Socialist History 67

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Cover image: Marx and Engels at the Hague Congress, 1872 (public domain).

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Editorial

Sebastian Berg and Claus-Ulrich Viol

In spring 2024, we hosted a one-day workshop discussing the current relevance of historian E. P. Thompson and political scientist Ralph Miliband. We aimed at exploring the meaning of their work for scholars like us, who work in interdisciplinary fields and have an interest in the chances and limits of bottom-up political agency. For both Thompson and Miliband the analysis of class agency was central – as an academic project with political surplus value. Thompson demonstrated the potential of a Marxist social and cultural history that zoomed in on a 'history from below' which, however, could only be understood in a dialectical relationship with a 'history from above' – a history of class formation in and through class conflict.[1] Miliband sketched out an institutional Marxism which not only tried to locate state and class power but also to identify cases and models of collective insubordination.[2] There is a lot more that they have in common (including the fact that both turned 100 last year): both were active in Britain's 'first new left' and other social movements, for example, the anti-nuclear weapons movement and the short-lived Socialist Society of the 1980s, and were involved in founding and contributed to their respective political-academic journals and publications. *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* are the best-known ones. Both shared a commitment to an 'undogmatic' Marxism, which did not start, but became manifest, in the context of the uprising in Hungary in 1956, and was often referred to as 'British Marxism' or 'socialist humanism'.[3] Both, hence, understood the state in its various institutionalisations of power as far from neutral and class formation as an activity that occurred permanently in conflict with these institutions. Both engaged in detailed studies that structural Marxists criticised as empiricist (and the potential agency proposed on the basis of these studies as voluntarist), and both had their own specific controversy with structural Marxists over the relationship of theory and practice, experience and ideology, and the character and locations of power.[4] Among our own generation of the intellectual left, 'French' structural Marxism and 'French' (post-) structuralism for a long time seemed more fashionable than 'British Marxism' (though we personally had our reservations about the former two). However, more recently, in a time in which increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary narratives of nation-state-based resilience are made hegemonic, many of us are again searching for levers of political agency. New reflections on the analyses provided by Thompson and Miliband (and on what to do with them) might have something to offer here.

Two of the papers presented at the workshop and making use of some of Thompson's central concepts and reflections have been written up into articles for *Socialist History*. Christian Huck's piece transfers the analysis of the upper-class robbery of land 'made legal', which Thompson identified as the reason for protests against 18th-century land enclosures, to the global digital economy of the 21st century and its cultural enclosures. Once more, he suggests, enclosures endanger social reproduction. In particular he argues that today's exploitation and today's digital precariat have a lot more in common with the rent-based exploitation and the pre-industrial labourers than with the wage-based exploitation of the proletariat in the factories of the 19th and the 20th century, leading to a more silent and more individualised suffering – an observation which is highly relevant for any reflection on political agency and strategy.

Valentina Nava explores in her ethnographic study of former Communists in rural *Emilia Romagna*, who now support the 'post-fascist' *Fratelli d'Italia*, how the feeling of being left behind produces a new class consciousness and a process of class formation that is primarily directed against a 'governing elite'. She observes parallels with Thompson's evaluation of bread riots which, he argued, were based on considerations of what counted as legitimate and illegitimate practices in a moral economy. People's turn to the extremist right has to be understood, Nava suggests, as a protest against a centre-left that ideologically delegitimised and materially destroyed the infrastructure that once was the cultural and structural basis for a moral economy of solidarity and sharing.

Both articles show that it is not only possible but helpful to apply Thompson's work and its key concepts to contemporary phenomena, to use them for the revelation and critique of today's power structures, and to think about (pre-) conditions of collective political agency.

Notes

1   E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth 1963.
2   Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society: An Analysis of the Western System of Power*, New York 1969.
3   E. P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner* 1, 1957, pp.105-143.
4   Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London 1980; Ralph Miliband, 'The Capitalist State – Reply to Poulantzas', *New Left Review* 59, 1970, pp.53-60; Ralph Miliband, 'Poulantzas and the Capitalist State', *New Left Review* 82, 1973, pp83-92; Nicos Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', *New Left Review* 58, 1969, pp67-78; Nicos Poulantzas, 'The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau', *New Left Review* 95, 1976, pp.63-83; E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays.* London 1978.

To Call a Robbery a Robbery:
Land, Rent, Culture

Christian Huck

Introduction

'The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time', E.P. Thompson wrote in the preface to his account of *The Making of the English Working Class*: 'It was present at its own making.'[1] Today, more than sixty years after the publication of Thompson's best-known work, we appear to be at the end of a cycle: now, the working class seems to be going down, present at its own unmaking. While proletarianisation is still rampant, class formation seems on the wane. Following Thompson, we can sense a lack of 'common experiences' that could provide workers with an opportunity to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men'.[2]

Despite the obvious differences between the time Thompson talks about (c. 1780-1830) and the present moment, I find Thompson's observations still relevant to our understanding of the early twenty-first century. Especially, Thompson's analysis of *land enclosures* might provide a roadmap for comprehending what could be called *culture enclosures*. I will argue that both forms of enclosure force proletarians to scrape for central aspects of their *social reproduction*, that is, 'the socially necessary mental, physical, and emotional work that reproduces and maintains human life on a day-to-day basis, what some have summarised as "care work" or "people-making work".'[3] Part of this reproductive work is also the 'sustaining [of] shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation'.[4] While land enclosure makes first of all access to the physical means of reproduction precarious, culture enclosure endangers access to the vocabulary of social cooperation.

Social reproduction is threatened by the appropriation of first natural and then cultural resources by one (small) group, which then forces everyone else to pay for accessing these essential necessities in the form of *rent*. 'Since its historical inception during the process of enclosures,' Carlo Vercellone suggests, 'capitalist rent has been the other face of the common. It is the outcome of a process of expropriation that is the starting point and essential feature of the reproduction of capital over time and space'.[5] While Thompson's peasants were often driven from the land by increasing rents, proletarians today once again 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', as

Phil Neel has asserted.[6] To understand this parallel, the term 'rent' is used here in the sense that 'includes taxation, interest paid on debt, land rent',[7] as well as payments for the use of 'infrastructure, platforms, public services, [and] utilities'.[8] Finally, I will argue that the pressure on social reproduction through various forms of rent leads to a much more silent and clandestine suffering than the more obvious exploitation of waged labour, and thus elicits a different response – by those that suffer from it as much as by those who support it: riots are met by rentier fascism.

1. Land Enclosures

Thompson dealt with questions of enclosure mainly in his chapter on 'The Field Labourers'. Here, he was first and foremost interested in the experiences, desires and actions of said labourers. Central to their experience is, of course, their wage. Contemplating the average wage of agricultural workers, however, Thompson found such wages very difficult to determine as no single figure would be able

> to show a score of other influences: payments in kind or at cheap rates: gardens and potato patches: the effect of enclosure: the effect of taxes, tithes, game laws, and poor-rates: fluctuations in rural industrial employment: above all, the operation of the Poor Laws […].[9]

It is rather common, at least for those who grew up in the second half of the twentieth century, to think of workers as waged labourers, earning a specific sum of money in order to pay for life's necessities (food, shelter, clothes, travel etc.); if the wage is not enough to cover the cost of living, bargaining and industrial action – in the form of strikes, for example – will try to effect a raise in wages. In discussing the situation of field labourers around 1800, however, Thompson realised that wages were by no means the only thing, and maybe not even the most important thing, that kept the labourers (and their kin) alive and well. Some food, for example, was still provided directly by farm owners, some was still grown in one's own garden, some was still sourced on common land; wood and turf for heating were collected from forests and peats; roofs were covered with thatch taken from riverbanks; festivities were self-organised; health care was reliant on herbs and received wisdom; etc.

Where such direct forms of access to the means of subsistence were not enough to cover for insufficient wages, state agencies stepped in. This was especially important in the realm of agriculture, with its constantly shifting demand of labour: 'labourers were employed for odd days or half-days,' Thompson discovered, 'and then turned back on the parish'.[10] While the employers

wanted the field labourer's work only when it appeared to be productive, the parish became responsible for making sure that the labourer would be ready when called up again. Here, the state was securing the labourers' social reproduction when they themselves could not. For this task, of course, the parish would use the 'taxes and tithes' the labourer had provided for. In other words: the field labourer had to pay a kind of rent for the (scarce) infrastructure of social reproduction the parish provided.

Where the parish could no longer deal with the poor, as Thompson's student Peter Linebaugh added, a 'massive prison construction program accompanied the enclosure of agricultural production.'[11] That prisons become an apparent fix for an economic problem, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore observed in late twentieth-century USA, is thus not a bug, but a feature of capitalism which presents 'the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution'.[12] Where welfare became too costly, and thus would eat up too much of the 'taxes and tithes', prisons became 'a means of managing those who find themselves superfluous to the needs of a capitalist economy'.[13]

While welfare and prisons are central to understanding the state's role in shaping the population to the demands of capital, I am more interested here in the 'effect of enclosures' which both Thompson and of course Linebaugh addressed. Because, in a way, the enclosures made the parish provisions and the prison system necessary in the first place. Enclosures, Ellen Meiksins Wood has emphasised, are central to the definition of property rights that made the emergence of capitalism possible: 'Enclosure is often thought of as simply the fencing in of common land, or of the "open fields" that characterised certain parts of the English countryside', she writes, '[b]ut enclosure meant not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.'[14] Before enclosures became widespread, most peasants not only had access to their own piece of land, however small, but they also, as Marx wrote, 'enjoyed the right to exploit the common land, which gave pasture to their cattle, and furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf, etc.'[15]

But, as Thompson observed:

> In village after village, enclosure destroyed the scratch-as-scratch-can subsistence economy of the poor. The cottager without legal proof of rights was rarely compensated. The cottager who was able to establish his claim was left with a parcel of land inadequate for subsistence [...].[16]

Those field labourers who were able (and willing) to leave the agricultural sector were encouraged to migrate to the (urban) manufacturing districts, Thompson added, where the workers would be bereft of any means of subsistence and thus wholly dependent on wages. As Marx argued, 'the expropriation of the mass of

the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production'.[17] Only within a world of enclosures, the famous 'double freedom' of the workers comes into existence: 'freed' of the means of subsistence the workers are now 'free' to sell their labour-power, but in fact have no other choice than to do so.

Those field labourers that did not enter the factory system had to cope with a completely new situation. Not only did they have to pay 'taxes and tithes' to finance parish and prison, as smallholders they also had to rent the land off which they lived. As Thompson argued, 'the ground-swell of rural grievance came back always to access to the *land*'.[18] To be able to pay rent *and* produce food for subsistence, small-scale farmers had to get more out of the land than before. Landlords enabled and supported the 'improvements' necessary to produce surplus in many cases. But, as Thompson emphasised:

> we should remember that the spirit of agricultural improvements in the eighteenth century was impelled less by altruistic desires to banish ugly wastes or – as the tedious phrase goes – to "feed a growing population" than by the desire for fatter rent-rolls and larger profits.[19]

In sum, land enclosures produced urban wage labourers, but they also produced field labourers who 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', just as today's new proletarians.[20] Even though the field labourers weren't workers in the modern waged labour sense, they were by no means remnants of a pre-capitalist society, i. e. peasants, but an integral part of the system. They were integrated through predation, as Thompson commented: 'Enclosure (when all the sophistications are allowed for) was a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers.'[21]

It is important, however, that we do *not* understand the notion of robbery as a transferral of property and rights, but as the creation of new relations. 'The developments known as dispossession were simultaneously processes of propertisation', Eva von Redeker argues: 'things owned in indigenous and feudal forms were transformed into modern property, which permits not just usage and control, but also abuse and destruction.'[22] Enclosures, thus, did not *transfer* property, they *created* property (with all its implications), as legal scholar Radha D'Souza emphasises: 'Historically, rights transformed places into property. It transformed a relationship into a thing, a commodity.'[23]

Although it was owners (with the help of lawyers and law enforcers) who appropriated the land and made it their property, it was not 'property' that the poor lost: instead, they were robbed of a *whole way of life*. The 'social violence of enclosure', Thompson asserted, 'consisted precisely in the drastic, total imposition upon the village of capitalist property-definitions'.[24] What was destroyed, Thompson argued, were the 'customary relations' between land and people that

might not have been formulated in the language of rights, but which have been 'endorsed by the collective memory of the community'.[25] These 'customary relations' made up 'the economic and cultural universe of the rural poor', but were often incompatible with the rights of property.[26] Thompson would later call this 'economic and cultural universe' a 'moral economy', embedded in 'customary consciousness and customary usages'.[27] In other words, what is destroyed, or at least attacked and endangered by enclosures is 'culture' in Raymond Williams' sense of a 'whole way of life':[28] 'a whole vocabulary of discourse, of legitimation and of expectation'.[29]

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson tried to show how the moral economy of the poor helped to form a unified class consciousness, arguing that in 'the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers'.[30] Based on a common culture that had survived the onslaught of capitalism, together, they came to fight 'the exploitive and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism', as the conclusion of Thompson's book claims.[31] And for a long period, large swaths of the working class (at least in the capitalist centres) were indeed 'able to improve [their] quality of life by forcing capital to make concessions'.[32] Industrial capitalism, however, is no longer the name of the game; heavy machinery is giving way to the ethereal 'cloud'.

2. Cultural Enclosures

'The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter.'[33] This is the bold claim of the 1994 internet manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', published by the Progress & Freedom Foundation (PFF), which had close ties to Newt Gingrich, the then speaker of the United States House of Representatives and chief ideologue of the Republicans. The PFF was stoutly libertarian in its outlook:

> The Progress & Freedom Foundation is a market-oriented think tank that studies the digital revolution and its implications for public policy. Its mission is to educate policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public about issues associated with technological change, based on a philosophy of limited government, free markets, and individual sovereignty.[34]

Current social and economic problems, the text suggests, are merely a consequence of cast-iron economic structures that can easily be overcome in cyberspace.[35] The authors envision a three-step-model of economic development: 'In a First Wave economy, land and farm labor are the main "factors of

production". In a Second Wave economy, the land remains valuable while the "labor" becomes massified around machines and larger industries.'[36] Now that this model is running into serious difficulties, there is (apparently) little use contemplating a reform/overthrow of this industrial phase as it would soon be washed away by a third wave anyway: 'In a Third Wave economy, the central resource – a single word broadly encompassing data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology, and values – is actionable knowledge.'[37] This 'actionable knowledge', as the central resource of this new wave economy, needs neither material production places nor the exploitation of labour: it is there for the taking and can easily be reproduced.

The 'internet Magna Carta' can be read as a reaction to a crisis of overproduction that befell the US economy (as much as most European economies) after a boom period post-WWII. Increased productivity through technological innovation, and cost-cutting through the movement of production sites to regions that provide cheaper labour, created an oversupply of affordable consumer goods. Long before the rise of the internet, therefore, immaterial properties – artificially made scarce – came to eclipse material assets, as Maxime Ouellet argues:

> since the physical production of goods is no longer the primary source of profits, companies have come to rely on research and development, patent production, advertising, and branding. In short, they concentrate on controlling information, knowledge, and image.[38]

The best thing about the new assets was that they did not even need to be produced. The new Magna Carta imagined endless immaterial fields, ready for the taking: 'Cyberspace is the land [sic] of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilisation's truest, highest calling.' However, the techno-utopians faced a similar problem as the pioneers of land enclosure: appropriation – even if immaterial, or rather: especially if immaterial[39] – had to be legitimised by property rights. Thompson, as outlined above, had emphasised that the land enclosures were a form of 'class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers'.[40] Accordingly, for enclosures to work in cyberspace 'clear and enforceable property rights are essential', and to establish these is once again a 'central function of government'.[41] The property rights are, of course, not to be granted to government itself, but to those the government represents: *the people*. However, 'the people', here, are not a community of whatever kind, but a conglomeration of individuals: 'the key principle of ownership by the people – [that is:] private ownership – should govern every deliberation. Government does not own cyberspace, the people do.'[42]

To be able to earn money from something that needs no production and thus provides no immediate opportunity to exploit labour-power, this something needs to be fenced in, in order to be rented out. As Matteo Pasquinelli put it:

> the central axis of contemporary valorisation is the 'expropriation of the common through the rent' (Negri/Vercellone). [This] explains the ongoing pressure for a stronger intellectual property regime: copyright is one of the strategic evolutions of rent to expropriate the cultural commons and reintroduce artificial scarcity. Speculation then is directed toward intellectual property, forcing artificial costs on cognitive goods that can paradoxically be reproduced or copied virtually for free.[43]

For this to happen, once again, customary rights had to be curtailed: endless lawsuits put an end to the file-sharing practices of the 1990s, itself a continuation of manual tape copying, in a similar way as courts suppressed the right to usufruct in the eighteenth century. Only with ownership, the way is paved for the collection of 'economic rent', which has become 'the most appropriate category for understanding the location of platforms in the capital accumulation process'.[44] Rent, today, is not restricted to land and realty, but has to be understood in a more general and abstract sense as 'the value exacted or extracted from the socio-natural world as a result of the relations of ownership and control of particular assets or resources, primarily because of their constructed degree of scarcity or quality.'[45]

Material assets like land and realty have not lost their importance, as Brett Christophers has shown in his book *The New Enclosures*: 'since Thatcher's election in 1979, two million hectares of British land – 10 per cent of the country's total surface area – has been sold off by public entities, in what amounts to the largest privatisation in national history'.[46] Increasingly, however, immaterial assets such as money and data have become even more important. On the basis (and entanglement) of both material and immaterial enclosures, today's economies are shifting towards 'the extraction of economic rents from the ownership and/or control of assets and resources, rather than profits resulting from the production and sale of new goods and services'.[47] And with that shift, many people once again 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', just as in Thompson's pre-industrial time.[48]

On the basis of these parallels between 1800 and 2000, it has been suggested that we 'are in the middle of a second enclosure movement': 'True, the new state-created property rights may be "intellectual" rather than "real", but once again things that were formerly thought of as either common property or uncommodifiable are being covered with new, or newly extended, property rights.'[49]

The radical libertarians of the PFF refer to American history to legitimate a global future: 'the need to affirm the basic principles of freedom is real', they claim. 'Such an affirmation is needed in part because we are entering new territory, where there are as yet no rules – just as there were no rules on the American continent in 1620, or in the Northwest Territory in 1787.' 'Cyberspace is the latest American frontier', the new Magna Carta thus suggests, thereby aligning cyberspace with the idea of a 'virgin land' colonial settlers had made their own.[50] Following this ideological framework, the 'things' that should become private property were seen as just sitting there waiting for Google, Meta & co. to collect them, just like some apparently unprofitable wastelands were just waiting for the European settlers to improve them. It is not far-fetched, then, to think of current proceedings not only as a new round of enclosures, but as a new form of colonialism, as Nick Couldry and others have argued:

> Colonialism, and the appropriation of resources and knowledge, like all major historical phenomena, is not static: it goes on developing. Its latest form is data colonialism. Whereas historical colonialism grabbed land, the land's resources and the bodies to mine them, the latest phase of colonialism acquires something new to appropriate and grab: human life, seized through the medium of data.[51]

As we saw in Thompson, it is only in a very superficial way that we can say that 'land' has been stolen. Quite the contrary: the material entity of 'land' becomes a means of subsistence only insofar as it is entangled in relations between humans and between human and non-human nature. The idea that 'there were no rules on the American continent in 1620' blatantly denies the complex relationships thousands of communities had formed with the land over thousands of years before European raids. It is all too obvious that in the settlement of the American continent the introduction of property rights did not just rob people of their land, but violently destroyed their whole way of life (and in most cases, life itself). As Silvia Federici has argued, 'it was not only access to the land but also to community organisation and reproductive knowledge that stood in the way of urbanisation and proletarianisation'[52]. In other words: it was not only access to the material side of social reproduction that had to be cut off in order to produce proletarians dependent on purchasing commodities and selling labour-power; at the same time, communal forms of learning and caring had to be either privatised or institutionalised in order to deny direct access to the cultural side of social reproduction, Thompson's 'moral economy'.

The 'land' of the historical West is replaced today by 'data': 'we should consider data to be the raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material', Nick Srnicek reports in his influential book on *Platform Capitalism*.[53] Speaking of data as the 'raw material

that must be extracted', however, obscures the second part of the sentence which sees 'the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material'. When we speak of 'raw material' we usually think of unprocessed material (iron ore, for example) that people just find in the earth and which no human has touched before. To speak of 'raw data', however, would pose an oxymoron: data does not precede human activity, but is a product of such activity.[54] What is even more misleading, however, is to describe 'the activities of users' as a 'natural source'. It is, of course, a social activity and consequently a 'cultural source'. Just as 'the American continent in 1620' was surely not without rules, but entangled within a complex network of intra-relations between humans and between human and non-human nature, data is the product of such networks, too. To consider data as 'raw material', consequently, is to (ideologically) naturalise a social entity:

> Big Tech companies, such as Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft or Meta, as well as their Chinese versions such as Alibaba, Tencent and Weibo, like to claim that data is a new 'raw' material that is there for taking. A reservoir that waits to be discovered by capable actors, who will tap into it and release data's potential for the benefit of humankind. The latest spin of Google's chief financial officer, for example, was to abandon the metaphor of data as the new oil in favour of likening it to sunlight, implying that data is a 'replenishable, inexhaustible (especially as compared to finite oil) and ownerless resource that can be harvested sustainably'.[55]

What is taken, however, is not a natural entity, but a cultural product, a network of relations, a whole way of life, as Jodi Dean asserts: 'Communicative capitalism subsumes everything we do. It turns not just our mediated interactions, but all our interactions, into raw material for capital.' The tools of the platform economy '*enclose* every aspect of our life into the data form. […] Big data is the capitalists' name for this material that Marx understood as the social substance.'[56]

It is thus not a question whether data should be enclosed or not: data *is* the enclosure – of culture, of 'every aspect of our life', of our 'social substance'. Big data is, in Thompson's words, a digital form of 'class robbery': 'Rather than regarding data as a resource we should understand it as human experience and social relations that are 'datafied' and thus transformed into a commodity'.[57] Data would not exist without social activity, but it still has to be captured (by digital machines) and made profitable (through rent).

