' that had been spilled during the Champ-de-Mars massacre. By contrast, the *tricolore* signified liberty and the glory of the fatherland, as well as the victory of the French people.<sup>48</sup> The dispute eventually ended in a compromise with the *tricolore* becoming the official flag of the French Second Republic, but symbolically accompanied by a red rosette.

What these developments revealed was a determined search for recognition of the red flag as the official icon of the Republic and, by extension, a popular bid to entrench social rights and a revolutionary legacy. Indeed, it had been Hegel who had originally emphasised that striving for recognition had always been a struggle, even a struggle over life and death. It was only by asserting and demonstrating their willingness to risk their lives that the revolutionaries could hope to convince the other side that they deserved recognition, hence the slogan *la liberté ou la mort*. As Hegel concluded: 'it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence'.<sup>49</sup> To be recognised here was to be acknowledged as a different class, as *the other* of bourgeois society, representing an organic working-class consciousness and politics. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, recognition as well as misrecognition shape identities – in this case, class identities.<sup>50</sup> By recognising the red flag as the embodiment of a new symbolic social order, its bearers, and the social class that feels represented by it, would gain an identifiable pattern in the social fabric of their country. Unsurprisingly, Karl Marx had been a keen observer of the events in France, and soon praised the new revolutionary banner:

So swiftly had the march of the revolution ripened conditions that the friends of reform of all shades, the most moderate claims of the middle classes, were compelled to group themselves around the banner of the most extreme party of revolution, around the *red flag*.<sup>51</sup>

Within the German Confederation, the meaning of the red flag as a political symbol had also changed. While the appropriation of the red banner was previously motivated by hatred against it as an expression of historic domination, and had been understood as a negative sign of rejection, this had changed with the temporary success of the liberal revolutions of 1848. Displaying the red flag, or the red cockade, now reflected a sense of pride in the movements' achievements, while also symbolising the dawn of a new era. One of the first of these 'professional' proletarian red flags was the official banner of the *Demokratische Gesellschaft*, of which Marx and Engels were members, that was founded in Cologne on 25 April 1848. Bordered by a golden fringe, its ensign included the slogan of the French Revolution, *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit*, inscribed on red cloth.<sup>52</sup> Within the new political realities of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, the red insignia now delineated a specific stance.

### **Banning the banner: repression and control**

The events that transpired in Paris in February 1848, left a lasting impression in Berlin where protesters were keen to adopt the same radical symbolism as the French. In March of that year, the *Vossische Zeitung* reported that, 'a mob of more than a thousand men marched on Berlin town hall, carrying a quickly improvised red flag'. Furthermore, red flags could be seen flying from windows in Berlin's 'proletarian quarters'.<sup>53</sup> Of course, the members of the Communist League did not wish to fall behind and attempted to seize this revolutionary impetus. As a protocol from a League meeting, held on 9 March 1848, stated: 'Marx proposes that all members of the League shall wear a *red* ribbon. Agreed unanimously'.<sup>54</sup> Soon, the red flag stood for the democratic, republican movement, becoming associated with a radical political agenda during the summer of 1848.

The red flag also had evolved from a means of political communication into a metaphor whose semantic content was increasingly charged and broadened. As the then revolutionary poet Ferdinand Freiligrath wrote: 'He grasps the rusted gun once more, and swings the battered blade, while the red banners flap the air from every barricade!'<sup>55</sup> By this point, the red flag had also represented a radical differentiation from the liberal faction that had rallied around the German tricolour, and with some agitators even demanding that it replace the federal black, red and gold. At a people's assembly near Cologne in September 1848, for instance, several thousand workers called for a 'democratic – social – red Republic'. The organised working class was now being called the *Rote Partei*.<sup>56</sup> The *Rote*

*Republik* (Red Republic), for example, was frequently referenced in Karl Marx's 1850 essay 'The Class Struggles in France', later becoming common parlance among the early German Social Democrats.<sup>57</sup> More than this, however, the *Rote Republik* – illustrated by the red flag – manifested as a horrifying vision for the ruling class and its increasing hostility to socialism. In 1848, Berlin's city council had even reported imminent danger, noting that members of the local workers' associations 'had repeatedly unrolled the red flag'.<sup>58</sup> Like the French Revolution, a state of emergency was now being declared by the working class and as an attack on the ruling elites, eliciting fear and panic within the ranks of the bourgeoisie, especially among the press. The newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung*, for instance, wrote about the people's assembly held near Cologne and warned of 'the red revolution flag and its cannibalistic barbarism'.<sup>59</sup> Even King Frederick William IV of Prussia had reportedly been furious when the 'red flag of the republic' was waved in the streets of Berlin.<sup>60</sup>

The wave of repression that followed the revolution from late 1848 onwards, included efforts to control public symbols, leading to a ban on red flags, red feathers, the red sash and other revolutionary insignia.<sup>61</sup> Six months later, as these laws were further tightened and rigid censorship was reintroduced, it even became a criminal offence to wear any sign that was dominated by the colour red.<sup>62</sup> All these measures exemplify how the forces of reaction were focused on repressing the colour red; prior to it being banned outright, the final issue of Karl Marx' *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, published on 19 May 1849, included a farewell address printed in full red.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, although the German working-class movement had been defeated for the time being, the red flag remained a subversive symbol, appearing at workers' funerals and prompting police officers to cut any red ribbons from the wreaths.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless for Ferdinand Lassalle and the emerging German social democrat movement of the 1860s, their red flag with its embroidered handshake depicting workers' fraternisation was the most important sign by which they could distinguish themselves from the reformist bloc. The red flag would keep this delimiting role for the next 100 years, remaining an outward expression of high hopes and great fears. Moreover, following the introduction of the synthetic red dye alizarin in the late 1860s, red ceased to be an expensive or elitist colour. Red flags could now be readily obtained as they were being industrially produced in mass quantities. The red banner continued to serve as the most aggressive form of expressions within the symbolic arsenal of the Left. In its crimson dyed cloth, the long history of bloody conflict had been inscribed.<sup>65</sup>

Pejorative metaphors of red were at the centre of the anti-communist discourse that also developed in the late nineteenth century, especially in view of the bloodshed that followed the Paris Commune in 1871. Around the world, Marxists projected their hopes, and the bourgeois projected their fears, onto this urban model society. Although only lasting a few short weeks, under the Commune the red banner became an official municipal symbol for the first time in history. As one decree from the city's revolutionary commission stipulated: 'The flag of the Commune, the red flag, is to be raised over all the public monuments in the district'. No other flag was to be shown or hoisted in communist Paris – for the first time it was the red flag, not the *tricolore*, that flew above the Hôtel de Ville.<sup>66</sup>

However, the state repression that followed the bloody defeat of the Commune put an end to this: no more red flags flew in the streets of Paris, with it even being banned in neighbouring Switzerland.<sup>67</sup> Yet out of this defeat a new, more peaceful, symbol of the working class emerged, first extolled by the revolutionary feminist Louise Michel, who won fame as the *Vierge Rouge* ('Red Virgin') of the Commune. In bidding her fallen friend and comrade Théophile Ferré farewell, she wrote the poem *The Red Carnations*.<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, in times where the red flag was viewed as representing social unrest, and therefore a target of official persecution, it was a seemingly innocent flower that emerged as a new symbol of tacit working class pride – a subtle reminder of earlier struggles and losses but also signifying the political spring to come. Expressing meaning through secret rituals, such as specific dress codes, has been a tradition in folklore and subversive cultures before and after. After May Day was established internationally in 1890, workers would march in their Sunday best with red carnations in their button-holes. In the twentieth century, this cheap little red flower became a symbol for social democratic parties worldwide, and even – in Portugal in 1974 – the symbol for a veritable revolution.<sup>69</sup>

A more subtle shade of red could also symbolise utopian hopes of a political spring awakening, as illustrated by the rituals that accompany the first of May celebrations, and a new dawn for the proletariat and humanity at large. Until the end of the German Empire, the rising sun became an emblematic design adorning the (red) flags of working-class organisations and an expression of eschatological expectations within the Marxist movement. As Germany's working-class organisations rapidly expanded in the 1880s, having effectively reached a new dawn after more than a decade of persecution and restoration, Lassalle, as leader of the General German

Workers' Association, exclaimed in its program with great confidence and considerable pathos:

A purple streak colours the extreme verge of the horizon blood red, announcing the new light; [...] What an hour is in this spectacle which nature presents to us every day, one or two centuries are in the far more imposing spectacle of a sunrise in the world's history.<sup>70</sup>

For all their disdain for the red flag and its connotations, the ruling elites made no efforts to re-appropriate the colour red, increasingly deemed a lost cause. Furthermore, with the elite's growing identification with nationalist ideologies, the colours of the national flag, be it the *tricolore* or the German black, white and red, emerged as the symbolic antagonist of the red flag.<sup>71</sup> Up to this day, the respective national colours serve as an important symbolic marker of anti-communism.

Disdain and hatred also continued to define those opposed to the Left. Even before Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws were passed in 1878, attacks on the social democrats, who had established themselves as a political party in 1863, were also focused on the use of those dangerous symbols of class struggle and upheaval. During the notorious 1872 Leipzig high treason trial against the socialist leaders and parliamentarians Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel, and Adolf Hepner, the state prosecutor condemned them for using the red flag as a political metaphor in order to elicit direct agitation. Citing several articles from the socialist *Volksstaat* newspaper, the judge highlighted the dangerous aspects of promoting the revolutionary flag, citing one article that read:

You too have chosen the flag of the proletariat, the colour of mankind, the holy red! – It is not the colour of innocence, not the one of mourning, nor that of hope and not of atonement: it is the colour of human kindness, of the flame of enthusiasm that flares up from the embers of the heart, it is the colour of our lifeblood, that we have to be willing to sacrifice for the liberation of mankind!<sup>72</sup>

Liebknecht commented that the judge 'seems to especially take umbrage at the "red" flag', insisting that it should not be seen as anything indecent. 'Therefore', he concluded, 'red doesn't imply "blood", but "equality", and using the red flag as a symbol for democracy dates back to the French Revolution, where she served as the antipode to the national and bourgeois *Trikolore*'.<sup>73</sup> The judge's response however, was far from

sympathetic: 'What the red flag means, everyone in this courtroom knows, whose voice bears weight. This article involves an incitement to rape the bourgeoisie'.<sup>74</sup>

In 1875, facing the growing electoral threat of the Social Democratic Party, the authorities made it illegal again to openly carry 'unpatriotic ostentatious emblems' during public events.<sup>75</sup> The German Anti-Socialist Laws exacerbated this by outlawing all public meetings liable to spread social democratic principles, along with trade unions and dozens of newspapers. Nevertheless, the social democrats survived – and thrived – underground, hiding the symbols of class war and working-class pride. When faced with state persecution, some working-class associations took great care to preserve their material expressions of social democracy, including shipping their organisations' red flags to the United States for safekeeping. When these were returned with great fanfare in 1891, several ceremonial festivities were held to mark this symbolic victory.<sup>76</sup> Even after the Anti-Socialist Laws had been repealed, several courts in the Reich confirmed the ban on red flags and other symbols of working-class organisations. By 1891, however, the Prussian *Oberverwaltungsgericht* decided that displaying the red flag of a working men's association at a public meeting would pose no threat to public order and the constitution.<sup>77</sup> This mirrored the initial thaw in domestic politics after Bismarck's downfall – later repressive bills by emperor Wilhelm II were rejected by parliament. It seemed that the red flag became just one material expression of political organisation among many, having apparently lost much of its threatening quality.

### **From artefact to metaphor to self-reference**

To follow up on Wittgenstein's observations at the beginning of this article, it could be stated that colour has an artefactual quality, having its own materiality rather than just being a signifier. As can be seen with this example, the red flag became a symbol for itself: a relic with pseudo-religious connotations. This might indicate that by the end of the nineteenth century the material cult of the red flag had become more commonly established. In his opening address to the first conference of the Second International in Paris in 1889, Paul Lafargue rejoiced that the socialist delegates would 'unite not under the folds of the Tricolour or any other national banner; they unite under the folds of the red flag, the flag of the international proletariat'.<sup>78</sup> Later that same year, the Irish political activist Jim Connell's socialist anthem *The Red Flag* was published for the

first time: 'The people's flag is deepest red, It shrouded oft our martyred dead'.<sup>79</sup>

In what was, by then, evolving into a mass (media) society, the material object of political revolt also became a decorative element while further expanding into allegory, illustration and discourse. By the late nineteenth century, mass mobilisation was increasingly rooted in mass media with socialist newspapers, pamphlets and books having become abundant. As such, by the year 1900 there had been a shift away from the material symbol as an indicator and catalyst of cognitive change,<sup>80</sup> towards a metaphoric turn that affected socialist discourse and anti-socialist resentment alike. A final example, which vividly links the discursive and the material regarding the fight over the red flag, is a short pamphlet that Liebknecht published in 1889, and running to several editions. Titled *The political colour theory: a play in three acts*, Liebknecht's work covered the trial of a group of social democratic workers.<sup>81</sup> They had been seen hiking through the landscape of Saxony, stopping for the occasional beer on their way and engaging in toasts and singing. What had been deemed politically unacceptable, said the prosecutor, was that they had been marching under a red handkerchief that was knotted to a walking stick. These were the times of the Anti-Socialist Laws, leading the judge to rule that this had been, without doubt, a rally under a red flag, which 'as everyone knows is the colour of the Social Democrats who follow republican tendencies' and who would desire a red republic.<sup>82</sup> The men were subsequently sentenced to three to seven days in prison, prompting a backlash from the Social Democrats who ridiculed the verdict. To draw on that, Liebknecht affixed a reproduction of the *corpus delicti* of the trial to his 15-page pamphlet – a red handkerchief.<sup>83</sup>

Industrialised society eventually saw a gradual transformation of symbolic orientations, caused by a reduced receptivity to symbols and, I would argue, an earlier discursive turn in European societies.<sup>84</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, around 90 per cent of the population in Germany, France and Britain were literate, an immense increase compared to just two generations previously.<sup>85</sup> Symbolic forms were therefore becoming framed, or even replaced, by linguistic forms.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the material object of the red flag was now more a metaphor for socialist and anarchist media. In 1880, for example, *Le Drapeau Rouge* was the title of a short-lived Belgian periodical. This same title was used in Paris five years later.<sup>87</sup> Under the Anti-Socialist Laws, the German Social Democrats, in quite a military fashion, termed their illegal apparatus for distributing banned newspapers the *Rote Feldpost*.<sup>88</sup> Prior to this, Liebknecht had even



indicated that revolutionary media would eventually replace the revolutionary symbol of the red flag: 'Our best and only weapon against the hostile press is our press; as long as we possess it, it will be our flag under which we will be able to assemble'.<sup>89</sup>

The red flag lost some of its significance as a sign for orientation, a material expression of workers' disdain and pride. However, knowledge of the traditional signs remained deeply embedded in working class mentalities as well as in metaphor and imagery. By the turn of the twentieth century, its usage had been transformed, into something more playful or ludic, echoing many of the gradual reconfigurations within working-class identity itself.<sup>90</sup> By then, such symbols had become historicised, marking a process of historicisation within the movement at large.

Considering the long process of symbolic signification through the different appearances of the red flag, I want to emphasise the supranational and diachronic quality of its symbolism. In this regard, there had been a shared tradition of political signifying over the last centuries that went beyond any specific cultural or territorial boundaries – first within a European, and eventually on a global scale. More than this, signs create identities and form social practice through their representational value. We could, therefore, speak of practices that reaffirm or challenge the existing *symbolic social order*. Yet this symbolic struggle was no proxy war on meaning, intending to merely grant legitimacy to a specific cause or claim to power. Symbolic power isn't simply symbolic after all. Historic attempts to topple and subvert the symbolic social order were as real and as formative as the actual physical confrontations surrounding it. Throughout history resistance against the recognition of symbols, and therefore power and domination, prevailed.

Great emphasis has been given to the symbolic form of domination extending beyond the scientific order, but remaining within the realm of language, myth and art.<sup>91</sup> Notwithstanding this emphasis on the mythopoetic function of symbolic forms for culture and more specifically the symbolic social order of the state, what traditional interpretations have mostly overlooked, were a long history of attacks on the symbolic power and the struggles over what Pierre Bourdieu (with Max Weber) called the 'domestication of the dominated'.<sup>92</sup>

This very symbolic struggle was made permanent with the founding of several Labour Parties, although it later gained further momentum with the birth of the international communist movement after 1917. Yet the fractions that were engaging in this symbolic struggle were very much defined, as were their arsenals of political symbols. As these motifs were

eventually naturalised, they were slowly transformed into mere symbolic decorations for the political discourse at large. Thus, in the early days of the expropriation of the red flag, we can observe a social practice that was based on *over-affirmation* – when the military flag was turned over and made the revolting masses the agent of a state of emergency. Subsequently, it became a practice of *anti-affirmation*, when under the red banner the existing social order was being defied. Finally, as workers' parties became more established within different European societies, the metaphorical and material uses of the colour red expressed a practice of identity formation within working class organisations and culture – they turned into *re-affirmation*. The red flags of twentieth-century state communism eventually became a static symbol of self-reference.

In the end, those who had challenged the symbolic social order for centuries emerged victorious. The working class and its organisations expropriated and appropriated the colour that had formerly stood for the venerable domination of the ruling class. They turned over the red, so that today the colour has been naturalised as the signifier for social revolt, the working class and communism at large. The Red Front Fighters of the 1920s were therefore correct when they claimed that red is the historical colour of international class struggle. However, this ignored its thousands of years as a preserve of the ruling elites who had used the red flag as their means for declaring a state of emergency. Only quite recently, from a historical perspective, has its meaning been changed. Indeed, within anti-communism there seems to still survive a subliminal grudge: the ruling class has never forgiven the working class for taking away what they view as having once rightfully been 'their' colour, that of the ancient order of domination.

## Notes

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68. Louise Michel, *Mémoires de Louise Michel*, Vol I, Paris, 1886, p159.
69. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p115.
70. Ferdinand Lassalle, *The working man's programme*, London, 1884, p59.
71. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, 1992, p102. It should also be noted that Hobsbawm, among others, was mostly researching the acceptance of nationalism and its symbols among the working class and petit bourgeoisie. However, its reception by the elites requires further attention within historiography.
72. Karl-Heinz Leidigkeit (ed.), *Der Leipziger Hochverratsprozess vom Jahre 1872*, Berlin, 1960, p201.
73. *Ibid.*, pp202-203.
74. *Ibid.*, pp203.
75. Hübner, *Geschichte der roten Fahne*, p25.
76. *Ibid.*, p29.
77. Anton Reger, *Entscheidungen der Gerichte und Verwaltungsbehörden*, Vol. 12, München, 1892, pp92-97.
78. Hübner, *Geschichte der roten Fahne*, p10.
79. Bloom, *Riot City*, p152.
80. Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, Chicago, 1971, p34.
81. Wilhelm Liebknecht (ed.), *Zur politischen Farbenlehre. Ein Schauspiel in drei Akten*, Borsdorf, 1889.
82. *Ibid.*, p7.
83. *Ibid.*, Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, signature A 05-2466.
84. It could be argued that the symbolic regime under the later fascist 'aestheticization of politics' (Walter Benjamin) represented a revival of this nineteenth century political *relicism*.
85. R.A. Houston, 'Literacy', in Peter Stearns (ed.), *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, Vol. 5, Detroit, 2001, p393.
86. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p108.
87. It was only shortly after this that the black flag was to replace the red banner as the dominant symbol of the anarchist movements.
88. Knut Hickethier, 'Arbeiterpresse', in Wolfgang Ruppert (ed.), *Die Arbeiter*, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p308. However, it wasn't until 1918 that a plethora of communist periodicals were named after the red flag throughout the world.

89. Kurt Eisner, *Wilhelm Liebknecht: Sein Leben und Wirken*, Berlin, 1900, p59.
90. Korff, 'History of Symbols', p107.
91. See for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. I-IV, New Haven, CT, 1953-65.
92. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, 1992, p169.

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# British socialism and European history

The right to work, 1880-1914

*Liam Ryan*

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## Abstract

This article builds on the insights of scholars who have sought to analyse the history of British socialism through a broader European analytical lens. It demonstrates that British socialists, as well as being aware of and influenced by contemporaneous late nineteenth and early twentieth-century developments on the continent, also drew inspiration from European history in order to justify specific political aims relating to the issue of unemployment. This insight is developed via the medium of a case study investigating the debate surrounding the 'Right to Work' campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The socialist advocacy of the right to work owed an overt debt to French political and social theory, being most commonly associated with the ideas of Louis Blanc, a nineteenth-century reformer who argued that state-funded cooperative production on the part of workers provided the means by which capitalism could be overthrown. British socialists explicitly referred to the political and economic inspiration of Blanc and situated their own views and policies, particularly in relation to the state and the role of politics, as belonging to the same historical tradition. Indeed, socialists were forced to defend the reputation and legacy of Blanc in fractious late-Victorian and Edwardian era debates involving opponents of state support for the unemployed who commonly cited the failure of the National Workshops in the French Revolution of 1848. By paying close attention to the contours of the contested debate between socialists and anti-socialists over the historical lessons of the Workshops, this article will demonstrate the stature of Louis Blanc in British socialist circles and make a broader point about the relevance of European history to political culture in Britain.

**Key words:** socialism, Europe, Britain, Louis Blanc, National Workshops, 1848 Revolution, unemployment, history



History has always been a key resource for political movements, traditions and parties. The record of the past was used in a myriad number of ways: deployed to instil a strong sense of shared origins amongst political activists and communities; establishing a recognisable and mutually agreed-upon lineage of leaders, heroes, events, villains and rituals; shaping and providing a justification for particular positions and identities; and also, often being situated within broader teleological frameworks that led inexorably either to the present or the future.<sup>1</sup> History was of fundamental importance to British socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they established their own distinct political organisations and crafted an identity that built upon, but was also recognisably different from, the established liberal, radical and Tory traditions. As the existing historiography has delineated in great detail, socialists during this period commonly celebrated the collectivist agrarianism of pre-industrial English society, invoked the oppositional implications of the English Civil War and pointed to the more recent inspirations of Peterloo, Robert Owen and Chartism.<sup>2</sup>

Invocations of the national past were also married with a recognition of the importance of European history for political struggle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Chris Wrigley has noted, socialists in the 1880s and 1890s were also stimulated by memories of a 'wider European radical and socialist past'.<sup>3</sup> The salience of Europe in the historical memory of British socialists constitutes an important and still underdeveloped area of research; a lacuna in the existing scholarship that owes much to the lingering influence of traditional interpretations which stressed the vast gulf of difference between British and continental socialism.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, British socialism was defined by its moderate outlook and practice, influenced by the conservative economic influence of trade unions, an intersection of liberal, religious and ethical perspectives, commitment to parliamentarism and largely dismissive of revolution and Marxist theory. In contrast, continental socialism, symbolised most pertinently by the powerful German Social Democratic Party, was characterised by its adherence to a theoretically sophisticated Marxism, hostility to organised religion, overt separation from alternative political traditions on the left and a more radical estrangement from and opposition to the institutions of the state. There was undoubtedly much truth in this assessment of the differences between British and European socialists with the contrasting respective strengths and weaknesses of Marxism constituting perhaps the most striking feature.

A body of revisionist work challenged this influential scholarly

dichotomy in the 1990s, which emphasised the close cultural, personal and political links between European and British socialists in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The strength of reformist socialism in Britain and on the continent was particularly highlighted here with figures such as Jean Jaures, Eduard Bernstein and Keir Hardie featuring prominently.<sup>6</sup> More recent work in the field of intellectual history has noted that the ideological eclecticism of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century British socialism had parallels on the continent, with republicanism in France and religious anti-materialism in Italy playing important roles.<sup>7</sup> This article builds on the insights of scholars who have sought to analyse the history of British socialism through a broader European investigative lens. It will demonstrate that British socialists, as well as being aware of and influenced by contemporaneous late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century developments on the continent, also drew inspiration from European history in order to justify specific political aims relating to the issue of unemployment. This insight will be developed via the medium of a case study investigating the debate surrounding the Right to Work campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, a diverse array of socialists, from a range of organisations including the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, members of the Labour Party and trade unions, sought to pressurise local and national authorities to provide work for the unemployed during times of economic distress.<sup>8</sup> The demand that workers had a right to work underpinned a series of parliamentary bills tabled by the Labour Party in the first decade of the twentieth century, which would eventually be rejected by MPs on the grounds that they constituted examples of socialism.