3. App/ropriation and Rent

In order to understand how such robbery can go unnoticed, or at least unchallenged, it is necessary to take a closer look at how exactly the robbery is performed in practice. Thompson's 900-page analysis of the emergence of the working class has produced some memorable and often quoted lines, but its real strength lies in the meticulous reconstruction of working-class experience. We need to be as meticulous when chronicling its demise, using the archive, like Thompson, but also ethnographic means to reconstruct patterns of experience.

The digital platforms that dominate the contemporary economy can be described as being at once *intermediaries* and *data hubs*.[58] As 'intermediaries', contemporary digital platforms act as employers, trying to exploit the labour-power of those who work for them in a gig economy that very much resembles the situation of Thompson's field labourers: Uber drivers, Amazon delivery workers, Just Eat riders, etc. However, as 'data hubs', platforms try to make a profit seemingly without exploiting labour, but through collecting rent. And the latter, as I argue, has become the more dominant form of profit-making in the digital economy. According to Dean, this move is exemplary for the current conjuncture:

> In the contemporary global economy, rents and predation are more effective accumulation strategies than commodity production […]. Globally, in the knowledge and tech industries, rental income accruing from intellectual property rights exceeds income from the production of goods.[59]

Let me give a localised example of this global trend from a recent study we conducted among riders working for food delivery companies in Hamburg (Germany) during the Covid pandemic.[60] In a way, these 'riders' are the contemporary equivalent of Thompson's field labourers. Relying on short term contracts, enjoying little job security, for many the job offers the only way to social reproduction: partly through a meagre wage, but mainly through access to credit and welfare. One of the biggest players in this new economic field in Germany at the time of research was Lieferando. The company's role as a player in a temporary staffing industry, however, might only be a phase towards a focus on its function as a data hub. In 2020, food delivered by riders employed and paid by Lieferando made up only ten per cent of all orders, the rest was handled by restaurants themselves. Like its competitor Deliveroo, Lieferando loses money with every delivery made by the riders they employ.

Once the company had achieved near-monopoly status in Germany (mainly through the acquisitions of rival companies and their data bases, financed by venture capital),[61] Lieferando began to ask itself whether it actually wanted to continue employing riders at all, even in the current, low-cost and temporary

form. Indeed, Lieferando openly questioned whether it would ever be able to make a profit on the basis of waged labour in whatever form. Ideally, the managing director of Lieferando suggested, the company should focus on its app, which increasingly monopolised the knowledge communication between empty restaurants and hungry consumers; only if the restaurants themselves deliver the meals, the managing director concluded, Lieferando can find a sustainably profitable business model. Within this new business model, Lieferando merely licenses, or rents, information to customers and producers. You cannot buy the database; you can only use the results of your momentary search: what you get is 'actionable knowledge', assumed to be the intellectual property of the platform. (On other platforms, rent is paid by advertisers who use the 'actionable knowledge' to target consumers.)[62]

If we accept the premise that the data in the database is a product of enclosure, we must once again pose the question of robbery. Lieferando's algorithms claim to know what 'the people' usually want to eat, who the finest producers are, how consumers rate them, and how reliable they are; they purport to know the best matches between producers and consumers, as well as the quickest transport routes. Lieferando prides itself on possessing such knowledge, because they have been gathering data from the actions of consumers and the activities of its riders. Only Lieferando has an exclusive overview of the transaction details of all actors. Its system of evaluation and reputation is designed to build trust in the expectation that the consumers will always get what they want, as fast as possible. Ideally, in the eyes of Lieferando, this information is to be used to *connect* consumers and producers only; the *realisation* of any transaction is then left to producers and consumers.

While Lieferando participates in the apparent 'extraction' of data through their customer app, much of the data that Lieferando gathers is the product of the riders' activities using their socially-acquired knowledge of the urban infrastructure to navigate the city. In fact, the customers also use their acquired, *socially-formed* taste to evaluate restaurants. If their knowledge was not social, it would not be of any use value: if their liking of some food was strictly idiosyncratic, it would be of little use to others. Thus: 'Data is not out there waiting to be discovered as if it already exists in the world like crude oil and raw ore'. Instead: 'Data is a recorded abstraction of the world created and valorised by people using technology.'[63] This appropriating abstraction is performed through the app.

To understand what is going on inside the app, let us take a step back and look at the advertising agencies of the 1980s whose marketing activities were supposed to counter capital's accumulation crisis by stirring up consumer demand. In my view, these agencies did not so much *produce* but *appropriate* images of urban creativity and symbolic behaviour. For the new, post-Fordist agency

worker that Paolo Virno described, what 'is learned, experienced and consumed in the time of non-labour is then utilised in the production of commodities, becoming a part of the use-value of labour-power'.[64] Advertising agencies tapped cultural knowledge by hiring the avantgarde of the so-called creative class that was willing to commodify its cultural knowledge – and able to ask a good price for it.

However, and this is my central point, these knowledge workers sold something they never owned in the first place: no fashion, no trend, no craze, by definition, can ever be individually produced, its essence is always elsewhere, deferred. In other words, the knowledge workers were paid well to appropriate, that is: to rob, what was a collective practice, an intersubjective relation. The Lieferando riders of today, however, are beyond such notions of a 'creative class'; they do not explicate and thus valorise their cultural knowledge; they do not, they cannot sell out. Their affective condition, instead, allows for an appropriation on an almost subliminal level. It is the app that does the appropriating now. Unlike the entrepreneurs of the creative class, the deskilled and precarious workforce of Lieferando is made to fail at appropriating the informational product of their labour. Instead, the algorithms of the smartphone-app expropriate (or dis-appropriate) the information the riders produce before it can be incorporated and appropriated by the riders themselves. This information is then stored on the company's servers, and 'what these servers store is us, the social substance, the general intellect, all the data that our interactions and lives generate'.[65] The riders are left with nothing.[66]

Just as the land enclosure of old 'was a plain enough case of class robbery', as Thompson had put it, the appropriation of commonly produced cultural knowledge must be understood as a similar case of robbery, not by means of fences, but by means of 'terms of use'. We have to understand culture, like land, as a 'resource, *produced* by all in common', that is 'seized, enclosed, and privatised in a new round of primitive accumulation'.[67]

However, this does not mean that the platforms have transcended capitalism and managed to create profit without exploiting any labour at all. As Lieferando suggests getting rid of their riders, the company still assumes the actual value-producing labour to be done elsewhere, that is, at the place of the restaurant. Such a move transfers centralised labour, which was at least under some control from workers' councils and labour laws, towards a less regulated, more informal realm of small-scale, often family-run businesses. Here, the gendered and racialised exploitation of low-income service workers becomes even less visible, but all the more real. While the platforms collect profits through rent, the service workers are forced to exploit their own labour-power, as Dean neatly summarises:

More and more of the people forced to sell their labor power to survive sell this labor as services to those looking for deliveries, drivers, cleaners, trainers, home health aides, nannies, guards, coaches, and so on. The buying and selling of services are enabled by new intermediaries, technological platforms whose owners insert themselves between service offerers and seekers, being sure to exact a fee along with the data and metadata that accompany the transaction.[68]

4. Conclusion: Riots and Rentier Fascism

In both the early-industrial period Thompson writes about, and the late-industrial times of today, rent is a central means for generating profits, and both then and now the appropriation of common goods rather than the organised exploitation of labour-power is the basis for generating profits. Just as the robbery of land was a necessary condition for collecting land rent, the robbery of culture is now a necessary condition to produce digital rents. Thus, enclosures 'are not a one time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism',[69] as it is sometimes thought, but an ongoing process, both in the form of neo-colonial land enclosures (not only) in the Global South, and as culture enclosures (not only) in the capitalist core regions. As Dean argues: 'Processes long directed outward – through colonialism and imperialism – are turning inward in ways that […] repeat accumulation strategies typical of feudalism: rent-seeking, plunder, and political control.'[70] Or as Maximilian Jung puts it: 'Digital companies seeking to maximise profits have penetrated into ever more layers of human life itself enclosing and colonising previously non-commodified, private times and space'.[71]

'The loss of the commons entailed, for the poor, a radical sense of displacement', Thompson observed.[72] The riders of our case study have no relation to the articulations of trends, values and norms they help to produce; they are entirely dissociated from what they effect. And despite the early promise of user-generated content, social media users more and more experience a similar impotence in relation to the trends, the values and norms the algorithms generate from their activities. This, then, becomes not only an economic issue, but also a political one: the dissociation from culture through appropriation makes the 'social cooperation' necessary for social reproduction impossible, or at least precarious, creating a sharp sense of 'political incapacity'.[73]

Thompson highlighted the 'vehemence in some of the protests against enclosure' and reports of 'enclosure-riots', but he also noted the 'patchy character of resistance by the poor'.[74] In a similar way, Dean interprets the 'years of riot and protest' after the financial crash of 2007/2008 as 'the political struggle of a knowledge class whose work is exploited and lives are expropriated by communicative capitalism'.[75] The 'radical sense of displacement' that today's 'class

robbery' is causing, is not simply a matter of dispossession, as I argued, but the result of robbing a class of the opportunity to socially reproduce themselves. Riots, both then and now, can thus be understood as 'practices arrayed against threats to social reproduction', as Joshua Clover suggests.[76] In this sense, riots and related forms of protest (blockade, occupation, sabotage etc.) are an articulation of class grievances, despite not being fought at the point of production, but at the dispersed points of rent collection instead:

> Debt, cost of living, transportation, education, health, and housing struggles all take on the expropriative practices of asset holders. These struggles are not fought against capitalists as the bourgeois class of owners of the means of production. They are fought against landlords, banks, and the state that imposes cuts, fines, and force on the many in the interest of maintaining the power of the few.[77]

The politics of the riot remain unclear, however, wavering between the radical and the reactionary. In the present moment of the mid-2020s, 'ignoble feelings like envy (of the disempowered for the powerful) or paranoia (about one's perceived status as a small subject in a "total system")' seem to be more easily articulated when it comes to addressing 'a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such'.[78] (It doesn't matter much, when addressing such grievance, 'whether the obstruction is actual or fantasised'.)

In this sense, the 2024 riots in England were widely interpreted as being right-wing motivated. As the BBC (and various other media outlets) reported at the time: 'The violence, in towns and cities across England and in Northern Ireland, has been fuelled by misinformation online, the far-right and anti-immigration sentiment.'[79] A report by England's Children's Commissioner, based on qualitative interviews with a significant number of children and young adults involved in said riots, however, revealed the media's interpretation as fitting the script a little too easily: 'What these conversations do not support is the prevailing narrative […] that online misinformation, racism or other right-wing influences were to blame for why young people were enticed to join in the aggression', the Commissioner reports.[80] One young person said in their interview: 'Half the young men there don't even know what far right means. We're in such a deprived area … they don't even know what politics means'.[81] Instead of an overtly political motivation, the Children's Commissioner found feelings of being 'disaffected and disempowered', as well as experiences of a 'lack of opportunities in their community', as the central grievances of young rioters.[82]

In a situation of deprivation, feelings of disaffection and disempowerment reveal an insecurity about the possibilities of social reproduction; 'the socially necessary mental, physical, and emotional work that reproduces and maintains

human life on a day-to-day basis' becomes increasingly difficult to be carried out.[83] With state and capital mainly absent from these deprived areas, the people living there once again experience their plight mainly as a matter of rents, rather than wages. It is the rent they cannot pay that bothers them, rather than the wages they do not get – scraping by on odd jobs, informal and unregulated work, Universal Credit, housing and winter fuel allowances, criminalised activities, food banks, etc.

During the post-war period of the twentieth century, problems of social reproduction were mainly experienced as the result of inadequate wages. If the pay check was not big enough to pay the bills for housing, food, clothing, mobility etc., raising the wages was seen as the solution; if a pay raise was not granted, a strike could give weight to collective demands. The situation that forms the background to the 2024 riots in England, however, is usually described as a cost-of-living-crisis: a crisis of too high prices for accommodation, fuel etc., rather than a crisis of too small wages. While 2022/2023 saw a strike wave the size the UK had not seen in decades, these strikes of NHS nurses and doctors, teachers and civil servants were mainly asking the state to provide for adequate resources to ensure social reproduction, rather than bargaining with producers; in other words, these were strikes about the just distribution of tax money, and thus struggles about rent, too.

Industrial production and manufacturing have shrunk considerably in the UK since 1980, and with it the basis for strikes. Instead, the same period saw an increase in rent-seeking economic activities: 'Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a broad-based shift towards economic activities conducted by 'rentiers' in the sense that they are structured around the control of, and generation of income ('rents') from scarce assets', Brett Christophers has analysed.[84] Especially 'those corporations at the heart of digital capitalism – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM) – are accumulating value through rentier practices'.[85] While rents bring large profits to companies, these profits offer few opportunities for workers to bargain for a fair share as these profits are not the result of exploiting labour-power in production, at least not directly. Strike, thus, is not an option; rent-seeking companies avoid unionisation and collective bargaining. Accordingly, a smaller share of profits returns to the worker. The consequence of unfettered rentier capitalism is thus 'the extreme polarisation of wealth between an extremely rich minority and a mass of precarious or even obsolete workers'.[86] However, processes of enclosure and rentierisation are not only widening the gap between the owners of assets and those that have to pay for access to these assets, they are also 'draining resources from the public sector,' as Cédric Durand argues. The 'massive upward redistribution has made it increasingly difficult for local public administrations to provide

social amenities, from affordable accommodation and hospitals to leisure facilities, playgrounds and parks.'[87]

Most governments that are considered right-wing are supportive of rentier capitalism, praising its apparent capacity to increase GDP. The political aim, despite such labels as 'authoritarian' or 'populist', is usually 'not to centralise authority in the state, but rather to empower private interests at the expense of public institutions […] trying to emancipate the most bullish fraction of capital from any serious federal constraints'.[88] With less earnings through taxes, most states became increasingly reliant on debts, which in turn lead to drastic spending-cuts: 'debt is the instrument by which global financial institutions pressure states to slash social spending, enforce austerity, and generally collude with investors in extracting value from defenseless populations'.[89] The increasing need for private consumption (because there is less and less public provisioning) has the biggest impact on people with low income. This is exacerbated by the 'poor tax' of inflation, and drives many 'obsolete workers' into debt: 'As one of the poorest generations in recent history, debt and rent are the defining features of our lives', Neel contends.[90] As a consequence, social reproduction

> no longer depends solely on the relationship of wage domination, but largely on the ability of households to obtain credit. This does not mean that labor as a central form of social mediation – and domination – has disappeared, but rather that its role has changed. The main function of employment is now to obtain a minimum wage salary in order to acquire sufficient financial credibility to access credit and repay part of one's debts.[91]

The social-democratic consensus of the third quarter of the twentieth century was based on the high profitability of manufacturing (thanks to environmental plunder and 'third world' exploitation), which allowed for successful collective bargaining. While this provided families with relatively stable incomes, the situation has changed dramatically in the twenty-first century: 'as low-waged, precarious service work replaces unionised industrial labor, wages fall below the socially necessary costs of reproduction', Nancy Fraser contends, and in such a situation, 'continued consumer spending requires expanded consumer credit, which grows exponentially'.[92] Where high national debt forces states to disinvest from social welfare, privatised debt – *the* rent-seeking mechanism per se – becomes a pivotal means of '*managing the crisis*', as Veronica Gago argues:

> nothing explodes, but everything implodes. It implodes within families, in households, in workplaces, in neighborhoods; the financial obligation makes relations more fragile and more precarious because they are submitted to the permanent pressure of debt. The structure of mass indebtedness […] is what gives us clues to the shape the crisis takes today: as individual

responsibility, as an increase in domestic violence, as the growing precarisation of existence.[93]

High prices are experienced while shopping, while paying bills, or while trying to settle debts, rather than while working. Consumption and debt-settling are highly individualised procedures, private, even shame-associated matters; 'common experiences' that could provide people with an opportunity to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men' (as Thompson saw around 1800) are difficult to attain today,[94] and only momentarily articulated in the riot, the camp, or the assembly. The abstraction and commodification of culture, and thus the loss of 'a whole vocabulary of discourse, of legitimation and of expectation', which according to Thompson still existed around 1800, makes it increasingly difficult to transcend the lack of a common experience.[95] Put drastically, datafication brings 'the end of the common world, which is a condition for the possibility of politics'.[96]

Right-wing parties react with anti-political practices of exclusion to the demand that they should compensate for the fact that average wages cannot ensure social reproduction: the 'welfare scavenger' and the 'underserving immigrant' are taken from the well-established imagery of the far right,[97] and turned into scapegoats for the effects of rentierisation. This is what I would like to call *rentier fascism*.[98] Both the conservative *and* the social-democratic parties of Western states remain tied to an economy that is centred on waged labour; while they might support different sides of the worker-owner divide, they are united in their belief that labour-based profits and taxes can fully support social reproduction. Rentier capitalists, however, have little need for labour to exploit directly, and therefore neither for the systems that support this exploitation: family, welfare, education etc. Rentier-friendly governments and movements (from Milei's La Libertad Avanza to Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia to Weidel's Alternative für Deutschland) might pay lip-service to some of the labour-based institutions (e.g. 'the family'), but they do no longer believe in full employment and a labour-based society. Instead, they turn to fascist strategies in order to reduce the number of 'obsolete workers' they have to pacify by devaluing and dehumanising various groups of people that can then be more easily pushed into irregular and/or informal forms of labour – which is, as I explained, still needed for value production, but not for profit-making. Where the 'mute compulsions' of waged labour no longer apply,[99] widespread imprisonment, violent border regimes and necropolitcal modes of 'letting die' are on the rise.[100]

Thompson wanted to rehabilitate those that had struggled against the subsumption of their lives by capitalism: the famous 'poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper' and 'the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver' who 'lived through these times of acute social disturbance'.[101] They might have been 'deluded', even 'backward-looking', Thompson concedes, but their actions were a consequence 'of their

own experience'; they did not want enclosures, but they bore the brunt of what followed from them. In a similar way, the destruction of shop windows and the looting in today's riots might not always be progressive in itself. But these actions are often a genuine articulation of discontent from those, to use Thompson's words, who 'lived through these times of acute social disturbance'. As Stuart Hall emphasised when the 'Great Moving Right Show' first got underway, the 'success and effectivity' of a fascist party 'does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions'.[102]

Thompson knew that the left had to address these 'real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions' – if they fail to do so, the right will succeed. In order to be able to address the 'real problems', the left needs a clearer understanding of an economy based on enclosures and rent rather than waged labour: not to throw themselves into the arms of asset holders like the rentier fascists do, but to call a robbery a robbery and demand the return of the loot.

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The disrupted moral economy:
Understanding Italy's working-class far-right shift through the legacy of E. P. Thompson

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When first introducing the concept of the moral economy, E. P. Thompson uses it to criticise the way historians have classified eighteenth and nineteenth century riots in England and France; uprisings that, at first glance, appeared disorganised or devoid of political demands. Spontaneous direct-action protests over food or bread, which erupted in nearly every English town around the 1840s, were often dismissed under the label of 'mobs'. Historians, rather than seeking deeper explanations, frequently attributed these revolts to nothing more than a desire for loot. Thompson writes that:

> [the riot for food/bread] was rarely a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops. It was legitimised by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people.[1]

The adjective 'older' here conveys more than just temporal age; it evokes a historical depth, referring to a well-established moral economy that had been transmitted across generations. This older moral framework encompassed a set of implicit norms and ethical principles, deeply ingrained within the community, and shaping their collective understanding of justice and fairness. It is within this context that, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson finds the term 'riot' inadequate, placing it in quotation marks. For Thompson, the term fails to convey the depth and historical significance of these uprisings, firmly rooted in popular sanctions and traditions. This critique is particularly evident in the sections where the concept of moral economy is most frequently discussed.[2] Thompson argues that, at the time, it was not wages that acted as the catalyst for political class conflict, but rather the price of bread. Every sharp increase in price sparked a revolt, and political antagonism crystallised around the cost of bread.

The 'mobs' often mobilised within an established pattern of habitual, organised, and 'self-disciplined' behaviour.[3] By reaffirming and contextualising the political significance of bread prices, Thompson attributes a deeper motivation

to the flour and bread riots, dismantling the assumption that these mobilisations were merely instinctive responses to hunger or famine.

These uprisings, among those affected, were widely regarded as acts of justice, and their leaders were seen as heroes. Such large-scale actions reflect a deeply embedded model of behaviour and belief. The significance of Thompson's work lies in his demonstration of how the working classes organised to defend their interests and moral values in the face of an industrial revolution that was imposing a new way of life: 'the final years of the 18th century saw a last desperate effort by the people to reimpose the older moral economy as against the economy of the free market'.[4]

The English working classes mobilised to preserve the moral rules of common life and of *œconomia* in its original Greek sense, in which each part is connected to the whole and each member recognises their duties and obligations. It is in this sense that the English working classes had a class consciousness, because class is 'made' historically through shared experiences, struggles, and cultural traditions; is not merely the result of economic subordination. Although Thompson did not make it a point to provide a precise definition of moral economy in 1963, he did so eight years later in the journal *Past and Present* to account for the genesis of the so-called 'bread riots' in eighteenth-century England, offering this definition:

> It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.[5]

The concept gained significant traction, and thanks to the work of James Scott, it shifted from being used primarily by historians to also being adopted by anthropologists studying rural societies.[6]

What, then, is the connection between the moral economy underpinning the popular revolts of the nineteenth century and the contemporary far-right vote in Italy? Drawing on E. P. Thompson's notion of the moral economy, I argue that such frameworks are historically situated and socially constructed through collective struggles and shared norms.[7] While the rise of the far right among rural working classes is a broader European trend,[8] it is through the specific lens of this local history that we can understand how long-standing moral and political economies were formed, transformed, and ultimately eroded. The political

traditions this article focuses on, deeply rooted in collective resistance and egalitarian ideals, helped sustain solidarities, norms of reciprocity, and channels of political agency. Their progressive dismantling through different processes has opened the way to new forms of discontent and political realignment.

Traces of the old moral economy have not simply disappeared. In some cases, they have been rearticulated in reactionary terms, producing a distorted echo of past demands.

The aim of this article is to apply Thompson's theoretical lens to the political history of the Bolognese mountains in order to trace the historical construction of a local moral economy, explore its transformations over the past two centuries, and analyse how its residual logics interact with today's far-right turn. I will use data collected through ethnographic fieldwork on changing electoral preferences in the Bolognese mountains (Emilia-Romagna), along with archival material that allows for a reconstruction of the region's moral economy through cycles of mobilisation and conflict. The historical inquiry will be paired with an analysis of contemporary discourse among my interviewees, revealing how collective values persist, mutate, or disintegrate, and how this disintegration has shaped the ground for contemporary far-right support.

My sample consists of fifty interviews with voters of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia,* FdI), alongside forty-five interviews with voters from other parties, former activists of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), local elected officials, trade unionists, and FdI activists. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured method, with each lasting approximately an hour and a half. One-third of the sample was interviewed two or three times. The rural working-class segment I studied is primarily composed of individuals employed in agriculture and industry, with significantly less representation from the crafts and service sectors.[9]

The roots of the older moral economy in the Bolognese mountains

When I interviewed Daniele in his family house in the Reno Valley, I began by asking him to describe what life in the mountains was like when he was younger, and he began saying:

> You know, these people talk about citizenship income...[10] I'd have them talk to the people I know who went to work in the quarry when they were 11! Here you had to go to work right away. All the families had six or seven children, eh. All of them. Those who had a bit of land didn't have the right to go to the quarry... Why? Because they had food already, they had a bit of bread, the land gave them food, a cow gave them food, a bit of milk. Those

who were six or seven, and where the father had no land... They had to give him a job in the quarry first. It's different how it is now. (…) there was a rule. And it was *just*, because everyone had to eat. There were rules... for living, some equality, let's say... So that everyone could eat. This is missing today. [Daniele, 76 years old, retired former railway worker]

In his work, James Scott introduces the concept of the 'subsistence ethic', a set of economic practices that connects Southeast Asia with Russia, France, and Italy in the nineteenth century rural areas.[11] This *ethos*, grounded in local traditions and practical necessity, ensured that everyone could maintain a dignified life. Survival was not just about individual success but about collective security. The priority was meeting basic needs and preserving social cohesion, rather than fostering economic competition.

In the interview, Daniele recounts how, in the past, when two families in the community—one of farmers with seven children, and the other landless, also with seven children—faced the possibility of a job at the quarry, a clear sense of prioritisation prevailed. This serves as an example of how the moral economy worked in the community, with norms in place to ensure that society was governed fairly, determining what was acceptable and what was not. For Daniele, 'just' meant equal, or more precisely, ensuring the subsistence of all: 'so that everyone could eat'. Daniele was a lifelong voter for the Communist Party and for all the successor parties after the PCI dissolved.[12] In the 2022 elections, he cast his vote for Brothers of Italy. When discussing their decision to vote for the far-right for the first time with his wife Pia, she tells me, 'We were never aligned with that ideology... but we like Giorgia Meloni'.

To provide context for Daniele's example, it is necessary to retrace how the community's moral economy has been historically constructed and transmitted across generations. The traditions and cultural norms that inform local economic expectations and notions of justice have deep roots, extending at least as far back as the nineteenth century, and have evolved through decades of everyday practice.

While the concept of a moral economy has rarely been addressed explicitly by Italian political scientists, similar processes have been captured through the notion of a 'red political subculture'.[13] This term refers to a system of values, identities, and political practices historically rooted in regions such as Emilia-Romagna, where the PCI developed deep organisational and symbolic ties with the population. This subculture helped institutionalise forms of collective belonging, political socialisation, and mutual support that extended far beyond formal party membership.

The mountains of the Bologna province lie within the Emilian Apennines, which have historically served as a natural border with Tuscany. This region is expansive, covering approximately seven hundred square kilometers, and

currently houses a population of fifty-thousand inhabitants. The Emilia Romagna region is often referred to in Italy as the quintessential 'red region,' a designation reflecting its strong political and cultural ties to the left. It was within this region that the PCI maintained its highest levels of electoral support and membership throughout the twentieth century. This support stemmed from the peasant movements of the nineteenth century, which evolved into robust trade union organisations. According to Robert Putnam, the region's substantial political capital can also be traced back to its long-standing historical foundations, with Putnam suggesting that Emilia Romagna's civic traditions may be linked to the Etruscan period.[14] He argues that the autonomy and participatory governance structures of the Etruscan city-states fostered a legacy of cooperation and strong local institutions, which set the region apart from the more hierarchical structures of southern Italy. This historical continuity, Putnam posits, has contributed to both the quality of governance and the distinctive associative culture found in the region.

The Bolognese mountains exhibited a proportionally higher level of support for the Communist Party than the city of Bologna itself, which served as the party's headquarters. In certain municipalities, such as Castiglione dei Pepoli, one of the most remote areas in the mountain range, the vote for the PCI reached sixty-five percent, with only two percent abstention. This figure challenges the broader Italian trend of mountain areas tending to be largely conservative and represents a unique case within the Emilian Apennines.[15] In the provinces of Parma and Modena, for example, there has never been significant support for socialist or communist parties.

According to the historian of socialism Renato Zangheri, this uniqueness can be attributed to the political consciousness that emerged during the peasant uprisings which affected the valley in the nineteenth century.[16] The Bolognese mountains witnessed three major episodes of peasant revolt: in 1809, against the Napoleonic regime, sparked by the introduction of the milling tax; in 1869, following the tax's reintroduction; and in 1898, driven by widespread economic discontent. While a few isolated studies have examined these individual events, no comprehensive work has yet connected them to one another or traced their influence on the anti-fascist resistance that would later define this region in the following century.

The available historical records on these uprisings, aside from some rare oral testimonies,[17] come primarily from State archives, particularly police reports. This dependence on official sources poses a significant limitation, as it constrains the possibility of reconstructing a truly bottom-up historical narrative. As a result, these accounts remain partial, necessitating careful interpretation and critical analysis to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

The peasants' riots in the nineteenth century

The milling tax had never existed in the Bolognese mountains before its introduction in 1809 across the entire *Regno d'Italia* under French rule. At the time, the episodes of armed rebellion to the tax were labelled as 'banditry' (*brigandaggio*), a term that persisted in historical discourse. The insurgents mobilised in response to two key impositions by the French administration: military conscription, enforced for the first time in Italian territories, and a wave of new taxes that disproportionately burdened rural communities.[18]

The rioters burned public records, tore down symbols of sovereignty, desecrated them in defiance, and plundered both public and private holdings. The uprising against the milling tax became a crucial point of convergence between distinct social strata: the rural petty bourgeoisie, sidelined from political participation in the nascent state apparatus, and the broader popular classes, particularly sharecroppers and landless labourers, who bore the brunt of the new fiscal burdens.[19] This alliance underscores how resistance was not merely a spontaneous reaction but part of a larger struggle against economic injustice and political exclusion, foreshadowing future waves of peasant mobilisation in the region.

The ruling power, however, deliberately framed these uprisings as mere acts of criminality, while systematically downplaying their revolutionary and political significance. Official records explicitly referred to these events as attempts at 'dissolution of the Government' and armed insurrection, yet they ignored the broader political aspirations that underpinned them. Notably, from 1809 onward (and up until the fascist regime, as Zangheri suggests), the insurgents defined themselves as *patriots,* compelled to resist the foreign occupier. In 1809, this meant opposing the French regime, which had seized control of the province of Bologna by force as early as 1796. Within the valley, the first sparks of insurrection ignited in the villages of Tolè, Zocca, Marzabotto, and Sasso—places that, more than a century later, would become symbolic strongholds of the anti-fascist Resistance. In a report to the Minister of the Interior of 1869, the city's prefect sought to explain the scale of the milling tax revolts that would erupt again in that year. He noted that brigandage had, by then, become a glorious tradition in the province, with brigands themselves remembered as heroes.[20]

The culture of insurrection was passed down to the next generations, and in 1869, a few years after the establishment of the Italian State a milling tax was introduced nationwide on 1 January. Just days later, the first revolts erupted in the Bolognese region. This tax required a levy to be collected at the moment of grain milling, making it particularly oppressive for the peasants. Around the protest movement that emerged in response to its enforcement, long-standing grievances over exploitation, land deprivation, and state-imposed burdens

resurfaced. The taxation method was especially intolerable because it was applied directly to flour production: peasants would bring their sacks of grain to the mill and be charged based on the number of rotations the millstone completed. While consumption duties were a well-established practice, they were far less unbearable—both economically and symbolically—than the direct taxation of the milling process.[21] There were uprisings across Italy, but those in the Bolognese region saw particularly high levels of participation. One possible explanation for the intensity of these movements in Emilia is the rapid transition from traditional, subsistence-based agricultural economies to capitalist forms of production.[22] However, it is important to note that in the mountainous areas, this shift was significantly slower. Local newspapers in 1975 still lamented the fact that the mule remained the primary means of transportation. If we apply Thompson's thesis to the situation in the mountains, we could indeed hypothesize that the peasants were morally rebelling against a type of production that did not respect their economic-moral traditions.

On 8 January 1869, peasants began to assemble in various parts of the upper valley, summoned to the streets by the tolling of church bells. By the hundreds and thousands, they gathered in the mountain communities, chanting 'down with the milling tax' (*abbasso il macinato*).[23] Notably, the only written account that captures the grievances of the people was discovered in one of these villages, Camugnano. On 12 January, four hundred peasants stormed the town hall, setting fire to the King's portrait, population records, and military draft lists. They forced the town secretary to write an official report, which reads:

> The community of Camugnano has unanimously declared the following decisions: that they absolutely wish the milling tax be abolished, as it is too burdensome for the people; (…) that the seed tax on communal goods be reduced to 5 (…); that the salary of the town doctor be significantly reduced, and the current doctors be completely removed from office, with only one doctor to be appointed through a public assembly of the people; (…) that all council meetings must be open to the public so that everyone may know what the council is declaring...[24]

A series of ten demands were formulated in this petition, which was submitted to the mayor for immediate action. Notably, there is a subtle yet significant challenge to the popular authority, particularly regarding the selection of the town doctor. However, the document does not directly confront municipal authority. Nonetheless, the milling tax serves as a catalyst for raising further grievances, illustrating that, similar to the eighteenth century English bread riots, the motives behind the revolt cannot be reduced to a mere response to a *stimulus*. Rather, they arise from a deeper sense of what is perceived as just or unjust, which

is rooted in a shared cultural tradition of values and practices. This perception also integrates an awareness of class relations.

The petition was signed by the mayor, and the insurgents celebrated their victory. But in the days that followed, the police began mass arrests and the milling tax was forcibly implemented across the entire mountain region. The presence of the police was significantly increased throughout the valley. In the following months, smaller uprisings emerged, but the police managed to suppress them all. Throughout 1869, the population remained under intense surveillance, with authorities closely monitoring their movements and actions. The numerical participation of land workers in the uprisings was overwhelmingly dominant. Of a list of 723 individuals arrested by the province of Bologna by January 23, 1869, 426 were farmers and 150 were day labourers.[25]

Renato Zangheri wrote about the riots in the Bolognese province:

> The riots were suppressed, but tranquillity in the Bolognese countryside would never return. (…) what matters is the significance and consequences of this tumultuous movement within the peasant world, the changing social and civil relations that began in the countryside.[26]

The bourgeois state, still in its early stages, failed to liberate the peasants from the semi-feudal system and imposed harsh taxes. A few years would pass, and the population would learn to oppose it in the name of socialism. The experience gained by the peasants during this revolt taught them to organise, forging a solidarity between towns and villages that had previously been unknown.

It was about thirty years later that the last revolt of the nineteenth century took place. In 1898, the Prefect of Bologna reported that spontaneous demonstrations against the rising cost of living had reached the mountain villages. In Castiglione dei Pepoli, two hundred workers gathered on 8 May, marching to the town hall with flags and a banner reading 'bread and work'. Upon arriving at the mayor's office, they forced him to reduce the price of bread and flour. They also succeeded in obtaining the abolition of the tax on livestock and on work services. The police were unable to disperse the crowd. When they returned to arrest the main instigators, forty people (women and children) threw stones at them.

In Camugnano, another protest lasting three days ended with a positive outcome. A crowd of three hundred and fifty people took the mayor from his home and marched through the streets to the town hall, demanding the abolition of the compulsory road tax. It is reported that 'having achieved their goal, the demonstrators, after cheering the mayor, peacefully dispersed and returned to their homes'.[27] The success of the uprisings was most likely due to the fact that the local police forces were insufficient to control the vast mountainous territory. The sub-prefecture of Bologna, located in the town of Vergato in the mid-

valley, was still approximately thirty kilometres away from the municipalities in the upper valley. The police arrived too late, and arrests were made based on witness testimonies.

The inhabitants of the mountains had learned the importance of challenging the rulers, and the uprisings of the nineteenth century sowed the seeds for resistance against fascism from the 1920s onwards. From the early 1900s, prior to the rise of the regime, numerous instances of strikes are recorded by the prefecture which took place throughout the valley. Various socialist circles emerged across the valley, and their activities were closely monitored by the police. Political activity was not limited to workers but also extended to peasants. In the aftermath of the First World War, the first sharecroppers' leagues were established in the valley, led by several revolutionary trade unionists from the region. One testimony recounts that every Sunday, meetings were held at the Marzabotto league headquarters to discuss political issues, but also to read, study, and build a Marxist culture within the peasant class.[28]

In the years when fascism sought to take root in the Bolognese region, it ultimately failed to establish control due to the highly cohesive nature of the local population. Fascism was a movement originating within the bourgeoisie, attracting industrialists and large landowners who forged alliances with the fascist combat squads.[29] For the people of the valley, who had spent decades learning to resist the police, the large landowners, and the industrial elite, their opposition to fascism was a natural response, as it directly contradicted their deeply held sense of their moral economy.

In the section of the 'subversives' (*sovversivi*) in the State archives of the fascist era, a significant number of individuals from the Bolognese mountains are found. These were people who refused to join the fascist party and whose political activities were closely monitored. Many were forced into exile, with a considerable number fleeing to France. The political influences among them were primarily socialist, though also syndicalist-revolutionary. One of the most prominent figures was Mariano Girotti, the mayor of Castiglione dei Pepoli, a revolutionary leader who was exiled to Nice. In his memoirs, Girotti recalls that one of the most formative events of his life was his childhood memory of the 1898 uprising, as mentioned earlier. In Castiglione dei Pepoli, fascism was never able to take hold, largely due to the working-class solidarity fostered by Girotti during the struggles in the construction sites for the new highways.

The anti-fascist and communist political hegemony in the twentieth century

The opposition and resistance to fascism in the valley led the Nazis to develop a visceral hatred for the local population. On 29 April 1944, the Nazi soldiers,

who had a base in the mountains along the border between Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, decided to exterminate the *Linksbazillen* — literally, the 'left-wing germs'. Italy's largest Resistance movement had been formed in these mountains, around Monte Sole. In killing primarily women, children, and the elderly, the German soldiers carried out the largest massacre of civilians in Italy of the Second World War, murdering approximately eight hundred people.[30] This event would shape the political consciousness of the population in the Bolognese mountains throughout the twentieth century, providing massive support to for Communist Party. Locally and nationally, the Italian Communist Party was relying on an extensive network of activists. During the decades following the war, until the party declined, approximately fifteen percent of the population was registered as members, with peaks reaching twenty percent in the municipality of Marzabotto and Castiglione.[31]

The PCI was not only a governing political entity but also, and perhaps more importantly, a force fostering social cohesion. Along the entire valley, there were the so-called 'houses of the people' (*case del popolo*), built by the party and made available to the local population. These venues served as bars, small restaurants, and meeting places, where political activities blended with informal exchanges, creating a space for political socialisation in a festive environment. In the evenings, for example, elderly people could often be found playing games and discussing politics, as my interviewees recall.

There were also entirely informal PCI headquarters that have now been lost to history, often housed in private homes designated for this purpose. In Campolo, a hamlet of Grizzana Morandi, for instance, there is still a house bearing the inscription 'P.C.I. Campolo'.

The activists of the PCI also organised the *Feste de l'Unità*, festivals that took place in every municipality over the course of two weeks. *Unità* was the official newspaper of the party. Summer was thus the time when there was always a festival to attend in a nearby village, and the local population was deeply involved in the organisation. Women were primarily engaged in the kitchen, while men worked at the bar or in event planning. Even the seemingly mundane act of participating in these festivals, particularly in their organisation, served as a powerful political mobiliser.

The activities that activists carried out within the party were primarily linked to the party membership and the distribution of *l'Unità* in the mountain regions. The distribution took place every Sunday and was carried out in a highly organised and widespread manner across the entire valley. This activity not only served to disseminate political ideas, but also fostered close contact with the population, which often transformed into friendships. Joining the party meant becoming part of a network of people, thus gaining social capital. This provided individuals with greater opportunities to find work, exchange favours, and offer

mutual support. Pietro, a 72-year-old former activist, recounts how the distribution was carried out:

> We would go to see the peasants and the workers, to renew the membership. But it wasn't like I would come see them once a year. I was always in touch with everybody. So we also had to deal with a lot of criticism, and we would engage with it. This helped us say, 'Here's the situation: there is discontent about this, but this other thing is going well'. In other words, we had our finger on the pulse. Every Sunday, we would bring *l'Unità* to these people, going door to door to sell it in the morning. We went to all the hamlets, to every remote house. It was a meticulous organisation, so nothing escaped us.

The activists organised conferences, especially with young groups of people, to discuss contemporary issues such as divorce and abortion. They read political theory, particularly the works of Marx and Gramsci. During these years of activism, those who would later become the mayors of the mountain municipalities in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were shaped. The most recognised mayors of the valley came from working-class backgrounds and had a primary school diploma, but they all gained significant cultural and political capital through their activist experience.

Interviews with the local community revealed that having personally been involved in activism or participated in the party events over the years acted as a protective factor against the likelihood of shifting to the far right. Among the approximately fifteen people with such a history I interviewed, none had stopped voting for left-wing parties.

The dissolution of the PCI in 1991 was a traumatic event for the political and cultural life of the local population. After the party's disbandment, its political legacy split into two main currents. The majority of the party formed the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), marking a gradual shift towards social democracy. In 1998, the PDS became the Democrats of the Left (DS). Meanwhile, a minority opposed to the reformist turn founded the Communist Refoundation Party, maintaining its communist identity. Former PCI activists in the mountains recall how this division 'split families in two'. In the 2000s, the DS merged with the Margherita party (a centrist formation with roots in the Christian Democrats) and other progressive forces to create the Democratic Party (PD) in 2007, aiming to build a large reformist party modelled on European social democracies. In the mountain region, voting percentages for Communist Refoundation remained much higher than the national average (around nine percent) throughout the first decade of the 2000s. However, the majority of the PCI's electorate followed the Democratic Party's project.

Gradually, the traditional *Unità* festivals faded away, PCI headquarters were abandoned, and activists felt deserted. Political discourse in social spaces slowly diminished over time. The PD, which became the primary left-wing force and the partial inheritor of the PCI's political legacy, managed to maintain electoral support from the communist base until the election of its secretary, Matteo Renzi, in 2013. However, following his labour reform (Jobs Act), which made workers more vulnerable by abolishing the protections against unfair dismissal, workers in the Reno Valley felt betrayed and shifted their votes toward new parties. An elderly voter of the PCI remarked, 'Renzi is the one who did the worst thing... how can one turn against the people who supported the party like that? Renzi betrayed us. I will never vote for the PD again.'