Some historians of the Labour Party have described the Right to Work bills as 'propagandist ventures' which 'got nowhere'.<sup>9</sup> These assessments do not capture the ideological centrality of the right to work in British socialist thought and, importantly, do not convey any sense of its historical trajectory. The socialist advocacy of the right to work owed a debt to French political and social theory, being most commonly associated with the ideas of Louis Blanc, a nineteenth-century reformer who argued that state-funded cooperative production on the part of workers provided the means by which capitalism could be overthrown. British socialists explicitly referred to the political and economic inspiration of Blanc and situated their own views and policies, particularly in relation to the state and the role of politics, as belonging to the same historical tradition. Indeed, socialists were forced to defend the reputation and legacy of Blanc in fractious late Victorian and Edwardian debates involving

opponents of state support for the unemployed who commonly cited the failure of the National Workshops in the French Revolution of 1848. The National Workshops had been established by the French provisional government in the wake of the abdication of King Louis Philippe and represented a practical recognition of the right to work principle.<sup>10</sup> The Workshops were organised and funded by the state and provided work for upwards of 100,000 artisans and labourers between February and June 1848. These had met an ignominious end after only four months of operation, having been shut down by moderate republicans in the provisional government on the grounds of cost and inefficiency, a decision that ultimately led to the bloody June Days workers' uprising. The purported reasons for why the workshops failed in June 1848 constituted a key bone of contention between socialists and anti-socialists. In debates concerning the unemployment issue during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Conservative and Liberal anti-socialists argued that the failure of the National Workshops proved the futility of the socialist demand that the unemployed had the right to expect remunerative work from the state. By paying close attention to the contours of this highly contentious debate between socialists and anti-socialists over the historical lessons of the workshops, this article will demonstrate the stature of Louis Blanc in British socialist circles and make a broader point about the relevance of European history to political culture in Britain.

This article will be divided into two sections. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the right to work and will sketch its origins and trajectory in European radical and socialist thought. The second section examines how the history of the right to work became central to discussions concerning unemployment in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain.

### **Origins: The history of the right to work**

Thomas Paine, the great British radical and prominent participant in the American and French Revolutions, was among the first modern thinkers to promote the idea that individuals had a right to work. In his major work *Rights of Man*, published in 1791, Paine asserted that the government should erect public buildings 'containing at least six thousand persons, and to have in each of these places, as many kinds of employment that can be contrived'.<sup>11</sup> Paine's ideas developed very much in the context of the French Revolution, which accelerated existing eighteenth-century trends that emphasised awareness of society's obligations towards its poorer

members.<sup>12</sup> The right to work featured in the Jacobin constitution of 1793 and was grounded in the explicit recognition that citizenship contained economic as well as political components.<sup>13</sup> More sustained reflections on the economic dimensions of these rights claims would gain even more traction in France as it experienced its first pangs of industrialisation in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. The right to work became firmly established as a specifically socialist principle during this period. For the French socialist, Charles Fourier, the liberal tradition of natural rights, rooted in understandings of political liberty and equality before the law, constituted a ‘chimera’ as it failed to address the main social problem of the nineteenth century: whether the expanding ranks of the urban, industrial poor possessed adequate means of subsistence and work.<sup>14</sup> Fourier declared in 1848 that ‘the first right of men is the right to work’.<sup>15</sup> This philosophy was practically applied through Fourier’s phalansteries (*phalanstères*), small, self-contained co-operative communities where each member worked together for the mutual benefit of the collective.

Following in the wake of Fourier, the right to work would be further refined and connected to a more overtly political and statist framework by Louis Blanc. Blanc first came to prominence in the 1820s and 1830s as a radical critic of the newly emerging industrial order in France. Blanc argued that the right to work should be predicated on political democracy with governments and states, whose legitimacy was derived from a popular mandate, organising production and employment.<sup>16</sup> In Blanc’s schema, the state was to empower workers, providing them with lines of credit so that they could form producers’ workshops within their own trades.<sup>17</sup> These workshops, termed in most contemporary and subsequent scholarly parlance as ‘social workshops’, were voluntary organisations of producers where the instruments of production had been provided by the state.<sup>18</sup> The co-operative ethos of the ‘social workshops’ was envisioned by Blanc as ultimately helping to quash the evils of free competition and usher in a new world where producers laboured for the common good.

As briefly noted in the introduction, Blanc played a prominent role in the French Republican government of 1848, helping to pass a decree which established a system of workshops ‘based on the solemnly proclaimed right of all citizens to work’.<sup>19</sup> The designation of these workshops as national indicated that they were a fundamental institution of the new French republic.<sup>20</sup> However, in practice, the National Workshops deviated substantially from Blanc’s ideas and proposals. Blanc was not involved in the organisation of the National Workshops with this key function being delegated to Pierre Marie de Saint-Georges and Emile Thomas, a

liberal republican and an engineer who were both virulently opposed to socialism and viewed the workshops as a temporary solution to alleviate the plight of the poor during a period of commercial contraction.<sup>21</sup> The employment provided under the aegis of the workshops was rudimentary, differing little from the charity workshops that had been set up by the Ancien Régime in earlier times, and contained none of the cooperative elements favoured by Blanc.<sup>22</sup> The lack of governmental commitment to the workshops' success meant that they were not self-financing, operating at a loss with the cost derived entirely from public funds.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the inglorious fate that met the National Workshops in June 1848, Blanc's vision concerning the organisation of labour and the right to work found favour across the channel in Britain. The enthusiasm for Blanc's ideas amongst Chartists helped to temper the traditional libertarianism of English radicalism and supplemented attacks on the aristocratic elite with demands for state intervention on behalf of the poor.<sup>24</sup> The salience of the right to work or alternatively the right to labour in Chartist ideology can be traced in the rhetoric of trade unions connected to the radical wing of the movement. At a meeting of the National Association of United Trades in 1851, the right to labour was recognised 'as a social axiom' ... necessary for 'the sustenance of man'.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, one of the last issues of the leading Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, declared that 'the right to labour' ... was 'part and parcel of the rights of man'.<sup>26</sup> Here, Chartists were operating within the parameters of a now established socialist argument that pointed to the limitations of political rights claims that had little to say about the social and economic ills of modern industrialised societies. British socialists would build upon this ideological inheritance in the context of an economic downturn in the 1880s with unemployment recognised for the first time as a chronic social problem affecting large sections of the working classes.<sup>27</sup> The article will now move forward in time and delineate how the history of the right to work was invoked by both socialists and anti-socialists in debates concerning the causes and solutions to the issue of unemployment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### **The right to work: late Victorian and Edwardian perspectives**

Socialists organised marches and demonstrations in support of the rights of the unemployed during the 1880s and 1890s. This agitation largely focused on the provision of public work for the unemployed and was cast into the public eye by violent events like the Bloody Sunday riot

of 1887, where Metropolitan Police officers baton charged demonstrators protesting against rising rates of unemployment and Irish coercion policy in Trafalgar Square. Cross-party deputations, acting on behalf of the unemployed, pressured politicians and local authorities to act on the issue. In 1888, one such deputation led by Cardinal Henry Manning, who would become famous for his role in the London dock strike of 1889, petitioned the sitting prime minister, Lord Salisbury, to provide work for the unemployed.<sup>28</sup> Salisbury responded by employing a historical analogy; Manning's proposals were said to be equivalent to the solution offered by the National Workshops. Having offered labour 'to all those who wanted it, earning the ordinary wages of labour', the failure of the workshops provided a salutary lesson that the state should never seek to supplant the role of the private employer in the marketplace.

Socialist right to work campaigns were dismissed through similar historical attacks. Liberals such as John Morley, an ardent individualist, opponent of state intervention and historian of France, claimed to detect a hint of the same principles that had caused the collapse of the workshops in the unemployment proposals of Edwardian socialists.<sup>29</sup> At a meeting of the Walthamstow Liberal Association in November 1905, Morley outlined his opposition to any scheme that sought to provide work or relief for the unemployed at the expense of ratepayers. Any plan to increase the financial burden on ratepayers would greatly increase the 'numbers of the unemployed'. Morley illustrated this point by referring to the national workshops of 1848, noting that they had been financed 'out of the pockets of the country'. Men had withdrawn from private enterprise and were forced to labour under the aegis of the workshops. The ensuing results had been catastrophic with 'industry dislocated and finance destroyed'.<sup>30</sup> Morley ended his speech on a more positive note, stating that the historical failure of the workshops would never be repeated in England because of the 'widely held qualities of sanity, sobriety, and self-control'.<sup>31</sup>

Morley would repeat these sentiments two months later in a meeting with a deputation of labour and socialist bodies in Arbroath in Scotland.<sup>32</sup> The deputation called on Morley to support an amendment to the Conservative Party's Unemployed Workmen's Act of 1905 that would give distress committees power to undertake public works at standard rates of wages; the whole cost to be met from public funds. One of the members of the deputation also stated that it 'was the right of everybody born to have the opportunity of earning their living in their country and that when private enterprise failed to supply that opportunity it was the duty of the state to secure it'. Morley responded by taking direct aim at the

principle of the right to work; the idea that any man was owed employment by the state was fundamentally unsound. The practical application of this principle, again citing the example of the National Workshops, would only serve to increase the numbers of the unemployed. The folly of large-scale schemes of public employment had been demonstrated most pertinently by the failure of the workshops.

Both Salisbury's and Morley's beliefs were indicative of widely held assumptions about the inability of public works schemes to provide meaningful employment. State intervention in the marketplace, according to the tenets of orthodox political economy, would 'crowd out' private enterprise and investment. Furthermore, the socialist proposal that workers employed under the terms of public works schemes should be maintained at standard levels of daily pay would drive private capitalists out of business and encourage dependence on the state. The issue of funding was especially controversial with socialists asserting that ratepayers should fund the operation of public works, seen by critics as a form of class warfare.

The anti-socialist invocation of the historical example of the National Workshops was vigorously contested by socialists. The Social Democratic Federation activist, J. Hunter Watts, argued that critics were drawing the wrong historical lessons from the example of the workshops.<sup>33</sup> They had been organised by politicians 'whose interests' were 'bound up in their failure rather than their success'. Watts was unsurprisingly far more partial to citing the positive historical legacy of the workshops, declaring that 'France had rightly been called the 'Christ of the nations' and celebrating the 'named and nameless heroes of 1848 who had fought for the right to work'. Independent Labour Party member Sam Mainwaring struck a similar chord to Watts, arguing that the workshops were organised by 'bourgeois members of the provisional government' ... 'who had been bitterly opposed to socialism'.<sup>34</sup> Louis Blanc, accurately characterised by Mainwaring as having little to do with the operation of the National Workshops, was instead praised for his institution of cooperative mutual aid workshops at the Luxembourg Palace in Paris during the revolution of 1848.

Indeed, it is notable that Blanc garnered much praise in the pages of the Independent Labour Party's newspaper, the *Labour Leader*. A condensed version of his writings entitled 'The Evils of Competition' was featured in the newspaper's penny pamphlet series.<sup>35</sup> In its May Day supplement of 1910, a writer named J.F. Mills argued that Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Louis Blanc, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle and John Ruskin were the

pioneers of the modern socialist movement.<sup>36</sup> A year later in 1911, another *Labour Leader* contributor went even further, referring to Blanc ‘as the French pioneer of modern socialist method’.<sup>37</sup> The author praised Blanc’s argument that socialism and the right to work could only be realised by a democratic state that commanded broad popular support. The state, supported by democratic legitimacy, had been correctly identified by Blanc as the key mechanism for achieving social transformation and as a result he was entitled to be known as the ‘father of modern social democracy’.<sup>38</sup>

Admiration for Blanc’s ideas was notable too amongst early leaders of the Labour Party. Ramsay MacDonald singled out Blanc’s commitment to reformist strands of socialism and his disavowal of revolutionary means. MacDonald asserted in 1907 that Blanc was entitled to be called the ‘father of modern socialist methods’, drawing attention away from revolution and towards the realisation that ‘fundamental social change was to be brought about by reform’.<sup>39</sup> Blanc’s assertion that the democratic state could implement socialist reforms, such as the right to work, as opposed to the Marxist belief in revolutionary class struggle, meshed well with MacDonald’s own gradualist, reformist tendencies. The Fabian Society’s leading members, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, also noted Blanc’s impact on the Christian socialist cooperative movement in the nineteenth century. In their 1912 work *What Syndicalism Means*, the Webbs referenced the intellectual debt Christian socialist co-operators owed to Blanc’s vision of social workshops. The Cooperative movement’s ideal of ‘self-governing workshops’ was similarly organised around the view that industries should be democratically controlled by workers.<sup>40</sup> British socialist leaders such as MacDonald also found themselves defending the historical legacy of Blanc and the right to work in Edwardian unemployment debates. In his 1911 book *The Socialist Movement*, MacDonald wrote that ‘there are some events in history about which popular opinion comes to a conclusion, wrong as wrong can be, but the opinion is circulated, is reiterated ... until it become an unquestioned assumption’.<sup>41</sup>

This tide of ‘popular ignorance’, as MacDonald deemed it, pertaining to the failure of the National Workshops, had serious practical ramifications for the Edwardian Labour Party after 1905, as it sought to pressurise the then Liberal administration to pass legislation on the issue of unemployment. The party, then known as the Labour Representation Committee, had made an electoral breakthrough at the 1906 general election, winning twenty-nine seats and benefiting from an alliance with the Liberals who won a landslide majority. Labour politicians worked hard in the succeeding years to differentiate their party from the bigger and more powerful



Liberals, focusing on unemployment in particular. Liberal inaction provided the most immediate catalyst for Labour's introduction of its own Unemployed Workmen's Bill into the House of Commons in July 1907.<sup>42</sup> The bill was predicated on the idea that the state had a duty to assist the unemployed. It proposed that urban and rural districts should act as local unemployment authorities and work together in creating schemes of labour for the unemployed with wages being funded from the rates.<sup>43</sup> The principle of the right to work was embodied in the bill's third clause which recognised that 'where a workman had registered himself as unemployed, it shall be the duty of the local unemployment authority to provide work for him'.<sup>44</sup> This bill, and its third clause which recognised the right to work, proved controversial in Liberal and Conservative circles. John Burns, a former socialist and Liberal president of the Local Government Board from 1905 to 1914, stated that 'no friend of labour' would advocate the right to work with its echoes of the Parisian National Workshops of 1848.<sup>45</sup> Conservative commentators such as W.G. Towler, the secretary of the London Municipal Society, also depicted attempts at enshrining the right to work into the statute book of British law as merely recapitulating the 'disastrous experiment which was tried in France in 1848'.<sup>46</sup>

The spectre of the workshops would also haunt the subsequent re-introduction of the Right to Work bill in March 1908. When introducing the bill in the Commons, the Radical Liberal MP, P.W. Wilson, referenced criticisms that compared it to the national workshops, deeming them to be inapplicable to modern British conditions. 'You take a city in a state of revolution, with barricades in the street ... and you say that it is a fair parallel to a country which has enjoyed sixty years of unmistakable progress and pacific social development'.<sup>47</sup> Following the bill's defeat, by a decisive majority of 150 votes, the liberal *Daily News* expressed the opinion that those members who had opposed it were motivated to do so because they detected the hint of socialism in the right to work principle.<sup>48</sup> The enshrinement of the right to work would lead immediately to the establishment of national workshops where the unemployed would be remunerated at trade union levels of wages. 'Few such disastrous experiments would make the very name of socialism stink in the nostrils of all thoughtful observers'.<sup>49</sup> The Radical Liberal, J.T. Martindale, addressing a December 1908 meeting of the party's youth wing in Burnley, declared that clause three of the Labour Party's bill reminded him of the principles of the national workshops, 'where any man could employ himself and receive the ordinary rate as paid for similar goods elsewhere'.<sup>50</sup> The workshops 'went on for a week or two but there arose such a state of chaos that

they had to be abandoned'.<sup>51</sup> The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, for example, claimed that clause three of the bill was animated by a 'principle which involves in its application ... the complete ultimate control by the state of the full machinery of production'.<sup>52</sup> George Pudsey, the Liberal chief whip, cautioned against what he saw as a widespread tendency with the party to embrace 'a chronic state of semi-socialism'.<sup>53</sup> Any further acceleration of this development, he declared, would result in a party split with the consequent loss of 'the vast bulk of that moderate opinion which had been the backbone of Liberalism for fifty years'.<sup>54</sup>

Conservative opinion was similarly dismissive of Labour's Right to Work bill. An article by T.H. Manners Howe in the *Graphic* referenced 'the insidious, but historically refuted doctrine of the right to work, embodied in the Socialist principle of rate-supported labour'.<sup>55</sup> The Conservative historian, John Marriott, provided a more rigorous intellectual analysis of the Edwardian right to work debate and its parallels with the events in revolutionary Paris sixty years earlier. Marriott insisted that the essential principles of the bill and 'of the experiment tried with disastrous results in 1848' were 'not merely similar but identical'.<sup>56</sup> The story of the National Workshops had pertinent relevance for the student of contemporary politics in England as the Liberal Party, just like the French Republicans, were allied to 'social democrats' who looked forward 'to the speedy realisation of a social millennium'.<sup>57</sup> Decrying the falsehoods of natural rights theories, Marriott believed that no man possessed an inherent claim to demand employment from the state.<sup>58</sup> The failure of the Parisian experiment was not attributable to reasons of circumstances and context but rather resided in the faultiness of its logic, which was 'radical and fundamentally false'.<sup>59</sup>

Marriott's more rigorous historical dissection of the failure of the National Workshops and its lessons for contemporary socialism constituted a rarity amongst the Conservatives and Liberals cited in the article. Rarely going into meticulous historical detail and delving into the relevant nineteenth-century source material, anti-socialists deployed the example of the workshops as a prejudicial historical analogy; a crude political and rhetorical strategy that was nonetheless powerfully resonant in a context where suspicion of the state's role in the economy was widespread. Socialists tried to expose their opponents' lack of scholarly rigour by referencing what they deemed to be authoritative source materials. Ramsay MacDonald called attention to the 'oft exposed error of attributing the collapse of these workshops to Louis Blanc and his socialist allies'.<sup>60</sup> The workshops had, in fact, been instituted by moderate republicans fearful of socialism and were deliberately designed with the manifest aim of

destroying the credibility of the right to work. MacDonald's analysis prominently invoked the authority of Thomas Kirkup: the first English historian of socialism and the author responsible for defining the term in the 1887 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.<sup>61</sup> Kirkup asserted in his influential work *A History of Socialism* (1892) that the National Workshops represented a travesty of the proposals of Louis Blanc, having been established expressly to discredit them.<sup>62</sup> Whereas Blanc envisioned a future society organised around the principles of the right to work and co-operative production, the workshops had offered nothing but unproductive labour and it was intended that labourers employed under their remit would be ready to assist the republican government 'in the event of a struggle with the socialist party'.<sup>63</sup>

*The Social Democrat*, a monthly magazine founded by the Social Democratic Federation member Harry Quelch, even reprinted an article written by Ferdinand Lassalle in the 1860s in direct response to 'the gross misrepresentation of the experiment of '48' by Liberal politicians such as John Morley.<sup>64</sup> In the article, Lassalle condemned the popular assumption that the National Workshops were organised according to the principles of Louis Blanc. Vehement opponents of socialism active in the provisional government established after the February abdication of the monarch, Louis Philippe, had offered relief work to the unemployed as a means of creating 'a paid working-class army devoted to the moderate republication majority'. Lassalle cited the contemporaneous accounts of Emile Thomas, the official tasked with the organisation and maintenance of the workshops and, Augustine de Lamartine, the minister for foreign affairs in the provisional government, to underpin this argument. He specifically quoted in detail a conversation between Emile Thomas and the minister for public works, Pierre Marie de Saint-Georges, where the latter had stated that the workshops had been allowed to fail. This, the scheming Saint-Georges believed, would demonstrate the 'falsity' and 'hollowness' of the theory of the right to work.

Writing in a February 1906 article for the Social Democratic Federation's newspaper *Justice*, the socialist barrister, Ernest Belfort Bax, espoused a similar line of analysis, referencing Emile Thomas' 1848 work *History of the National Workshops* and the same conversation cited by Lassalle to counteract the 'stale falsehoods' uttered by John Morley.<sup>65</sup> Thomas, described by Bax as a 'violent political enemy of socialistic ideas', intimated that the whole business of organising the workshops had been done for the 'express purpose of failure in order to discredit such schemes once and for all'.<sup>66</sup> Bax questioned how a man such as John Morley, a Francophile

and a man who had written books concerning Voltaire, Diderot and Robespierre, could seemingly be so ignorant of modern French history. Seeking to convince an audience of a long-discredited historical fallacy, Morley was guilty of 'deliberate misrepresentation'.<sup>67</sup> Bax's interpretation was not without controversy amongst socialists. J. Margaret Mahler, also writing in *Justice*, argued that the conversation between Emile Thomas and Pierre Marie de Saint-George had actually been in reference to the social workshops set up by Louis Blanc in the Hotel Luxembourg.<sup>68</sup> Referring to passages in Thomas' *History of the National Workshops* as evidence, Mahler noted that it was important that socialists had 'gotten to the bottom of the facts relating to this historic experiment in view of its bearing on the right to work'.<sup>69</sup>

Other socialists referred to Blanc's own oeuvre to disprove anti-socialist claims. Herbert Burrows of the Social Democratic Federation implored his opponents to read Blanc's book *Historical Revelations of 1848* (1858) to learn how every effort was made to crush the workshops by the provisional government.<sup>70</sup> This book, alongside Lord Normandy's *A Year of Revolution* (1857), would prove to interested observers 'what lengths personal jealousy and prejudice went to in relation to thwarting such experiments'.<sup>71</sup> Contemporaries of Blanc who had participated in the 1848 revolution and fled Europe as a result of persecution also spoke wittingly of anti-socialist historical claims. The German liberal, Karl Blind, a participant in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848 and later exiled to Britain on account of his political activities, challenged the historical arguments of anti-socialists in a 1906 article penned in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century*.<sup>72</sup> He remarked that the National Workshops were in no way a socialist experiment and had petered out at the behest of their political adversaries.<sup>73</sup> A personal acquaintance of Blanc, though not sharing his views on political economy, Blind argued that the National Workshops were corrupted by the machinations of Bonapartist and royalist elements.<sup>74</sup>

Judged by the practical considerations of *realpolitik*, the socialist espousal of the right to work could be deemed unsuccessful. Socialists singularly failed to achieve their objective of enshrining the right to work in unemployment legislation. Anti-socialists, with their jibes linking the right to work to the historical failure of the National Workshops, appeared to have achieved their aim of ostracising socialist plans to reform Britain's unemployment laws. However, this purely instrumentalist view would be an unduly short-sighted one to take. Advocacy of the right to work performed a unifying function in the socialist movement, cutting across the often otherwise rigid divisions between reformist and revolutionary

socialists in Britain. Socialists from both camps felt compelled to promote and defend the right to work and the historical legacy of Louis Blanc. The right to work provided the British Left with a sense of historical mission, a practical principle and slogan around which political action concerning the issue of unemployment could coalesce and crucially continued to underpin productive critiques of an economic system that denied many the means of leading a dignified existence.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to illuminate the influence of European history on British socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It has done so by examining the political and rhetorical battle over the legacy of the French National Workshops of 1848. Citing the inspiration and pioneering role of Louis Blanc, it is evident that European history was significant to the political and intellectual worldview of British socialists. The focus on this continental contribution to British socialist thought and practice has been one of the key features of this article. It has illuminated an alternative set of historical resources for British socialists, ones that were not firmly orientated around national traditions, figures and events. While in no way denying the importance of national history, it is equally apparent that British socialists saw themselves as very much operating within a broader European movement and tradition, something which the historical record had helped to confirm.

The socialists examined in this article were active in a historical context where prevailing opinion asserted that the state organisation of employment impinged on the economic freedom of employers and employees, distorting the operation of supply and demand and the natural tendency of markets to equilibrate. Furthermore, it was also widely believed that rate- or tax-supported public work schemes did not provide employment that was reproductive and functioned as an unfair form of class warfare that targeted the incomes of the prosperous. The idea that large-scale state intervention could not influence economic outcomes in a beneficial way would totter in the 1930s and eventually collapse in the 1940s as Western governments sought to find solutions to the problems unleashed by the Great Depression and the Second World War. Both of these events helped convince policy-makers of the need to manage and plan the economy, protecting it from the uncoordinated and inefficient operations of the free market. Socialists, unsurprisingly, were one of the driving forces behind this re-ordering of economic thinking, which eventually culminated in

the establishment of social democracies across Europe in the post-1945 period. The principle of the right to work was embodied in the consensus social democratic view that full employment was a necessary component of a civilised society.

## Notes

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2. See Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, Princeton, 2011, pp66-70; Paul Readman, *Land and Nation: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914*, Woodbridge, 2008, pp150-154; Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924*, Woodbridge, 1998, pp24-25; Chris Wrigley, 'The European Context: Aspects of British Labour and Continental Socialism before 1920', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-1939*, Farnham, 2009, p80.
3. Wrigley, 'The European Context', p80.
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5. Alongside the above cited work of Berger see Duncan Tanner, 'The Development of British Socialism, 1900-1918', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997): 48-66.

6. *Ibid.*, pp51-52.
7. James Thompson, 'The British left in European perspective, c. 1880-1914', *Global Intellectual History*, 4 (2018): 26; see also G. Claeys, 'Non-Marxian Socialism 1815-1914, Gareth Stedman Jones & Gregory Claeys (eds), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Political Thought*, Cambridge, 2011, pp521-556.
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9. Tanner, 'The Development', p55; Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Basingstoke, 2008, p24.
10. On the workshops see Geoffrey Ellis, 'The Revolution of 1848-1849 in France', in R.J.W. Evans & Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (eds), *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848-1849 From Reform to Reaction, 1848-1849*, Oxford, 2002, pp27-55; Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*, Cambridge, 1994, p197.
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29. Account of Morley's speech taken from 'Eye of Triumph: Mr Morley's Prediction', *Daily News*, 21 November 1905.
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# **‘Education for democracy’, ‘Education for emancipation’**

Historical narratives of the Workers’ Educational Association and the Labour colleges 1900-1920

*Pushpa Kumbhat*

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the diversity of thought within the labour movement and how the history of working-class adult education reflects and represents different political aspects of the British left. It argues that the making of the modern British left is closely aligned to the history of working-class adult education. To gain insight into how this history has shaped the political left, this article will analyse the historical narratives that two twentieth century voluntary working class adult education organisations – the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) – used to support their activities in adult education. It will analyse what motivated the WEA and NCLC to take ownership of pre-existing systems and structures of adult education and adapt them to the diverse demands of the modern labour movement as it evolved from 1900 to 1920.