The Five Star Movement captured some of the disillusionment with the Italian political class,[32] widely viewed as corrupt and opportunistic, drawing a portion of the Democratic Party's electorate in the 2013 elections. Giulio embodies this shift. Reflecting on the evolution of his political preferences, he explains:

> I started with communism because I was a worker, all the workers voted communist there, but then I saw that it was all just a game, and nothing was actually being distributed. Politicians, in the end, always act in their own interests, even the communists, who think they do the most for the people, are really just interested in their political roles. I even voted for the Five Stars last time. The Five Stars were the biggest disappointment I've ever had, bigger than all the others. All the expectations collapsed. I liked them because they weren't tied to the political world, but it's impossible to stay clean in that world. After a year, everyone started switching sides, there were mixed groups, and they lost all credibility. [Giulio, 56, qualified worker, voter of PCI - PD - 5 Star Movement – FdI]

Between the 2013 and 2018 elections, a significant portion of the traditional left-wing electorate in the Bologna mountains gravitated towards these two parties. Then, following Giorgia Meloni's electoral campaign from 2020 to 2022, during which she positioned herself in opposition to the Draghi government, FdI managed to attract much of the mountains' electorate that had drifted away from the PD in 2013, as well as nearly all of the right-wing electorate, securing between thirty and thirty five percent of the votes in the valley during the 2022 elections, despite having no local grassroots presence.

The reactionary turn of the moral economy

The mountains, having almost entirely lost their socialist and communist political heritage, now face a profound transformation. The Democratic Party has

proven unable to sustain the ideals and mechanisms that once allowed the social fabric to remain cohesive. With the deepening effects of neoliberal transformation, the older moral economy and the values it carried have unravelled. In reference to Emmanuel Pierru's work in the Somme region of Northeastern France on voting patterns for the *Front National*: 'it is in the (de)structuring of social relations and the "crisis" of popular sociabilities that the key to these electoral outcomes in rural worlds lies'.[33] The shift away from the perspective of the 'economy of exchange' between individuals, can be observed in several facets of social and economic life that have changed dramatically over the years. Historically, this region was marked by strong networks of solidarity that regulated economic and social interactions outside of market dynamics. Small-scale agricultural production, cooperative labour exchanges, and informal forms of mutual aid ensured that economic activity remained embedded in local relationships rather than dictated by profit motives. People helped each other with farm work, shared tools, and maintained systems of collective welfare that provided stability even in times of economic hardship. These practices were not merely economic transactions but part of a moral framework that emphasised obligations toward the community.

However, this moral economy was progressively dismantled by successive waves of capitalist restructuring, from post-war industrial expansion to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. The breakdown of mutual-support networks, compounded by the incursion of market logic into previously non-commodified domains, accelerated the erosion of reciprocal norms. Processes of extended commodification, exemplified by what Habermas describes more broadly as the 'colonisation of the lifeworld',[34] transformed collective forms of social security into individualised market transactions. Cooperative organisations, village gatherings, and party-led activism that once facilitated social cohesion, were replaced by individualised economic survival strategies. What was once exchanged through reciprocal obligations is now increasingly subject to financial transactions, whether in care, housing, or even community support itself.

The disintegration of the PCI's political structures, which had once provided not only ideological cohesion but also practical social services, left a void that the Democratic Party failed to fill. As local structures of collective belonging weaken, new forms of political alienation emerge, making these regions susceptible to reactionary electoral shifts. In this way, the contemporary crisis is not only about economic precarity but about the loss of a social fabric that once defined rural life. To refer back to the interview with Daniele, (see above):

> In the past, people helped each other, families helped each other, there were few things, but they helped each other nonetheless. If there was grain to sow, people helped each other, they all went to sow. (...) The other day, I went to

friends' house in the mountains, in the other valley, who has a farm isolated from everything. The head of the family is sick and I went to help him, not because they asked me, but because it used to be like that, there was no need to ask. I went to help them sow potatoes... I was the only one. No one else had gone... It's sad... They cultivate everything themselves and do everything by hand. The grandmother made tagliatelle afterward. We were happy, it's a joy... Today, everything is lost.

The practices of sharing that fostered a network of relationships were fundamentally structured around the moral economy of the community. When the dynamics of household labour shifted, so too did the social fabric. Many of my interviewees recounted, for example, how the homes they inhabit were constructed collectively, with friends and community contributing every weekend. The traditions and practices of reciprocal obligations tied to manual labour and reproduction were not merely the product of shared moral values, but, more crucially, they were the foundation of the community's economic reproduction. These practices, deeply rooted in the rural world, were primarily carried out by workers who, despite transitioning to factory work, preserved peasant traditions and engaged in various forms of upkeep and maintenance.

In this regard, there is a dialect expression that is difficult to translate into English, or even standard Italian: *fèr a żérla* (*fare a zerla*), which referred to the collaboration among farmers in carrying out specific tasks, particularly during the sowing and harvesting seasons, when the physical strength of the workers on those plots of land was insufficient. The entire process operated within a framework of reciprocity. In other words, it was a form of mutual aid—a spontaneous collaboration traditionally practiced among neighbours. The term *zerla* had dual meanings: it referred both to the yoke used to pair oxen together and to a worker who temporarily substitutes another.[35] The term would therefore seem to figuratively refer to the use of additional labour power, much like the practice of adding extra oxen to the team when necessary for tasks requiring more pulling strength.

Another significant shift occurred with the increasing bureaucratisation of ecological land management over the course of the twentieth century. As regulations intensified, local inhabitants were no longer allowed to intervene in the maintenance of forests, streams, and other natural features of the mountain. This change had a profound symbolic impact on the way the residents understood their relationship to the land and to nature itself. It also influenced how they spent their time and engaged with their environment. The prohibition on interacting with the mountain's flora played a role in the growing individualisation of working-class life throughout the century.[36] This shift not only restricted access to land but also reshaped the collective, social and cultural practices tied to it.

In his work on the subsistence ethic, James Scott emphasises a critical point: that the moral economy was a defining characteristic of all pre-capitalist rural societies. He argues that it was the rise of the welfare state that fundamentally changed this dynamic. With the state taking on the role of guaranteeing economic well-being, the traditional forms of solidarity and mutual aid gradually diminished.[37] People, now operating within a system of state-provided support, began to adopt a more profit-maximising approach. In Italy, the introduction of the welfare state in the 1970s triggered significant changes, including the migration of agricultural workers to industrial sectors and the subsequent depopulation of the mountain regions. As Daniele observes:

> The farmers had no health insurance, no vacation time, and worked from morning till evening. Industrial workers began to receive benefits like health insurance and paid vacations, people in the mountains, who had nothing of the sort... They moved to the city or emigrated. Among them were individuals who were incredibly skilled at manual labour...

The subsistence ethic in this rural society, as in many others, was grounded in the principle that everyone had to contribute to the reproduction of society. The possibility of subsistence, particularly for those living on the margins, relied on the utilisation of one's body as labour. It was unthinkable for either men or women to disengage from the generational and material reproduction of the labour force. However, with the evolution of the labour market, the rise of unemployment, and later the economic crisis of the 2000s, this traditional model began to erode. At the same time, the importance of welfare provisions ceased to be collectively defended or politicised. In the absence of strong political or union actors rooted in the territory, no one stepped in to reframe state subsidies as a legitimate form of social protection. This is illustrated in an interaction recorded at the home of Laura and Pino, with their daughter Giovanna:

> **Pino**: 'When I worked up there, in Castiglione, the son of one of us would come to plant fir trees up on the ridge. And the father would say, 'I sent you to school for eight years, you cost a fortune, look at where you are now.' [laughs] That's how it was. But you see, at least this boy was admirable, because he said, 'Rather than staying home, I'll work. Even if they send me to plant trees and cut roots.'
> **Giovanna**: Especially now, with the citizenship income, many people say, "You know what? I'll just stay at home. Why go work? They give me 1000 euros a month".
> **Laura**: It's right that they took it [the Citizenship Income] away. We need more meritocracy. I mean, I understand people who really need it, but not a twenty-five-year-old who spends the whole day with his

PlayStation. [Pino, 76, retired and former bricklayer; Laura, 68, retired and former factory worker; Giovanna, 39, factory worker.]

The conversation captures the evolving relationship between work, welfare, and social expectations in this rural context. While the interviews still reveal remnants of a moral economy based on mutual aid and collective labour, it seems that the disappearance of a politicising agent has caused a shift toward a more reactionary stance. Within the community, no efforts have been made to politicise the issues surrounding the citizenship income. Instead, misinformation was spread about the amounts of these social benefits, fraud cases were exaggerated and 'average recipients' stigmatised. In fact, studies have demonstrated that the citizenship income primarily supported individuals who were excluded from the labour market and struggled to re-enter it.[38]

New voters of Brothers of Italy think it is immoral and unjust for people to receive money from the state without 'giving anything in return'. Thus, many welcomed Giorgia Meloni's proposal to eliminate the subsidy. In interviews, there is a frequent suggestion that these recipients, whose average monthly payments were around four hundred euros, should be put to work in service of the municipality, performing tasks beneficial to society. The working classes feel that by voting for someone who prevents 'dishonest' people from exploiting state funds, they are acting in their own interest and promoting justice, calling for greater meritocracy.

As social and economic practices have evolved, while there remains a desire for social cohesion within the community, it is no longer directed outward but inward. The focus has shifted to protecting those perceived as belonging to their group; those who embody the values of labour respectability upon which the community's social identity is based.

In the last decade, the local workforce in the mountains has decreased by an average of 25%, forcing workers and employees to move to the city, resulting in a loss of quality of life due to long commutes. Faced with the fear of social decline, the community adopts hostile behaviours towards welfare recipients. This reaction reflects a deepening divide, where those who still hold on to their jobs and routines view welfare recipients as a threat to the limited resources available, fuelling resentment. The perception that those who rely on state aid are not contributing to the community's welfare creates a sense of unfairness, reinforcing the idea that only those who 'earn their place' in society deserve support.

A hypothesis is that calling for a more meritocratic society implicitly suggests that the standard of living achieved by these individuals – and especially that of their children – has not been proportional to the efforts they made throughout their lives. In a region undergoing heavy deindustrialisation, with diminishing job opportunities, fewer services, rising rents, and living costs, members of the

working classes tragically perceive the deterioration of their economic situation for the incoming generation. The mountain area of Bologna is one of the economically and socially most fragile regions these days, whereas, during the previous century, it had been a key location for the development of the metalworking industry. Workers, employees, small business owners, artisans, farmers, and retirees alike have seen their economic conditions worsen since the 2008–2009 financial crisis. For those still in the midst of their working lives, it is very difficult to understand how they can achieve a decent standard of living without the help of their parents, who can assist them financially or leave them real estate that was acquired during a more economically advantageous time. The generations now in retirement have reached a relatively stable level of security, but they fear for the future of the generations to come, as they hold little hope for what lies ahead.

The erosion of these collective bonds, exacerbated by economic precarity, has made individuals more susceptible to narratives of division and resentment. The new voters of the post-fascist far-right blame the left for failing to defend the 'workers' and for prioritising the protection of minority groups (migrants and the LGBTQI+ community), abandoning issues of labour and precariousness. These new voters are convinced that 'the politicians' are doing everything to make them to leave the mountains and their homes. Faced with the objective deterioration of living conditions due to the crisis, the decrease in services in mountainous and rural areas, and the reduction of local businesses that has turned entire town centres into ghost towns, the mountain population feels abandoned. The far-right vote feeds on the anxiety of precariousness, relegation, and exclusion. This sense of marginalisation, in turn, fuels a narrative that positions the far-right as the only political force capable of protecting the locals' interests and restoring a sense of belonging and security.

Conclusion

Although the set of values and shared beliefs that once sustained the moral economy is still present in the community, it has undergone a reactionary turn. The demand for equality now often takes the form of resentment toward those perceived as abusing the system, particularly welfare recipients who are not seen as contributing through labour. The centrality of physical labour, once vital to the reproduction of the community, becomes a symbolic marker: a way for individuals to position themselves as those who 'do their part' while morally condemning others who receive aid. This stigmatisation of welfare is a symptom of the depoliticisation of social demands, a process tied to the absence of political actors capable of giving voice to working-class grievances.

Voters from working-class and leftist backgrounds have grown disillusioned with the left, viewing its failure to defend labour rights and tackle economic insecurity as a betrayal. In their eyes, the left's focus on marginalised groups has led to the neglect of core working-class concerns, such as job instability, vanishing public services, and the decline of local economies. The far-right's rhetoric, emphasising meritocracy and portraying welfare recipients as undeserving, resonates with this electorate, offering them a way to reaffirm their own moral worth amid rising rents, crumbling infrastructure, and shrinking opportunities.

It is important to note that this shift does not necessarily signal a permanent or stable transition to far-right parties. This may merely be a phase, one that has not yet solidified into a lasting political shift. In the valley, there is still the potential for political realignment or the resurgence of solidarity-based movements that reconnect these disillusioned communities with a renewed sense of collective purpose and belonging. Without such efforts to rebuild solidarity and address the underlying economic grievances, the cycle of disenchantment and political fragmentation may only deepen, further entrenching division and exclusion in the social and political fabric of the region.

Notes

1   Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1991, p.63.
2   Ibid., p.63-67.
3   Ibid., p.64.
4   Ibid., p.67.
5   E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), pp.76-136.
6   James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven, 2000.
7   For a synthesis of Thompson's critical methodology and a grounded examination of the explanatory reach of the moral economy concept in contemporary social sciences, see: Federico Tarragoni, 'La méthode d'Edward P. Thompson', *Politix*, 118(2) (2017), pp.183-205.
8   See for example: A. Mamonova, M. Françesa, and D. Brooks, 'Right-Wing Populism in Rural Europe: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Rural Sociology*, 85(1) (2020), pp. 1–10; K. Arzheimer, 'Falling Behind Whom? Economic Geographies of Right-Wing Populist Support in Europe', *Geographical Journal*, 189(2) (2023), pp.255-271.
9   It was decided not to anonymise the studied geographical area, as the article would lose its meaning without the specificity of the local history. This decision aligns with the approach of my thesis, which relies on a monographic method that includes a historical dimension so unique that it would remain identifiable

even if anonymised. Nonetheless, the identities of the individuals have been protected using pseudonyms and by omitting sensitive data.

10 The citizenship income (*reddito di cittadinanza*) is a social welfare program introduced by the Five Star Movement in Italy to provide financial support to low-income individuals and families. It aimed to reduce poverty and encourage employment by offering a monthly allowance to those who meet certain income and residency criteria, while also requiring recipients to participate in job training and job-seeking activities. It was abolished by the government led by Giorgia Meloni in 2024.

11 Scott, *The moral economy,* p.2.

12 After the dissolution of the PCI, the successor parties included the Communist Refoundation Party, the Democrats of the Left (PDS), the Democratic Party (PD).

13 Mario Caciagli, 'Fra storia contemporanea e scienza politica: le subculture territoriali', in *Partiti e movimenti politici fra Otto e Novecento*, ed. by Gianfranco Pasquino, Bologna, 2004.

14 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, 1993.

15 For a broader comparative argument showing why mountain zones frequently develop political trajectories that diverge from national majorities, see : James Scott, 'La montagne et la liberté', *Critique internationale*, 11(2) (2001), p85-104.

16 Renato Zangheri, *Agricoltura e Contadini Nella Storia d'Italia*, Torino, 1977, p.189-240.

17 Stefano Cammelli, *Al suono delle campane. Indagine su una rivolta contadina: i moti del macinato (1869)*, Milano, 1984.

18 Giovanni Natali, 'L'insorgenza del 1809 nel Dipartimento del Reno', *Atti e Memorie della R. Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Emilia e la Romagna*, XV.II (1936-1937), pp.43-109.

19 Ibid.

20 Camera dei Deputati in *Documenti presentati dal ministro dell'interno (Cantelli) nella tornata del 20 gennaio 1869 intorno ai fatti avvenuti nelle province dell'Emilia in conseguenza della legge sul macinato*, Firenze, 1869, p.53.

21 Zangheri, *Agricoltura,* p203.

22 E. Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne (1860-1900),* Torino, 1947, p.115.

23 From the note of 'Sottoprefetto di Vergato to prefetto, 8 gennaio' in ASB, Prefettura. 1869. Affari di Gabinetto.

24 In Italian : '(…) la comunità di camugnano ha dichiarato unanime di deliberare e volere quanto segue : che vogliano assolutamente soppressa la tassa sul macinato perché sono troppo gravose ai popoli, (…) che la tassa sementi sui beni comunali sia ridotta a 5 (…), che assolutamente sia ridotto lo stipendio del medico condotto e gli attuali medici condotti siano assolutamente levati d'impiego e che vi sia in comune un medico solo, il quale sarà nominato in adunanza del popolo (…) che le adunanze del consiglio debba essere sempre pubblica perché ognuno possa sapere cio che il consiglio dichiara…' Ibid.

25 'Carceri giudiziarie di Bologna. Stato nominativo degli individui stati arrestati per ribellione alla legge del macinato', in ASB Questura. 1869. *Agitazione pel macinato*, mazzo 58.

26 Zangheri, *Agricoltura*, p.236.

27 Prefettura di Bologna, Gabinetto, (1859 - 1928), IV 282. Legione dei Carabinieri di Bologna, 17 maggio 1898. Oggetto : dimostrazioni avvenute in Camugnano.

28 Interview with Laura Veronesi, in : Remo Sensoni, Vinicio Ceccarini. *Marzabotto nel primo dopoguerra*, Milano, 1999, p.29.

29 For the anti-fascists in Emilia, it was already clear that the Resistance was both a class struggle and a civil war. The historian Claudio Pavone was the first to strongly support this thesis, a position that would earn him considerable criticism from his fellow historians at the time. Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Torino, 1991.

30 Andrea Speranzoni. *A partire da Monte Sole: stragi nazifasciste, tra silenzi di Stato e discorso sul presente*, Roma, 2016 ; Luca Baldissara and Paolo Pezzino, *Il massacro : Guerra ai civili a Monte Sole*, Bologna, 2010.

31 Archivi del Partito Comunista Italiano (Fondazione Gramsci), Fondo 'Zona montagna', Statistiche elettorali del 1986.

32 The Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) is an Italian political party founded in 2009, known for promoting digital direct democracy and advocating for a universal basic income as a means to reduce social inequality and reform traditional politics.

33 Emmanuel Pierru and Sébastien Vignon, 'Comprendre les votes frontistes dans les mondes ruraux. Une approche ethnographique des préférences électorales', in Gérard Mauger, Willy Pelletier ed., *Les Classes Populaires et Le FN: Explications de Vote*, Vulaines sur Seine, 2016, p.86.

34 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston, 1987.

35 Pietro Mainoldi, *Vocabolario del dialetto bolognese,* Bologna, 1996. Many thanks to Gian Paolo Borghi for the reference and providing valuable insight on this matter.

36 Olivier Schwartz, *Le monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord.* Paris, 1990.

37 Scott, *The moral economy*, p.10.

38 ISTAT, *Condizioni di vita e reddito delle famiglie*, Roma, 2023.

The significance of communism in the time of Marx and Engels
Synonym for socialism, human dream or 'spectre'?

Joshua Graf

Introduction

Hardly any political term evokes such strong reactions from people as 'communism'. Whether a supporter or a convinced opponent, when this term is discussed, it is usually emotionally charged. However, this emotional charge is rarely backed by the conceptual precision necessary for any serious discussion.[1] There is a discrepancy between the often positively-perceived, emancipatory, theoretical content and the authoritarian practice, although both are subsumed under the same title. Some seek to protect the ideal, while criticising the practices of communist-ruled states.[2] To this day, the question of whether the Soviet Union and its allies should be regarded as 'communist' or 'real socialist' remains disputed. 'Communism' produces these reactions even in the absence of any agreed and precise definition of the term.[3]

When we look at the constitutive phase of Marx's communism, Ahlrich Meyer's conclusion from 1977 still applies: 'The terms socialism and communism [...] as they emerged in the 1830s and 1840s and were used politically and journalistically, are considered unclear or indistinguishable, uncritical'.[4]

This article does not seek to provide a 'correct' definition of the term 'communism'. The ongoing change in meaning that the term has experienced over the years stands in the way of this. Instead, I hope to achieve two things. Firstly, I want to give a brief recapitulation of the different stages of subaltern history, to show why it makes sense to apply the label 'communist', at least as Marx himself understood it, only to certain practical movements since the French Revolution of 1789. Secondly, I want to draw attention to a perhaps slight, but existing and important historical difference between the terms 'socialism' and 'communism', as they were understood in the early years of Marx and Engels. At that time 'socialism' simply denoted a broader political movement, of which 'communism' was a part. Communism, therefore, was a form of socialism, but socialist politics were not necessarily communist. The 'Marxist-Leninist' framework, which designates 'socialism' as an earlier stage on the way to 'communism', belongs to a later era.

This article seeks primarily to address the following questions:
Is 'communism' a modern phenomenon or a timeless ideal?
(How) did the meanings of 'socialism' and 'communism' differ?
What connotations did the term 'communism' have at that time for both its supporters and its opponents?

The History: Humanity's Dream or Modern Movement?

Is communism something which has existed for thousands of years, or is it a phenomenon of the modern world? Undoubtedly, various examples of small egalitarian-structured communities can be found in history. As Ernest Mandel observed, the 'dream of a classless society is as old as class society itself'.[5] Often, these were religious minorities living in small groups and propagating an ascetic lifestyle. For example, a communal group in present-day Palestine is documented even before our current era.[6] The militarily-organised 'communism' of Plato is well known.[7] Egalitarian approaches have also been documented among indigenous peoples. As Michael Brie put it:

> Recent research points to the largely egalitarian-communal character of early societies of hunters and gatherers. They were manageable groups with intense direct communication and cooperation. They exercised intense control over their members to ward off dangers from individuals as well as from the group as a whole and to socially align individual behavior. Access to subsistence goods was largely egalitarian.[8]

Thus, there were numerous movements and groups that sought a non-hierarchical, community-oriented economy and implemented it on a small scale.[9] Considering this broad history, Michael Brie has gone so far as to call communism 'a suppressed tradition of Europe'.[10]

In addition to these small practical implementations of communal property, the first fictional utopias began to appear in the fifteenth century. Herman Duncker calls the most famous utopian Thomas More the 'forefather of modern communism'.[11] It was from the sixteenth century, starting with More's 'Utopia' in 1526, followed by Tommasso Campanella's 'City of the Sun' in 1602 and Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis' in 1627 that the genre of utopian novels, where authors described their ideal society as a form of common property, became quite popular. One could also trace this line even further up to the French philosophers of the radical Enlightenment, Morelly and Mably, who both argued for the abolition of private property on philosophical and moral grounds. Scholars like Duncker, who date the origins of communism from that period, see the central aspect of

communism in its shared economy. In this reading a theoretical critique of private property and the depiction of alternative utopias, seem to be enough to characterise something as 'communist'.

Another take on the origins of communism is provided by André Tosel in his well-known German handbook on Marxism. He locates the beginning of modern communism in the religious movements of the 'True-Levellers' and 'Diggers',[12] considering the aspect of communism as an active movement to be the decisive element. I consider both these historical localisations premature.

For my argumentation I follow Marx's notion from *The German Ideology* (1846) that communism is the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things'.[13] In accordance with this very brief description I argue that one should grasp communism as a 'real movement' that intends to overcome class society in a struggle for a use value-based economy, by seizing power to 'actually change' the world. Communism is, then, both the fulfilled classless society and/or the subaltern struggle towards it. As Ernest Mandel put it:

> Communism, from then on, would designate both a classless society without property, without ownership – either private or nationalised – of the means of production, without commodity production, money or a state apparatus separate and apart from the members of the community, and the social-political movement to arrive at that society.[14]

The category of subaltern struggle is central for this reading. However it does not necessarily involve the use of revolutionary violence. Struggle can also be understood in a peaceful way. Nevertheless, this characterises communism as an inherently political, and therefore social issue. Individual opt-outs are not seen as communist in this definition.

I agree with Tosel's position that the central point about communism is that it is a movement which seeks to actually change the world, by practically achieving radical social change towards a form of use-value based economy. Nevertheless, it seems incongruous to locate the beginning of communism in the religious movements of the 'True-Levellers'. They were a puritan religious sect, who believed they had a God-given right to harness currently unused land for the sake of God. In that respect they were an actual, practical movement, aiming at establishing a community-based economy. But their movement was not seeking to abolish the existing class system. They were happy with the few liberties they were granted by the English crown and did not seek to form a broad political movement to challenge the existing system. Instead, they tried to live their religious life in the little niches of society conceded to them.[15] That is not really enough as to denote a movement as communist, as communists do not seek to drop out of the system individually, but rather to end class rule completely. Communism comes

from a subaltern and rebellious tradition, for which the notion of 'class struggle' is central. The True-Levellers were not a movement which aspired to grow radically in order to overthrow society, but a little religious group, open to converts, seeking to live peaceably under feudal monarchy. They did not seek to abolish the status quo, but to coexist with it, and not be bothered by it.

There is no question that there was an extensive tradition of egalitarian-organised communities in history. It is also true that modern communist movements were influenced by this tradition of ideas. But should they all be subsumed under the term 'communism'? Some theorists consciously place themselves in this tradition and advocate a concept of communism that fits into a broad and diverse tradition of subaltern egalitarianism.[16] Politically and strategically, by referring to this long tradition they sought to legitimise their own contemporary communist concerns. This transhistorical argumentation found its form among the French materialist early communists, especially in the form of an appeal to a supposed 'natural law'.[17] The radicalisation of the value of universalism inherent in bourgeois emancipation efforts served to justify their own concerns and political programme, as it directly, albeit in a more radical form, connected to the common values of the emerging bourgeoisie.

In the light of all this, it makes sense to locate the starting point of communism in the left-wing radicalism of the French Revolution of 1789. That was the moment when a movement came into the world, that actively sought to change society as a whole and radically overcome the status quo. For Gracchus Babeuf, whose movement Marx called the 'first manifestation of a truly active communist party',[18] struggling for a classless society was no longer a utopian dream, but an active political programme. Babeuf and his supporters insisted on a clandestine and insurrectionist approach, and envisaged seizing state power through a coup d'état rather than through any kind of subaltern mass party. However, the essential difference is that their aim was to reorganise society as a whole along communal lines, and that they all acted with the sincere conviction to do so, in the name of the poor masses. In numerical terms their circles might not have been much bigger than the True-Levellers' communities, but their aim was different – to build communism on the scale of the whole society. This is the central innovation which represents the origins of communism.

The Babouvist conspiracy was the predecessor of another, more significant movement – 'workers' communism'. This term denoted the little collectives of communists which emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century, in which communist ideas were broadly discussed by wandering and proletarianised artisans.[19] The term 'workers' communism', although widely used, is misleading because its agents were not workers in the industrial sense, but mainly artisans.[20] As Joachim Höppner and Waltraud Seidel-Höppner explain:

> Workers' communism is the theoretical and political current of the early pro-
> letariat, which emerged in France, England and Germany in the second half
> of the 1830s and generalised the experiences of the first struggles of the West-
> ern European proletariat in order to form the workers' movement as an ideo-
> logically and politically-organisationally independent force.[21]

As such workers' communism was the practical expression of the rebellious, pro-
letarianised masses. It did not attach too much importance to constructing com-
munist utopias, but focused on the direct struggle for a classless society.[22] The
workers' communists ascribed a central role to class antagonism,[23] although they
mainly conceived it in a moralistic fashion as poor versus rich, and denounced the
rich not for exploiting, but for idleness. In Germany it was highly religious, while
its French version was strictly atheist. It was this movement of workers' com-
munism that spread communist principles and shaped the concrete political prac-
tice of communists. This was the movement which Marx and Engels sought to
address, criticise and transform.

To sum up my brief historical walkthrough: I have provided a sketch of im-
portant historical egalitarian movements and ideas, and argued why one should
not designate them as 'communist' too easily. If we accept Marx's notion that
communism should be seen as the 'real movement which abolishes the present
state of things',[24] then it would be inaccurate to date the beginning of com-
munism before the French Revolution of 1789. If such different, even contradic-
tory, projects are subsumed under one term, it loses all meaning. Therefore, I ar-
gue we should consider communism, as Wolfgang Schieder has already suggested
for socialism, to be a 'future-oriented movement concept'.[25] As such, it is closely
linked to modern political thought. Moreover, the '-ism' implies that it is a political
movement, not an isolated utopia of a few outsiders. It makes no sense to speak
of 'communism' before the French Revolution of 1789, and even then, it was not
until the 1830s that this movement acquired any practical relevance. With the
emergence in that decade of workers' communism, it became a highly debated
social phenomenon and Marx and Engels needed to address both their criticism
and their sympathies to the discursive field shaped by that new movement. This
rapid growth in its social importance is also reflected in its etymological history.

The etymology of 'communism'

It was only through the French Revolution that the idea of the influence of the
subject on politics and society could prevail.[26] The emerging materialist com-
munism, shaped by the repressive conditions, relied on clandestine organisation
and conspiratorial practice. The emergence of workers' communism in different

European countries in the 1830s stemmed directly from the altered conception of the relation between the individual and the political sphere that developed after 1789.[27]

If communism is understood as a political movement, this assessment is largely undisputed. Historical-etymological research also suggests considering communism as a phenomenon which first appeared with the Enlightenment. Schieder comes to the following assessment:

> The German words 'communist' and 'communism' were adopted as neologistic formations from French in the early 1840s. The plural form 'communistes' is first documented in French at the end of the Ancien Régime. [...] The system term 'communisme' was formed in France during the revolutionary period at the end of the 18th century.[28]

Exact details are difficult, but Jacques Grandjonc states that after 1797, the term was not used again until 1835.[29] Jean-Luc Nancy,[30] on the other hand, dates the use of the term to 1785. But there is no question that the term only gained real relevance from the 1830s onwards. Alexandre Zévaés states:

> Communism and 'communist' emerged around 1834, without it being possible to determine who first used these expressions. But from 1834 to 1848, they are constantly found in newspapers, pamphlets, books, in discussions and polemics.[31]

J. R. Bestor suggests that the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' emerged as modern terms around this time, while the egalitarian utopias of earlier periods were usually denoted by the terms 'community', 'communauté', or 'Gemeinschaft'.[32] The term gained popularity through the 'Communist Banquet of 1840', held in Paris. This event was the first major gathering of communists and radicals from different political movements, who met in Paris to discuss their ideas and to connect with each other for the greater cause of communism. In the neo-Babouvist tradition, natural law reflections mingled with plebeian-egalitarian elements.[33]

The spectre of communism

What did the early communist movement, with which Marx and Engels came into contact, look like? The communists were almost exclusively proletarianised craftsmen, and especially journeymen. Their obligatory time as a journeyman was marked by poverty.[34] As travellers, they were particularly open to radical ideas. Certain professions, such as tailors, were especially open to agitation.[35] At that time, communist agitators could connect to a backward-looking and often

religiously justified 'moral economy', basing their arguments on the obvious inequalities and their glaring discrepancy with the lofty promises of the French Revolution. Paris, in particular, was a highly politicised city.[36] Heinrich Heine estimated the number of 'raw fists, waiting only for the password to realise the idea of absolute equality' at about 400,000.[37] The young Friedrich Engels even assumed about 500,000 communists in France at that time.[38]

Such estimates were almost certainly massively exaggerated, but they also provide an insight into how seriously the rulers took the problem.[39] From 1841 onwards, warnings about 'the communist danger', primarily in France, appeared ever more frequently in the German press. Lorenz von Stein, a Prussian spy and a convinced conservative, warned as early as 1842: 'It is in vain to deceive oneself that communism is approaching our fatherland daily'.[40] Marx and Engels's well-known phrase, 'A spectre is haunting Europe',[41] thus connects to a common metaphor of the time.[42] The repression meant that communist, and sometimes merely radical-democratic, societies were organised in clandestinity.[43] Their elusiveness made them appear particularly unpredictable and thus 'spectral' to the repressive authorities. As Karl Birker points out: 'The danger of an extensive communist movement existed more in the minds of the officials than in reality'.[44]

Lorenz von Stein's 1842 report on current socialist and communist activities in France identified communism as a modern phenomenon and advocated social reforms to head off social unrest.[45] The liberal observer of current political trends Theodor Oelckers also considered the emerging movements of 'socialism' and 'communism', condemning the latter much more than socialism.[46] In Switzerland, the jurist Johann Caspar Bluntschli published an exposé of the communist agitator Wilhelm Weitling in 1843. His report *The communists in Switzerland according to the papers found with Weitling* testifies to the seriousness with which the ruling powers faced the emerging and elusive security problem of communism.[47] Ironically, Bluntschli's report significantly contributed to the spread of communist ideas. He provided such long quotations in his report that readers could learn a lot from these passages, even without owning the original communist writings.[48] As it was an official state document, it was legal to possess it in Switzerland. There were other reports which also testified to the official fear of this 'spectre', including a work from 1851 on secret societies of the revolution by the ex-revolutionary Lucien de la Hodde, who had defected to the police service,[49] and a two-volume report by the German police agents Wermuth and Stieber, published in 1853-1854.[50]

While Parisian politics was generally a mixture of radical political actors, mainstream opinion was mainly concerned with the 'threat' posed by the communists. Heine wrote: 'I speak again of the communists, the only party in France that deserves serious attention'.[51] Although a radical himself, he was worried about the

growth of communist influence. To Heine, it meant the dominant Babouvist tradition, which proclaimed asceticism, self-denial and rigorous moralism, rather than the value of self-fulfilment. He attributed the rapid success of communist agitation to its accessible language:

> The propaganda of communism possesses a language that every people understands, the elements of a universal language are as simple as hunger, as envy, as death. It is learned so easily.[52]

Clearly, communist ideas frightened not only convinced conservatives or Prussian state agents, but also politically liberal social reformists like Heinrich Heine. These ideas, along with all forms of communist agitation, were widely denigrated as being against all commonly shared moral values. Then as now, this was enough for some people to denounce anything supposedly 'communist', without having any clear understanding of its essence.

Socialism and communism in Marx and Engels

Today the usage of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' is still confused. The Marxist-Leninist tradition has strongly influenced the way both terms are now understood, deriving from the distinction made by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, in which 'socialism' denotes a less developed social phase, to be incrementally replaced by the higher form, 'communism'.[53] In this reading socialism and communism are different stages of the same project, in which communism is the more advanced social system, which can only come after a socialist transitional stage.[54] But, as Peter Hudis has pointed out, this is not the way Marx and Engels understood the terms.[55] In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where Marx roughly differentiates between different stages of maturity, socialism does not stand for the first and communism for the second stage. In contrast, Marx speaks of the 'first' and 'a higher stage of communist society'.[56]

Engels, too, had no great difficulty using the terms synonymously later in his life. However, this does not mean that this was also the case during the constitutive phase in the 1840s of what Marx subsequently called 'critical communism'.[57] Marx used this term to distinguish his ideas from the already established and allegedly uncritical French materialist communism.[58] Therefore, Hudis's claim that Marx and Engels considered the two terms interchangeable is too crude.[59] Certainly, both Marx and Engels used both terms, and we cannot prove a clear conscious distinction in every single mention. In some of Engels's early writings, before about 1845, a very diverse assortment of characters was labelled 'communist'. For example, in his articles from 1844 and 1845 for the English socialist newspaper

The New Moral World, titled 'Rapid Progress of Communism in Germany', he listed many figures later known under the derogatory term 'true socialists'. In his first article, he wrote:

> The most active literary characters among the German Socialists are: — Dr. Charles Marx, at Paris; Dr. M. Hess, at present at Cologne; Dr. Ch. Grün, at Paris; Frederick Engels, at Barmen (Rhenan Prussia); Dr. O. Lüning, Rheda, Westphalia; Dr. H. Püttmann, Cologne; and several others. Besides those, Henry Heine, the most eminent of all living German poets, has joined our ranks, and published a volume of political poetry, which contains also some pieces preaching Socialism.[60]

A subsequent article in that paper listed most of the same people, but this time as 'communists'.[61] Engels' usage also seems ambiguous when he wrote to Marx in 1844, 'In Barmen the police inspector is a communist'.[62] In his early years, unlike Marx, Engels was highly interested in the experiments to establish communist colonies, in the hope that they could demonstrate the feasibility of communal property. In this light, the broad definition of the term communist can be understood. Similarly, Weitling had already labelled almost every socially-engaged person as a communist.[63] The aim was presumably neither to provide a precise definition of the term, nor to structure the discursive field within a communist movement, but rather to consolidate the communist movement and reduce the prejudices against it.

In his manuscripts of 1844, Marx still referred negatively to the communism of his time, which he dismissed as 'as yet completely crude and thoughtless'.[64] At that time he had a positive view of what he understood as socialism, noting:

> Atheism, as the denial of this unreality, has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, and postulates the existence of man through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the essence. Socialism is man's positive self-consciousness, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion, just as real life is man's positive reality, no longer mediated through the abolition of private property, through communism. Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.[65]

Here, socialism functions as a society of positive, unmediated life activity, while Marx assigned communism a more historical, yet largely negative role. The higher valuation of what he understood as 'socialism' is central here, as in the manuscripts he contended that the development of material productive forces in history was a necessary objective condition for a liberated society which would not merely generalise poverty. Because he associated contemporary communism with ascetic-natural law efforts, Marx could not fully embrace the term here. Nevertheless, he conceded that it was playing a historically progressive role in negating the old, and did not consider the term 'communism' itself to be ahistorical. When he said it was still 'raw and thoughtless', he identified a potential in the real movement of communism which, when realised, would justify a fully positive appraisal. However, before this could happen, Marx and Engels first needed gradually to develop the historical-materialist perspective.[66]

It is both possible and necessary to determine more clearly the meanings of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' in this period, even though contemporaries did not always find it easy to do so. Precisely because communism as a real movement was a new phenomenon and remained a 'spectral' entity in response to repression, some of its enemies were also unable to really grasp it. The liberal Oelckers wrote in 1844:

> One has still not been able to give a proper definition of the concept of communism, which is natural, as it is a completely contentless, indefinite concept. One could call it the negation of everything existing, without regard to something new to be built, and in general, this designation should suffice.[67]

In this respect, Jan Gerber is right to observe that the terms were often used diffusely at that time, although they certainly dealt with distinguishable objects.[68] Looking back in 1894, Engels wrote:

> It will be noted that in all these essays, and particularly in the aforementioned one, I consistently do not call myself a Social Democrat, but a Communist. This is because at that time in various countries people called themselves Social Democrats who had certainly not inscribed upon their banners the taking over by society of all the means of production. […] For Marx and myself it was therefore quite impossible to choose a name of such elasticity to describe our special standpoint. Today the situation is different, and the word can be allowed to pass, unfitting as it remains for a party whose economic programme is not just generally socialist, but directly communist, and whose ultimate political aim is to surpass the entire State, and thus democracy too. The names of real political parties never fit exactly; the party develops, but the name stays.[69]

This is insightful in two ways. First, Engels confirmed that a clear distinction between communism and social democracy could no longer be maintained in everyday language even then. Secondly, he emphasised the necessity of using the term 'communist' in his early years. This was also reinforced in the following retrospective statement by Engels, which is worth quoting extensively:

> Yet, when it was written, we could not have called it a Socialist Manifesto. By Socialists, in 1847, were understood, on the one hand, the adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France, both of them already reduced to the position of mere sects, and gradually dying out; on the other hand, the most multifarious social quacks, who, by all manners of tinkering, professed to redress, without any danger to capital and profit, all sorts of social grievances in both cases men outside the working class movement, and looking rather to the 'educated' classes for support. Whatever portion of the working class had become convinced of the insufficiency of mere political revolutions, and had proclaimed the necessity of a total social change, that portion, then, called itself Communist. It was a crude, rough-hewn, purely instinctive sort of Communism; still, it touched the cardinal point and was powerful enough amongst the working class to produce the Utopian Communism, in France, of Cabet, and in Germany, of Weitling. Thus, Socialism was, in 1847, a middle-class movement, Communism a working-class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent at least, 'respectable'; Communism was the very opposite. And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself', there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take. Moreover, we have, ever since, been far from repudiating it.[70]

How far are Engels's claims empirically tenable? We have seen how unacceptable communism was in 'polite society' at that time, so Engels's account seems to me to be sustainable. The historian P. H. Noyes, however, doubted whether the distinction of the class basis between socialism and communism is historically correct.[71] He argued that there were no relevant differences in terms of the class basis of socialist and communist movements. I consider this criticism to be incorrect in two ways. First, their leading figures did indeed come from different social strata and classes. Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen all had privileged backgrounds. They also affirmed the idea of a representative elite. They were emphatically trying to attract patrons and wealthy benefactors for their philanthropic efforts.[72] Hal Draper used the term 'socialism from above' for the tradition of socialist surrogate politics based on them.[73] Petra Weber described the technocratic systems of Fourier and Saint-Simon as 'intellectual socialism'.[74]

In contrast, the main communist actors, such as Babeuf, Buonarotti, and Blanqui in the French context, and Weitling in the German-speaking context, came from significantly poorer circles and were self-taught. Accordingly, they were often 'men of action'. They came from the people and sought to lead them, usually with recourse to long-standing ideals of justice, to the justice they deserved. The driving force for them was the misery of the masses and the moral contempt for wealthy idlers.

Secondly and more importantly, Noyes misunderstood Engels's (and Marx's) concept of class. It was not so much about the backgrounds of the representatives of this or that movement, but about the political content of the programmes they put forward. This 'petit-bourgeois' socialism was content with establishing a 'just' society without too great differences in living conditions,[75] taking an anti-revolutionary and class-reconciliatory stance. This can be seen in Marx's polemic against Proudhon's project of a 'just' society of commodity production. Marx accused Proudhon of seeking not to overcome capitalism but to organise bourgeois society according to eternal laws of justice, and criticised this idea as reflecting the class position of the petty bourgeois. To Marx and Engels, socialist attempts to reorganise society in a 'fair' way were an expression of a petty-bourgeois class consciousness, whereas the complete revolutionary abolition of bourgeois society expressed a proletarian view of the world. Compare the socialist 'scientific' credo of Fourier, which is cited below, to the critique that Marx directed against the anarchist Proudhon and it becomes clear that the position of reconciling class conflicts, rather than overcoming them, is classified as a typical petty-bourgeois ideology. Marx writes against Proudhon's system: 'He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and the proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois.'[76] For Marx and Engels, ideologies expressed certain world views reflecting the outlook of certain social classes – which did not mean that they imagined all 'communists' were proletarians, or that all 'socialists' were petty-bourgeois.