**Key words:** WEA, Labour Colleges, adult education, democracy

The diverse origins of the modern British labour movement are embedded in an intriguing history of political reform and radicalism.<sup>1</sup> Several different traditions have contributed to the heterogeneity of the modern left in Britain including the movement for working-class adult education. In this article I argue that this educational strand played an important role in the making of the modern British left – a role that has been oddly neglected in the historiography.<sup>2</sup>

A brief overview of education provision during the nineteenth century

illustrates why adult education was an important resource for working class people. Before 1870, no comprehensive national state system of education in Britain existed with government funds being, instead, allocated to voluntary schools run by religious institutions, charities and philanthropists. Consequently, much of the country did not have any form of educational provision.<sup>3</sup> Those schools that did exist were neither compulsory nor free, with child labour still widespread and working-class families often under financial pressure to have their children enter the workforce as early as possible. The lack of access to, and availability of, primary education meant that most of the population remained uneducated. Thus, where the authorities fell short, voluntary organisations sought to meet the demand, particularly for adult education.

To examine how the history of adult education contributed to the development of the political left, I will analyse the historical narratives that two twentieth century voluntary working class adult education organisations – the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Labour Colleges – used to support their activities. Emphasis will be placed on their motivations for educational provision, highlighting the diversity of thought within the labour movement as a whole and how the history of working class adult education reflects and represents different political aspects of the British left.

There are three reasons for focusing on the WEA and the Labour Colleges. First, both were founded at around the same time in the early twentieth century and, unlike their Victorian-era predecessors, tended to be staffed by people from working-classes backgrounds, rather than the middle or upper classes. Furthermore, although the WEA and the Labour Colleges existed to provide education to working class adults, they differed fundamentally over the definition of working class education and its purpose. The political outlook of the two organisations reflected two different but partially compatible intellectual perspectives on the British left. It is significant that the WEA has never been formally affiliated to the labour movement whereas the Labour Colleges were firmly of and for it, their respective slogans reflecting a political position, or lack of one. The WEA presented itself as 'democratic, un-sectarian and impartial' while the Labour Colleges exhorted workers to 'educate, organise, agitate'. Its central aim was to use existing systems of adult education, in the form of university extension, to disseminate higher education in the arts and humanities, turning culture and knowledge into a form of common heritage that could be easily accessed and enjoyed by working-class students. By contrast, the Labour Colleges aimed to create a new

type of education based on Marxism that would equip workers for the struggle to gain common ownership of the means of production. Finally, despite their ideological differences, each organisation endeavoured to reach working-class people through education and empower them at a cultural and political level by cultivating support for the wider labour movement, explicitly in the case of the Labour Colleges and implicitly in the case of the WEA.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the terms 'working-class' and 'labour movement' are not synonymous, as Frank Parkin's work on working-class conservatism has shown.<sup>5</sup> In a society dominated by traditionalism, deference, monarchism and conservatism, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, supporting the labour movement was considered politically deviant. The working class was and is diverse within itself, with huge variety in social, cultural and religious backgrounds, occupations and political outlooks, and the types of adult education that working-class people attended reflected this diversity.

### **Nineteenth century – adult education initiatives**

Both the WEA and the Labour Colleges were heirs to a tradition of adult education initiatives originating in the nineteenth century, which greatly influenced their development and activities. The Elementary Education Act, 1870 (or 'Forster Act'), for example, was the first piece of legislation to address the fact that many working-class children did not even receive an elementary education.<sup>6</sup> Further legislation passed in the following years made primary education to the age of twelve compulsory. A key motive behind these changes was to train and prepare a skilled and competent industrial work force better able to contribute to the national economy in an increasingly competitive global environment.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the 1870 Education Act served to fill the gaps in the provision of elementary education, establishing school boards to build and run schools in areas without any voluntary institutions. Unlike the latter, these state schools delivered non-denominational religious teaching. In the twentieth century, the 1918 and the 1944 Education Acts raised the school leaving age to fourteen, and then fifteen, respectively. The 1944 Act also made secondary school free and in 1972 it became compulsory to attend school until the age of sixteen.

As can be seen, the formation of a national state system of primary and secondary education for all was slow to develop. Working-class people, in particular, suffered from a lack of education because of their adverse social and economic circumstances. This, however, did not mean that

there wasn't demand, a fact reflected by the variety of voluntary organisations offering adult education. These included the Young Adult Schools, the Mechanics' Institutes, the Working Men's Colleges, the Co-operative and university extension.<sup>8</sup>

The Young Adult Schools were among the earliest adult education organisations to be established. Their original purpose was to disseminate religious education by teaching illiterate adults to read the Bible. The first of these schools was founded in Nottingham in 1798 to cater to female students. A second school, 'The Institution for Instructing Adult Persons to Read the Holy Scriptures', was founded in Bristol in 1812.<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Harrop reports that between 1812 and 1832 in 'Bristol alone, 12,445 women and 2,333 men had attended the schools'.<sup>10</sup> Many other young adult schools were established across England, particularly in West Yorkshire, the Midlands and the south west. As literacy rates increasingly improved, however, the adult schools responded by switching their focus to religious education. In 1899, the adult schools formerly came together under the aegis of the National Council of Adult School Unions (NASU), initially dominated by the Religious Society of Friends, with membership peaking at 113,789 in 1910.<sup>11</sup>

Mark Freeman identifies the adult school movement as one of the 'largest voluntary movements in the history of adult education'.<sup>12</sup> From 1910, however, it began to decline in popularity and membership as a result of the secularisation of adult education and the expansion of alternative leisure opportunities. Nonetheless, as Freeman argues, adult schools continued to flourish for some considerable time, being particularly sensitive to the religious outlook of their membership.<sup>13</sup>

The Mechanics' Institutes were another important nineteenth century adult education initiative. The first institute was founded by George Birkbeck (1776-1841) in Glasgow in 1823, and was initially conceived as an educational space for training skilled mechanics and craftsmen in matters of technology and innovation.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, there were over '600 Institutions in England alone with a membership of over 100,000'.<sup>15</sup> Although the institutes certainly included skilled workers within their collective membership, as Martyn Walker's research on the Huddersfield Mechanics' Institute shows, this was not consistent across each institution.<sup>16</sup> Roger Fieldhouse reports that it was often the lower middle class consisting of clerks, shop men and tradesmen who dominated the membership of Mechanics' Institutes. In addition, by 1849, 'only about one-fifth of the Institutes were predominantly working class'.<sup>17</sup> J.F.C. Harrison also asserted that it was mainly middle class and

professional men who attended their lectures and events.<sup>18</sup> The original educational aims of the mechanics' institutes had therefore changed over time to suit a more middle class and professional student body.

Moreover, the institutes' governing bodies remained dominated by the propertied classes and maintained a Victorian ethos of self-improvement and material aspirations, a view supported by Wright's research on the Bradford Mechanics' Institute and in the Annual Reports of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes.<sup>19</sup> At their 53rd meeting (1890), Sir Joseph Whitwell Pease (1828-1903), the grandson of Edward Pease, gave an address on why workers' education was important.<sup>20</sup> In it, he emphasised that workers had been given an 'enormous amount of political power' and that it was vital for employers to educate workers 'in those habits, thought, life and mental discipline which made them [workers] able to sympathise with their employers in times of depression in trade'. The purpose of the Mechanics' Institutes was to bring 'all classes together ... to meet for one patriotic purpose, trying to make the world better than they found it'.<sup>21</sup>

However, Pease's paternalist view of workers' education was out of step with the crystallising ethos of the British labour movement. Indeed, by the 1890s, such Victorian-era mentalities were being actively challenged by an upsurge in militancy and strikes among the less skilled and previously unorganised sections of the working class, who had been organising in 'new unions'. Pease's ideal may well have been of harmonious relationships, based on common goals and outlooks, to the mutual and equal benefit of all, yet this was far from the reality of industrial relations or the labour movement in late nineteenth-century Britain.

Co-operative education initiatives emerged at the same time as the Mechanics' Institutes. Conceived by Robert Owen (1781-1851), Co-operative education was deeply significant because it focused on the relationship between education, environment, character and social reform. Owen believed that education in tandem with the right environment could transform character and create a new society on the principles of co-operation and brotherhood. Through its tenets, Co-operative education, or 'Owenism', encouraged working-class people to actively engage in not only improving themselves, but to work towards raising themselves as a class, ultimately aiming to unite them as individuals with a common set of interests. This outlook was in contrast to the Mechanics' Institutes, which maintained a more utilitarian focus on the purpose of adult education. As Harrison noted 'The Owenites wanted no more tinkering with *laissez-faire* capitalism but a thorough and immediate transformation of the very roots of society'.<sup>22</sup> Owenism represented an ideological strand

of the labour movement that did not differentiate between working-class interests in the way that the trade union movement did. Rather, Owenism as a form of British socialism aimed to empower the working class through education and by engendering co-operation between classes.

From the 1820s to the 1840s, co-operative societies had established libraries, reading rooms and schools; Owen's approach attracted middle-class reformers but also working-class radicals like the Chartist leader William Lovett.<sup>23</sup> In 1829 Lovett, along with Henry Hetherington, founded the National Union of the Working Classes which became the London Working Men's Association in 1836.<sup>24</sup> Through education, the Association aimed to create 'a moral, reflecting, yet energetic public opinion; so as eventually to lead to a gradual improvement in the condition of the working classes, without violence or commotion'.<sup>25</sup> The Association also set up classes where the writings of radicals such as Thomas Paine and Owen were studied and discussed. While this may have appeared radical at the time, the emphasis on gradualism and peaceful transformation can be regarded as a forerunner of the approach to socialism adopted by the Labour Party during the twentieth century. Lovett also led educational initiatives in the Chartist movement to disseminate education designed to prepare working-class people for political action.

These initiatives show that a vibrant culture of voluntary adult radical education linked with movements for social and political reform thrived during the mid-nineteenth century. With the failure of Chartism in the late 1840s, this radical trend fell away, making space for other forms of non-political adult education. However, the legacy of this earlier period of co-operative and Chartist initiatives cemented the relationship between education and the labour movement. This relationship was based on creating, using, or transforming education to serve the social, economic, cultural and political collective interests of working-class people whatever their background.

The working men's colleges took yet another approach to workers' education. In 1854, the Christian Socialist, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), founded the London Working Men's College to give working-class students opportunities to study the arts and humanities. Education, Maurice believed, should be available to all regardless of class or wealth.<sup>26</sup> The impact of the working men's colleges was more ideological than practical.<sup>27</sup> This is especially important to acknowledge because achieving the ideals of Christian Socialism – fellowship, class unity and harmony – through education in the humanities and liberal arts proved to be the most effective means of uniting different strands of the adult

education movement from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. It also reinforced many of the principles of co-operation and Owenism: working men's colleges helped democratise higher education, a key theme of education disseminated by university extension and subsequently the WEA.

It should be noted however, that widespread illiteracy hindered the efforts of the Mechanics' Institutes and the working men's colleges, obliging them to provide elementary classes to prepare illiterate students for further education.<sup>28</sup> Harrop reports, for example, that 'between 46% and 63% of all Yorkshire Institutes provided elementary classes'.<sup>29</sup> This evidence highlights the great lack of basic education accessible to all but the wealthy and why voluntary adult education of any type was such an important resource.

University extension represented the final significant adult-education initiative established before 1900. Representing a non-radical venture in the tradition of the London Working Men's College, it aimed to democratise higher education as part of a common culture and heritage. One of its leading proponents, James Stuart, a middle-class lecturer at the University of Cambridge, recognised a great demand for adult education that existed in different communities.<sup>30</sup> Stuart reasoned that in order for universities to maintain their relevance to society, 'it was desirable that the country at large should become the heirs to the immense educational traditions of the two Universities [Oxford and Cambridge]'.<sup>31</sup> As Sheila Rowbotham identifies, educationalists like Stuart believed that '... education was a basic democratic right which should be available to everyone'.<sup>32</sup> Middle-class women, in particular, sought higher education in the absence of access to universities and further education at the time.<sup>33</sup> In 1873, Stuart, with a group of his fellow academics, established university extension to give people of all classes wider access to higher education in the form of public programmes of lectures. Rather than remaining cloistered within the walls of Oxbridge, Stuart and his associates expanded the university's reach by travelling to different parts of the country and delivering, often very well attended, lectures on a variety of subjects, from astronomy, to philosophy.<sup>34</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century university extension had influenced the founding of new higher education institutions, including the Universities of Exeter, Reading and Nottingham.<sup>35</sup>

Between 1873 and 1886 the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, London and Victoria (a federation of colleges in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester) all provided some form of university extension teaching.<sup>36</sup> The subjects taught were based on the humanities and liberal arts and included philosophy, literature, history and economics, along with



sciences such as geology and astronomy. Each of these universities took a slightly different approach to educational provision, however. Cambridge, for instance, aimed to enrol those willing to commit to intensive study for up to one term. Courses were aimed at 'earnest students willing to give time to private reading and home study'.<sup>37</sup> Oxford by contrast, sought to attract students at a more general level, awakening an intellectual interest that would 'widen and deepen their ideas of life'.<sup>38</sup> University extension consisted of two components – the lecture and a voluntary class that followed the lecture. The class served those students who wished to gain an extension certificate, while furthering their understanding of the lecture topic through discussion.<sup>39</sup> R.D. Roberts, an administrator of university extension, reported that in Winter 1885-86 Cambridge University delivered extension courses of eleven or twelve lectures at forty-seven centres including Derby, Preston, Norwich, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Chesterfield and Sudbury, the mining villages of Skelton, Hucknall Torkard in Yorkshire and Backworth in Northumberland. He also explained that

The centres are associated into groups of three or four, and a lecturer is appointed to each group who lives in the district for the term, [sic.] and gives a lecture a week at each of the centres under his charge.<sup>40</sup>

While the Co-operative Union and societies, the Gilchrist Educational Trust, the Working Men's Clubs and the Merchant Taylors all gave subsidies to university extension projects, the initiative largely relied on student fees. In practice this meant that the cost of a twelve-meeting lecture course was seventy pounds. Even if 300 students were recruited, tickets were still priced at five shillings each.<sup>41</sup> Funding a successful lecture series was therefore reliant on recruiting large audiences or raising attendance fees at the risk of pricing out many less well-off working-class people and making university extension affordable only to the middle class.

A recurrent criticism of university extension was that it tended to attract middle rather than working-class students.<sup>42</sup> This tendency invariably raised debates within the educational community over who university extension was for. Two distinct lines of thoughts emerged that made the debate a class-based one. One argued that university extension was classless and that it was a universal need.<sup>43</sup> The other asserted that university extension needed to be more accessible to working-class people to support them in their educational aspirations and to empower them socially, politically and economically. This view recognised and acknowledged the rising political power of the labour movement.<sup>44</sup> The debate

about the purpose of, and access to, university extension became key to future developments in how the initiative was organised.

Towards the middle and end of the nineteenth century, a powerful, politicised and economically indispensable industrial urban proletariat had started to arise. Key labour movement organisations that also emerged as a consequence of this were the Trade Union Congress (TUC), founded in 1868, and the New Unions with their mass membership during the late 1880s. In the political sphere, the (Social)-Democratic Federation was founded in 1881, the Fabian Society in 1884, the Independent Labour Party in 1893 and finally the Labour Party in 1900. However, although these bodies were certainly active and growing in influence, they remained outside the formal structures of political power, hindered, in part, by the composition of the electorate. Despite the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, most working-class people, large numbers of men and virtually all women remained disenfranchised. It was not until 1918 that the Fourth Reform Act partially rectified this great electoral imbalance.

Nonetheless, the political significance of these organisations, all of which took diverse approaches to the task of improving the social, political and economic rights of working-class people, lay in how they had come to reflect the changing understanding of workers' education with those who had taken an interest in becoming more class conscious. In the twentieth century this led to the rise of a voluntary working-class education movement with a class-conscious character that could respond to the different demands of the rising labour movement.

To summarise, the historical narrative of adult education in the nineteenth century was one of economic necessity, self-improvement and paternalism. Adult education, aside from the Co-operative, was organised *for* rather than *by* those without means or access to higher education. The organisations named were created and controlled by a combination of philanthropists, entrepreneurs, industrialists, humanitarians, Christian Socialists and middle-class academics.

In the twentieth century however, the WEA and the Labour Colleges emerged as a direct challenge to the traditions of these Victorian-era initiatives with each organisation forming a new historical narrative in support of the future of the modern labour movement in Britain. The class-based debate about who adult education was meant for shifted in favour of creating an alternative that was accessible for working-class people in the form of adult education. The founding of the WEA in 1903 was a clear representation of this shift in thought.<sup>45</sup>

## The WEA – Education for Democracy

Albert Mansbridge (1876-1952) was a key figure in the founding of the WEA.<sup>46</sup> Born in Gloucester, Mansbridge came from a middling working-class background, his father having been a carpenter. He attended Battersea Grammar School but left at the age of fourteen owing to his family's limited financial resources, and became a clerical worker. Nevertheless, he continued to pursue his educational aspirations through university extension classes at King's College London, and eventually becoming qualified to teach evening classes in economics, industrial history and typing.<sup>47</sup> A devout Christian and a member of the Temperance Society, he also had a strong interest in Owenism and the Co-operative, and, for a time, worked as a cashier for the Co-operative Permanent Building Society. Through his educational and religious activities, he eventually became friends with Charles Gore, the Bishop of Oxford; the future Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple; and R.H. Tawney. All these personalities adhered to the idealistic philosophy of T.H. Green and were deeply interested in adult education as a way of creating a harmonious and cohesive society based on citizenship, public service and civic duty.<sup>48</sup>

Mansbridge, by all accounts, was no less passionate about adult education and its potential. He also recognised the need for co-ordination between the university extensionists and labour movement organisations in order to make university extension education easier for working-class adults to access and participate in. Mansbridge devised a system whereby the Co-operative, the TUC, trade unions and other working-class organisations worked in partnership with institutions, initially Oxford and Cambridge and later the newly established civic universities, to deliver higher education to working-class adults in their local communities. The system worked by way of a network of joint committees at local, regional and national level that were spread across different districts of the country.<sup>49</sup> By 1938 the WEA operated in eighteen districts nationwide.<sup>50</sup>

The 1903 joint conference of Co-operators, Trade Unionists and University Extension Authorities held at Oxford under the auspices of the newly formed WEA set the foundations for joint committees and how they were to function. According to the Constitution, WEA local joint committees were to consist of 'two representatives from the University Extension Centre [sic.], two from the Co-operative Society [sic.], and one from each Working Class Organisation [sic.] of standing in the locality, and two directly elected members'.<sup>51</sup> At the seminal Oxford and Working Class Conference held in 1907, Mansbridge succeeded in further uniting

university extensionists, co-operators and trade unionists in their shared mission to make higher education accessible to working class adults.<sup>52</sup> The Conference was attended by '430 delegates from 210 organisations including many trade councils and trade unions'.<sup>53</sup> Mansbridge was also successful in further cementing the principle that joint Committees must include a combination of university academics, WEA representatives and members of Local Educational Authorities (LEAs). The Oxford University joint committee included Mansbridge and J.M. McTavish, a shipwright and later the general secretary of the WEA, and 'two Labour/trade union MPs, C.W. Bowerman and David Shackleton' representing the wider labour movement.<sup>54</sup> The university representatives, all staunch supporters of the WEA, included J.A.R. Marriott, Alfred Zimmern, Sidney Ball, and the Master of Balliol College, A.L. Smith. Bernard Jennings suggests that Mansbridge himself may well have selected the university representatives, a testament to his influence.<sup>55</sup> *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, a report subsequently produced by the Committee, served as a blueprint for how all WEA classes were to be organised. Of significance was the provision that WEA branches or a 'representative body of workmen' were to have 'a controlling voice in the election of a teacher' for a tutorial class.<sup>56</sup> Working-class representatives and students could thus exercise considerable influence over what subjects were taught and who was delivering their classes. This characteristic of the WEA's prescribed teaching programme was consistent with its mission to promote and encourage democracy in thought and practice.

The key to the WEA's success in co-ordinating and organising tutorial classes lay in its system of direct consultation with groups of working-class students. After being recruited through local publicity, these students were then consulted on the subjects they wished to be taught. Once a course subject was identified, the local and regional WEA committees co-ordinated with the universities and organised class venues, times and tutors.<sup>57</sup> Suitable tutors were then identified based on their knowledge of a subject area and ability to communicate with students from working-class backgrounds.<sup>58</sup> This aspect of how the WEA went about organising adult education, using the pre-existing system of university extension, was a true innovation and distinguished it from all previous and contemporary adult education initiatives.

The gold standard of the WEA was the tutorial class, representing much of what the organisation had originally aspired to be. This would, ideally, consist of a group of around thirty working-class adult students who had chosen to study subjects such as literature, history, economics and philosophy under the direction of a sympathetic university tutor,

who had established a strong rapport with the group. Those enrolled on these courses could also choose from more resource-intensive subjects, such as biology, geology and musical appreciation. The two-hour class would take place weekly over three terms and on a yearly basis for up to three years provided the class requested it and funding, tutor and a venue remained available. Students ideally would produce written work – although this was something that many failed to achieve due to work and time commitments as well as a lack of resources – gain essay-writing skills and the fundamental training needed for independent academic study.

Thus, the WEA succeeded in re-shaping the pre-existing boundaries that surrounded the delivery and dissemination of adult higher education in the liberal arts and humanities to the benefit of more working-class students. However, this invariably raised the question as to what type of education should be provided. Here the WEA was firmly in support of that taught at Oxford and Cambridge. During the 1907 Oxford and Working Class Education Conference, J.M. Mactavish voiced the wishes of a significant section of the labour movement: ‘I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give. I claim it as my right, wrongfully withheld’.<sup>59</sup> Mactavish’s statement encapsulates the attitude towards educational opportunities that many working-class people, having been denied a primary and secondary education, held at that time. Here, then, in the world of voluntary working-class adult education, we see a historical narrative transformed from one based on paternalism, philanthropy and charity to self-determination, innovation and influence over aspects of the means of production of higher education – university extension – and a democratised model of access. Critically, the WEA and their partners in the labour movement did not reject what Oxbridge had to offer. This is especially apparent in the founding of the Workers’ Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) supported by the Iron and Steel Trade Confederation and the Union of Post Office Workers in 1919. Trade Union members that subscribed to the WETUC were able to attend WEA classes for free, reflecting the WEA’s commitment to raising accessibility for trade union students.<sup>60</sup>

The relationship between the WEA and the labour movement goes some way in explaining why the WEA was able to promote Oxbridge as a working-class option for higher education without any ideological conflict, unlike the Labour Colleges. Mansbridge, in his writings and addresses, was assiduous in stressing the WEA’s unsectarian and impartial disposition. Although it supported the labour movement indirectly through its ties to political organisations, trade unions and co-operative

societies, it did not, as an association, take a political position.<sup>61</sup> Education, as far as the WEA was concerned, was a universal need and right which transcended politics. What was important was to make it accessible as a common good without forcing a political stance onto those wishing to enrol. It was up to individual students to use their intelligence and education gained from WEA classes wisely in support of democracy.

Jennings' research shows evidence of the distribution of labour movement support for the WEA in the form of affiliations. In 1913-14 'the trade union movement accounted for 953 out of 2,555 affiliations', falling considerably short of the maximum number of trade union potential affiliations in that year. Jennings adds that '388 Co-operative affiliations represented a much larger number of people and more consistent support'.<sup>62</sup> Other groups that affiliated to the WEA included a range of political and educational societies, but its main base consisted of 'religious groups, particularly adult schools and societies'.<sup>63</sup> The impartiality of the WEA and its commitment to democracy made it inclusive, rather than exclusive, of large and diverse sections of the working-class population, regardless of political outlook.

However, local WEA branches differed in their membership and political outlook depending on who the administrators and students were. For example, George Thompson, the longstanding secretary of the WEA in Yorkshire District, believed its contribution lay primarily in offering more effective support for working-class activists serving in the labour movement. Thompson included service as public representatives as well as for specifically working-class organisations, viewing the purpose of the education disseminated by the WEA as being to

make available to the workers as citizens the kind of knowledge and understanding of the social and political order that is essential if democratic principles are to be progressively applied.<sup>64</sup>

Thompson, a strong and determined administrator, ensured that WEA classes in his district adhered to his ideas on the purpose of education. Education was not enough in itself but needed to be exercised through public duty and citizenship. By doing so, the greater purpose of a good education would be actualised to the benefit of society.<sup>65</sup> At a national level, the WEA fully supported this aim, evidenced in their pamphlet *The Adult Student as Citizen* (1938) which lists over 2,000 current and former students as being involved in some form of public service work.<sup>66</sup> The organisation was no less keen to have education promote citizenship and

democracy and to encourage worker-students to take part in local government in direct democratic support of their immediate communities.