'Socialism' at that time was primarily a response to the 'social question' in Germany and especially to the challenge of the 'organisation du travail' in France. It was a reaction to the changes in society being brought about by industrialisation sought to shape these changes through planning and organisational measures for the benefit of all members of society. Fourier summed it up when he wrote, 'This peculiarity of the socialist system to satisfy all classes, all parties, is important because it guarantees success.'[77] Weitling therefore referred to socialism as a 'new science.'[78] Even in 1890, socialism was defined in *Meyers Arbeiterlexikon* as 'the designation for a specific direction, a specific system for solving the workers' question'.[79] As a solution to the workers' question, its focus was on regulatory concerns, rather than the pressing misery of the poor, and its supporters intended to

distribute wealth fairly among 'capital', 'labour', and 'talent', affirming a hierarchy based on differences in competence.[80]

Fourier's follower Victor Considerant openly formulated the central distinction between socialism and communism for him:

> Communism is based on the complete equality of all its members; whoever brings in a considerable capital, works a lot, or stands out for their talent is not better rewarded than someone who has brought in nothing, is lazy or incapable. The association, on the other hand, takes into account a hierarchy based on inequality and differences in skill and ability; it rewards everyone according to what they contribute to the common work. Communism recognises no superiority and seeks to bring such to a low level; it undermines all competition. The association, on the other hand, promotes the free development of the individual and their striving for advancement; instead of suppressing distinctions and privileges, it develops them in unlimited variety and makes them accessible to all. Communism resembles a piece of music, constantly repeating the same note. The association resembles a score that combines all notes into a harmonious melody.[81]

Accordingly, conservative and liberal representatives treated socialism relatively respectfully. It was quite different with communism, which stood for a radically egalitarian social formation. Oelckers denounced it as 'the idea of absolute equality pursued to the extreme',[82] and the Prussian state agent von Stein wrote: 'Communism is therefore in all its forms the first, rawest system of the social idea of equality.'[83] It constantly grows but possesses no 'peculiar doctrine' of its own.[84] Instead, von Stein notes in 1842: 'The word itself has no fixed technical meaning yet'.[85]

It was this narrative of a freedom-hostile primitive egalitarianism that brought communism into disrepute even with Heine, even though he was a harsh critic of the existing conditions.[86]

The positions the workers' communists themselves held were considerably more sophisticated. For example, the workers' communist August Becker wrote:

> In communism, the principle applies: 'From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.' Please note: It does not say: To each according to their abilities, as it should actually be called according to the opinion of the great crowd and even a certain large socialist party. They believe that different abilities should also be rewarded differently in quantity. According to them, abilities and their performance should be the measure for the wage that society owes the individual. The communists think the opposite. According to our thinking, the abilities of the individual indicate what this individual owes

to society, and not what society owes to the individual in material terms. All abilities of the individual belong to society and are equally necessary and equally valuable to it.[87]

Wilhelm Weitling wrote in the same vein:

When we speak of equality of all according to natural law, we do not mean a fixed equal distribution of work and needs according to number, measure, and weight – for this would be against natural laws, because often one needs more of these, the other more of those needs than the other, but a distribution that corresponds to the needs and abilities of each in a way that is equal for all. If of two individuals working in the same business, one is only able to deliver half as much work per day as the other, it does not follow that they should be given only half as much to eat, for their stomach may demand at least as much as the other's.[88]

And further declared:

Nature has not made us all equal, just as it has not made everything as we wish, but it has given us the means to remedy the imperfections.[89]

It is clear that the narrative of a crude, equalising communism was a caricature. In the 1840s, workers' communists had already undergone important steps in their theory formation.[90] The goal was not indiscriminate equal treatment of every person and the obliteration of the individual. The communists were aware of the objective differences between people. What they demanded was not completely equal treatment, but the equal validity of the interests of every person and the equal participation in the social community project according to their own abilities and strengths. However, for Marx and Engels, this communism remained 'raw' and 'thoughtless' in that it did not go beyond the stage of a Babouvist distributive communism.[91] The communists still lacked an understanding of a comprehensive, industrialised production, and were less positive about the developing industrialisation process than the utopian socialists, for whom Saint-Simon's slogan 'since everything is done through industry, everything should be done for it' applied.[92]

'Communism' as a term emphasised the plebeian-egalitarian tradition more strongly. It aimed at emancipation from below, although this did not necessarily preclude a conspiracy of a small minority with a revolutionary transitional dictatorship in the Babouvist and Blanquist tradition. But the central point is that for the communists, hierarchy could only be a necessary temporary evil, while for the socialists it could be legitimised over time by differences in performance or talent.

But communism was associated with a crude 'equalisation' and a lack of insight into the material advantages of the development of productive forces, which meant that Marx did not come round to the idea straight away. Engels, with his early interest in communal property settlement projects, was less deterred by this connotation and generally somewhat less strict in how he used the term. But Marx and Engels were also dissatisfied with the indefinite self-designation 'communist', as it did not allow for an adequate distinction from other varieties of communist thought. They therefore sought to distinguish their own ideas, primarily by labelling other representatives as 'utopian'. This was a necessary part of their endeavour to establish an accepted and hegemonic 'order of truth' in this complex situation.[93]

Doctrinally, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was often celebrated as a fusion of utopian socialism and communism. The origin of this sacralisation comes from no one less than Engels himself, writing in 1892:

> German socialism made its appearance well before 1848. At that time there were two independent tendencies. Firstly, a workers' movement, a branch of French working-class communism, a movement which, as one of its phases, produced the Utopian communism of Weitling. Secondly, a theoretical movement, emerging from the collapse of the Hegelian philosophy; this movement, from its origins, was dominated by the name of Marx. The Communist Manifesto of January 1848 marks the fusion of these two tendencies, a fusion made complete and irrevocable in the furnace of revolution, in which everyone, workers and philosophers alike, shared equally the personal cost.'[94]

Whatever the flaws in this account, there is a certain truth in it. Marx and Engels were partly positively influenced by socialist and communist ideas, and partly developed their position through deliberately rejecting aspects of existing theory. Marx and Engels certainly derived their prioritisation of material production and the development of productive forces from the socialist theoretical tradition. The three well-known so-called 'utopian socialists' all advocated a 'progressive industrialism',[95] while the communist theoretical tradition often drew on the backward-looking ideologies of pauperised craftsmen. A recognition of the material development of the productive forces as a necessary condition of social liberation was not to be found in communism before Marx and Engels. Hal Draper's formulation seems appropriate: 'For Marx, communism is proletarian socialism'.[96] It captures the immanently proletarian character of communism, which clearly distinguished it from the socialism of that time, while recognising that Marx and Engels, unlike other contemporary communists, shared the socialists' great confidence in the liberating possibilities of the emerging bourgeois society and its industry. In this sense, it is true that Marx and Engels led communism and socialism to a unity,

but this process itself only took place through fierce struggles for hegemony within the League of Communists, which culminated in and through the *Manifesto*.[97]

Accordingly, I concur with Bruno Leipold's assessment: 'it is clear that Marx did not so much convert to communism as fashion a new form of it'.[98] However, in refashioning the understanding of communism, Marx had to deal with the pre-existing connotations of the concept of communism. Throughout his life, Marx was concerned with political struggle. To understand him, we need to consider not only which political opponents and positions he fought against, but also which rhetorical moves were necessary to, on the one hand, build on an existing communist theoretical tradition with its valid legitimisation patterns and, on the other, develop these further to win the necessary support for a mass movement.

Résumé

The meanings of the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' shifted, especially in the twentieth century under the influence of Marxism-Leninism. Historically they had not denoted different stages of the same political project, but related, albeit different, political approaches. Both socialism and communism are modern phenomena that only gained relevance with the slow emergence of bourgeois society. Both are 'future-orientated concepts of movement',[99] but they have different connotations. The distinction between the two terms which was current in the 1840s, denoted real differences in political systems, ideas and movements. One could say that socialism was the broader term, advocating a planned response to the chaos of the emerging industrial society. In this understanding, every form of communism is socialist, but not vice versa, because communism had some specific characteristics which were not necessarily present in all varieties of socialism.

There is a long history of plebeian-egalitarian social formations, or attempts at them, but before the nineteenth century they had not been conceived as political (mass) movements. With the emergence of industrial society, both socialist and communist movements arose in response to the anarchy of production, impoverishment and the destruction of long-standing feudal patterns. Even before Marx, 'socialism' was clearly more industry- and production-friendly. It was by no means revolutionary and affirmed the inequality of people and its translation into unequal wealth and opportunities for participation. It was also mostly designed to collaborate with philanthropic elites. Socialism recognised the class divide, even in its emergent industrial capitalist form, but understood class society not as an irreconcilable antagonism, but as a scientific and organisational question of good planning and fair distribution. In contrast, communism at the time was often backward-looking and even religiously charged. It usually condemned the idleness of

the rich on the basis of natural law (Babeuf, Buonarotti, Blanqui) or Christian motives (Weitling, Becker, Laponneraye, etc.) and aimed at the complete abolition of class distinctions. It was recruited from proletarianised craftsmen and not from a homogeneous industrial proletariat. Whilst the communists upheld the principle of equality, it is inaccurate to impute a 'crude' communism to all of them. Equality, at least for some, did not mean complete egalitarianism, but equal consideration of individual needs and interests. Even if the common image of egalitarianism and total asceticism is historically unfair on the communists, it should be noted that communism was historically much more suspicious of the opportunities and risks of emerging industrialisation. This lost conceptual differentiation seems to me to be valuable; it provides a clearer distinction between political programmes. It deserves to be revived.

Notes

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The Rhyming Reasoner (1956)
A publication to be remembered

George Houston and Ronald Meek
introduction and annotations by Francis King

The year 1956 was notoriously traumatic for communists around the world. In the CPGB, most would have felt the 'shock and horror' recalled by Margot Heinemann on learning of Nikita Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth CPSU Congress. Beyond that, as the memoir literature shows, there was a range of reactions as the crisis of that year unfolded.[1] Almost a third of the CPGB membership left the party between 1956 and 1958; two thirds chose to remain. But besides the disillusionment and disenchantment of some, and the defiance of others, there were other responses, including a kind of gallows humour from those able to appreciate the more ridiculous aspects of the situation. This last reaction is brilliantly expressed in *The Rhyming Reasoner* – a privately-circulated bulletin of verses lampooning the absurdities of the party crisis and 1950s communist culture more widely. Its irreverent humour clearly struck a chord with some comrades: the first issue, dated September 1956, was not printed at all, but directly typed on a manual typewriter in several copies using carbon paper, and presumably passed from hand to hand. By the time of the second (and final) issue, dated November 1956, word had evidently spread: it was produced on a duplicator in considerably greater numbers, and carried cryptic, but quite definite instructions about how to order copies or get them sent to friends and contacts.

Its immediate inspiration was the duplicated journal *The Reasoner*, produced by E. P. Thompson and John Saville, which appeared over three issues between July and November 1956.[2] The story of *The Reasoner* is well known: Thompson and Saville, CPGB members in Yorkshire, were dissatisfied with the limited opportunities offered by the official CPGB press for discussing the implications and political lessons of Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret' speech to the CPSU 20th congress in February 1956, and the crises which erupted in Eastern Europe in the summer and autumn of that year. They therefore created their own publication as a forum for the discussion they believed was necessary. Since party rules forbade individual members to set up political journals to discuss party matters outside of the official party structures, Thompson and Saville were first instructed to desist and, once they had refused to comply, the party's disciplinary procedures were invoked against them. Although the authors of *The Rhyming*

Reasoner, as CPGB members, were technically in breach of the same rules, there is no evidence of any party sanctions against them for circulating it.

The lampoon was produced by two lecturers in economics at Glasgow University, George Houston (1920-1996) and Ronald Meek (1917-1978). Although part of the joke was the claim that the bulletin had been dictated from the Elysian Fields by the late and great Scottish humorous poet William McGonagall, a line in one of the verses which referred to 'Two Glasgow Red economists' who had written in praise of J. V. Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism* (1951) made it clear that Houston and Meek were responsible – a few years earlier they had jointly published a glowing review of Stalin's pamphlet in *The Modern Quarterly*.[3] Meek subsequently resigned from the CPGB in the aftermath of the crisis but continued to consider himself a Marxist; Houston remained a critical member of the CPGB almost to the end of his life. A further allusion to Meek's identity can be found in the cryptic jibes in the second issue about New Zealand, where Meek had been born, had joined the communist movement, and had studied before moving to Britain in 1946 to undertake doctoral research.

Some of the humour in *The Rhyming Reasoner* is timeless, while other verses refer to specific news items from 1956. The state visit to Britain of Soviet Premier Nikolay Bulganin and party leader Nikita Khrushchev from 18 to 27 April 1956, which included an audience at Windsor with the Queen, is referenced in 'Hat Trick', 'The Comrades' One-Day School' and 'Ode to Mr. Khrushchov'. The popular press routinely referred to the Soviet visitors as 'B. and K.'. The last item also refers to the (false) rumour that Lavrenti Beria had been directly executed by Khrushchev at the CPSU Plenum on 26 June 1953 where he was denounced and arrested.

'Hat Trick' refers to the arrest in London at the end of August 1956 of a Soviet Olympic discus thrower, Nina Ponomareva, on a charge of stealing five hats from the Oxford Street branch of C&A. This apparently trivial matter rapidly blew up into a significant – and absurd – diplomatic incident, as the Soviet side alleged provocation, cancelled a visit from their athletics team for the upcoming White City games, and threatened to pull a long-awaited four-week tour by the Bolshoi Ballet. On 1 September the *Daily Worker* published a mildly critical editorial comment regretting the Soviet decision to cancel their athletes' visit, which in turn led to a lively exchange in the letters column.[4]

'The Ballad O' The Reasoner' refers to the meeting of the CPGB Executive Committee in September 1956 which instructed Thompson and Saville to cease publication of their journal at a point where two issues had already appeared and the third and final one was already in production. Their refusal to comply set in train the process which led to their resignation from the party shortly thereafter. The 'Comments on our First Number' in the second issue of *The*

Rhyming Reasoner reference a comment attributed to Bert Ramelson, at that time Yorkshire CPGB District Secretary, at an earlier phase in the CPGB's attempt to discipline Saville and Thompson, as well as the rationale given by the *Daily Worker* for spiking some of Peter Fryer's dispatches from Hungary during the rising in October-November 1956.[5]

The songs referenced in *The Rhyming Reasoner* would all have been well known (to communists at least) at the time. The one song which readers today will find jarring – if not offensively inappropriate – is 'The Darkies' Sunday School' – an American folk song lampooning the sort of garbled Bible stories supposedly taught to the black population of the USA. In the early part of the twentieth century, this song was sometimes included in American radical song-books on account of its mockery of illiterate religious indoctrination, and as such would have been familiar to mid-century British communists. However, whatever its main *target*, the basic *premise* of that song is irremediably racist and by the mid-1930s it had been dropped from most anthologies.

The copies of *The Rhyming Reasoner* used for this feature were held at the Communist Party archive, and were 'republished' (photocopied) as a limited 'souvenir edition' for a conference in 1990 organised by the CP History Group, the predecessor of the SHS. The page layout of the originals has been preserved, apart from the type- and handwritten sheet appended to the archive copy of the four-page first issue, which reads: 'With compliments and thanks, Faithfully Yours, William McGonagall, poet and tragedian'. We have also preserved the original transliterations of Russian names and most of the punctuation, apart from some of the underlining.

Notes

1. See e.g. the essays by Margot Heinemann, Malcolm MacEwan and John Saville in *Socialist Register* 1976, as well as in Alison Macleod's indispensable *The Death of Uncle Joe*, London, 1997.
2. All three issues of *The Reasoner* can be accessed on https://banmarchive .org.uk/the-reasoner/
3. See Ronald L. Meek and George Houston, 'Some aspects of "Stalin's Economic Problems"', in *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 8 No. 3, Summer 1953. That entire issue of *Modern Quarterly* was devoted to assessments of the life and times of the recently-deceased Stalin, and a fellow contributor to that issue, J. D. Bernal, was indeed awarded the Stalin prize later that year.
4. See 'Wrong step', *Daily Worker*, 1 September 1956, p.1, and letters, 4 and 7 September 1956, both p.2.
5. For Peter Fryer's letter of resignation from the *Daily Worker* and the paper's case for not publishing the dispatches Fryer sent from Hungary, see *Daily Worker*, 16 November 1956, pp.1 and 4.

THE
RHYMING REASONER

A Journal of Indiscretion

Edited by W. McGonagall

"The most effective antidote for the poison of self-alienation is self-laughter".
– K. Marx

* * * * * * *

First Number   September, 1956

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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

We do not wish to write a line
That might be reckoned treason;
All we intend is to combine
A little rhyme with reason.

In case our title makes you all
Think Yorkshire is to blame,
We would point out McGonagall
Is not a Yorkshire name.

HAT TRICK

(Air: "Where Did You Get That Hat?")

I went one day to Gorki Park,
And saw some British models;
With joy I yelled when I beheld
The hats upon their noddles.
They looked so sweet, so chic and neat
My heart began to flutter,
And rising boldly from my seat
This question I did utter:

"Where did you get those hats?
Where did you get that style?
If into GUM a stock did come
The queue would stretch a mile!
I should like to have some
They'd go so well with plaits!
I cannot wait, so kindly state
Where did you get those hats?"

They said to me: "You'll find those hats,
Which seem to make you dizzy,
At C&A, where B. and K.
Bought twenty-five for Lizzie".
I had a try those hats to buy
When over for the discus,
But found myself accosted by
A gentleman with whiskers:

"Where did you get those hats?
Where did you get that pile?
As I'm alive, she's snaffled five!
Away with her to jile!"
For hours and hours they shouted,
Enough to drive me bats:
"Confess! Confess! You can't do less!
Where did you get those hats?"

When papers say: "We can't obstruct
The course of British justice";
When F.O. types, in suits with stripes
Declare they cannot trust us;
When people pout, and rave about
A "dirty provocation"-
I want to raise a mighty shout
Of fierce denunciation:

"You're talking through your hats!
You're talking out of bile!
Like King Farouk, you make us puke!
You ought to shut your dial!
Avaunt, ye petty Metternichs!
Avaunt, ye bureaucrats!
That such as we may brothers be!
You're talking through your hats!"

* * * * * * *

THE COMRADES' ONE DAY SCHOOL

(air: "The Darkies' Sunday-School")

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

>Stalin was a mighty man, a mighty man was he,
>He started going to the dogs in 1933;
>He planned his battles on a globe, the front he never saw -
>Isn't it a wonder that the Russians won the war?

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

>Lysenko was a scientist, so modest and discreet,
>Who hatched a lovely plan for hybridising winter wheat;
>But when he tried to plant his wheat along the Arctic shore,
>The ice and snow all melted, and he perished in the thaw.

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

>B. and K. were travellers, the greatest ever seen;
>They travelled up to Windsor for to see the Duke and Queen.
>The Duke now sells the "Worker" every day along the Mall,
>And the Queen is Party Organiser in the servants' hall.

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

> Two Glasgow red economists, whose books would never sell,
> Made plans to win a Stalin prize, with all the perks as well.
> They wrote in praise of "E.P.S.", and of its author too -
> Now Lenin's name is on the prize, what is a guy to do?

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

* * * * * * *

TAIL-PIECE

We plan an issue once a quarter,
And hope you get yours as you oughter;
But if the Centre ever hears,
It won't appear again for years.

* * * * * * *

Published on behalf of W. McGonagall, Elysian Fields, N.

Note: As is known, communications with the Elysian Fields are difficult to maintain. Every effort will be made, however, to prevent the Bard's manuscripts from falling into the hands of the State Department, and we hope our readers will take similar precautions.

THE
RHYMING REASONER

A Journal of Indiscretion

Edited by W. McGonagall

"The most effective antidote for the poison of self-alienation is self-laughter".
– K. Marx

* * * * * * *

Second Number   November, 1956

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COMMENTS ON OUR FIRST NUMBER

Comrade R. P. Dutt: "No, I am definitely not responsible for the *Rhyming Reasoner*. The only periodical run by me which is independent of control by any elected party committee is the *Labour Monthly*".

Comrade Bert Ramelson: "Subjectively, Comrade McGonagall may be perfectly sincere, but objectively it is impossible not to see that there are sinister class interests standing behind him".

Daily Worker: "Not an objective account of events".

TWENTIETH CONGRESS BLUES

Joe and me were buddies;
We were pledged to love eternal;
I subscribed to *Soviet Studies*
And the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*.

I treasured all his pictures
From the date of his accession
Until I read the strictures
Of that horrid secret session.

So now -   I've got those 20th Congress blues
            I hate the sight of *Soviet News*;
            For everyone keeps snarlin'
            At my darlin' Joey Stalin -
            I've got those 20th Congress blues.

Life so grim and harsh is
That I'm feeling suicidal;
I long for the moustaches
Of my cultured Georgian idol.

I don't want Vyacheslav now;
Lavrenti is *finito*;
Who is there left to love now?
Not even Comrade Tito!

So now -   I've got those 20th Congress blues
            I hate the sight of *Soviet News*;
            For everyone keeps snarlin'
            At my darlin' Joey Stalin -
            I've got those 20th Congress blues.

* * * * * * *

THE MARXIST-LENINIST'S SONG
(From "The Pirates of King Street")

M.-L.   I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist,
        I'm anti-war, and anti-God, and very anti-feminist;
        My thinking's dialectical, my wisdom's undebatable,
        When I negate negations they're undoubtedly negatable.
        And yet I'm no ascetic - I am always full of bonhomie
        When lecturing to classes on the primitive economy;
        And comrades all agree that they have never heard a smarter cuss
        Explain the basic reasons for the slave revolt of Spartacus.

Chor.   Explain the basic reasons, etc.

M.-L.   I'm fierce and unrelenting when I'm extirpating heresies,
         Yet patient and forgiving to the comrade who his error sees
         In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
         I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

Chor.   In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist
         He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

M.-L.   My love of party history comes very close to mania,
         I teem with information on the Bund in Lithuania;
         My speech on the Decembrists is replete with fun and pleasantry,
         I know the different stages in collectivising peasantry.
         With Russian Social-Democrats I'm always glad to clench a fist
         (While carefully distinguishing the Bolshevist and Menshevist);
         But when I am confronted with a regular Bukharinite
         I get a rise in temperature (both centigrade and fahrenheit).

Chor.   He gets a rise in temperature etc.

M.-L.   I know what Lenin said about the concept of the deity;
         And why it's very dangerous to worship spontaneity;
         In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
         I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

Chor.   In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
         He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

M.-L.   In fact, when I begin to try to fight against bureaucracy,
         To criticise myself a bit, and practise more democracy;
         When bringing Marx's teachings up to date I'm much more wary at,
         And when I've done with phrases like "impoverished proletariat";
         When I have learned that workers think that nothing can be sillier
         Than "monolithic unity" and biased Russophilia
         Then people will exclaim: "Hurrah! He's not a stupid sap at all;
         A better Marxist-Leninist has never studied *Capital*!"

Chor.   A better Marxist-Leninist, etc.

M.-L.   My policies and theories have an air of unreality
         Because I am a victim of the cult of personality;
         But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
         I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

Chor.   But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
         He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

* * * * * * *

ODE TO MR. KHRUSHCHOV

(Note: A number of readers of our first issue have written to us pointing out that McGonagall, when on earth, was the greatest writer of *bad* poetry the world has ever known, and asking how it is that his work has improved so remarkably since he took up residence in the Elysian Fields. The answer is simple; the Elysian Fields is a very improving place. But we suggested to McGonagall that he might be prepared to write us a poem in the old unimproved style of his well-known *Poetic Gems*, simply in order to provide evidence of the authenticity of his latest work. When the medium put this suggestion to him, laughing heartily as she did so, McGonagall became so annoyed that he hit her over the head with the trumpet. This incident in itself shows how greatly his character has altered since he changed his address – on earth, as is known, he was never one for striking a happy medium. But he apparently soon repented, since the next poem which he transmitted, the *Ode to Mr. Khrushchov* which follows, will be clearly recognised by Scots and other civilised readers as "the real McGonagall".)

Hurrah for Mr. Khrushchov, so intelligent and plump,
Who told us the truth about Mr. Stalin, all in a lump.
No one at Kremlin banquets is better than he at sinking vodkas,
And at walking round muddy building sites in his goloshes.

The only sad thing about him is that his head isn't hairier,
And he was the one who disposed of the arch-criminal Beria;
Yes, his was the hand that fired the fatal bullet off -
An act warmly applauded by his famous colleague, Mr. Molotov.

But the best friend and colleague of Mr. Khrushchov is Mr. Bulganin
With a beard most worthy to be seen, which I'm sure there's no harm in;
And he has gathered so many other well-loved people around him;
That I'm sure lots of people in Russia must be wanting to crown him.

Mr. Khrushchov is a great favourite with the collective farmers,
And in the Far East he is prayed for every morning by the lamas.
When he was in India, he was well-received by Mr. Nehru,
But was rather rude to Mr. Gaitskell, to whom he is no hero.

Hurrah then for Mr. Khrushchov, who with most marvellous hilarity
Ruthlessly exposed the harmful cult of personality.
He said that Mr. Stalin had hysterics during the Nazi bomb raids,
And thus threw into confusion a large number of comrades.

Hurrah again for Mr. Khrushchov, whom naught can affright him,
And I hope that one day our dear Queen will be willing to knight him;
And then she will say: "Arise, my dear Sir Nikita!
Compared with you everyone else is but as a Mosquito!"

THE BALLAD O' "THE REASONER"

(Air: "The Ball o' Kirriemuir")

I'll tell you a' a story
O' a meetin' in the toon,
Whaur five-and-thirty comrades met
Tae pit *The Reasoner* doon.

  Wha'll ban it this time?
  Wha'll ban it noo?
  The anes that banned it last time
  They cannae ban it noo.

A copy o' *The Reasoner*
Wis passed aroond tae read;
The comrades disinfected it,
An' turned awa' the heid.

Harry Pollitt he wis there,
An' musin' in his min' :
"I wish I'd had a *Reasoner*
Way back in '39".

Geordie Matthews he wis there,
A michty man wis he;
Tae a' the comrades' questions
He cried "Solidarity!"

They passed a resolution
Tae gie the rebels hell,
An' exorcised *The Reasoner*
Wi' candle, book an' bell.

Then up spake John an' Edward
Wi' a voice as bold as brass:
"We don't want your resolution -
You can throw it in the grass!"

Guid health tae John an' Edward
An' power tae their backs!
Lang life tae them - despite the fact
That baith are Sassenachs.

I'm glad tae see their effort
Wisnae sterile after a' –
Their wean, the *Rhyming Reasoner*,
Is guid enough for twa!

  Wha'll ban it this time?
  Wha'll ban it noo?
  The anes that banned it last time
  They cannae ban it noo.

SONG OF THE PERMANENT PARTY MAN

(Air: The Vicar of Bray)

In good King Joseph's golden days
When cults were still in fashion,
A zealous Stalinist was I,
Adoring him with passion.
I never mentioned Lenin's will,
Or how Joe ruled his nation,
And wove my way 'twixt right and left
In every deviation.

Chorus: The party's line I shall maintain
Until my dying day, sir,
And whatsoever king may reign
I never will say "nay", sir.

When Joseph's era passed away
There came a new directive;
I gave my new allegiance to
The leadership collective;
Self-criticised all other folk
Except the N.E.C., sir,
And burnt the Soviet History of
The C.P.S.U.(b) , sir.

Chorus: The party's line, etc.

I'm all for solidarity,
Think liberty's a fiction;
From B. or K. or R.P.D.
I welcome each restriction.
For every shift in policy
I rationalise the reason,
And voices raised to criticise
I stigmatise as treason.

Chorus: The party's line, etc.

* * * * * * *

OIL-LESS IN GAZA

(Air: Old song)

Oh, the warlike desires of the Tories
Are greater than anyone thinks:
One day in a moment of passion
They attacked the canal of the Sphinx.

Now oil cannot pass through that passage,
Which is blocked by ships sunk in a pile;
Which accounts for the illness of Eden,
And the Sphinx's inscrutable smile.

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ON THE 21ST CONGRESS

(Note: In the Elysian Fields, it is sometimes granted to the inhabitants that they should be given a glimpse into the future. Comrade McGonagall was recently granted this privilege, and had a vision of a time, not so far in the future, when his undoubted poetical merits would be fully recognised by the Executive Committee of the British Communist Party, and he would be commissioned to do Executive Committee resolutions into verse for publication in the Daily Worker. The following is his version of the Executive Committee resolution which will be promulgated after the 21st congress of the Soviet Communist Party.)

On behalf of the Executive Committee
We send fraternal greetings warm and hearty
To the Congress lately held in Moscow city
Of the Soviet workers' one and only Party.

Along with all progressive-minded nations
We rejoice that the decisions were unanimous;
We welcome the collective condemnations
Of comrades who were weak and pusillanimous.

We welcome Stalin's rehabilitation,
And the downfall of the Khrushchov-Kadar cliques
Which nearly caused the party's liquidation
(Especially in 1956).

It emerges from the Soviet discussions
That we must have solidarity or burst:
We're always glad to criticise the Russians
(Provided that the Russians do it first).

What though false information may mislead us?
Our discipline is based upon conviction!
What though the toiling masses never heed us?
We've solved the basic social contradiction!

Our efforts we shall double and redouble
In London, Cardiff, Aberdeen and Donegal
And pulverise the Tories into rubble.
I am, sir,
              Yours fraternally,
                McGonagall

<div align="center">* * * * * * *</div>

Published on behalf of W. McGonagall, Elysian Fields, N.

Notes: Comrade McGonagall is at the moment haunting a certain address which may be known to the more psychic of the recipients of this incomparable journal. If any of these would like copies sent to their friends, requests to this effect directed to the aforesaid address will be handed on to comrade McGonagall for his consideration.

Publication costs of journals of this type are high, even in the Elysian Fields, and donations will be welcome, particularly from those readers who would like copies sent to their friends. Any surplus will be contributed to the McGonagall for Poet Laureate Fund which certain public-spirited citizens have set up in London and one or two of the other provinces.

We regret that a difference of policy has arisen on our editorial board of two. As it was found impossible to discover a majority to which the minority should submit, or a higher committee whose directives the lower committee should obey, the younger member has decided to resign at once. He is considering the publication of a rival journal to be known as *Labour Rhymes Monthly*, but wishes to make it clear that he has no intention of leaving the Elysian Fields and will start to fight for the deportation of all pseudo-Scots poets to some God-forsaken country like New Zealand.

Biographies of US and British Twentieth-Century Leftists
From Early US Cultural Leftism to Stalinism

Victor G. Devinatz

Rosalind Eyben, *John Horner and the Communist Party: Uncomfortable Encounters with Truth*, Routledge: New York, 2024; 262 pp., 33 b/w illus.; ISBN 9781032671345, £145.00, hbk; ISBN 9781032670775, £26.99, pbk; ISBN 9781032671352, £22.94, ebk.

Steve Batterson, *The Prosecution of Chandler Davis: McCarthyism, Communism, and the Myth of Academic Freedom*, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2023; 232 pp.; ISBN 9781685900366, $89.00, hbk; ISBN 9781685900359, $26.00, pbk; ISBN 9781685900373, $16.00, ebk.

Robert C. Cottrell, *Martyrs of the Early American Left: Inez Milholland, Randolph Bourne and John Reed*, McFarland: Jefferson NC, 2023; 309 pp.; ISBN 9781476691497, $55.00, pbk.

There have been many biographies of US and British socialists, communists and other leftists published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The biographies considered in this review article largely cover the lives of secondary leaders and grassroots socialist and communist activists rather than the most prominent figures. Nevertheless, these profiles provide important insights into twentieth century left history while offering inspiration for present and future leftists as they fight for a saner and more equitable world in the twenty-first century.

A British Communist Trade Unionist

John Horner's biography has been written by his daughter, Rosalind Eyben, an accomplished social anthropologist, and an Emeritus Fellow at the University of Sussex's Institute of Development Studies. Although she admires her father's positive qualities, she appears unsympathetic towards Horner's CPGB membership and, unlike her older sister, did not join the Party herself. Eyben portrays her father as much more than a trade-union activist interested in left-wing

politics, with his loves and talents for history, writing, oil and water-color painting, chamber music, photography, and sculpting.

John Horner was born in Walthamstow in 1911. His father was an unskilled building laborer. Young John won a scholarship to Sir George Monoux, the nearby grammar school, in 1923. The 1926 General Strike, in which Horner's father participated, accentuated the class differences for Horner between the school's scholarship students and the rest of the student body who came from privileged families. By 1927, Horner considered himself to be a socialist.

Due to his father's influence, Horner became interested in the sea. He served as a South American freight trade shipping business apprentice for four years, and in June 1933 he acquired his Merchant Navy officer's certificate. During the Great Depression, Horner had trouble securing nautical industry work, so in 1934 he leveraged his knowledge and skills to obtain a London Fire Brigade position for which nautical experience was highly valued.

As a rookie firefighter, Horner immersed himself in Marxist writings. He became a Fire Brigades Union (FBU) activist, elected to the London Branch Committee in 1936.[1] At age 27 in June 1939, Horner was elected FBU General Secretary. At this stage he was an (open) Labour Party member and also a secret CPGB member.

FBU membership grew meteorically from 2,000 in 1934 to more than 30,000 by May 1940. By the end of the Blitz in May 1941, the government had established a National Fire Service, something long advocated by the FBU. Moreover, by 1943, communist influence in the FBU was substantial with members at every union level.

In the 1945 British elections, some left-leaning Labour Party branches hoped that Horner would stand as their parliamentary candidate, based on his FBU leadership and oratorical skills. But Harry Pollitt, the CPGB leader, probably convinced Horner that he would be more valuable to the cause as FBU leader than as a sympathetic back bench Member of Parliament (MP). Horner became an open CPGB member in 1945, and was elected to the party's Executive Committee in November that year. In 1946, he was re-elected FBU General Secretary by a substantial majority.

As a CPGB member Horner was excluded from Labour Party events, and as Cold War anti-Communism was heating up, by the late 1940s, he was also barred from Trade Union Congress official positions. Nevertheless, through the mid-1950s, he retained the FBU membership's support while racking up victories for union members. Khrushchev's 'secret speech' in February 1956 led to a personal crisis and 'nervous breakdown' for Horner, but he did not resign from the party until the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956. In his resignation letter, he acknowledged the 'immense material advances made by the Soviet Union' (p.216), contending that while he remained committed to bringing

socialism to Britain, the CPGB was no longer relevant for attaining that goal. He remained FBU leader and rejoined the Labour Party. In 1964, having retired from his union position, he was elected as Labour MP for Oldbury and Hales-owen.

Because of the Stalin regime's crimes, Horner remained conflicted about his CPGB membership until his death in 1997. Upon the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, Horner burned his collection of Communist literature in a garden bonfire. The only volume spared was Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism*. It is unclear what this last act meant, and Eyben does not offer an explanation. Did Horner secretly hope for the Soviet Union's rejuvenation through *perestroika* and *glasnost* during the 1980s? And why did he save the Webbs' *Soviet Communism* from the conflagration? Was it because this was a book written by British social democrats who recognized the achievements of a collective society, albeit attained in a brutal and undemocratic way?

A US Communist Victim of McCarthyism

Steve Batterson's volume tells the story of Chandler Davis, a University of Michigan math instructor who lost his university position during the Cold War Red Scare.[2] Entering Harvard University in 1942 at age 16, Davis joined the CPUSA while working in a textile factory the next summer. Upon returning to Harvard in the fall of 1943, Davis enrolled in the Navy V-12 program and resigned from the CPUSA in line with Party policy. Military training and rigorous coursework occupied 1944 and 1945 enabling Davis to graduate in mathematics one year early. Before enrolling in Harvard's mathematics graduate program in 1946, Davis was a minesweeper in Florida. Once back at Harvard, Davis rejoined the CPUSA.

Despite his CPUSA membership, Davis was awarded an Atomic Energy Commission Fellowship in 1949. However, due to the affidavit requirement, the CPUSA local branch decided that Davis should remain in the Party, so he declined the fellowship. In 1950, he relinquished his UCLA position after several months because he refused to sign the school's loyalty oath.

Davis was already rethinking his CPUSA membership upon attaining his University of Michigan instructorship. He had concerns regarding the CPUSA supporting the Soviet Union's harsh treatment of dissidents and had come to believe that the Soviet government ruled by terror. Because of the Party's strength, however, Davis remained a Party member although he was politically involved in other groups, and felt that the CPUSA 'was out of steam' (p.64). While visiting his parents in the summer of 1953, Davis took a leave from the Party and then never got back in touch.

In the fall of 1953, HUAC representatives served Davis with a subpoena to appear in Lansing (Michigan) in January 1954 regarding his CPUSA membership. Believing that the HUAC investigations were unconstitutional and hoping that the case would end up before the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), Davis invoked his First Amendment rights but was cited for contempt by Congress in July 1954. Shortly after the May 1954 HUAC hearings, the University of Michigan president suspended Davis with pay pending an inquiry. The college's Executive Committee could not verify his being (or having been) a CPUSA member and moved towards his reinstatement. However, a subsequent Ad Hoc committee investigation recommended that Davis be dismissed for his unwillingness to reveal past or present CPUSA membership. He appealed the decision to the Bylaw Committee which upheld his termination, ruling that a university professor being a CPUSA member overrode First Amendment rights. He was fired in August 1954.

Unable to obtain another academic position, Davis took a marketing research job on Madison Avenue in 1955.[3] In 1956, despite lower pay, he taught mathematics at the Columbia University night school. In 1957-1958, he was awarded a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship and a visiting position at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study.

In February 1956, a federal district court trial considered setting aside Davis' indictment. The judge upheld the indictment, determining that Congress had the right to examine Communism's role in universities. In November 1956, the judge ruled Davis guilty on all counts. He journeyed to Cincinnati for the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals' review in April 1958 which was delayed because of the anticipated SCOTUS decision in *Barenblatt,* a related case. In June 1959, in a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court determined that HUAC's actions were not a First Amendment violation, thus reconfirming Barenblatt's contempt of Congress conviction.

Two months later, the Sixth Circuit upheld Davis' conviction, primarily based on *Barenblatt.* In December 1959, the SCOTUS denied certiorari with only Justices William Douglas and Hugo Black in favor of hearing the case. He was imprisoned for six months at the Danbury (Connecticut) federal prison where Lloyd Barenblatt also served his sentence.

Davis was still blacklisted in US academia after his release, but through a professional contact he landed an associate professorship at the University of Toronto. He moved to Canada in 1962 where he had a distinguished career as a mathematician while remaining politically active on the Left until his death in 2022.

Two US Cultural Leftists and an Early Communist:
A Suffragette, a Writer-Intellectual and a Writer-Activist

Robert C. Cottrell's volume recounts the stories of three left activist intellectuals in the 1910s who died young. The chapters of the book are interspersed with segments of the lives of Inez Milholland, Randolph Silliman Bourne and John Reed, who were all unique individuals participating in different aspects of left-wing activity and expressing independence of thought.

Inez Milholland was a socialist, largely known for her work in the US suffrage movement during the early part of the twentieth century. Because of her desire to help the suffrage movement and to become financially independent, she chose to study law and enrolled at the New York University (NYU) School of Law. But before entering law school, she had become active in supporting the Uprising of the 20,000,[4] a general strike involving some 20,000 to 30,000 shirtwaist workers in the New York City garment industry. This was the first of several strikes that she championed during the 1910s.

By the summer of 1912, Milholland was featured in *McClure's Magazine* as the most effective and eloquent speaker in favor of suffrage in the United States. She continued to speak and write articles in favor of suffrage for various publications even after earning her law degree. She vigorously opposed World War I, taking part in the voyage of Henry Ford's Peace Expedition ship, the *Oscar II*, which set sail in December 1915.

Milholland died participating in activities that she loved. On a speaking tour out West, she was hospitalized after her last talk in Los Angeles on 23 October, and passed away in November 1916.

Randolph Silliman Bourne was born in Bloomfield, New Jersey in May 1886, to a family that could be categorized as members 'of the town aristocracy' (p.25). At the age of 23, he was awarded a scholarship to attend Columbia University, matriculating in September 1909, where he excelled. He penned articles for the university's literary journal, the *Columbia Monthly*, eventually becoming editor. In 1911, while a university student, he began to write for publications such as *The Atlantic Monthly*. He gained a national reputation as a spokesperson for young intellectuals who viewed progressivism as too limiting and who were inspired by the radical philosophies of socialism, feminism, and anarcho-syndicalism.

Throughout his career, Bourne wrote articles on education, individuals with physical disabilities (such as himself), socialism and radicalism for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Masses*. He published his first book *Youth and Life* in 1913, and in 1914, he secured a position with *The New Republic* whose inaugural issue appeared in November 1914. While employed there, he published his second and third books, *The Gary Schools* (1916) and *Education and Living* (1916) which cemented his status as a leading educational reform expert. He was actively writing

at the time of his death, perishing in December 1918, a victim of the 1918-1919 global influenza pandemic.

John 'Jack' Silas Reed was born to a wealthy Portland, Oregon family in October 1887. He became a socialist while a student at Harvard University. He worked as a journalist for the *New York Globe* and the *American Magazine*, and in 1911 he also began writing for *The Masses*, a cultural Left publication. He contributed an article on the IWW's 1913 Patterson Silk Strike,[5] and was disappointed when the strike was defeated. He was lauded for his coverage of the Mexican Revolution for the *Metropolitan*, and then traveled to Ludlow, Colorado, where he reported on the 1914 coal strike with amazing aplomb.[6] He vigorously opposed WWI when it broke out.

Reed returned to Russia, which he had first visited in 1915, in time for the Bolshevik Revolution, which he wholeheartedly supported. He worked for the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs' Bureau of International Revolutionary Propaganda and began to pen his masterpiece on the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

After expulsion from the Socialist Party of America's (SPA) 1919 national convention, Reed helped to establish the Communist Labor Party (CLP), which wholeheartedly supported the Bolsheviks, became the CLP's International Delegate, and went back to Russia. Attempting to leave Russia in February 1920, Reed was arrested and convicted by a Finnish court of smuggling diamonds and foreign currencies. On 19 May 1920 he was released suffering from malnutrition, and returned to Petrograd, where he wrote and remained politically active until dying from a stroke in October 1920.

Interpreting the Meaning of Biographies of the Lyrical Left and the Old Left

One way to analyze and understand left biographies is based on the era in which the person lived and was active. Three broad periods can be identified: the Lyrical Left (prior to 1917), the Old Left (1917 to 1960), and the New Left (post-1960). The biographies considered in this essay span the periods of the Lyrical Left and the Old Left. Three of these individuals, Inez Milholland, Randolph Bourne and John Reed, can squarely be characterized as being of the Lyrical Left and two biographies, those of John Horner and Chandler Davis, of the Old Left. Reed, who was of the Lyrical Left,[7] offers a kind of bridge to the Old Left, given his role and activities in the founding of the CLP in September 1919. Horner was a member of the CPGB from the 1930s through the 1950s and Davis of the CPUSA during the 1940s and 1950s, respectively.