Another important aspect of the WEA's courses was their implied social purpose. For many, adult education was a hobby that allowed them to meet like-minded people and expand their interests. Regular extracurricular events like tea dances and rambles were organised by local WEA branches to raise funds but also to give students the opportunity to socialise outside their classes.<sup>67</sup>

The evolution of working-class adult education in the early twentieth century reflected the evolution of the British labour movement as a whole. Many political activists in the movement asserted that education was key to success in the art of citizenship and democratic governance. The challenge was to first gain access to it and then to re-shape it in support of the majority of an, as yet, unrepresented working class who would eventually gain access to political power, as would happen with the extension of the franchise in 1918. Moreover, a need to extend education to potential future leaders from working-class backgrounds was also recognised as a necessity by the then current political leaders and educationalists.<sup>68</sup>

Here the WEA took an approach to higher education that was similar to that of the Labour Party's route to achieving political power. Each organisation aimed to adapt pre-existing structures – the universities and Parliament respectively – to directly reflect the best interests of the majority of working-class people in a way that had not been done before. What was significant about this process of adaptation was the fact that academic and government structures were perceived as class neutral. How they functioned to include or exclude different people or whose interests to serve was predicated on who controlled them.

Two ideological elements of the labour movement thus emerged within the context of adult education. The first was generated by trade unionism and labour representation at government level that strove to establish an influential and large body of workers that would represent the sectional interests of fellow workers in government. From 1900, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) fulfilled this function in relation to Parliament. From 1906, as the Labour Party, it had begun broadening its agenda to accommodate the second ideological element – socialism. Socialism took the British labour movement beyond the confines of labour representation by challenging both the structures and class nature of power. Nonetheless, the Labour Party adhered to the principles of representative parliamentary democracy and the Fabian doctrine of the inevitability of gradualness in achieving its socialist agenda. The approach

taken by the Labour Party and the WEA was one of adapting the system of governance and education respectively in the interests of the majority of working-class people. It was not a case of changing what the state had to offer but of making access to it easier and more equal. As Rodney Barker observed, 'The aim was fairer shares not a new society'.<sup>69</sup>

The narrative that the WEA formed of adult education recognised the value of higher education as taught and disseminated by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. With higher education, they would transform the political system from within and work towards the development of a classless society based in part on Ramsay Macdonald's vision of an organic socialist state wherein all classes would appreciate each other and work towards social harmony, political consensus and economic success.<sup>70</sup> The WEA's success lay in how it skilfully situated itself within two intertwining contexts: the historical narrative of adult education and its significance to the political emergence of Labour politics in Britain.

### **The NCLC – Education for emancipation**

Another interpretation of the history of working-class adult education, parallel to that of the WEA, served to support and inform a more radical element of the modern British left – the Labour College Movement.<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Mansbridge and his peers, those affiliated to the movement had little regard for Oxbridge as the perceived educational ideal. University education in the liberal arts and humanities was viewed as nothing more than a cultural smokescreen, an illusion that deterred the working class from their true calling – revolution and social transformation. The Labour Colleges aspired to innovate and construct a higher education system based entirely on Marxism that responded to the specific political demands of the modern industrial proletariat.

The origins of the Labour College Movement lay in the 1906 student strike at Ruskin College, an institution established just before the WEA to provide higher education on an 'impartial' basis to worker-students. Ruskin was founded in 1899 by the American Christian socialists Walter Vrooman, his wife Anne, and the historian Charles Beard. Vrooman wished to establish a working-class residential college that was based on a model of teaching derived from the ideas of the Victorian art critic and social philosopher John Ruskin.<sup>72</sup> Writing in the early 1860s, Ruskin had criticised the prevailing *laissez-faire* model of capitalism and had found political success in his book *Unto This Last*, later cited by many early Labour MPs as one of the major works that influenced them in their political outlooks.<sup>73</sup> The



purpose of Ruskin College was to 'establish a full-time residential college so that men and women could leave their jobs and devote their time entirely to study'.<sup>74</sup> It was supported by Keir Hardie, the TUC, the Manchester and Oxford Trades Councils as well as the University of Oxford.

The type of education offered by Ruskin College was firmly non-partisan. In 1901, H.B. Lees, the College's first General Secretary, reiterated that at Ruskin 'All the teaching is carefully impartial, and all its tutors are not socialists'.<sup>75</sup> The College taught subjects that included industrial and political history, English constitutional history, political economy, public speaking and citizenship.<sup>76</sup> It also offered correspondence courses in which 'by July 1899, 700 students were enrolled'.<sup>77</sup> By 1903, of a 'total of 20 students, 15 were trade unionists'.<sup>78</sup> In 1907, the number of students admitted was fifty-seven, forty-seven of whom were active trade unionists sponsored by their unions to attend the College.<sup>79</sup> The majority of those enrolled were miners from South Wales owing, partly, to the efforts of T.I. Mardy Jones, himself a former Ruskin College student (1902-1904) and later MP for Pontypridd (1922-1931). Mardy Jones campaigned enthusiastically on behalf of the College in South Wales and emphasised that the purpose of education was not self-advancement but for the collective benefit of all, something that attracted support from the local trade unions.<sup>80</sup> The South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) Rhondda No.1 District, for example, saw a direct political utility in higher education:

We have to contend with the masters, who have men thoroughly versed in the laws of supply and demand, and we want to bring into our ranks young men educated in these matters at Ruskin College, able to hold their own against all comers.<sup>81</sup>

Much has been written on the origins of the strike and its consequences so here I will provide a brief summation.<sup>82</sup> In 1908, students attending Ruskin College demanded a more Marxist curriculum in subjects such as political philosophy and economics. The College authorities declined to accommodate this demand, prompting the students, mainly radical trade union representatives from the SWMF and the railway unions, to go on strike in protest over what they described as 'the private ownership of working-class education'.<sup>83</sup> The striking students called themselves the 'Plebs' in connection with the American socialist newspaper editor, Daniel DeLeon's historical parallel between Marxism and the plebs of ancient Rome. DeLeon had argued for the 'Plebs', or working-class populace, to take power from the Plebian leaders or tribunes, whom DeLeon compared

to the contemporary labour movement's leaders who, he argued, had subverted the true interests of the working class to capitalist demands.<sup>84</sup> By 1908, this group, referring to themselves as the 'Plebs' League', had seceded from Ruskin College and established the Central Labour College (CLC) and other Labour Colleges throughout the country. The CLC, originally based in Oxford but later moved to London, dissolved as an institution in 1929 because of a lack of resources and financial irregularities.<sup>85</sup> The remaining Labour Colleges existed as a federation under the co-ordination of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), founded in 1921 and dissolved in 1964. The journal *Plebs' Magazine* served as their official news organ until 1927 when it came under the direct control of the NCLC.<sup>86</sup>

When compared to the WEA, the Labour Colleges were considerably less successful in terms of student numbers and appeal. By 1922-23, the WEA was operating a national total of 933 classes with 23,045 students.<sup>87</sup> By contrast, Harrison observed that during that same academic year the Labour Colleges 'ran 529 classes with 11,993 students' nationwide.<sup>88</sup> This shows how at this point the Labour Colleges lagged far, far behind the WEA in terms of student numbers and classes.

However, the movement's historical influence was not the extent of the Labour Colleges' tangible success (being limited and confined only to certain communities and regions),<sup>89</sup> but their significance as a radical element of the modern British left that re-imagined working-class adult education as a tool for its political aims. The Labour Colleges aimed to establish a system of adult education that was tailored specifically for the industrial proletariat by their compatriots and peers. The Plebs coined the phrase 'Independent Working Class Education' (IWCE) which encapsulated the ethos and principles of the Labour Colleges.<sup>90</sup> Independence of thought based on Marxist ideas were central to their *raison d'être*. This was encapsulated in their slogan 'Educate, organise, agitate' that emphasised their radical activism in opposition to the WEA's unwieldy, but earnest, 'impartial, unsectarian, democratic'. The Plebs argued that:

The mission of the workers cannot be committed for achievement to those above them in economic position: *it must be self-accomplished* [sic.]. From every point of view, in every part of the field industrial, political or educational, the workers must act independently.<sup>91</sup>

Further, the CLC's stated purpose was to 'train men and women for the industrial, political, and social work of the organised labour movement, under the supreme control of the Labour organisations in the United Kingdom'.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout the inter-war period, the leaders of the WEA and the Labour Colleges engaged in a series of heated debates regarding the efficacy and value of working class adult education.<sup>93</sup> Educationalists in the WEA argued that impartiality was a central principle of higher education: students should be taught to think independently and autonomously by engaging in discussion of a topic from a variety of different perspectives. For the Labour Colleges this way of teaching made little sense. All education in their view was political and therefore needed to be delivered in an overtly political framework. Their own educationalists, in turn, were criticised for their dogmatic approach to teaching that elevated the significance of Marxism to politics, the economy and society to the exclusion of all other views.<sup>94</sup>

The Labour Colleges, in addition to rejecting all forms of higher education provided by, and in association with, the established universities, also refused funding from all non-working-class sources. State funding, in any form, was viewed as politically tainted and compromised the integrity of their mission to revolutionise the educational system to properly reflect working-class interests and culture. The only acceptable means of financial support was from bona fide working-class sources such as the trade unions and co-operatives. In this respect, as well as in their Marxist-based curriculum, the Labour Colleges further distinguished themselves from the WEA, which accepted LEA funding, as an alternative and radical voluntary working-class adult education organisation. This would come to be their unique selling point that appealed to the more radical element of the labour movement. In 1909, for example, 'the delegates to the Annual General Meeting of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants decided by 44 votes for and 5 votes against to transfer all support from Ruskin College to the CLC'.<sup>95</sup> Unsurprisingly, such stringent principles on acceptable funding limited resources and meant that the Labour Colleges always struggled to organise and deliver classes.

As discussed, the educational leadership of the WEA and the Labour Colleges approached the issue of the purpose and content of education from very different perspectives. However, worker-students, unlike the leadership of the WEA and Labour Colleges, tended not to regard these two differing types of education as mutually exclusive and often attended classes run by both organisations. The trade union leader, Jack Jones, for instance, observed that the only notable difference between classes run by the WEA and the Labour Colleges was that the WEA 'had more university and professional people as tutors. For the rest of it they were almost the same'. He also noted that the WEA's approach and curriculum was

much broader than the Labour Colleges. However, for those not interested in music, history and art, the Labour Colleges offered education on 'industrial, law, the structure of trade unionism and what socialism meant, international affairs, international labour politics, international economic matters'.<sup>96</sup> For Jones and those worker-students like him, these were important options to have. The existence of a distinct choice within workers' education, even if both options were ideologically at odds with each other, enabled students who availed themselves of it to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the labour movement, democracy, socialism, Marxism and knowledge for its own sake. As the *1919 Report on Reconstruction* stated with regard to adult education, it was not that there was 'too much teaching which is partial or one-sided in character, but that there is too little education of any kind'.<sup>97</sup> Worker-students took advantage of what was available and independently reached their own conclusions.

Here, then, was another historical narrative used by the left of the British labour movement to radically reconfigure the world of working-class adult education. The Labour Colleges and their proponents sought to reframe the WEA's narrative of the history of working-class adult education for parliamentary and representative democracy and transform it to reflect their vision of British Marxism and an emancipated industrial proletariat. What is perhaps most significant and intriguing about the Labour Colleges, and their drive to create IWCE, is that it represented an original, organic and fundamentally British element of the radical left. Significantly, the Plebs, the CLC and the Labour Colleges had succeeded in establishing themselves and their own distinctive Marxist curriculum before the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920. Their educational salience lay in an approach to teaching predicated on a uniquely British interpretation of Marxism, rooted in the specific demands of Britain's industrial proletariat, without reference to external 'authorities'. Stuart Macintyre and Richard Lewis have skilfully drawn attention to how and why particular industrial communities in South Wales and Lanarkshire succeeded in incorporating Marxist-based education into adult education enterprises.<sup>98</sup> The key to success in this endeavour was to shape education around the immediate political, economic and social interests and needs of working class people, making Marxism relevant and applicable to the locality, region and, most importantly, one's immediate community. Marxism had to be fashioned for a local context for it to be accepted as a realistic option to other less radical approaches on the left such as gradualism. In the IWCE case studies centred on the 'little Moscows' of South Wales and Lanarkshire;

for example, mining communities invested in and attended courses offered by Labour Colleges because they responded to and reflected the political profile of the students attending.<sup>99</sup>

The term 'little Moscow' is also briefly worth unpacking, as it may give the impression that these communities had simply embraced Bolshevik interpretations of Marxism. In reality, the politics of these communities were radical but not necessarily revolutionary.

Stuart Macintyre shows that the Plebs were active in these communities and observes that the 'regional movements for independent working-class education prospered in the pre-war years'.<sup>100</sup> Members of the Plebs founded branches of the League and supported local Labour Colleges and classes. Macintyre further notes that classes run by the Labour Colleges 'merged with the existing efforts of Marxist groups and, where possible, won the support of local trade union branches'.<sup>101</sup> Between 1914 and 1917 William Craik reported that there were "at least a hundred" classes operating in England and Wales' with forty of these having taken place in South Wales.<sup>102</sup> In this way, the Plebs succeeded in embedding themselves in communities that were radical in their political outlook.

In the absence of competition from other politically radical organisations, the Labour Colleges flourished throughout the Edwardian era and during the First World War. This changed in 1920 with the founding of the CPGB, which sought to monopolise Marxist thought in Britain by correcting 'defective (non-Leninist) understandings of Marxism'.<sup>103</sup> It subsequently proceeded to undermine the efforts and achievements of the Plebs' League and Labour Colleges by attempting to make them into 'adjuncts of the Party activity'.<sup>104</sup> The ensuing conflict that erupted between the League and the CPGB was further complicated by the fact that many of the Plebs were also members of the CPGB and vice versa. Between 1922 and 1924, prominent personalities such as Frank and Winifred Horrabin, Ellen Wilkinson and Raymond Postgate, all staunch members of the Plebs, left the CPGB because of their differences with the Party on several issues, including their conception of Marxism and Marxist education.<sup>105</sup> The most significant point of disagreement was over the CPGB's adherence to the Bolshevik idea that working class education could 'only achieve its objective under the leadership of the Party'. By contrast, the Plebs were firmly of the opinion that what was most important was not the Party but an educational organisation 'supported by all workers, industrial and political organisations and uncommitted to any sectional policy'.<sup>106</sup> The final split between the CPGB and Plebs' League occurred in 1923. It is significant, as Macintyre notes, that the CPGB's strategy weakened the League's

educational influence, stripping it of a valuable network that included many potential activists interested in Marxism.<sup>107</sup>

This brings the discussion back to how the Plebs interpreted Marxism from a very British perspective and used education to enact change. For the Plebs, the purpose of IWCE was to instil British society, especially the industrial workforce, with a strong sense of class consciousness. By disseminating this concept through education, a British understanding of Marxism would eventually permeate society and bring about a transformation of the British political system from below.

The Plebs and the Labour Colleges, established almost a decade before the Russian Revolution, demonstrate that a home-grown British Marxism had been taking root before being displaced by the Leninist-Bolshevik version. Why was this important? Why is this relevant to the historiography of working-class adult education and the radical left in Britain? The answer lies in democracy. Political and social space, based on democratic values, already existed within the context of British working-class adult education, allowing for voluntary organisations like the Labour Colleges and WEA to emerge in support of a generation of future labour-movement leaders with diverse political creeds.

The key difference between the two organisations was the WEA's 'impartial' approach that sought to disseminate higher education as a universal good. A potential and indirect benefit was that the worker-students would become politically active in support of the labour movement. Conversely, the Labour Colleges believed that the purpose of education was to nurture and directly support potential militant leaders for class struggle.

Both organisations co-existed despite their differences and engaged in vigorous debate on the efficacy and purpose of adult education for working-class British people. It was this plurality of views which reflected and responded to the diversity of political perspectives within the labour movement.

## Conclusion

This article set out to analyse why and how narratives of the history of working-class adult education were used by the WEA and the Labour Colleges to support and empower a diverse British working-class body. It has analysed what motivated nineteenth-century organisations to disseminate working-class adult education. It has also shown how the WEA and the Labour Colleges re-interpreted aspects of the ownership of the means

of production of education and changed the world of adult education to reflect and respond to the diverse educational demands of working-class adult students. It has also explored the, still on-going, debate surrounding the purpose of higher education in terms of widening participation, citizenship and political empowerment.

The history of working-class adult education from the perspective of the WEA and Labour Colleges, emphasises the relevance and significance of democratic space to debate issues and challenges around its provision and political relevance to those on the moderate and radical left. Ultimately, the historiography of working-class adult education and its contribution to different elements of the modern British left reveal how a robust democracy was integral to supporting and nurturing a diverse culture of working-class learning and political empowerment from 1900 to 1920.

## Notes

1. Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid (eds), *Alternatives to State Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*, London, 2016; Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, Princeton, 2011; Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880-1914*, Cambridge, 1996.
2. A selection of works on adult education in Britain include Roger Fieldhouse & Associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, Leicester, 1996; Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Working Class Education Since 1850*, Oxford, 1995; Peter Gordon, Richard Aldrich and Dennis Dean, *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1991; J.F.C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement*, London, 1961; Sylvia Harrop (ed.), *Oxford and Working Class Education*, Nottingham, 1994; Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Britain From the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, 3rd Ed., Liverpool, 1992; Brian Simon, *The Search for Enlightenment: The Working Class and Adult Education in the 20th Century*, London, 1990.
3. W.P McCann, 'Elementary Education in England and Wales on the Eve of the 1870 Education Act', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 2,1 (1969): 20-29; Stuart J. Maclure (ed.), *Educational Documents England and Wales: 1816 to the Present Day*, 5th Ed., London, 1986.
4. The Central Labour College (CLC) was founded in 1909 and dissolved in the 1920-21 academic year. The remaining labour colleges became a federation administered by the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) from 1921 to 1964. Throughout this paper I will refer to the 'labour colleges' for accuracy.

5. Frank Parkin, 'Working-Class Conservatives: A Theory of Political Deviance', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 18 (1967): 278-290; 289.
6. Allen Warren, *William E Forster (1818-1886) Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* <https://www.oxforddnb.com> (accessed 15 November 2019). Forster was a Quaker, the MP for Bradford and a key proponent of the 1870 Education Act.
7. Maclure, *Educational Documents*, p104.
8. For general histories of these organisations please see Kelly, *A History of Adult Education*; J. Wilhelm Rowntree and Henry Harry Binns, *A History of the Adult School Movement*, London, 1903; Thomas Pole, *A History of the Origins and Progress of Adult Schools*, 3rd Ed., London, 1968; Mark Freeman, 'The decline of the adult school movement between the wars', *History of Education*, 39, 4 (2010): 481-506; Martyn Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond*, London, 2017; Jonathan Davies and Mark Freeman, 'Education for citizenship: The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the educational settlement movement', *History of Education*, 32 (2003): 303-18; J.F.C Harrison, *A History of the Working Mens' College*, London, 1954.
9. Sylvia A. Harrop, 'Adult education and literacy: The importance of post-school education for literacy levels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *History of Education*, 13, 3 (1984): 191-195, 194.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p484.
12. Ibid., p481.
13. Ibid., p506.
14. Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education*, Liverpool, 1957; Thomas Kelly, 'The Origins of Mechanics Institutes in the Nineteenth Century', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1,1 (November 1952): 17-27.
15. Norman Jepson, *The Beginnings of English University Adult Education – Policy and Problems: A critical study of the early Cambridge and Oxford University extension lecture movements between 1873-1907 with Special Reference to Yorkshire*, London, 1973, p55.
16. Martyn Walker, "'Earnest students anxious to acquire a practical knowledge suited to the trade of the district": The growth and development of the mechanics institute movement with particular reference to Huddersfield 1824-1890', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 46, 1 (2014): 38-56, 43.
17. Fieldhouse, *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, p24.
18. Harrison, *Learning and Living*, pp57-89.
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# Doris Lessing

A person of interest

*John Callaghan*

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## **Abstract**

This article examines an important phase of Doris Lessing's life – the years of her commitment to socialism, which began in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and which she continued in London as a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the New Left which emerged from it. World war and her experience of colonialism played a large part in initiating this commitment but so too did her belief that the Soviet Union represented a giant step forward as the first socialist state. She never ceased to discuss these years, but with a growing discomfort derived from her earlier support for Soviet socialism, probably compounded by the fact that she continued to express optimism about the USSR well after her resignation from the CPGB. The result was that she tended to downplay her Communist years and the work she did for the party. The article gives a fuller and clearer account of her political commitments than her own recollections provide of those socialist decades, and establishes continuities between her socialist years and the reforming zeal which suffused many of her later works of fiction.

**Key words:** Doris Lessing, Communism, New Left

## **Introduction**

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) achieved international acclaim as a prolific writer of fiction and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. The Nobel citation referred to that 'scepticism, fire and visionary power' with which she 'subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny'. Lessing's critical engagement with the social order began in the racist settler colony of Southern Rhodesia in 1939, where she was raised from the age of five. But

it was when she moved to London in 1949 and especially after she joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1952 that she became known as a writer and political activist. She resigned from the CPGB in 1956 and was often inclined in later decades to play down the depth of her earlier Communist political convictions and commitments. But she was no apostate.<sup>1</sup> Her aspirations for a better world survived her disenchantment with Communism and she remained a critic of the social order, anticipating the multiple crises of the world she has left behind.

In this article I will present an account of her socialist years which differs from her own in significant ways. In doing this, the article reveals more about her significance in the party and New Left and the esteem in which she was held by her comrades in both. Her tenacious opposition to colonialism and knowledge of the British African settler colonies had much to do with this. Anti-imperialism and anti-racism were among the attractive powers of Communism and though the commitment of the CPGB has been questioned on both counts,<sup>2</sup> Lessing was closely involved in its attempts to intervene against the colonial settlement in Central and Southern Africa. Like many other socialists and Communists she was subject to surveillance by the political police; in her case for at least twenty years. The scale of this purported 'defence of the realm' is only beginning to be understood, yet MI5 had already amassed 250,000 files on the Communist Party 'and its fellow travellers' by 1950.<sup>3</sup> Since the release of some of these files it has become apparent that academics, scientists, poets and writers were among those whose privacy was violated by phone taps, mail and baggage intercepts and various forms of monitoring. This article draws on Lessing's files and shows the international scope of the intelligence operation.

## Salisbury

Two world wars played a major role in arousing overseas support for the Communist movement and during the second conflict Doris Lessing was drawn in to left-wing politics. In Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, she met 'a group of people ... who read everything, and did not think it remarkable to read, and among whom thoughts about the Native Problem I had scarcely dared to say aloud turned out to be mere commonplaces. I became a Communist because of the spirit of the times, because of the *Zeitgeist*'.<sup>4</sup> Lessing sometimes referred to this phase in her life as 'short-lived', like the *Zeitgeist* she refers to.<sup>5</sup> But bearing in mind the rapid turnover of members in Communist Parties, her commitment to Marxist politics is

more accurately described as long-lived, spanning around twenty years from when she was about twenty-three until she was approaching her mid-forties. This goes some way towards explaining why she constantly talked about this phase in her life and struggled to explain it. Though she never claimed to be a political theorist, politics in the broadest sense informed her fiction and non-fiction alike, sometimes with great knowledge and insight.<sup>6</sup> Her Marxist years of political activism began with the Salisbury group and included the South African Communist Party, for which she worked for some months in 1946, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the New Left which emerged from among its former members. She was no ordinary rank-and-file member in any of these transitions. In Salisbury she married the most dedicated Communist in the group; in South Africa, she worked for the communist newspaper *Guardian* in its subscriptions department, selling the journal in the industrial areas of Cape Town, at a time when its circulation was still close to its wartime peak and the post-war repression of the South African Communist Party was increasing; in London she lived for a time, from 1950, with Joan Rodker, her best friend and a remarkable activist for the CPGB who had actually lived in the Soviet Union and shared Lessing's literary interests and single parenthood. Joan, 'knew everyone in the Party ... and ... most people in the arts'.<sup>7</sup> Within weeks of formally joining the CPGB Doris – now a publishing success with a deserved reputation as a talented critic of colonialism and racism – was on first name terms with some its leaders and taking on party responsibilities. The writers' trip to the Soviet Union of 1952, which she remembers in her autobiography, was the first time she had visited the country since her family travelled back to Britain from Persia overland in 1924 and witnessed the chaos, squalor, disease and hunger of the early Bolshevik state. It was undertaken before she formally joined the party, a sign of the confidence its Communist organisers placed in her.

But there is no doubt that the circumstances of 1942-3 played a big role in drawing her in to left-wing activism. An important element of this situation, perhaps the most important, was supplied by the victories of the Red Army 'and nothing the newspapers had said for years could explain how they did it'.<sup>8</sup> People were left to draw their own conclusions and many of them seem to have thought that Soviet socialism must be worth fighting for.<sup>9</sup> Meetings in Salisbury were organised around Medical Aid for Russia, by Friends of the Soviet Union and a Left Club mostly composed of non-Communists who were well-disposed to the small group which established a would-be Communist Party. The goodwill had peaked

before the end of the war, however, and so had the 'party'; by VE Day, as the airmen returned home, it was finished. From the start public meetings of the 'Race Relations' group, as it was known, were attended by the CID, even though the revolutionaries had no contact with organised black groups, which did not exist in the Salisbury area. Charles Mzingele, 'who dreamed of a trade union of mine workers', was the only black African with whom the group was in regular contact.<sup>10</sup> But the hyper-active fraternity to which Lessing belonged managed to establish a branch of the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party for black members, with Mzingele as its intended leader.

In 1943 she married Gottfried Lessing, a lawyer and leading figure among the Salisbury Communists, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1938 and reached Southern Rhodesia via Britain (where 70,000 alien refugees resided when the war began). Gottfried's commitment to the party was lifelong. He settled in East Berlin in 1950, joined the Socialist Unity Party in 1951 and worked in various prominent official capacities for the DDR until his death in 1979. Doris, by contrast, doubts that she was 'really interested in politics' even at this stage in her development, judged by what she could remember about it when writing her autobiography.<sup>11</sup> Memory is notoriously unreliable, as she admits, sometimes 'utterly unreliable'.<sup>12</sup> John Saville, an associate of her party years, did not recognise the doubt-ridden Doris Lessing of her autobiography.<sup>13</sup> Carole Klein, an unauthorised Lessing biographer, quotes an observer from her Salisbury days who also remembered it differently: 'Doris was, and to my mind still is, an ideologue'. Other acquaintances and former friends of later years took a similar view, one of them recalling Lessing after she resigned from the party in the 1950s as a person of 'radical views ... lacking in ambiguity or irony ... strangely literal-minded in her leftism'.<sup>14</sup>

### **British Communist Party**

In 1949 she moved to London with her son and the manuscript of her first publishing success, *The Grass is Singing* (1950). She mixed with Communists for some years before she joined the CPGB 'for reasons which I still don't fully understand, but did not go to meetings and was already a "dissident", though the word had not been invented'.<sup>15</sup> The suggestion of critical detachment, however, was not visible in her behaviour and even in her autobiography it is thrown into doubt by the notion that party membership was akin to a religious belief and that its devotees shared the mentality and capacities of the 'young activists, dedicated members of



the [Soviet] Communist Party' who carried out Stalin's directives, 'those murderers with a clear conscience'.<sup>16</sup> This presupposes, at the least, a powerful ideological conviction and commitment to the Communist version of socialism shared by Lessing's associates and her supposedly semi-detached self. But if it is difficult to believe that Lessing's mentality was anything like that of those 'murderers with a clear conscience', she provides evidence to reinforce our doubts. One of her abiding memories of the war years, she recounts, was the shock the Salisbury group felt when the Russians publicly hung German war criminals.<sup>17</sup> They had imagined the war in terms of named battles and had little idea of the mass murders and systematic cruelties that went on in the heart of it. Was the same true of their imaginings of 'building socialism'? Far from carrying out Stalin's orders, were Lessing and her friends able even to guess what they might be? Some answers to these questions emerged in 1956.

Lessing recalls that optimism about the future was strong in post-war London. Socialism was the key to the prevailing optimism in her own milieu. She found, however, that 'anywhere outside communist circles' people denied or simply did not want to know what she had to say about Southern Rhodesia and the Republic of South Africa. The communists were set apart – they were interested in the politics of other countries as well as their own. She was accepted as one of their number even before she joined the party. 'The world was their responsibility' and they shared her immersion in literature.<sup>18</sup> Lessing's autobiography veers between memories of what attracted her to party circles, what had always troubled her about being a communist and what she finally found repellent. She claims that she was already 'Unhappy with communism ... unhappiest with its language' in the year she joined the party. It 'was probably the most neurotic act of my life ... at a time when my "doubts" had become something like a steady private torment'. She was 'far from a true believer' and yet one who secretly believed that the Soviet leadership had become corrupt and would be replaced by 'the good communists ... and then communism would resume its march to a just society ....' Doris, it seems, 'hated joining anything', and especially loathed meetings. She was upset by what she saw in Moscow in 1952, the dreary streets, the empty shops, bad clothes, even the atmosphere of Stalin's Moscow. Upon her return to Britain she was already regretting joining the party.<sup>19</sup> Yet she spoke with the other participants at meetings organised by the CPGB, and the *Daily Worker* (18 July 1952) published a report on the trip extolling the USSR as a country of book lovers. She also asked party officials to provide contact details for members of the Communist Party of France (PCF), to see what

the PCF was like, and attended receptions at the Czech, Bulgarian and Soviet embassies in London; she spoke to members of the IRA and even sold copies of the *Daily Worker*.<sup>20</sup> In 1954 or 1955 she would arrange to meet Samuel Marshak – a prominent Soviet writer she had met in Moscow – whenever he came to London. Surprisingly, these nocturnal trysts at a London hotel seem to have been missed by MI5, an organisation inclined to regard anyone attached to the Soviet Embassy as a spy, let alone the holder of the Stalin Prize for Literature like Marshak.<sup>21</sup>

Lessing had been under observation for some time and emerges from the files as a committed activist with strong connections to world Communism. The first record of surveillance is an intercepted letter of 1943 shortly after she met fellow radicals in Salisbury.<sup>22</sup> This connection followed her to London. As early as April 1949 MI5 was informed of her left-wing affiliations and of the likelihood that she would make contact with the CPGB upon arrival in Britain.<sup>23</sup> In December 1951 London was again informed by the Salisbury police of her membership of the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party and of its propaganda committee. The Security Liaison Officer in Salisbury reported in September 1952 of her continuing correspondence with Charles Mzingeli, Elias Mtepuka, of the Nyasaland African Congress, and other opponents of the Central African Federation (CAF) such as Lawrence Vambe of *African Weekly*. Soon after Lessing joined the CPGB in 1952 she behaved like a veteran rather than a new recruit. She had been a member of the CPGB only a matter of months when she is recorded as having spoken to Party officials (Idris Cox, Sam Aaronovitch and Desmond Buckle) about the possibility of providing leadership training for African activists.<sup>24</sup> Charles Mzingeli is named as one of those she wants to bring to Britain. In April 1953 another telephone tap found her speaking to the long-standing party intellectual and full-time official Emile Burns in connection with a problem she had writing a novel (*Retreat To Innocence*) in which the party and its ideology featured.<sup>25</sup> When her baggage was searched at London airport in June 1954 her passport was found to contain 'several 1952 visas for Iron Curtain countries'; (apart from the writers' trip to Moscow and Czechoslovakia, these would have included journeys to East Germany to speak to Gottfried). That month Lessing is reported to have offered her services to the CPGB's National Cultural Committee – Aaronovitch was its national coordinator – and is described in the files as a 'leader' of the Party's Writers' Group. Lessing is said to have been writing articles for the Moscow-based *Literary Gazette* and the World Peace Appeal journal *Preview*, connected with its Film Panel. She was also a member of the management committee of the Russia

Today Book Club. An intercepted letter to Desmond Buckle in 1953 mentions her as a speaker at the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR on the topic of her recent visit to the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> At the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1954, according to the British Embassy in Moscow, she was praised as representative of 'modern progressive literature'. Her activities also included peace agitation as a speaker under the auspices of the Authors' World Peace Appeal. The Communist leadership in Britain was known to be keen on making more use of her, for example within the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) and perhaps as London correspondent of an overseas journal.<sup>27</sup> MI5 and the South African police were aware of her planned visit to Southern Rhodesia and South Africa by the end of 1955 and of her connections with South African Communists. She was visited at her London address by South African Communists such as Moses Kotane (secretary general of the South African Communist Party) and Charles Feinstein (party member and Cambridge economic historian) in November and December 1955.<sup>28</sup> Phone taps record conversations with Charles Mzingeli advising him to make use of the MCF in London. In January 1956 an anti-Communist Czech immigrant and neighbour of Lessing's reported that she was 'frequently visited by persons of various nationality'. For this reason, laughably, the local constabulary supposed that her flat was 'being used for immoral purposes'.<sup>29</sup> After her return from southern Africa Lessing hosted members of the Northern Rhodesian National Congress two or three times a week for several months, together with exiles from Zanzibar and Nyasaland. This was prompted, she says in her autobiography, by criticism from the CPGB that she was not pulling her weight.<sup>30</sup> But the reality is that she continued to advise and befriend African political activists well after her party days were over.

Lessing was aware that she was under surveillance both in Britain and in Southern Rhodesia and wrote about it in the *New Statesman*.<sup>31</sup> With Paul Hogarth,<sup>32</sup> she left for Lusaka at the end of March 1956 and was thought to be making contacts 'for future Party use' but also gathering material for writing.<sup>33</sup> They returned on 19 May. The visit was monitored by local police who complained that Hogarth and Lessing 'have been careful and wary over their plans and movements', taking evasive action and occasionally giving them the slip. They nevertheless reported trips to Salisbury, Bulawayo, Ndola, Kitwe, Kabulouga, Umtali, and Gwelo and noted the people<sup>34</sup> they stayed with, all of whom possessed 'advanced views on inter-racialism', when they were not actually 'Communists' (the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, Garfield Todd, with whom she had a three-hour interview at his request, was said to be 'distressed to note the

number of Communist sympathisers who appear to have found refuge in the Native Education Department’).<sup>35</sup> The local CID was also distressed that it did not have ‘a properly equipped’ Special Branch. Lessing told black activists that the purpose of her visit was to ascertain opinion on the question of the CAF but the police believed she was establishing contacts for future CP use and asserted that she made no secret of her Communist commitments.<sup>36</sup> The copper belt of Northern Rhodesia was of special concern, with its African Mineworkers Union, 43,000-strong, and African National Congress membership of 80,000. Lessing was there between 7 and 13 May. In Bulawayo she also met members of the Nyasaland African Congress. Lessing also flew to South Africa from Salisbury but was refused entry. She immediately contacted Desmond Buckle telling him to get Reuters alerted to her ban from the country; and articles explaining why she had been refused entry were later published in the *Daily Herald* and the *New Statesman*. It was observed by officials in Salisbury that in future, with advanced notice of any planned visit, she could be prevented from entering the CAF as ‘a prohibited immigrant’ before she had even left London.<sup>37</sup> It would save a lot of trouble, though on this occasion, as she observes in her autobiography, Todd had actually intervened to allow Lessing to enter the country when Special Branch alerted the authorities that her name was on the passenger list. The Prime Minister, perhaps overestimating his powers of persuasion, was convinced that she would find nothing but good to say about the CAF and promised ‘every facility’ during her visit.<sup>38</sup>

In *Walking in the Shade* Lessing explains that she was ‘being urged to go back to Southern Rhodesia by friends there ... the comrades generally ...’ at a time when all the newspapers in Britain, except *Tribune* and the *Daily Worker*, supported the CAF. Yet unrest was ‘already breaking out everywhere in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia’.<sup>39</sup> She made unsuccessful efforts to get *Picture Post* to fund the trip and finally spoke to the cultural attaché at the Soviet Embassy in London. A week before the trip she received a cheque from the Narodny Bank, nominally as royalties for her publications in the Soviet Union. The articles she prepared for British newspapers were also sent to the embassy and ended up in Soviet publications after ‘creative’ translation to ‘make the situation in Central Africa worse than it was’.<sup>40</sup>

Though MI5 decided not to tamper with Lessing’s and Hogarth’s notebooks upon their return to London – officials were bearing in mind the *New Statesman* article in which Lessing had reported its surveillance activity – monitoring continued. This surveillance should have allayed all

the worries expressed in the files about the multiple Communist contacts which the trip to the Rhodesias had allegedly involved; likewise, it should have soothed the fears of the 'over-stretched' CID in Salisbury. But it also supplied evidence confirming their assumptions about the purpose of the tour. Lessing's public reports on her trip focused on the CAF, which she accurately described as an object of universal opposition among the indigenous people. She even suggested that they preferred South African apartheid, if only because South Africa provided greater economic opportunities than the CAF.<sup>41</sup> Africans were subject to very similar segregation within the CAF and most of the whites would have gone further if they had been able to and adopted full apartheid, which, according to Lessing, they found perfectly acceptable. But their leaders favoured co-optation of a minority of Africans to give the appearance of a 'partnership', utterly bogus, but the better strategy for holding on to power. In London the motivation of the British government was strategic, in Lessing's view; the CAF would become a suitable object for dominion status which would ensure continued British influence and access to resources such as copper.

Lessing published an account of her visit in *Going Home* (1957) in which she elaborated on this analysis. She noted the links between British intelligence and the political police in South Africa and the CAF and wondered why they bothered with her visit; 'I could hardly be called a politically active person ... writing does not leave much time for politics; and in any case it was of my firmest principles that a writer should not become involved in day-to-day politics ... it has a disastrous effect on writing'.<sup>42</sup> But she conceded that she did not stick to that principle because of her 'puritan sense of duty' and her fascination with political behaviour which made her 'an agitator manquée' who mixed socially with political activists. Not many pages later, however, Lessing admitted that she was considered undesirable in southern Africa because 'I am a Communist' and added that she believed 'that in a decade the Communist countries of the world will be freer, more democratic (in the political, as well as the economic sense of these words) than the Western World, which is rapidly becoming less free, less democratic. If I did not think this I would not remain a Communist'.<sup>43</sup> Supposing that these words were written immediately when she returned to Britain in the summer of 1956 they are still surprising in view of the tumult which had already engulfed the Communist world and all the more so in view of Lessing's acknowledgment, in conversation with a critic she encountered in Lusaka, that she 'hated as much as he did the massacres and atrocities that have occurred under Communism'.<sup>44</sup> They seem to show that the scale of the violence

Khrushchev revealed in 1956 was not the major factor in denting her faith in the Communist project.

By September 1956 MI5 also had information on Lessing's report of the trip to officials of the CPGB, as well as the public meetings she addressed, neither of which are mentioned in her autobiography. She was said to be 'disparaging' of Charles Mzingeli, in private party gatherings, while stressing that he was 'the only leader who is of any calibre'.<sup>45</sup> At a meeting of the Africa Committee held at King Street on 25 July 1956 – attended by Idris Cox, Hugo Rathbone, Desmond Buckle and others – the main subject was the CAF and Lessing was invited to reveal what her trip had disclosed. In this report she lamented a general lack of know-how of Africans in the political struggle. In Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland the Congress movements are described as 'on the wrong lines', both violently nationalistic and imagining that they could obtain Colonial Office protection. Lessing thought highly of Kenneth Kaunda but was critical of his attitude to the Indian community in Northern Rhodesia. Communist influence was described as 'small' throughout the CAF, completely absent in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and involving only four or five people in Southern Rhodesia, but none in Salisbury itself. What could the CPGB do to improve the situation? She thought it essential to make contact with Africans when they came to London and reported that the Indian government was doing some useful work in the CAF by sending so-called Trade Representatives 'who were in actual fact agitators'. Lessing thought that it might also be possible to use Cairo Radio in which Simon Zukos (an executive committee member of the MCF) had a contact. Zukos and Lessing had already 'worked out a complete plan of cover addresses to receive information' but what remained to be done was the organisation of people who could send information from the CAF. Cox suggested the WFTU might be able to get Africans to London, and delegations of miners and fireman might be sent there. The MCF could also be used for this purpose. Lessing began attending its meetings in the House of Commons in 1956.<sup>46</sup> But she found that Southern Rhodesia was ignored by these meetings on the grounds that it was a self-governing colony and Britain had no say on what was going on – a point she unsuccessfully challenged (despite the fact that the protection of the native population had been reserved to the British state since 1924). Lessing said that she soon stopped going to the meetings but MI5 records show that the political police in Britain and Southern Rhodesia remained convinced of her involvement with the MCF well in to 1958 and noted her connection to Dixon Konkola of Bulawayo, president of the Railway African Workers' Union.<sup>47</sup>

## Stalin

At the time Lessing left for southern Africa in March 1956 questions were already being asked about Stalin within the CPGB as its membership digested Khrushchev's rehabilitation of Tito, whom Stalin had anathematized, and wondered why the party leaders at home had been so uncritical of the Soviet leader. On her return, the CPGB was plunged into turmoil when the full text of Khrushchev's speech to the twentieth congress of the CPSU was published in the *New York Times* (5 June 1956) and the *Observer* (10 June). Shorter versions had been in circulation in the English-speaking world since March but the full text, revealing Stalin as a mass murderer and ruthless tyrant, exposed Communist leaders everywhere to an interrogation that would not go away. Lessing was soon exchanging correspondence with John Saville and Edward Thompson who emerged as leading party dissidents when *The Reasoner* commenced publication in July 1956 with the intention of reforming the CPGB from within, a goal Lessing supported, believing that the leadership could be saved from itself and taken out of the orbit of the Soviet Union. In fact she counted herself among a minority of Communists who were not shocked by the revelations but who wondered why Khrushchev had not gone further and told the whole truth. She expected that true Communists must exist who would 'put Soviet communism back on the true path'.<sup>48</sup> The situation of world Communism deteriorated sharply, however. In late October the Hungarian uprising against Soviet domination began and on 4 November Soviet military intervention suppressed the rising. The CPGB supported the Soviet action and thus demonstrated the survival of slavish support for the USSR within the party leadership and the continued health of Stalinism both at home and in Moscow. Up to a third of the CPGB membership quit the party by the end of 1957 and Lessing was among them.

On 11 December 1956 she submitted her letter of resignation to the party leader John Gollan:

Dear Comrade Gollan,

Firstly, I should like to congratulate you on the way you handled television last night. I thought you were impressively dignified in a very difficult situation, which does not mean that I agree with the line you put forward – I disagree totally with your attitude towards Hungary ...

I think the leadership of the British Communist Party has handled the situation since the Twentieth Congress in a way which makes it

inevitable that the British Communist Party can't win mass support in the foreseeable future, and will remain a small pressure group.

... I do not hold the view that Britain does not need a communist party – on the contrary, it is a tragedy that ... there will not be a strong communist party. Also, I think that a pressure group will be better than nothing.

.... I don't think artists should spend time on day-to-day politics; I never have and that is why I haven't taken part in branch life.

The development of the world towards socialism is an interaction between all the different forces inside communism and the different forces inside capitalism.

I want to make it clear that I have no intention of drifting into a position of being anti-communist or anti-soviet. Nor shall I join the Labour Party; because while I am not sure any longer what is meant by the word Marxist, I am quite sure I am not, and could not be, a social democrat.

If it were not another of those damned Russian phrases, I should say that I propose to be a non-party Bolshevik ... I won't suffer continually from a bad conscience ... because I am breaking discipline by criticizing the party ... I assure you of my continued respect for you as people and fighters for socialism even though (at the moment) I could hardly disapprove more strongly than I do of your policies and ways of thinking.

I shan't be issuing a press statement, because I can't stand these howls of malicious joy which go up from our opponents every time one of us leaves.

Lessing ended 'with fraternal greetings'.<sup>49</sup>

MI5 understandably took the view that 'despite her resignation we have no reason to believe that Mrs Lessing's fundamental Marxist convictions have in any way changed'. An unnamed source told them that Lessing thought the CPGB was 'hopeless and gutless over Hungary' but the source added that she remains a Marxist in search of a communist party she can support.<sup>50</sup> Why someone who purportedly had doubts about Communism when she joined the CPGB in 1952 should want to be regarded as a 'non-party Bolshevik' in the month that she resigned from it is not immediately obvious. One possible explanation, provided by her future lover Clancy Sigal, whom she lived with for four years from 1957, was that her break from the party was primarily motivated by its hostility to creative artists.<sup>51</sup> Another possibility, suggested by Lessing herself,



was that, under the influence of Sigal, she was thinking like a Trotskyist; Bolshevism had simply gone wrong under Stalin and was not inherently flawed.<sup>52</sup>

## New Left

In the autumn of 1956 Lessing was caught, like many other members of the party, between her established loyalties and her doubts about these commitments. She contributed correspondence to *The Reasoner* (launched in July 1956) in October 1956 explaining that ‘the cult of the individual’ was no explanation of what had gone wrong; it was rather the suspension of independent critical thinking on the part of all communists. She also informed Sam Aaronovitch that Thompson and Saville, though ‘very honest’ people, were also ‘impulsive’ and had published her letter without permission. From Thompson she had heard rumours that a party faction was forming that refused to participate in the Commissions and was demanding a new General Secretary. She promised to get in touch with Sam Aaronovitch ‘next time I have my colonial friends around’.<sup>53</sup> An attempt by Idris Cox to get Lessing more involved in CP work was rebuffed in October in what he called ‘a most pathetic letter’ pleading ‘please no more committees’.<sup>54</sup> But the following month she gave a talk on Africa to the Norland branch of the CP; only fourteen people attended.<sup>55</sup> She also addressed a meeting of the Association for African and Asian Affairs in Hull and was among the writers who condemned the British invasion of Egypt in a message sent to the Union of Soviet Writers. She was also among the signatories to a letter addressed to the party leadership criticising both them and the regimes of Eastern Europe while claiming that they ‘still consider the Marxist method to be correct’.<sup>56</sup>

Lessing was increasingly involved with the party’s leading critics, informing John Saville in October 1956 of the incomprehension of CP officials and of their blanket condemnation of ‘you intellectuals’. She argued in correspondence to Saville that *The Reasoner* should take its commitment to communism for granted and only open a debate to save the party; ‘above all we must accept our responsibility for having been part of the thing, our responsibility for the good and the bad ... We have all been part of the terrible, magnificent, bloody, contradictory process, the establishing of the first Communist regime in the world – which has made possible our present freedom to say what we think, and to think again creatively’.<sup>57</sup> An unnamed source is quoted in the MI5 files saying that Lessing’s resignation had very little to do with Hungary, much more

to do with her estimation of the 'feeble' state of the CPGB – the party she wanted to reform.<sup>58</sup> In October 1957, ten months since her resignation from the party, a letter from Idris Cox to Desmond Buckle refers to a meeting with Lessing at which they had shared a 'long conversation' – 'quite a friendly talk'. Lessing stressed, once again, her need for time in order to focus on her work. But this time Cox left the meeting convinced that she would ultimately rejoin the party.<sup>59</sup> Of course that never happened and is probably simply evidence of Lessing's acknowledged love of political intrigue – a disposition she invokes in her autobiography to explain why she was repeatedly drawn into political activity. Such activity continued to find expression in published writing and in 1957 that included a chapter in *Declaration*, a work promoting the journalistic notion of the Angry Young Men, with whom Lessing was associated.

There was no ideological or artistic unity in the group beyond the conviction that some kind of cultural decay was in evidence in Britain. Lessing and Lindsay Anderson stood out from the rest for their political commitment. Lessing identified with the realist tradition in literature which she said represented the shared ethical standards and values of humanism, 'a faith in man himself' now sorely lacking in contemporary writing. She believed the time was 'one of the great turning points of history', a time 'so dangerous, violent, explosive and precarious' but one also of 'agonized reappraisals' throughout the socialist world. She thought that 'there is a new man about to be born' but that younger intellectuals 'who totally reject everything communism stands for ... cut themselves off from a third of mankind, and impoverish themselves by doing so'.<sup>60</sup> This parochialism knows nothing of 'the most epic movement of change ever known in history ... the greatest event of our time ...' convulsing the Soviet Union and China. Lessing admitted that when she first became a communist she knew little about the Soviet Union but after fifteen years of 'adjusting to reality' she still found herself 'in the possession of an optimism about the future ... Perhaps it is that the result of having been a communist is to be a humanist'.<sup>61</sup> She certainly subscribed to the notion that profound progressive forces were at work in the Communist states well after her departure from the CPGB.

This was not the stance of the New Left gathered around Thompson and Saville, though building a broad socialist humanist front was. In London it could be found among those, like Lessing, who frequented John Berger's Geneva Club – including Lindsay Anderson, Paul Hogarth, Isaac Deutscher, and those realist painters and sculptors championed by Berger.<sup>62</sup> She was still meeting colonial radicals and those interested in the

colonial world such as Cheddi Jagan, Joshua Nkomo, Ruth Glass, Basil Davidson and Abu Mayanja general secretary of the Uganda National Congress.<sup>63</sup> Her friends within the milieu of ex-Communists, and among socialists who had never been Communists, included CND supporters and radicals of the theatre, cinema and the arts. MI5 described her in 1962 as a speaker or a sponsor of 'communist-penetrated organisations such as the National Assembly of Women, the British-Polish Friendship Society, the Committee for the Defence of French Democracy, the Connelly Association, the London Schools Left Club, the National Film Theatre Forum, the National Association of Labour Student Organisations and the British Cuba Committee.'<sup>64</sup> Her charge sheet included membership of the *New Reasoner* editorial board, CND activism – including speaking at CND meetings and lobbying parliament against an Anglo-American deal for missile bases inside the UK, and sponsorship of the Direct Action committee of the Committee of 100. Stuart Hall remembered her speaking at events organised by the journal *Universities and Left Review*, which merged with the *New Reasoner* in 1960 to form *New Left Review* (NLR). Peter Worsley remembered talks they gave together on their shared knowledge of British colonialism in Africa.<sup>65</sup> Lessing also joined the editorial board of NLR. She 'last came to notice', a note in the files records, in January 1962 as a member of the management committee of Centre 42, set up by Arnold Wesker and a group of writers, to which Lessing belonged from its inception in December 1961, to promote educational plays and encourage the arts in the provinces.<sup>66</sup>

But Lessing also supplied public evidence of her impatience with socialists and much of socialist ideology which of course MI5 ignored. She complained in 1961 about the abuse she suffered for expressing such criticisms.<sup>67</sup> Instead of thinking creatively about socialism, she said, energies were fragmented and wasted, while a 'false solidarity' blunted critical faculties on issues such as Cuba and Nkrumah's Ghana. Labour's left-wing remained utterly 'arid', no one made connections with the public, big issues such as the murder of sixty Africans in a Paris demonstration passed without causing a ripple, and socialists continued to pose 'no threat to that senile public school bully who owns and disposes of the country'. In fact Lessing's critical distance from the Left had been taking shape for some time and emerges in her relationship to the *New Reasoner* project despite her support for Thompson's 'socialist humanist and anti-Stalinist common intellectual front'.<sup>68</sup> Failures to contact Lessing and failures to communicate when they did meet are already recorded in February 1957.<sup>69</sup> She told Edward Thompson that month 'We are living in a time,

I am convinced, when there aren't likely to be any philosophies one can pay allegiance to'. But in the same letter she declared 'I know I am a socialist, and I believe in the necessity for revolution when the moment is opportune'.<sup>70</sup> However, the moral fervour that she believed necessary to underpin communist commitment had gone in the light of 'the blood baths and cynicism of the last thirty years' which made indignation about the depredations of capitalism impossible. Lessing's problem with the proposed *New Reasoner* also involved more mundane issues and began in the planning stage. It seems to have involved its perceived indifference to cultural issues at time when she believed her main contribution to the common cause could come through fiction.<sup>71</sup> In fact she told the other editors that she was working on a novel that would address the issues they all felt strongly about. In May 1957 she contributed 'The Day That Stalin Died' to the second issue which Thompson believed was 'bang on. I don't think we will have any disagreement about publishing it this time', he told Saville – a comment that seems to allude to an earlier piece 'Excuse Me' which had to be revised.<sup>72</sup> Thompson was actually very keen that Lessing and Randall Swingler should normally have final say on any publications involving fiction, poetry and reportage.<sup>73</sup> In preparation for the second number of *New Reasoner* he wrote to them both asking for 'the application of ideas and imagination', reporting that he had approached Beatrix Lehmann to write something on current theatre and suggesting that Swingler should approach Michael Warr, perhaps Sean O'Casey, and asking Doris to speak to John Osborne. Thompson thought that a recent article by Osborne for *Reynolds News* had 'expressed some strong and intelligent revolutionary socialist positions' and wanted Lessing to invite 'him to develop his views more seriously'.<sup>74</sup> Lessing hosted meetings related to the *New Reasoner* in London but the old aversion to such gatherings and the time they subtracted from her work was always present at a time when she was also living with Clancy Sigal, an individual with whom Thompson and Saville clashed on occasions.<sup>75</sup> She also felt 'more than aggrieved that when I write a novel all about left politics (*Retreat To Innocence*), and which surely ought to be of interest to the left, that neither the *New Reasoner* nor the *Universities and Left Review* can be bothered to review it'.<sup>76</sup> In fact neither journal attracted outstanding literary contributions for all their genuine concern to address cultural matters. Lessing nevertheless continued to speak at meetings organised by the New Left, one of the very few women to do so, and was valued for her ability to write persuasively and get into influential journals of opinion like the *Observer*.<sup>77</sup>

### Ongoing political commitment

One of the most prominent concerns of Left intellectuals in Britain in the years 1956-1962 was the state of working class politics. Lessing never contributed directly to this debate which raised questions about the decline or transformation of the working class as consumerist individualism grew, promoted by affluence and marketing, while other values, such as community and solidarity, were corroded under the pressure of social and economic change. Labour's third consecutive general election defeat in 1959 underlined the salience of these discussions that had been underway in response to publications by JK Galbraith, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and others. The question 'Must Labour Lose?' seemed to many an invitation to answer in the affirmative. Lessing had already complained of the deradicalising influence of affluence on former comrades when she wrote about her visit to Southern Rhodesia.<sup>78</sup> She and Clancy Sigal had separately arranged to live in mining communities in England – Doris five years before Clancy. She later complained that any working class people she had knowledge of – such as the ones she lived with and wrote about in *In Pursuit of the English* (1960) – were people who never lived up to the Marxist ideal, and were always dismissed as unrepresentative of the working class by people who defended that ideal. Sigal turned his experience into a novel – *Weekend in Dinlock* (1960) – which generated some controversy within the New Left.<sup>79</sup> While the New Left's turn to cultural analysis was powerfully informed by this 'state of politics, state of the working class' debate, and Lessing would have been well aware of it, her own retreat from Left activism after 1962, probably has multiple causes – first and foremost her commitment to writing. But whatever the causes of this stepping back from activism, her published work remained political and some of the old concerns continued to surface in her writing.

The sequence of near-autobiographical novels in the *Children of Violence* series, begun in 1952, grapples with Martha Quest's political commitments and beliefs, especially in the third and fourth volumes – *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) and *Landlocked* (1965). But politics is far from absent in the final volume, the dystopian *The Four-Gated City* (1969). In fact Lessing promoted the last volume as 'a prophetic novel' because she believed that 'the future is going to be cataclysmic' and this sensibility would remain a recurring element in her thinking as her focus shifted from a critique of capitalism to a critique of contemporary civilisation. Nuclear weapons worried her and dangerously hysterical politics such as the anti-Communism that had gripped the USA since 1947. But

so did global inequality and the fact that a third of humanity was inadequately fed and housed.<sup>80</sup> At Stony Brook university in New York she acknowledged in an interview in 1969 that she was 'intensely aware of, and want[ed] to write about, politics' and felt 'obligated to dramatize the political conflicts of ... [the] ... time in ... fiction'. She made clear her sympathies with the student rebellions that had broken out in France, Britain and the USA and claimed that she had tried 'to reach the youth' in *The Four-Gated City*, in which the prospect depicted is apocalyptic war.<sup>81</sup> She thought that 'the important sections of young people are revolutionary' but expressed concern that they had only known relatively liberal times and needed to prepare for a more authoritarian era by 'creating organisations that will survive in a totalitarian state'.<sup>82</sup> She claimed that 'young people had penetrated below the surface and have seen the horrors of our civilization ... Humanity has gotten worse, puts up with more and more, gets more and more bourgeois. The youth have realized this'.<sup>83</sup> Similar claims were made when she spoke to Studs Terkel later in the same promotional tour, suggesting that these were not off-the-cuff remarks.<sup>84</sup>

By this time she was most well-known for *The Golden Notebook* (1962), widely read as a feminist work, to Lessing's repeatedly expressed irritation. In the 1971 preface to the novel she made the point that though she supported Women's Liberation she believed its aims would soon look 'small and quaint' because 'it is already clear that the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by the cataclysms we are living through'.<sup>85</sup> Nor was this a long-term prospect. 'I am so sure everything we now take for granted is going to be utterly swept away in the next decade'.<sup>86</sup> Marxism would play no distinct role in this transformation because while it 'looked at things as a whole and in relation to each other' – an approach which she claimed had enabled current and former Marxists to understand what she was trying to do in *The Golden Notebook* – it had been absorbed into ordinary thinking to become 'the commonplaces of conventional social thought', so thoroughly absorbed as to be finished as a force.<sup>87</sup> It was a point she had made before; the left-wing had lost its distinctiveness, 'because it always has to do with the individual, the rights of. Rights. Fair play. Justice'.<sup>88</sup>

Her focus was on the collectivity and her approach was informed by the conviction, expressed in 1968, that 'the true novel wrestles on the edge of understanding'. Human beings were 'small things in the grip of gigantic forces'.<sup>89</sup> Influenced by R.D. Laing she now believed that mental illnesses like schizophrenia were not illnesses at all. Linked with this was the idea that 'we're breeding new kinds of imagination and ways of

thinking and experiencing', like extra-sensory perception and the ability to pass into different dimensions, something she explored in *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974). Experiences and beliefs conventionally dismissed as fantastic and superstitious were nothing of the sort.<sup>90</sup> Her gloom about the future had embraced environmental issues in *The Four-Gated City* and she told Studs Terkel when discussing the book that 'we could destroy all organic life' by everyday atmospheric pollution.<sup>91</sup> *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) signalled her turn to what she called inner space fiction – 'fables, spun out of what is happening today' – in which madness and the degeneration of human society on Earth are explored in a dreamlike stream of consciousness.<sup>92</sup> But having begun her writing career believing in 'the idea of transforming society' she now had to force herself to write when confronted by a sense of the futility of the effort arising from 'the ecological disaster we are facing [and] the self-annihilating madness of our society which brands its critics as "mad"'.<sup>93</sup> The many interviews she gave show that her sense of impending catastrophe, as expressed in her writings, was not confined to fiction. In 1972 she invoked the pages of *New Scientist* in support of her belief that war and ecological disaster were increasing dangers, but doubted that humanity could address such global problems or avoid a 'disabling despair'. The sense of civilisation falling apart which informed *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 was visibly happening, she felt, ten years later.<sup>94</sup> A representation of that disintegration dominates *Memoirs of a Survivor* in which she observes a city, like London, subject to lawless breakdown and a return to improvised self-help by bands of roving rootless young people. In *Shikasta* (1979) the grip of 'gigantic forces', now extraterrestrial, is depicted as beyond human control. Humanity is corrupted and rendered impotent by the influence of one of these cosmic powers representing evil; the decay would be terminal were it not for the countervailing power of benign aliens from Canopus, a kind of vanguard of enlightened guardians. Despair at the incapacity of humans to address global problems pervades the novel but so too does Lessing's rage and moralising. When questioned about her determinism in *Shikasta* she admitted it was what she believed and added that she had always sat in judgement of civilisation.<sup>95</sup>

Jenny Diski, who knew Lessing for fifty years and lived with her from the early 1960s when the influence of Laing was waning and Lessing's interest in Sufism, as taught by Idries Shah, was about to begin, recalled that Doris, while still demonstrating with the left on international politics, was somehow 'adrift' and lacking the 'totalising commitment' she had known. Sufism supplied that for the rest of her life. Some things remained

the same, however. Shah's 'table talk', as reported by Doris, was 'firmly apocalyptic' involving the end of civilisation.<sup>96</sup> In conversation 'there was no hope of being right as Doris was right' and she continued to have 'firm opinions about everything from politics and literature to sociology and psychology'.<sup>97</sup> Eve Berelson noticed a recurring tendency in the fiction to identify 'a group of people with higher faculties ... who will survive and recreate society from its ashes', a sort of cognoscenti. But Lessing claimed that she believed that evolution was producing a more intelligent and more intuitive person.<sup>98</sup> The novelist, however, she increasingly believed, performed the function of delivering information about the world to different segments of society.<sup>99</sup> In the Massey lectures, delivered in 1985 under the auspices of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Lessing examined the sources of human self-destruction and announced how they could be controlled. Her catastrophism is relatively muted in these radio talks but the belief that remedies are to hand and Lessing knows what they are is expressed with a naïve certainty, something she was prone to throughout her long ever-changing ideological career. This time the 'quiet revolution' in psychology, sociology, social psychology and social anthropology of the previous thirty years is invoked to argue that 'looked at collectively' they amount to a completely new attitude towards ourselves and our institutions and represent 'the most valuable thing we have in the fight against our own savagery'. This 'hard information about ourselves' and the 'social laws that govern groups and govern us' was, however, not being applied.<sup>100</sup> Lessing's conviction that groups manipulate and 'pervert' individuals when applied to political parties went a long way, she argued, to explaining why 'you can sell yourself out under pressure from other people'. She was thinking about her own experience in the CPGB but the idea was also pursued in works such as *The Good Terrorist* (1985).<sup>101</sup> Ideologies were of no interest to her now, she claimed, and yet the author's job, she believed, was 'to place their fingers on the wounds of our time' and 'be something of a prophet', sensing the way ahead while keeping a distance from the political issues of the day.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

Doris Lessing's autobiography has been found both honest and evasive.<sup>103</sup> An act of 'self-defence', it was acknowledged to depend on unreliable memory.<sup>104</sup> It is also a failure to explain her political commitments. The very obscurity of her explanation, J.M. Coetzee concluded, relying as it did on 'some kind of social psychosis or mass self-hypnosis',



argues she was unable to explain what she did.<sup>105</sup> But it will be clear that she also omitted a great deal of *what* she did and what she thought when she was doing it. We have been able to provide a fuller account of her involvement in radical politics by virtue of the record of surveillance compiled by MI5 and with the help of the John Saville archive. From these records she emerges as a prominent activist with some sort of Marxist understanding of the world for at least twenty years. Her views during and after 1956 show that even among those who resigned from the Communist Party there was no standard reason for leaving. Lessing continued to believe in the reality of progressive change in the Soviet Union and China for many years after she resigned from the CPGB. Eleven years later she was persuaded that all of the Communist countries had become ‘much more democratic, so much so as to make obsolete all the patterns of thinking of ten years ago’. Khrushchev’s speech had not been a revelation ‘in certain Communist circles, who had for some time been fighting to get the leadership of the Communist party to tell the truth and divorce itself from Russia’.<sup>106</sup> Even when she ceased to think of herself as a Marxist she remained passionately interested in politics, a disposition that went back to 1939, and expressed this disposition in both her fiction and non-fiction. Twenty-six years after she resigned from the CPGB she admitted that ‘I tend to minimize both what I believed then and for how long I believed it’.<sup>107</sup> Both phases – Communist and post-Communist – are informed by a recurring catastrophism and a conviction that forces deeper than conscious human agency are driving the world towards crisis. Lessing maintained that her own parents’ lives had been ruined by one such catastrophe – the Great War – and that her father’s rage took her over when she was very young and never left her.<sup>108</sup> This may have made her receptive to Communist politics when the Second World War began and helped to keep her involved during the Cold War, when a nuclear catastrophe seemed likely to many people. It may also help to explain why she remained a militant in many ways for the rest of her life.

## Notes

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Romantics*, London, 1997, pp37-38. Thompson distinguishes between apostasy and disenchantment in a discussion of Wordsworth and Coleridge contending that creative art can survive disenchantment as long as ‘a boundless aspiration’ exists in tension with unregenerate reality. This is a good description of Lessing’s work at her best.

2. J. Callaghan, 'Colonialism, Racism, the CPGB and the Comintern 1920-1939', *Science and Society*, Vol 6, No 4 (Winter 1997-98).
3. Quoted in Peter Hennessey, *The Secret State: Preparing For the Worst, 1945-2010*, London, 2010, pp81, 86, 89.
4. Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*, London, 1995, p259.
5. D. Lessing, *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, London, 1994, p30; E.G. Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently: Interviews with Doris Lessing 1964-94*, London, 1996, p96.
6. 'The Tragedy of Zimbabwe' is an example from 2003, contained in D. Lessing, *Time Bites: Views and Reviews*, London, 2004, pp231-247.
7. D. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume 2 of My Autobiography, 1949-62*, London, 1998, p19.
8. Lessing, *Under My Skin*, p271
9. This was also true in Britain. See P.M.S. Bell, *John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the Soviet Union*, London, 1990.
10. Lessing, *Under My Skin*, pp304-305.
11. *Ibid.*, p271.
12. 'Writing Autobiography', in Lessing, *Time Bites*, p96.
13. In conversation with John Callaghan.
14. C. Klein, *Doris Lessing: A Biography*, New York, 2000, pp78, 162, 171.
15. Lessing, *Under My Skin* p275.
16. *Ibid.*, p277.
17. *Ibid.*, p348.
18. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, p22.
19. *Ibid.*, pp36, 52, 53-5, 67, 80.
20. *Ibid.*, pp84, 103, 106; The National Archive, KV2/4054, 44, 42a.
21. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp146-149.
22. KV2/4054, 23 March 1943.
23. KV2/4054, 7a dated 21 April 1949.
24. KV2/4054, 31a dated 18 December 1951, 46a dated 24 September 1952; KV2/4055 piece 47a, 4 October 1952.
25. piece 66, KV2/4055.
26. piece 58a 17 January 1953, *ibid.*
27. 138z Idris Cox communication to Lessing 4 October 1956 in KV2/ 4057; piece 141c 23 October 1956 reports talk of a new progressive journal based overseas in which Lessing could be London correspondent and receive a 'small financial return'.
28. 108a and 103a in *ibid.*
29. KV2/4055, 110a 28 January 1956.
30. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp183-184.
31. D. Lessing 'Being Prohibited', *New Statesman*, 21 April 1956, pp410, 412.
32. Paul Hogarth OBE joined the CPGB in 1936 while a student at the

- Manchester School of Art. He was a talented illustrator and made a living working with many eminent authors including Doris Lessing. Desmond Buckle was told to approach the 'Commercial Branch' of the CPGB to obtain funding for Hogarth's trip, KV2/4055, 115a.
33. 115a in KV2/4057.
  34. These included Jacob Geras, Colin Leys, Carol and Nathan Zelter, Marjorie Chisnall, Francis Williams, Harry Chinowitz, Frederick Barap, George and Phyllis Loveridge. Lessing also received letters of introduction from Commander Thomas Fox-Pitt addressed to Chief Comani and Mwase Kazungo in Nyasaland and Loya Masouga in Fort Jameson.
  35. 131a in KV2/4057.
  36. 121b, 123a, 128a, 131a in *ibid.*
  37. KV2/4055, 128a .
  38. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp177-178.
  39. *Ibid.*, p172.
  40. *Ibid.*, p174.
  41. D. Lessing 'Central African Federation', *World News and Views*, number 27, 1956. See also 'The Settlers Have a Bad Conscience', *Daily Worker*, 16 October 1956.
  42. D. Lessing, *Going Home*, London, 1996, pp49-50.
  43. *Ibid.*, p82.
  44. *Ibid.*, p91.
  45. 136a 2 September 1956, KV2/4057/
  46. 25b 25 July 1956 and 136a 2 September 1956 in *ibid.*
  47. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp188-189; KV2/4057, 176b, 179a, 180b, 167a, 168a
  48. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, p175.
  49. John Saville Papers (JSP), Hull History Centre, U DJS/1/68, Doris Lessing to John Gollan, 11 December 1956.
  50. KV2/4057, 150a 18 January 1957 and 9 January 1957.
  51. C. Sigal, *The London Lover*, London, 2019, pp34-35.
  52. Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp154-155.
  53. KV2/4057, 141b, 26 October 1956.
  54. KV2/4057, 141a, 13 October 1956.
  55. KV2/4057, 156a.
  56. KV2/4057, 145z and 144d.
  57. KV2/4057, 141a 13 October 1956 and 140a 24 October 1956.
  58. KV2/4058, 189b 2 May 1958
  59. KV2/4057, 173a 10 November 1957.
  60. D. Lessing 'The Small Personal Voice' first published in *Declaration* (1957) in P. Schlueter (ed.), *Doris Lessing: A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, London, 1994, pp7-25, 17
  61. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

62. J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*, London, 2018, p32.
63. KV2/4057 193a 8 July 1958, 205a and 206a; KV2/4058 205a, 206a, 196a.
64. *Ibid.*, piece 216, 15 February 1962.
65. Klein, *Doris Lessing*, pp168-169, 141.
66. J. Harding, *Sweetly Sings Delaney*, London, 2014, pp109-112.
67. D. Lessing, 'Smart Set Socialism', *New Statesman* 1 December 1961, p822; KV2/4058, piece 215, an intercepted letter to Brian Simon of the CPGB.
68. JSP, Thompson to Saville, 10 January 1957, U DJS/1/61
69. Saville to Thompson, 23/2/57 in *ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*, p195.
71. *Ibid.*, Thompson to Saville 8/1/57 in U DJS/2/1/26.
72. *Ibid.*, Thomson to Saville 15/5/57 and 19/2/57 in U DJS/1/62; 'The Day Stalin Died', *New Reasoner*, number 2, autumn 1957.
73. *Ibid.*, Thompson to Saville 18/5/57 in U DJS/1/62.
74. *Ibid.*, Thompson to Lessing and Swingler, 20/5/57 in U DJS/1/62.
75. Sigal, *The London Lover*, pp59-60.
76. JSP, Lessing to Saville, 21/4/59 in U DJS/1/73.
77. *Ibid.*, Thompson to Janet Hase, nd, in U DJS/1/74; on the lack of female activists see also recollections of the New Left in Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group, *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left 30 Years On*, London, 1989, pp105-116.
78. Klein, *Doris Lessing* p163.
79. Tamara Rust suggested arranging for Lessing to stay with miners' families in north east England in 1953, KV2/4055, piece 70. Lessing confirms that she stayed in a mining community in *Walking in the Shade*, p234; *Weekend at Dinlock* was reviewed by Ron Frankenburg in *New Left Review*, 1, 2, March-April 1960 and was made the subject of a group discussion published in the same journal, 1, 3, May-June 1960. Sigal discusses aspects of his visit in *The London Lover*, pp95-104.
80. 'Talking As A Person', interview with Roy Newquist, in Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently*, pp9-10.
81. Schlueter, *Small Personal Voice*, pp74, 69; Ingersoll, *ibid.*, p42.
82. *Ibid.*, p77.
83. *Ibid.*, p80.
84. Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently*, pp21-23.
85. D. Lessing, 'Preface to *The Golden Notebook* in Schlueter, *Small Personal Voice*, p29.
86. *Ibid.*, p30.
87. *Ibid.*, pp33, 37.
88. D. Lessing in interview with Florence Howe, 1966, in *ibid.*, p86.
89. Afterword to *The Story of an African Farm*, by Olive Schreiner, in *ibid.*, pp163, 168.

90. Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently*, interview with Studs Terkel, pp20, 25-26, 29.
91. Ibid., pp29-30.
92. Interview with Margarete von Schwarzkopf, 1981, in *ibid.*, p107.
93. Interview with Joyce Carol Oates, 1972, in *ibid.*, pp38-39.
94. Interview with Josephine Hendin, 1972, in *ibid.*, pp42-43, 52. The actuality of catastrophe was asserted again in 1980, p67.
95. Interview with Christopher Bigsby, 1981; interview with Michael Dean, 1980, in *ibid.*, pp74, 87.
96. J. Diski, *In Gratitude*, London, 2016, pp84-85, 232.
97. Ibid., pp194, 57.
98. Interview with Eve Bertelsen, 1984, in Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently* p145.
99. Interview with Françoise-Olivier Rousseau, 1985, in *ibid.*, pp149-150.
100. Lessing, *Prisons We Choose*, pp23-24, 56.
101. Ingersoll (ed.), *Putting the Questions Differently*, interview with Michael Thorpe, 1980, p95.
102. Ibid., interview with Margarete von Schwarzkopf, 1981, pp104-105.
103. Klein, *Doris Lessing*, p251.
104. Lessing, *Under My Skin*, p11.
105. J.M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-99*, London, 2001, p300.
106. D. Lessing, 'Eleven Years Later', afterword to *Going Home*, pp248-249.
107. 'Twenty-Six Years Later', in *ibid.*, p253.
108. D. Lessing, *Alfred and Emily*, London, 2009, pp vii, 172, 257-8.

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## Reviews

V.A. Bazarov, *Productive Labor and Labor that Generates Value*, David G. Rowley (ed., trans., and introduction), self-published, Alden MI 2019; 84pp; ISBN 9781088532454, £6.36, pbk

Sometimes a book has to wait a long time for its translator to come along. In this case, it has taken 120 years. Vladimir Rudnev (nom-de-plume: Bazarov) first published this pamphlet – an analysis and critique of Marx's economics – in Russia in 1899, when he was just twenty-five years old.

The case Bazarov made – on the basis of a close reading of the three volumes of *Das Kapital* – was that Marx had introduced an inconsistency into his own analysis of capitalist production in regarding the labour expended in banking, trade and commerce in capitalist society as 'unproductive', and the expenses of circulation of commodities as 'a deduction from the gross surplus value created by the labour of industrial workers' (p52). On the contrary, Bazarov argued, 'the labour of the safekeeping of commodities, of trade, of banking is *productive*, since it is socially necessary in the commodity-capitalist system of production' (p38), and further, production should be regarded as 'the entire totality of the *socially-necessary* manipulations necessary for an object of nature to be transformed into an object of use' (p43).

The significance of this work, from today's perspective, consists not so much in Bazarov's attempt to refine Marx's political economy to lend it 'a completely harmonious and finished form' (p6), as in what it tells us about the first generations of Russian Marxist intellectuals. Bazarov, along with his close colleagues A.A. Bogdanov and I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, was mainly concerned at this point with organising workers' circles and educating them in Marxian economics. Bogdanov's *Short Course of Economic Science*, first published in 1897 and issued in translation by the CPGB in 1923, was the major work of this group, and can still be regarded as a classic primer of its type. Bazarov's contribution was supplementary to these efforts. What we see here is evidence of the remarkable seriousness of these young people, the depth of their engagement with, and understanding of, Marx's ideas, and their keenness to make this knowledge available to Russian workers. At the same time, there is very little of the authoritarian outlook which later infected Russian Marxism, in which 'revisionism'

was heresy. Bazarov felt no need to pretend he was not trying to ‘revise’ Marx’s economics. The case he made was frank, coherent, and, on its own terms, convincing.

Rowley’s translation is fluent and generally accurate. He provides extensive citations from the German editions of *Das Kapital* in his editorial footnotes to situate the points Bazarov was making. The editorial introduction gives a potted biography of Bazarov, detailing his later career as a Bolshevik around 1905, as an independent social-democratic internationalist journalist in 1917-18, and subsequently as one of the pioneers of planning economics in the USSR. There is also a brief discussion of some of the wider literature on Bazarov, although this could usefully have been expanded.

This is a very worthwhile and affordable little book for anyone interested in questions of Marxian political economy or the intellectual history of the Russian revolutionary movement in its most original and creative period, over a century ago.

*Francis King*

**Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System*, Max Fox (ed.), Christopher Nealon (introduction), Theory Q series, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2020, xii + 222pp; ISBN 9781478009580, £19.99, pbk**

Christopher Chitty was undertaking a PhD thesis when he committed suicide in 2015. This book is based on his work for his doctorate and was prepared for posthumous publication by Max Fox. He claims to have discharged his responsibilities thoroughly:

I tracked down nearly all of his sources and was able to verify their accuracy (or fix his citations), but between him and me and each of our limitations, there are bound to be errors for which we share responsibility (ppx-xi).

At the start of Chapter 4 (Homosexuality and Bourgeois Hegemony), Chitty refers to an anonymous eighteenth-century work, *Le nouveau tableau de Paris*, which contains an account of the author’s visit to the Jardin des Tuileries:

I no longer see this garden as it was under the reign of the voluptuous and shameless Louis XV, who presented a spectacle of dissolution to the Nation over which he exercised a tyrannical power: now I behold whores under the trees of the garden, turning the residence of our kings into a public brothel, and on the adjacent side, my gaze was on some dozen occasions drawn to that infamous traffic of the children of Sodom [*enfants de sodomie*], whose species abounds in France and who have established a nightly rendez-vous on the terrasse de Feuillants for conducting the most abominable orgies under the name, 'The Path of Heavy Breathing' [*allé des Soupirs*] ... (pp106-107).

Chitty informs us that the translations are his own. Suspicions are aroused by the erroneous lower case for *Sodomie* and the loss of a final 'e' in *Allée* – which has also lost its capital. However, this is not the major problem. After the colon, the original text reads (on p14 of the original): 'dans ce temps, je voyois sous les arbres de ce jardin, des filles prostituées, faire de la demeure de nos Rois un b ... public'. In the original, the author is clearly referring to the time of Louis XV. The 'dans ce temps' refers to that time, something clearly indicated by the use of the imperfect tense ('voyois' in the spelling of the time).

Either Chitty's French was unequal to the task or he has altered the text to support a point he wishes to make. He believes that the Revolution represented a moment of transformation in which the old order gave way to a new sexual order, allowing private sexual acts to move into public spaces:

This movement initiated a struggle between proletarians and bourgeoisie over the legitimate use and moral order of the urban fabric and generated a wholly new kind of libertine literature, one declaring the solidarity of all bodies pursuing sexual freedom outside middle-class norms (p107).

This would be a minor matter if Chitty cited other sources in support. *Le nouveau tableau* is clear: the scene is from the time of Louis XV, not the Revolutionary period.

This is not the only source of concern. Where Chitty sees liberty, 'the solidarity of all bodies pursuing sexual freedom outside middle-class norms', the original text sees corruption and exploitation. The anonymous author talks about 'the children of Sodom ... whose species abounds in France'. He later talks of 'defiling purity'. There is no doubt that he sees not sexual freedom but abuse. The term 'enfants' brings this



point home. Those in power and authority are abusing the young and powerless. What went on in the days of Louis XV was an ethical and political betrayal.

Trust in the accuracy of cited primary sources is crucial to scholarship. This inaccuracy leads one to ask if there are others. This raises a further question: why was this not spotted? Chitty wrote this as part of his thesis. His supervisor or supervisors should surely have picked this up. Fox's claim to have checked the accuracy of the sources simply is not true – at least in this instance.

Earlier on p82, Chitty writes of how texts from ancient Athens and Rome pointed to 'a world in which same-sex sexuality was not only tolerated but perhaps even celebrated as the foundation of cities and republics'. He claims that modern scholars play down the paedophilic aspect of this sexuality with which they are uncomfortable:

Much of queer theory and feminism have at least implicitly supported this censorship of the same-sex sexuality of the ancient world by adopting the view that pederasty was universally sexually abusive for the boy (p82).

Chitty does not provide testimony from any source, ancient or modern, to back his contention. It is now accepted that the victims of child abuse (almost always by people who in positions of trust and who have a responsibility towards them) suffer a trauma that is deep-seated and lasting. At the beginning of the next paragraph, he says that this is 'a politically and ethically fraught subject'. Is it really? It is not enough to argue that it is unfair to hold the past to present standards (presentism). There may have been an evolution of attitudes (as there has been with regard to slavery, for example) but that should encourage the reader to engage ethically and politically with the past.

The reference to feminism raises another issue, Chitty's attitude to women. In his final chapter, he dismisses 'the liberal sexual ethics of high-income societies' which 'have become the basis for the interventions of a global civil society of NGOs analogous to the charitable organizations of the high Victorian period in Britain (p177):

Whereas such phenomena led Victorian reformers to criticize the social relations of capitalism and to view such problems as consequences of a ruthless drive of capital toward extracting ever greater profit, the connection is less apparent to the Ladies Bountiful tending to the new

global poor, who have been relegated to the hell of various informal kinds of subsistence and hustle (p177).

It is valid to argue that NGOs should question the structures that cause the deprivation they seek to address but the reference to 'Ladies Bountiful' is misogynistic and derogatory. It feminises NGOs in order to denigrate them. Nealon in his introduction is clearly aware that Chitty has much to do in this area: 'A pressing question for any student of the history of sexuality who reads *Sexual Hegemony* will surely be its relationship to feminism and to lesbian studies (p13). He concludes: 'it is hard to read *Sexual Hegemony* without a sense of its unfinished exploration of feminist scholarship' (p14).

This perhaps sums up my overall response to this book: more work needed to be done. At a very simple level, some of the sentences just do not make sense. Chitty did indeed have, as Fox writes in the Foreword, 'a rare eye and mind' (pviii). He was asking important questions. However, what we have is something that ultimately does not fulfil its promise and its publication is questionable.

*John McCann*

**Andy Croft, *The Years of Anger: The Life of Randall Swingler*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2020; 317pp; ISBN 9780367344764, £27.99, pbk**

The year after Randall Swingler died I went up to Essex University, and by December I was falling apart at the seams. At the end of my tether, I drove through the snows to Pebmarsh looking for my godmother, Geraldine Swingler. She took me in and I knew I had finally found someone who understood and could put my mind at rest. I became a regular visitor and later lived nearby until 1977.

The cottage then was still much as described in this book except that there was a cold tap in the kitchen. There was no bath or WC, one had to pee in the orchard, and the light came from Aladdin lamps which burned with a quiet white flame leaving smutty rings on the low wooden ceiling. In the evenings we sat up half the night talking by the stove, drinking wine and throwing mandarin peel on the coals until the whole room was heavy with the scent. Sometime in the small hours I would light a candle and climb the rickety stairs to a tiny bedroom snug between the stove and the thatch.

I write about the cottage and the welcome I received there because it was there that I first realised the expressive power of classical music (through hearing James Gibb play a Chopin Nocturne). It was from Geraldine that I learned to appreciate the human elements of music, she took me to hear Sviatoslav Richter and the young Radu Lupu, who she said (rightly) would be one of the great pianists of our age. She helped me study music at the Guildhall, and she told me about the poets who had frequented Mount Pleasant, Dylan Thomas made a pass at her (no surprises there), Louis McNiece and John Berger visited, and W.H. Auden wrote a poem in the orchard (she did not say if he was taking a pee at the time). In fact it was through Geraldine that I was enabled to see that it was free to find my own way in life rather than developing blindly along the paths ordained by accidents of birth and education. I was always very aware that Randall had a lot to do with that.

The journey detailed in Andy Croft's biography spans the most turbulent decades of the twentieth century. It paints a picture of a man who started in the idyllic circumstances of a large Anglican family before the first war, seemingly springing fully armed from the head of Zeus. He was a classical scholar, a fine flautist who played in professional orchestras, a prolific poet and an excellent athlete and cross-country runner. Just to put the cherry on the cake, he married a beautiful and intelligent concert pianist (Geraldine told me he came backstage after a concert, dropped a halfpenny in her cup, and asked her to marry him). From that idyllic beginning is here painted an obstacle course of political struggle, traumatic military adventures, disillusionment and finally descent into quietism and depression during his last decade in Pebmarsh.

This biography will be of interest not only to historians of the British left, but also especially to friends and students of Geraldine and Mary and James Gibb, who were all active as teachers for many years after Swingler's death. This second edition adds some detail to the first edition, most notably from his MI5 files which have now been released, about which more later. Croft is sensitive enough to show the way in which Swingler didn't so much rebel against his Anglican upbringing, but rather sublimated his Christian values into a form of messianic socialism. After joining the CP in 1934 he threw himself into political activity, writing, organising and founding and supporting many of the most prominent literary and political journals of the day. There is a wealth of closely researched information here for anyone wanting to know more about the small poetry presses and political journals of the period, and Croft unpicks for us the way in which Swingler's relations with the CPGB

head office at King Street waxed and waned. Concurrently with all these writing, editing and committee meeting activities, Swingler was organising revues for the Unity Theatre and maintaining a busy social life with a regular crowd of poets and musicians of the day. Croft lists the many contemporary composers who set Swingler's words to music, including Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, Alan Rawsthorne, Bernard Stevens and Elisabeth Lutyens, who remarked that Swingler had been set by more composers than any other poet of his era.

Croft is good on Swingler's military campaign. He was in the Signals regiment in the Italian campaign and was awarded the Military Medal. The book details the way in which his officers came to trust and admire him despite his openly communist beliefs. A lot of this is culled from letters to Geraldine, which are quoted extensively, and which provide a very revealing window into the life of a soldier under fire. During the battle of Camino he was buried for several hours and emerged to find himself the only survivor of his unit, an experience which affected him deeply, and led to some fine poetry. Later, when the fighting was over and he was twiddling his thumbs with an army of occupation, he used to break the rules and fraternise with the Italian and Yugoslav partisans. Croft gives a hilarious account of an occasion when he confused a new officer by dressing up in a partisan outfit ('that weren't no partisan, that was old Randall').

After the war, there was the Cold War, and this biography discusses the way in which Swingler was treated by his contemporaries, Spender and Orwell denounced him, the BBC blew hot and cold, but mostly cold. Swingler continued his political activities until 1956, he was a founder member of *The New Reasoner*, and continued writing libretti for Alan Bush as well as publishing a collection of poems *The Years of Anger* in 1946. Stay at home contemporaries like Spender announced there were no worthwhile war poets and the guardians of the literary canon closed ranks against him. He threw himself back into writing and political organising. This often involved boozing, as mentioned earlier the MI5 files, whilst not containing any startling revelations, are often useful in that they show where Swingler was when nobody else seemed to know. Indeed, Swingler himself didn't always know where he was, one morning he woke up with a raging hangover and realised he had been supposed to give a lecture the evening before. He rang to apologise only to be told that he had given the lecture, and very interesting it was too.

Croft comments extensively on the poetry which he knows inside out. The poetry made a journey as varied and colourful as the man, from

Georgian lyricism to an end point which is confessional, almost mystical. No space to say more here, so I'll leave you with the opening lines of his last great poem *The Map*:

*The bomb-bud burst  
And blossomed  
And blew  
The map out of my hand.*

*Ben Thompson*

**Mike González, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui*, Haymarket Books, Chicago IL, 2019; 248pp; ISBN 9781608469154, \$19.00, hbk**

José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930), was a Marxist intellectual born in Peru. The year 2020 marked the ninetieth anniversary of his death. Since then, a lot of water has passed under the bridge with regard to the diffusion, circulation and reception of his work in Peru, Latin America and the world. Anniversaries are symbolic events which provide occasions not just for posthumous 'tributes', but to take stock and consider perspectives for the present time. After all, as Walter Benjamin said, the fundamental concept of historical materialism is updating. It is in this sense that Mike González's political biography of Mariátegui allows us to explore his multidimensionality.

Over ten chapters, *In the Red Corner* rescues the original thought of Mariátegui, and seeks to reconstruct his political development in its various stages. González endeavours to explain and understand the themes addressed by the Peruvian thinker during the 1920s and relate them to the political and cultural processes experienced in Latin America in recent decades, thereby bringing the thought of Mariátegui to life. González applies Mariátegui's analyses to practical anti-capitalist politics, not as closed and homogeneous formulae, but in the context of a multiplicity of interpretations and actions in historical controversies. We should note that González is chiefly addressing an activist and militant (and not necessarily academic) audience, and that this book was accompanied by another study on the decline of the Latin American left.

The first chapter is one of the most interesting. González marks the

centenary in 1994 of Mariátegui's birth as a kind of 'resurrection' of his Marxism, a 'new political consciousness' in the face of a working class shaped by the exploitation and oppression of neo-liberal capitalism (p6). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Eastern European bureaucracies opened up the possibility of discovering heretical authors of the Marxist tradition.

In subsequent chapters, González deals with the public trajectory of Mariátegui and his macropolitical context. Starting with a political, economic and social contextualisation of Peru in the first three decades of the twentieth century, González characterises the young Juan Croniqueur – the pseudonym adopted by Mariátegui in his writings between 1914 and 1917. The account then moves on to Mariátegui's time in Europe, and particularly Italy where he discovered Marxism, in the post-war context in Europe and the crisis of capitalism. Upon his return to Lima, Mariátegui taught at the Universidad Popular 'González Prada' in 1923 and 1924, a collective space created by sections of the student and labour movement in Lima. Mike González presents Mariátegui's political objectives on his return from Europe, inspired by 'the action of the multitudes' (p69): setting up a publishing house (*Empresa Minerva*), publication of magazines (*Claridad* and *Amauta*) and newspapers (*Labor*) to disseminate new ideas; studies on different aspects of Peruvian society, the dynamics of peripheral capitalism in the imperialist phase and the constitution of social classes in their ethnic form; establishing relations with workers' and artisans' guilds, indigenous leaders of the Andean regions, and intellectuals and artists from the country and Latin America and, finally, founding a political party.

The magazine *Amauta* and the book *Siete ensayos de la interpretación de la realidad peruana* stand out as far-reaching projects. González analyses and carefully reconstructs the fundamental questions explored in the magazine between 1926 and 1930, and in the book, published in 1928, highlighting the colonisation process, the memory of 'Inca socialism' and the different historical temporalities that marked a country on the periphery of the capitalist world system.

The final two chapters consider the type of socialist party founded by Mariátegui and his 'Marxism' – a difficult question to answer definitively because he made no systematic elaboration of his concept of the party. One of the pillars of Mariátegui's political development was forged in the communist movement of the 1920s. He adopted the united front policy, developed by Lenin and Trotsky at the Third Comintern Congress, and sought to find ways to accumulate social and political forces in the 'mass

organisms' and build a hegemonic force of the proletariat. González praises Mariátegui's Marxism for its 'Marxist method' that requires an 'understanding of the historical and cultural circumstances of Latin America', and for the 'sensitivity required of a young man working under limited personal and material conditions and at an enormous distance from the regions where Marxism originated' (p184).

Without wishing to detract from the merits of González's research, I would like to note some important gaps in the book. It does not spell out which questions have not yet been resolved or not formulated in this thematic field. It lacks a survey of the main works in the academic literature, and does not explore how far this study differs from those produced over the years by Genaro Carnero Checa, Diego Mesenger Illán, Oscar Terán, Osvaldo Fernandes Díaz and Miguel Mazzeo. Nor does González discuss the works already published on Mariátegui in English (Jesús Chavarría, Elizabeth Garrels, Harry E. Vander, Marc Becker, Melissa Moore). Although he occasionally cites some of these works, he does not consider the literature's scope and gaps and how far his political biography of Mariátegui differs from previous studies.

Moreover, there is an 'invisible' compass reference in Mike González's book – the Marxist historian Alberto Flores Galindo (1949-1990). Although Flores Galindo is cited at different times in the book, on Peruvian history or on Mariátegui, González has nothing to say about this person who was so crucial to the history of Mariátegui's reception. Flores Galindo was an extraordinary historian for his generation, who produced numerous works on the economic, social and cultural history of Peru. He was fully in tune with the 'Mariateguista' generation of the International Congress at the Universidad de Sinaloa in the city of Culiacán (Mexico), in 1980, who sought to highlight 'Mariateguian praxis' and 'remove dogmas', rejecting the orthodox and Eurocentric approach to the Peruvian thinker.

As long as there is capitalism, there will be anti-capitalists like Mariátegui, seeking to interpret and radically transform the world, indignant at its oppressive and exploitative rationality. Here is one of the thunderstorms on the periphery of the West that rend the homogeneous and destructive temporality of capital. Mike González's *In the Red Corner* is a political intervention that updates the critique of capitalism *with* Mariátegui.

*Deni Alfaró Rubbo*  
*University State of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil*

**Robert Henderson**, *The Spark That Lit the Revolution: Lenin in London and the politics that changed the world*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2020; xvii + 264pp; ISBN 9781784538620, £25.00, hbk;

**Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, Patrick Anderson (eds)**, *Lenin150 (Samizdat)*, Kickass Books, Hamburg, 2020; xviii + 298pp; ISBN 9783000662126, €15.00 plus postage, pbk

It's sometimes argued that Lenin's politics cohered at a particular moment, such as when his older brother Alexander was executed for attempting to assassinate Tsar Alexander III, or in 1903, when his disagreement with Martov over membership rules split the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party into 'Bolshevik' and 'Menshevik' wings. Such notions link to the myth that once Lenin had set out an unswerving course towards revolution, there was an inevitability to subsequent events.

His publisher's blurb suggests that Robert Henderson aims to offer another such foundational claim: that it was in London 'that the roots of Lenin's political thought took shape'. In fact, Henderson does not himself make overstated judgments of this kind. *The Spark That Lit the Revolution* actually includes very little treatment of Lenin's theories, programmatic perspectives or factional positions: as Henderson makes clear, his focus is on aspects of 'Lenin the man', and his book is very successful, interesting and engaging in this respect.

More than that, Henderson's account of Lenin's six stays in London between 1902 and 1911 is rich in context. He provides detail on the shifting community of Russian political émigrés in the British capital between the 1890s and the 1910s; vivid description of their varied political and cultural initiatives; and remarkable pen portraits of some of the fascinating figures who knew and worked with Lenin. Henderson also provides original information on the efforts of Scotland Yard and the Tsarist political police to keep tracks on what various 'plotters against the Russian throne' were up to.

Henderson worked for many years as a Russian curator at the British Library, and his book makes excellent use of a wide variety of archival sources. He nicely recounts moments when he found 'little gems' of information, including Lenin's request for a reader's ticket at the British Museum, filed and forgotten for over eighty years under 'Oulianoff' rather than 'Ulyanov'.

Some such discoveries open up others. In 2015, Henderson discovered a photograph of Apollinariya Yakubova, said by some to have



turned down a proposal from Lenin, shortly before he married Nadezhda Krupskaya. Publicity about the photograph in Russian newspapers led to one of Yakubova's relatives contacting Henderson, and some of her personal papers and diaries surfaced.

As a twenty-one-year-old student, Yakubova had been a friend of Lenin's younger sister Ol'ga, who died of typhoid aged 19. Krupskaya, another of Apollinariya's friends, first met Lenin at a clandestine meeting to which Yakubova had invited her. And, with Lenin, Martov and others, Yakubova was a co-founder of the St Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class (taking over responsibility for running the group after Lenin's arrest). Clearly a remarkable and inspiring young woman, friends described her as exuding 'a fresh fragrance of meadow grasses ... we called her the "primeval force of the black earth"'.

It is testimony to the warm feelings between Lenin and Yakubova that, despite growing political disagreements between them in the late 1890s, they maintained good personal relations (an unusual combination for Lenin). These continued even after Yakubova married Konstantin Takhtarev, a member of the RSDLP's 'economist' tendency. The Takhtarevs came to Britain as exiles in 1899, and when Lenin and Krupskaya moved to London in 1902, the already established couple provided support: as well as helping find lodgings for the new arrivals, it was Konstantin who first took Lenin to 37a Clerkenwell Green to meet Harry Quelch of the Social Democratic Federation (Lenin produced seventeen issues of *Isrka* from this building, now the Marx Memorial Library). Though they initially helped with its practical organisation, the Takhtarevs fell out decisively with Lenin and Krupskaya over the course of the 1903 RSDLP Congress, never to meet again: in a fascinating postscript, Henderson follows their story over subsequent years.

One chapter of the book covers the RSDLP's relatively clandestine 1905 Congress, attended only by Bolsheviks (as well as by Herbert Fitch, a young Special Branch officer who secreted himself in a cupboard, later assuring his superiors that the speeches he had heard from his hiding place were 'blood-curdling', even though it is thought that he knew no Russian).

Another provides a detailed account of the 1907 Congress, which was briefly addressed by the secretary of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Ramsay Macdonald, and at which the Bolsheviks consolidated their ascendancy in the Russian socialist party. This Congress was attended by over 300 delegates, many of whom stayed at a disused barracks in Dalston, walking every morning to the venue along the Regent's Canal towpath. Amongst other anecdotes, Henderson describes how Lenin and the writer

Maxim Gorky were continually seen together during breaks in business, making time to visit Hyde Park and the British Museum (where Lenin knew the cloakroom attendant by name).

The twenty-five short pieces collected in *Lenin150 (Samizdat)* vary greatly in tone and quality. The best-known contributors include a clutch of writers who are sometimes grouped together, but between whom there are significant differences of style and substance: Alain Badiou, whose voluntarist injunctions are, nevertheless, thoughtful; Jodi Dean, who explores the nature of comradeship through re-reading Krupskaya's *Reminiscences of Lenin*; and a typically stimulating and exasperating (but unusually brief) provocation from Slavoj Žižek.

Across such an uneven collection, different readers will find different contributions most valuable. I thought Michael Brie's piece very worthwhile. He works at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, and responded to the invitation to write in 'critical solidarity with Lenin' by distilling 'eight methodological propositions' from Lenin's work, showing how they set challenges which are relevant to today's European left-wing parties and groups.

Ronald Grigor Suny's piece on the rise of Stalinism is one of the more historically grounded contributions (much of *Lenin150 (Samizdat)* comprises theoretical argument or pamphlet-style polemic). Owen Hatherley's enjoyable and considerate account of how he now makes sense of his parents' career in the Militant tendency was originally written for a Russian audience: it is good to have this in English. And Tora Lane succeeds in explaining how the remarkable novelist Andrei Platonov achieved a writing style which caught Leninism's 'real political impact in the form of peoples' contradictory understanding and application of it'.

Perhaps the most interesting contributions in the whole book are by two LGBTQ activists from Kyrgyzstan. Mohira Suyarkulova's notes on the interplay between the construction of gendered identities and the different phases of national economic development are a remarkable combination of personal writing and critical analysis. Georgy Mamedov also applies personal experiences in his thoughts about how Leninism can resource progressive 'identity politics', and in his sharp observation that 'the representation of Vladimir Lenin in the late Soviet and post-Soviet contexts ... leaves almost no space for any serious critical engagement with Lenin's theoretical legacy'.

Unfortunately, too many of the remaining pieces in *Lenin150 (Samizdat)* amount to the strident but abstract assertions of Marxist-Leninist cadres, or attempts to replicate the crazy fizz and eclecticism of Žižek without any

redeeming substantive content. The best that can be said of contributions which finish with declarations that ‘we have Lenin over our shoulders’, or ‘Lenin is dead, long live Lenin!’, is that they provide examples of the sentiment which is animating some determined and sincere activists.

The main editor, Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, was inspired to produce the book on a visit he made in 2011 to Kyrgyzstan, ‘one of the few places in the world where every major town still hosts a monument to the great *vozhd* (leader) of the world proletariat’. Reflecting this, the book includes twenty-odd full-page colour photographs of the statues, murals and mosaics of Lenin which remain in place in and around Bishkek. The talented photographer, Johann Salazar, raises some pertinent questions about post-Soviet nostalgia, and, together with Joffre-Eichhorn, took the decision to ‘highlight the many distortions of the man’ by intentionally distorting ‘some of the images of Lenin’ when preparing them for inclusion in the book. Such questioning and ‘highlighting’ could have been taken further: the motives of the Kyrgyz authorities in maintaining their particular Lenin cult have nothing whatsoever to do with the hopes and intentions which were held by the hundreds of Russian émigrés who tramped every day alongside London’s Regent’s Canal to attend the RSDLP’s Congress back in May 1907.

*Mike Makin-Waite*

**Conn Mac Gabhann, *The Barbarous Irish: The Ethics of an Insurgency 1968-98*, LamhDhearg.ie, Belfast, 2020; 205pp; ISBN 9781527223868, £10.00, pbk**

The conflict in and about Northern Ireland, to use a generally accepted term for what is otherwise euphemistically referred to as ‘the Troubles’, has been subjected to intense scrutiny by leading scholars and journalists. The plethora of studies includes documentaries, books, journal articles and what are now substantive oral history collections featuring people from every walk of life, class, profession and gender orientation. Everyone who lived through the Troubles has a story to tell and for effective conflict transformation those stories need to be heard and lessons need to be learned. Some stories, however, are more told than others, those of former combatants in particular. Young scholars entering the field find some of their interviewees have already recounted their experiences upwards

of two dozen times. Hence, an entirely new approach to the conflict is exceptionally refreshing. Conn Mac Gabhann's *The Barbarous Irish: The Ethics of an Insurgency 1968-98*, is a bold and thought-provoking book that blends theology, history and politics. Its value is enhanced further by the appendices, a trove of key documents from the period.

Mac Gabhann, a student of philosophy and theology who studied at Oxford University, has clearly wrestled, as have so many before him over millennia, with the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in just war theory. He, however, has moved beyond theoretical discourse to test its applicability to the campaign launched by the IRA against the British state. In its conceptual stages, a theologian dismissed as 'immoral' Mac Ghabhann's proposal to examine the Irish Republican insurgency from a Just War perspective. In contrast, the project was welcomed by the liberation theologian Father Des Wilson. Wilson, recently deceased, was a much-loved Belfast priest and community activist. His passing brought forth torrents of tributes from all sectors of Irish society, from the bottom to the very top. The Irish president, Michael D. Higgins, noted he was revered as a 'champion of the people'. He was one of a number of religious, men and women, who undertook key roles that were essential in facilitating the peace process and helping bring an end to the violence plaguing their communities. Wilson wrote a long and carefully considered introduction to Mac Gabhann's book, which itself provides important insights into the conflict from a remarkable man who lived through and daily witnessed the suffering it caused. In commending the book, Wilson emphasised its significance. He argued that in an age now acknowledged by governments as one of 'continual war', there was now more than ever need to 'develop our ability for ethical thinking in order to better challenge this normalisation of evil' (p13). In Wilson's estimation, 'Conn Mac Gabhann has done us an immense service which, to be honest about it, many people have been too discouraged or too afraid to undertake. We must be grateful to him for it' (p13).

The author examines how the utility of Just War theory has been questioned, particularly in the context of the brutality of modern warfare and the twentieth century's immense death toll. Nonetheless, however imperfect, he argues it still offers a method of evaluating conflicts against a common standard of ethical behaviour. Addressing an important question that is increasingly relevant to modern warfare, Mac Gabhann examines whether or not a yardstick intended to measure the behaviour of states could be used for the sort of asymmetrical warfare that characterised the Troubles. Drawing on Irish history as well as the political context, Mac Gabhann persuasively illustrates precisely why it can. Notably, the Just

War tradition has two distinct branches, *Jus ad Bellum* and *Jus in Bello*. The focus of the book is exclusively on the former, the legitimacy of the decision to engage in war, and very deliberately, as the author emphasises, not the latter, ethical conduct during a war. Hence the study is weighted toward the pre-conflict period and the early Troubles and the moral reasoning that contributed to the decision to engage in conflict.

Mac Gabhann seeks to present a balanced and measured analysis throughout. He carefully leads the reader through the intricacies of Just War theory and its evolution through various philosophical, religious and cultural settings. He explains how the book is an exercise in attempting to understand the Republican insurgency, emphasising that understanding does not equate to support for the cause, but is a means to better comprehend, illuminate and critique the rationale behind it. Obviously, that requires addressing the discrimination to which Northern Ireland's Catholic population was subjected in the late 1960s and early 1970s, acknowledged eventually by even the notoriously sectarian Reverend Ian Paisley. In 2014 he belatedly conceded that the treatment accorded the minority Catholic population '... wasn't fair ... No, it wasn't justice at all' (p17).

Each of the *Jus ad Bellum* criteria receives a separate chapter, Just Cause, Legitimate Authority, Proportionality and The Possibility of Success. Mac Gabhann uses these 'orthodox' criteria to interrogate the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish Republican experience and perspective. There were of course a number of insurgent groups, of differing size, ethos and support levels. All, of course, were clandestine groupings. Hence, precision in defining their size, nature and aims is problematic. The book's focus is on the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) as the principal insurgent group and draws on Republican documents, such as IRA statements and Sinn Fein publications, to highlight 'corporate identity and ideology' (p23). Mac Gabhann shows, however, how it was civil rights and self-defence that fuelled the insurgency rather than traditional Republican ideology. Interestingly, from the beginning of the conflict Republican announcements stressed a consciousness of the Christian responsibility to ensure the well-being of all communities, of the oppressed and the oppressors. An Army Council statement from Easter 1970 proclaimed that 'Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters will have equal rights' (p158). Certainly, as the author acknowledges, the insurgents understood the power of propaganda and how to use it on a community imbued with Catholic values. Religion was a marker of identity in the Northern Ireland conflict. Christian values were important considerations in both Protestant and Catholic communities.

Mac Gabhann provides a valuable overview and critique of just war commentators whose evaluations of the Troubles and other conflicts derive from a selective use of evidence. Selectivity and subjectivity might be constants in most appraisals, as the author concedes they are in his, noting the importance of acknowledging and owning and explaining them, as he seeks to do from the outset. Mac Gabhann looks to elucidate and empathise with the perspective of the Other in order to demonstrate the necessity of recognising the alternative views that must be considered in order to achieve political settlements. The latter are delayed or put beyond reach by evaluations that dismiss insurgents simply as murderers. He argues that ‘unacknowledged selectivity allows for the demonization of the Other, and often, for the extirpation or attempt at extirpation of the Other; it is an abandonment of a “political solution”’ (p165). It also obscures injustice and is an obstacle to authentic peace. Given today’s levels of global insurgency, Mac Gabhann’s book is a timely reminder ‘of the need to search beyond dominant narratives which obfuscate ethical, political and historical discussions within the terminology of “terrorism”’ (p167).

Ultimately, the author questions the concept of Just War as a tool of Christian moral reasoning and the subjectivity involved in its application. Nonetheless, he also demonstrates that it remains a useful template through which systematically to address areas of ethical concern. It certainly serves to provide a new prism through which to view the Northern Ireland conflict. Mac Gabhann’s study is an important contribution to the on-going reflections about the Troubles. It transcends the competing narratives’ model that seemingly seeks largely to re-write the past. Most importantly, it contains cogent lessons for analysts concerned about insurgencies world wide in the global ‘War on Terror’. It deserves to be widely read.

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**Hattie Naylor (playwright), Barrie Stott (director), *The Marxist in Heaven***, play review, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Studio Theatre, Friday 6 March 2020

The National Theatre annually commissions new plays suitable for performances by companies of youth players around the UK. One of the 2020 plays, written by the prolific dramatist, Hattie Naylor, is a play about

a delightful paradox: what happens when a Marxist who doesn't believe in Heaven dies and finds herself in Heaven? This particular performance was one of the last cultural events held in Aberystwyth's magnificent Arts Centre before the Covid-19 crisis closed everything. It was a rather sham-bolic performance – because it was played by amateurs/teenagers I am not going to name names. The blocking was crude; timings of entrances and exits were not always adept; one actress' hair accidentally came undone when she was speaking; and the main actress had not learnt her lines properly and relied largely, unsubtly, on a printed script. Despite or maybe even partially because of these technical limitations the event offered an extremely moving and memorable evening.

Valerie wakes up in Heaven. She has died in a bike crash: fastidiously green and righteously ethical in every way, her response to arriving in Heaven is initially incredulous and then dyspeptic. She doesn't want to be in Heaven because she doesn't believe in it. She is a Marxist who regards Heaven as a construct contrived to distract proletarians from awareness of material inequalities and injustices. But the Heavenly authorities have decided that she must come to Heaven because she has fought the good fight: her contributions to campaigns against ecological vandalism, intensive agricultural cruelty and globalism-caused poverty are compatible with Christian views – so she is in whether she likes it or not. Valerie's complaints against brutal exploitation of animals and poor humans are both articulate and harrowing – just hearing young people discussing such issues through the medium of drama made the performance inherently worthwhile.

Ironies abound. Valerie soon discovers that Heaven isn't very Heavenly. In fact, Heaven is a grossly unequal world where people jockey for position in the conspicuous yet insecure hierarchies presided over by a suspiciously elusive God. People are not contented with their lot – everybody wants to be an angel, to climb up the ranks. This Heaven is a sort of dystopian cross between the crass aspirational Western world of reality television and the conformist world imposed by totalitarian states, such as North Korea, that pervert Marxism. Like drones watching Western reality television, Heaven's inhabitants admire those with more gaudy status but like drones in *Animal Farm* or North Korea they also dance exactly on cue to whatever music the state/hierarchy orders.

Tenacious, pushy and confoundedly righteous, Valerie bangs every door until she speaks to every manager she can find. She works her way up to God's deputy – the supremely oleaginous Mighty Metatron. This individual, who is suspiciously vague about the whereabouts of the actual

boss, God, is basically running Heaven as a fiefdom. He does not want things to change: self-interested profoundly, he is the ultimate reactionary. Because his people are brainwashed into believing that because this is Heaven they must be doing fine, they cater to his every whim and dance literally to his tunes.

Valerie, however, spreads discontent: the inhabitants of Heaven are made by her to want better things. They learn to want to dance to the songs they like – not the state-approved musak of Metatron. Civil disobedience gradually spreads – Valerie finds that some victims of Heaven’s inequalities are more easily persuaded to revolution than others. Eventually disorder in Heaven is so rampant that God herself appears. It turns out that she has been asleep since 1979 – a date that will of course mean more automatic horror for British socialists than for socialists anywhere else. God has simply been neglectful: she has not noticed the inequalities in immortal Heaven – let alone on the mortal Earth that she created. Bullied by Valerie into facing up to the dysfunctional injustices and material inequalities of Heaven, God facilitates great change – to the chagrin of Metatron and other reactionaries. The inhabitants dance wildly, celebrating their new, actually Utopian circumstances with excited dancing. Seeing young actors enjoy themselves with such cathartic abandon was inherently moving – but the play’s greatest moment was when the actors slowed down and lined up to sing a deliberately faltering, vulnerable, damaged yet defiant few verses of ‘The Red Flag’. Coming just a few months after Britons rejected their first opportunity since 1983 to elect a socialist Labour Party, this song sounded both elegiac and hopeful. The Valeries of Britain have been beaten by the Brexiteers and the imperialists and the meat-eaters and the exploiters – but at least there are young people to sing the Leftist songs – even if they do so in character. Despite her righteous disposition and rather charmless pushiness Valerie has become a genuinely revolutionary hero who has brought real change to Heaven. But the sense of triumph is conditional. Ultimately this is a sad play because we are forced to reflect on the greatest irony of all: real Marxism is perennially rejected in the mortal world – a genuinely Marxist revolution has happened only in the immortal, non-existent Heaven.

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Jairam Ramesh, *A Chequered Brilliance: The Many Lives of V.K. Krishna Menon*, Penguin India, Gurugram, 2019; 744 pp; ISBN 9780670092321, Rs. 999, hbk

Krishna Menon was active in British politics for twenty-nine years in the service of India, and he remained in that service until his death in 1974. He arrived in London in 1924, the protégé of Annie Besant, but was soon to join the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and enrol as a student at the LSE. More important, he joined Besant's Commonwealth of India League and threw himself into the campaign to gain Dominion status for India. His intelligence, energy and determination ensured that he rose to a leadership position in the League and these qualities meant that the League became a factor in Left politics and Menon commanded the respect of fellow socialists in the ILP, the Labour Party and the Communist Party. In 1931 the renamed India League followed the Indian National Congress in demanding independence for India. MI5's file on Menon, opened in 1927, discloses intensified interest from the mid-1930s, when he was in almost daily contact with the CP leadership. The suspicion that he had Communist affiliations would last. William Beveridge acted on that suspicion in 1934 when, as Director of the LSE, he ended Menon's decade-long student registration, during which he had acquired multiple degrees and Harold Laski's endorsement as a 'brilliant' intellect, on the grounds that he was a Communist, spreading dangerous ideas among the student population. But the following year Menon began his long friendship with Jawaharlal Nehru, a kindred spirit blessed with the patience of Job, who would protect him in the years to come from himself as well as his many critics in India.

Menon was often criticised for arrogance and an inability to get on with others. These defects in his personality did not prevent him from attracting the loyalty of activists in the India League. Nor did they get in the way of his own indefatigable efforts. In addition to his books, pamphlets, reports (such as *The Condition of India*, 1934), lobbying, speaking tours and his freelance work as an editor with several London publishers, he was also called to the bar, and worked with D.N. Pritt and the Haldane Society. He organised the London visits of Subhas Chandra Bose and Nehru, campaigned for Republican Spain and against fascism and militarism. In November 1934 he was elected as a Labour Councillor for St Pancras and served in that capacity for fourteen years, working alongside friends Barbara Betts and JBS Haldane. During the war he was an energetic civil defence worker and air-raid warden. He even had a hand in

launching the St Pancras Arts Festival in 1946, precursor of the Camden Arts Festival.

By November 1946 Menon had become Nehru's special diplomatic envoy and an alternate member of the Indian delegation at the UN. He was one of the first to establish close relations with Mountbatten when the latter became Viceroy in January 1947 and it was Menon who, championing India's membership of the Commonwealth, found a constitutional formula to make that membership acceptable. In July 1947 he became India's High Commissioner in London. He proved to be very much more than a gifted agitator. Nehru takes much of the credit for this. During his seventeen years as Prime Minister of India he backed Menon, constantly reassured him during his many phases of self-doubt and protected him from domestic critics. Menon was someone with whom he shared an 'uninhibited intellectual camaraderie' (p353) and Nehru recognised that he was often a lightning rod for criticism of himself. In 1952 Menon became the most prominent member of the Indian UN delegation and quickly immersed himself in the Korean crisis, working out the deal which resolved the POW problem blocking the way to peace. He further irritated the US at Geneva in 1954 in attempting to end the war in Indo-China and opposing the myth that the Vietnamese nationalists were tools of the Soviet Union or China. He denounced the French war in Algeria and the British invasion of Suez and was prominent at the Bandung conference in 1955. This led to his first visit to China and the release of 4 American pilots, held since the Korean conflict. What was sometimes perceived as his fierce anti-Americanism has to be viewed in the context of McCarthy and Dulles as well as the hostility shown by the US towards Indian foreign policy. Eisenhower called him a menace and a boor and as late as 1959 'The Americans were convinced that Krishna Menon was the head of the communist cabal around Nehru' (p500).

Though he remained head of the UN delegation Menon entered the Nehru Cabinet in 1956 as Minister without portfolio and member of the Planning Commission. He played a constructive role over Suez but abstained at the UN on a vote condemning the Soviet invasion of Hungary. This confirmed his domestic critics in their suspicions of his fellow-travelling inclinations but even they were disarmed by his acclaimed defence of India's Kashmir policy at the UN in 1957 and in his moment of patriotic triumph he was elected to the Lok Sabha. He also became Defence Minister. In December 1961 India took Portuguese Goa by force and Menon was re-elected to the Lok Sabha. After the Sino-Indian War of 1962, however, his patriotic credentials were again called into question

as the critics blamed him for India's unpreparedness, lack of military equipment and poor military leadership. Ramesh endorses the criticism of Menon's weakening of the high command, if only because the maligning of top military officers and the promotion of less competent men occurred on his watch. Nehru remained loyal but accepted Menon's resignation as Defence Minister. Contemporary research contests the notion that Menon neglected India's defences in the period 1956-1962.

His political career was by no means finished – his last election to the Lok Sabha was in 1971. But his best days were over. Jairam Ramesh's excellent research in numerous archives establishes what Indira Gandhi was referring to when she famously said, on hearing of Menon's death, that a 'volcano has been extinguished'. It will help to ensure, in the words of India's first Foreign Secretary, that he will 'long remain in the memories of men and the annals of history'. And no socialist history of twentieth century Britain is complete that ignores the contribution of V.K. Krishna Menon.

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**Giles Udy, *Labour and the Gulag: Russia and the Seduction of the British Left***, Biteback, London, 2017; 660pp; ISBN 9781785902048, £25.00 hbk

This is a rather odd book. The endorsement on the back cover by Michael Gove should have warned me. This is not the first book on relations between the Labour Party and Soviet Russia in the inter-war period, nor is it the first study of Soviet sympathisers within the Labour Party or of Russian agents in the late 1920s, which have been covered comprehensively, and from differing perspectives, by writers such as Victor Madeira, Gill Bennett, Timothy Philips, Kevin Quinlan, David Burke and Kevin Morgan (as well as a set of what are best described as more populist espionage factionalised works). Udy has a different perspective. His main interest is the persecution of Christians in inter-war Soviet Russia and he is an associate of the Keston Institute in Oxford which focuses on this subject. The objective of Udy's work, his first book and clearly magnum opus at 660 pages, is both to report on this persecution and on what he considers as the failure of the 1929-1931 Labour Government to take up the issue with the Soviet government. The core of the book is a study

of the Christian Protest Movement, pursued by a number of anti-Soviet clerics with the support of some leading Conservatives, such as Joynson-Hicks, Lord Brentford, the former Conservative Home Secretary who had expelled Soviet diplomats and broken off diplomatic relations with the Soviets in 1927.

While this chapter of the book provides an interesting and detailed narrative, it is the early chapters of the study that demonstrate the extent of the author's bias. Udy argues that the Labour Party, not just in the 1920s but at its foundation was a Marxist party. He goes so far as to argue that the Independent Labour Party was Marxist. This is not a view to my knowledge shared by any other historian of the early British socialist movement. Both contemporary observers and subsequent generations of historians have concurred that the ILP was largely based on ethical socialism (as distinct from the Social Democratic Federation which was to a large extent Marxist and was to evolve, via the British Socialist Party, into the British Communist Party in 1920). He claims that Marx attended the ILP foundation conference in 1893, which is curious given that Marx had died ten years earlier. He then goes on to argue that the Labour Party, being Marxist was anti-religious. This he does by quoting Labour Party figures, mainly from the post-1931 ILP, acknowledging the value of Marx's economic analysis, and quoting Marx's and Bolshevik anti-religious statements – clearly a case of guilt by association. In a chapter headed 'More Methodist than Marx?', he questions whether socialist leaders coming from religious traditions such as Keir Hardie (evangelical), Ramsay Macdonald (Scottish Presbyterian), Arthur Henderson (a Methodist lay preacher) and George Lansbury (a high Anglican) were really Christians, or if they were, how they subsumed their Christian beliefs to their Marxian beliefs and Soviet sympathies. The links between the ILP and John Trevor and the Labour Church are not mentioned, while socialist Sunday schools are seen as Marxist propaganda. There is no mention of Philip Snowden, who wrote a pamphlet on socialism as 'The Christ That is to be' or on the religious based ethical socialism of Isabella Ford, Carolyn Martyn, Margaret McMillan and other leading ILPers. Lord Parmoor, leading Anglican layman and Leader of the House of Lords in the 1929-31 Government is presented as a hypocrite.

This degree of historical misinterpretation, to the point of falsification, does make it difficult to take the core of Udy's study seriously. This is not helped by Udy's postscript which refers to the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party taking the Party back to the familiar territory of 'Marxian Socialism'. This is a pity, as the story of the anti-religious

campaigns of the Soviet state in the 1920s needed to be told, though some contextualisation in terms of the historic alliance between Russian orthodoxy and the Tsarist State and the role of priests in resisting collectivisation and Soviet power more generally would have strengthened the narrative. It is also somewhat odd that the narrative focuses on the persecution of Catholics, Protestants and Baptists, rather than on the suppression of the Russian Orthodox church (which, incidentally, has been revived by Putin as a supporter of the new autocracy). Moreover, Udy does not acknowledge that in the 1920s with famine and an impoverished state, there may have been a case for the church's riches being seized – Thomas Cromwell's suppression of the monasteries in early Tudor England being an interesting parallel. It is perhaps not unreasonable to treat clerics as not making a positive contribution to a productive economy. Udy is little interested in the Leninist and Stalinist suppression of political opponents including non-Bolshevik socialists, which perhaps understandably raised more concerns in the British labour movement than suppression of religions. Udy's argument is clearly that the Labour Government should have set aside other objectives in relation to re-establishing diplomatic relations and trade with the Soviet Union in favour of protecting Russia's religious minorities. This is not to say religious freedom (as opposed to the redistribution of church wealth) should not have been a matter of concern. The chapters on the campaign against slave labour in the Russian timber industry, which brought together church leaders such as Cosmo Lang, the Archbishop of Canterbury, anti-Communist Tories and the Anti-Slavery Society and the Labour Government's failure to take up the issue, despite the past involvement of several Ministers in anti-sweating campaigns in the UK, is perhaps the most useful and novel section of this long book. The final chapters on the Webbs' and Shaw's defence of the Soviet state are predictable and covers familiar territory, though the extracts from Shaw's 1921 *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* are profoundly shocking – Shaw supporting the extermination of those considered to be non-productive and even suggesting the use of gas to deliver this.

However, to imply as Udy does that the Labour government and the British left as a whole was seduced by the Soviets, because the Labour Government and the Labour Party as a whole were Marxist and therefore anti-religious and consequently unethical and amoral, is an argument too far. If Michael Gove considers this book to be 'scrupulous' with an 'unflinching commitment to the truth', we have even more reason to be worried. However, there are elements of the book which are compelling

and it is regrettable that Udy's prejudices weaken the argument and detract from the important narrative he is telling.

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UCL

**Clara Zetkin, *Fighting Fascism: How to Struggle and How to Win***, Mike Taber and John Riddell (ed. and introduction), Haymarket Books, Chicago IL, 2017, 131pp; ISBN 9781608468522, \$11.95, pbk

Clara Zetkin was one of the most influential leaders of both the German and the international working class movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She was in some ways as important in her day as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg, though she did not suffer martyrdom as they did. This book presents the texts of both her report to the Comintern on *The Struggle Against Fascism* of 1923 and her *Resolution on Fascism* which was adopted by the Third Enlarged Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in June of that year. The editors have done an excellent job of contextualising both documents and provide a useful glossary.

Zetkin saw fascism as essentially the product of 'the ongoing dissolution of the capitalist economy and the disintegration of the bourgeois state' which were, in their turn, the result of the destructive effects of the First World War. She paid less attention to fascism's ideological, cultural roots, and the crucial significance of the personal experience of the First World War as a catalyst which brought these factors together to give birth to the Fascist movement in Italy. However, she did admit that it was a movement of 'ideals'.

Her fears that fascism could spread rapidly throughout Europe must have seemed to have been realised when, in imitation of Mussolini's March on Rome, Hitler attempted a 'beer cellar putsch' in Munich in November 1923. The failure of that attempt was probably the reason why Gombos, the leader of the Hungarian fascist movement abandoned his plan to stage a 'March on Budapest'. On the other hand, Zetkin's belief that Italian Fascism would soon collapse from its own internal conflicts and contradictions was overoptimistic, even if, initially, that optimism seemed to be justified: Mussolini's government was nearly overthrown during the course of the events in the following year when Mussolini's hold on power slackened during the Matteotti Crisis of June to November

1924. Thereafter the Fascist Regime survived until Mussolini was unseated by the combined machinations of dissidents in the Fascist Party, leading generals and the King in July 1943.

Zetkin's analysis of Italian Fascism and her fears for its easy and quick spread throughout Europe was predicated on the assumption that Italy was not very different from other countries. In fact, Italy was, in today's terms, an essentially 'underdeveloped' country in 1923, with a small industrial base restricted to the industrial triangle of Milan, Turin and Genoa, and until 1945, the proportion of the work force employed in agriculture was still over 50 per cent. Germany was, of course, quite different, being a heavily industrialised, modern state. A consequence of Italy's relative economic backwardness was that the *agrarian* wing of the working class movement, the Socialist-controlled agrarian labour unions and peasant groups, especially in northern and central Italy was larger than in any other European country with the possible exception of Spain. Agrarian socialism was thus inevitably a special target of Fascist squadrist violence between 1919 and 1922.

Zetkin's belief that the organisation of the working class could defeat fascism was not borne out by the resistance which the Italian working class put up against the Fascist takeovers of Turin, Milan, Genoa, the San Lorenzo district of Rome, not to mention the united resistance of workers and other democratic forces in Parma. All of these efforts ended in failure. Like other observers, Zetkin also overestimated the revolutionary potential of the Italian working class movement which arguably should have made a bid for power during the workers' occupation of the factories in the summer of 1920. But the Italian Socialist Party and its allied union confederation woefully lacked a revolutionary leadership. It is indicative of their passivity that in November 1919, when the party had secured enough votes in the general election to form the largest party in Parliament, the party newspaper *Avanti!* came out with the headline, 'All we have to do is wait!', Lenin despaired of his Italian comrades and in February 1921 the revolutionary wing split to join the Comintern as the Communist Party of Italy (PCI).

For ten long years, Zetkin sought to persuade her party and the Comintern of the accuracy of her analysis of fascism and of the steps required to defeat it. Though the Enhanced Plenary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern meeting in June 1923 had adopted her resolution, there was increasing resistance within the organisation to her proposals, and much of the dissent came from the Russian delegates. Thus in 1924, the Comintern abandoned her proposal for a united front

of the workers, i.e. including even the German Social Democratic Party, in favour of narrower, leftist policy, treating all potential allies as 'social fascists'. She continued her struggle throughout her remaining years, but she was swimming against a Stalinist tide which engulfed both the Soviet Union and the Comintern. By an extraordinary irony, after the July 1932 elections, which made the Nazis the largest party in the Reichstag Zetkin, as the oldest member, was entitled to speak at its opening session. She had little need to warn against the danger of fascism because the presence of the Nazis in the chamber was warning enough, but she used the opportunity to once again call for working class unity against fascism and for the continuation of the struggle for women's rights.

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