The political movements of the Old Left before 1960 were often Marxist in orientation, emphasized economic issues as opposed to cultural ones, and as

such stressed the importance of trade unionization and the working class in promoting social change. While the SPA and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party were important components of the Old Left, the most significant US Old Left organization from the 1930s through the 1950s was the CPUSA. Similarly, in Great Britain during the same era, the CPGB was one of the major Old Left organizations.

Another theme of Left biographies, especially those of former Communist Party (CP) members, is whether these individuals remained on the Left. This is particularly relevant for CP members because of how they interpreted their *experiences* of feeling betrayed connected with the 1939 signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech, and the 1956 and 1968 Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, respectively. Some left and became virulent anti-Communists, others quit the Party but remained socialists, while others stayed in the Party. In Left biographies of the pre-Communist era or where the individuals were not CP members, this was not an issue, given that such incidents leading to feelings of betrayal by the organization were less likely to occur.

Apart from John Reed, the subjects of the biographies considered here were second-tier activists and leaders who all made their contribution. Three of them – John Reed, Chandler Davis, and John Horner – were Communists, and although Davis and Horner left their CPs in 1953 and 1956 respectively, they still considered themselves to be on the Left in later life. Reed, Inez Milholland and Randolph Bourne died young so it is impossible to say how their views would have developed had they survived to a mature age. That said, these biographies bring the ideas, activities and the contributions of largely unknown US and British Leftists to light and for that, we can be thankful of these authors' yeoman efforts.

Remaining on the Left When Others Did Not

John Horner remained a CPGB member because of the positive role that he felt that the Party was the best vehicle for strengthening the FBU and for attempting to bring socialism to Britain. For the most part, he was not concerned with international affairs or the Soviet Union. And after leaving the CPGB, because of his commitment to constructing socialism in Britain, he remained active in left politics.

Even when Davis was a CPUSA member, he never was an orthodox one that religiously towed the Party line. He was always willing to work with an array of ideological leftists, even Trotskyists, and later in life considered himself to have been more in sympathy with the Shachtmanites at that time.[8] Because Davis was committed to left-wing principles in general than specifically to the ideas promulgated by the CPUSA, when he left the organization in 1953, it was not

due to a personal crisis as many members experienced in 1939, 1956, or 1968. This perhaps explains his willingness to pursue his case to SCOTUS even after leaving the CPUSA. His aim was to benefit all leftists, not just those affiliated to the CPUSA.

When asked by Batterson how he could remain so long in the CPUSA given the nature of the Soviet Union, Davis responded that he and his wife Natalie, who was also a CPUSA member, were terrified 'by the repression & brutality we saw in the Soviet Union' (p.65) but because they were not planning to relocate there, this was not an immediate issue of concern. Furthermore, at that time he did not believe that the numbers murdered or imprisoned by the Soviet regime were that large. Natalie Davis[9] remarked that she remained in the CPUSA for as long as she did because she was never fixated on the Soviet Union and did not view it as the socialist model that she was interested in pursuing. She claimed that she only thought about the Soviet Union when it came to issues of foreign policy, and stated that she 'was interested in the promise of SOCIALISM in America, and was also very concerned to fight racial prejudice, repression of free speech, anti-Semitism, and continuing support for the Nazis' (p.66). She was also committed to preventing war as well as blocking the utilization of atomic weapons.

Milholland, Bourne, and Reed, active in an earlier period, were able to exercise more independence in expressing their left-wing views. All three died young, and were never confronted with a centralized, Bolshevized, and Stalinized Communist movement. We cannot know whether, had they lived longer, they would have retained their youthful positions on socialism, or whether they would have moved politically to the right as their contemporary Max Eastman did after the Great Depression.[10]

Conclusion:
Unsettled Questions and the Legacy of Stalinism

The subtitle of the John Horner biography, and the title of the book's epilogue, is 'Uncomfortable Encounters with Truth.' We never discover what this means and why this is the case. Why did he still feel haunted by his CPGB affiliation more than three decades after leaving the party? Rosalind Eyben attempted to coax him to discuss this issue after the Soviet Union's demise in late 1991. One might wonder if it has something to do with Eyben herself. In the unpublished autobiography of her older sister Carol, who had been a CPGB youth group member, Carol recounts that Eyben's 'happiest day in her life' (p.218) was when she found out that Horner had left the Party and that she was instructed to go down to the local store to buy every newspaper copy which had frontpage stories on Horner's CPGB resignation. Could it be that Horner felt uncomfortable

talking about this issue with Eyben because she never was a CPGB member or Party supporter? Additionally, perhaps he felt that she would be unable to understand the turmoil that Horner went through upon leaving the Party. Would Horner have felt more comfortable discussing this issue with Carol who had been a CPGB member herself? This is a question that unfortunately remains unanswered.

While many CPUSA and CPGB members were inspired primarily by the Soviet Union, many others, like Horner and Davis, were members of these parties chiefly for domestic reasons. However, a mass exodus from these two parties occurred during the events of 1956 when the truth came out regarding the Soviet regime. Many left these parties following the revelations of Khrushchev's secret speech and/or the invasion of Hungary.[11] US Communist Steve Nelson recalled open weeping among party members on learning of the contents of Khrushchev's speech.[12] If these individuals had been hard-core Stalinists, one would expect them not to behave this way but to express the attitude that in the building of socialism, unfortunate abuses might occur. This suggests that many individuals joined their national CPs, not because they believed that the Soviet Union represented *the* model in constructing socialism, but because of their CPs' role in fighting for trade unionism, struggling for civil rights, organizing against fascism, opposing atomic weapons, etc. and for building a socialism consistent with the political and cultural traditions of their respective countries.

Those affiliated with the Lyrical Left had it 'easier' than those on the Old Left who were confronted with Stalinism. Because there was no state that represented 'real existing socialism' while they were alive, the Lyrical Leftists did not encounter the same problems and issues with which CP members had to deal. All the struggles that these leftists were engaged in during the pre-1917 period were 'purer', whether it was battling for women's suffrage, struggling for victories in IWW-led strikes of super-exploited workers, or for promoting cultural issues in society including sexual liberation.

These biographies portray the varied interests and activities of these individuals, who were all united by their belief in the benefits of a socialist future. Their lives were shaped by their own personal developmental and psychological experiences as well as the historical, economic, cultural, and political factors of the eras in which they lived and worked. Their lives, thoughts, and activities provide a history of the important issues confronting socialists in the past. Perhaps through understanding their complex and difficult experiences, these biographies can provide a roadmap for those on the Left in the third decade of the twenty-first century as they struggle to develop strategies and tactics for creating a better world for themselves, their children, and grandchildren.

Notes

1. Two excellent volumes on the history of the Fire Brigades Union include Victor Bailey, *Forged in Fire: The History of the Fire Brigades Union*, London 1992; and Sian Moore, Tessa Wright, and Philip Taylor, *Fighting Fire: One Hundred Years of The Fire Brigades Union,* Oxford 2018.

2. For a book that contends that colleges and universities did not challenge McCarthyism but helped to further it, see Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*, New York 1986.

3. Ray Ginger of Harvard University also obtained a Madison Avenue advertising job in the mid-1950s after losing his Harvard position. For information on Ray Ginger's life before and after McCarthyism, see Victor G. Devinatz, 'McCarthyism on the Charles: The Life and Times of Labour Historian Ray Ginger before and After His Dismissal from Harvard University,' *Left History*, 13:2 (Fall/Winter 2008), pp.128-150.

4. The Uprising of the 20,000, also known as the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909, was the largest strike of women workers in US history up to that time. Useful information on the strike can be found in Richard A. Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York,* Philadelphia 2005, pp.25-56 and in Ann Schofield, 'The Uprising of the 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend', pp.167-182 in Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson, *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, Philadelphia 1984.

5. Anne Huber, *The IWW and the Patterson Silk Strike of 1913*, Urbana, IL 1987, contends that a major problem during the work stoppage was the IWW's conflicting objectives – to overthrow capitalism and to win its strike demands. Steve Golin's *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913*, Philadelphia, PA 1988, focuses on the significance of the workers' culture during the walkout.

6. There are several books on the Ludlow Massacre, e.g. George S. McGovern and Leonard F. Guttridge, *The Great Coalfield War*, Boston, MA 1972; Howard M. Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre: A Chapter in American Industrial Relations*, Philadelphia, PA 1988; Scott Martelle, *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West*, New Brunswick, NJ 2007; and Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, Cambridge, MA 2008.

7. For a treatment of the Lyrical Left in one chapter by the scholar who originally coined the term, see John P. Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, New York 1992. A volume covering two cultural radicals of the Lyrical Left is Edwards Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left: Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stieglitz, and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America,* Charlottesville, VA 1986.

8. Davis' comment that he realized in the 1970s that he should have been a Shachtmanite rather than a CPUSA member can be found in Alan Wald, 'H. Chandler Davis Was a Lifelong Radical and a Moral Touchstone for the Left,' *Jacobin,* October 6, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/10/h-chandler-davis-lifelong-radical-communism-academia-obituary.

9. Dr. Natalie Zemon Davis (1928-2023) was a prominent historian who taught history at the University of California-Berkeley before becoming the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University. She was awarded the National Humanities Medal (United States) and the Ludwing Holberg International Prize. This information on Dr. Natalie Davis can be found in David Palumbo Liu, 'Chandler Davis: Dissent and Solidarity,' *Against the Current*, No. 229, March/April 2024. https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/chandler-davis-dissent-and-solidarity/

10. Max Eastman (1883-1969) was an American writer and well-known left-wing political radical in the early twentieth century in New York City's Greenwich Village. Considering himself a socialist, he served as *The Masses* editor before co-founding *The Liberator.* A supporter of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union, he became increasingly disillusioned with communism and socialism before turning into an anti-Communist and a free market supporter. An excellent biography which covers Eastman's political transformation is Christoph Irmscher, *Max Eastman: A Life*, New Haven, CT 2017.

11. Around 7,000 CPGB members left the party in the aftermath of 1956, including many industrial workers and trade unionists. See e.g. John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds, *Socialist Register 1976,* London 1976, pp.1-23; and. Paul Flewers, 'The Unexpected Denunciation: The Reception of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' in Britain', *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory,* 47: 2, (2019), pp.289-329.

12. For reports of US Communists crying upon learning of the contents of Khrushchev's secret speech, see Steve Nelson, cited in Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents*, New York 1997, pp.394-395.

Reviews

Michael Braddick, *Christopher Hill. The Life of a Radical Historian*, Verso: London, 2025; 308 pp.; ISBN 9781839760778, £35.00, hbk; ISBN 9781839760785; £15.00, ebook.

Although Christopher Hill's academic career overlapped with mine for fifteen years, our paths only crossed once, many years after he had retired. When I went to university I was already familiar with his 1940 extended and highly polemical essay on the English Revolution, in which he set out to prove that the English Civil War was a class war in which the bourgeoisie overthrew an 'essentially feudal' regime and opened up the way for a 'freer development of capitalism'. Two years later in 1961 I read his *Century of Revolution* which had just appeared. This deceptively descriptive work had a profound impact on seventeenth century studies. Shorn of Marxist terminology it addressed in a fairly muted style the emergence of a 'modern' society and state, and a civil war made possible by a split in the ruling class. Even 'capitalism' did not make it into the index although there were a few capitalists in the text. Nonetheless the picture of merchants, industrialists and gentry engaged in a long and ultimately successful struggle to remodel the regime in their own interests was shaped by the same conceptual framework as the much earlier essay. Around this, Hill also offered chapters on the religious and intellectual history of the revolutionary years. There followed an enormous output over three decades or more in which he related developments in religious, scientific and political thought and above all in literature to the central social and political transformation. Almost single-handedly he set a new agenda for seventeenth century historians. His work has remained a central reference point, even as a shoal of critics and revisionist scholars have challenged his concepts, interpretations and methodology.

Hill's biographer, Michael Braddick, is a leading early modern historian who has devoted part of his own career to writing about the formation of the British state. He was, however, also the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution* published in 2015, a collection of overwhelmingly revisionist articles, which emphasised the short term precipitants of the civil wars and sought to subsume the Revolution in the politics of the three kingdoms over which Charles I ruled, with the effect of almost making it disappear completely. In that *Oxford Handbook*, Hill also disappeared with the Revolution, save for the briefest passage rehearsing old criticisms. In a work of 600 pages a mere eleven offered a systematic appraisal of socio-economic developments.

Fortunately, in his new work Braddick is generous in his appreciation of 'a major historian' whose 'questions remain fundamental to how we think about the significance of this period' (p. ix). Through an assiduous assembly of what was already known about Hill with an array of other sources including his personal papers and the files of MI5, Braddick provides a satisfying and rounded study of the man and his achievements. He paints a picture of a kindly, sometimes diffident person, with a sense of moral purpose, who was caring of his students, liked by colleagues, courteous and hospitable towards even to his harshest critics. Braddick has no time at all for the idea that Hill was either an unrepentant Stalinist and not much for the oft-repeated claim that he was an unreconstructed economic determinist. He is also well aware that it is difficult to separate the apparent decline in Hill's academic reputation in the 1980s from the very nasty mud that was flung around as the country slid rightwards; it was variously alleged that Hill was part of a Marxist plot to subvert academia or a Communist mole whose employment by the Foreign Office during the war had been a major security risk. Braddick spends some time reinforcing earlier rebuttals, helped by the MI5 files which, apart from their unintended value to his biographer, merely confirm that its surveillance of him down to the early sixties was a waste of public money.

It is not clear why Braddick chose to describe Hill as a radical rather than a Marxist historian in the book's title. Although at one point he observes that Hill's Marxism was ill defined, his perceptive treatment rather belies his own comment. For Hill, Marxism was a 'lifetime commitment' which survived his break with the Communist Party in 1957. According to Braddick it was the humanist Marxism of *The German Ideology* rather than the Marxism of *Das Kapital* that appealed to the young Hill as he grappled with the alienation and disassociation felt by so many in the troubled world of the 1930s. Seeking answers in literature rather than economic theory, he also found in Marxism a satisfying way into the dialectical relationship between culture and material life which he later sought to illuminate in so much of his work – not always to the satisfaction of his critics. In the process of becoming a Marxist, Hill, to the great concern of his parents, forsook their Methodism whilst retaining a 'respect for the seriousness of socially engaged Christian belief' which fed into his Marxist humanism and his empathy for seventeenth-century religious radicals, most famously exhibited in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). This exhilarating foray into the world of the Seekers, Ranters and Quakers, Braddick also suggests, was Gramscian rather than Leninist in its description of a radical challenge to the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. As Hill did not go in for much theorising there is no way of knowing how directly his work was influenced by Gramsci but his approach lends itself to this supposition. The faltering ideological grip of the monarchical regime can already be discerned in *The Century of Revolution*.

Like many on the Left in the 1930s Hill's hope that his humanist ideals would or could be realised was bound up with admiration for the Soviet Union. After a prolonged visit there from which he returned in May 1936, fluent in Russian and with a remarkable knowledge of Russian historiography, Hill joined the Communist Party. He shared the fundamentalist view that the Soviet regime, by virtue of having abolished capitalism, was *ipso facto* freer and more democratic than the West. Disillusion was slow to come. After the death of Stalin in 1953 he published an article which, apart from admiring Stalin's materialism for its recognition of the role of individuals in history and the power of human agency, included an extraordinary paean of praise to him as leader. The following year Hill accompanied Robert Browning, A. L. Morton and Eric Hobsbawm on a cultural visit to the Soviet Union from which Hobsbawm returned depressed and Hill seemingly invigorated. Braddick observes that Hobsbawm was much better prepared to withstand the shock in 1956 of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin followed a few months later by the second shock of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Yet shaken as he certainly was, angry and frustrated by the obstacles to an open and full discussion of these events inside the Party, Hill's first instinct was not to resign. He rapidly became a prime mover in a very public battle for greater transparency and honesty which then turned into a challenge to the Party's democratic centralism. Nominated by the Executive Committee to the Commission on Inner Party Democracy he was one of three signatories to a minority report which was overwhelmingly lost at the National Congress in April 1957. Braddick notes without comment Hill's later claim that the minority report would have become the majority one if the Party chiefs had not sat on one of the commission's members, but a quick check shows that full time party workers occupied ten of the fifteen places. At the time Hill was gloomy about the prospects given the restrictive terms of reference. He was in fact on a hiding to nothing and resigned almost immediately but, unwilling to feed the right wing press, without any public statement. He joined the Labour Party, but was not very enamoured of it, choosing to support an independent socialist candidate in one by-election. Braddick provides no information on how long he remained a member. His subsequent political activity largely consisted in lending his name to a variety of causes from opposition to the Vietnam War to the defence of academic freedom and the treatment of political prisoners in Czechoslovakia.

His name was well worth having. The difficult years of the 1950s, during which he also had to cope with the breakup of his first marriage, were those in which Hill, who had hitherto written mostly for CP-connected journals, began to establish his academic credentials amongst a wider public. Braddick highlights a talk on the tercentenary of the Barebones Parliament given in 1953 for the BBC, which to its credit refused to be intimidated by private warnings from the secret service about Hill's membership of the Communist Party. An article in *History Today* appeared in

the same year. Young academics today might be puzzled as to how Hill, who had not yet published a major book, started to acquire a public persona at this juncture. Part of the answer, Braddick hints, lay precisely in the fact that his Communism combined with a fellowship at a venerable Oxford college gave him a certain cachet. It is clear from Braddick's account that he was also an energetic academic networker, reviewer and letter writer; between 1956 and 1962, for example, he wrote 110 reviews for the *Spectator*, then edited by a former student. Yet the Cold War was into its stride, hostility towards Communist and Marxist historians often not hidden. Hill was aware that without security of tenure at Balliol he might have been thrown out. Even in his undergraduate years he had learnt to be circumspect about his Marxism and that continued when he moved to a lectureship at Cardiff for a couple of years in 1936. His trenchant 1940 essay was a retrospective shock to some of his erstwhile colleagues, provoking questions about whether his views had been concealed at the time of his appointment.

Oxford, however, looks after its own. Actively recruited by Balliol as a student when he was contemplating going to Cambridge, it was assumed that after his two years in Cardiff he would return to his college. There he remained, with an interlude for his war service in military intelligence and the Foreign Office, until retirement in 1978 when he took up a visiting professorship at the Open University. Despite accumulating honorary degrees from other universities, his occasional applications for chairs elsewhere came to naught. Even the former and progressive Master of Balliol, A. D. Lindsay, whom Hill greatly admired, could not bring himself to appoint Hill to the founding Chair at the University of Staffordshire (later Keele) on the grounds that although there was nothing wrong with being a Communist he might make an uncomfortable fit. This was Balliol's good fortune, as its reputation was enhanced as Hill's soared in the 1960s. In 1965 he narrowly won election as Master of the College against an equally distinguished don and proved to be a popular choice with both colleagues and students. He brought in some common sense reforms to the governance of the college, reducing his own powers in the process. An empathetic and egalitarian manner helped him to steer it through the years of student unrest in the late sixties and early seventies, although his colleagues bluntly refused to go along with his ideas for greater student representation. His desire that Balliol should admit women also encountered obstacles of one sort or another, coming to fruition just after he retired.

Braddick fails to connect Hill's growing stature directly to his role in that most unlikely and remarkable achievement of the cold war years, the founding of *Past and Present*, the board of which he chaired until 1968. The inspiration for the initiative came from the classicist John Morris, a fellow member of the History Group of the Communist Party where the launch was discussed and prepared. Yet the journal was never formally tied to the History Group or to the Party neither of which directed

its subsequent development. The intention, as Braddick underlines, was not to produce a specifically Marxist journal but one with a 'pluralist ambition' to provide an outlet for wide ranging but scholarly articles tackling significant issues in a calculated departure from the diet of past politics and narrowly-focussed research offered by other journals. The comrades' feel for what was possible in far from propitious political circumstances was quite remarkable, tapping into and reflecting a wider movement towards a different sort of history. The journal was initially over-dependent on Marxists to write for and manage it, and on a left wing subscription base, but by the late 1950s its future was assured as other front-rank historians joined it.

The robust and intellectually challenging discussions of the History Group itself, unsustainable after 1956 if not a little earlier, were nonetheless 'fundamental', in Braddick's words, to post war historiography. This was in no small measure due to Hill. Many years later he reflected that 'everything' he wrote subsequently 'derived' from the Group's debates. Braddick is not as precise as he might have been in unpicking what Hill took from them and what he discarded. The idea encapsulated in Marx's *Preface to Critique of Political Economy* of revolution as a total process by which the mental universe was transformed as well as its economic foundation remained his guiding concept; so too did the view that the English revolution came about when the old regime 'could no longer contain the social forces let loose or accompanying the rise of capitalism'. What was discarded was his initial insistence that the Tudor monarchy was a feudal absolutist regime and the idea that the transference of power had to have a 'nodal point' which was the revolution of the 1640s. This gave way to a more nuanced view of what was achieved then and what remained to be done over the rest of the century before the powers of the State were deployed unambiguously in the capitalist interest. Braddick overlooks the group's discussion on religion and ideology, where Hill's oversimplified view, derived from Engels, about the revolutionary character of Protestantism and its appeal to the bourgeoisie was rigorously challenged. This led him to a more subtle and less deterministic exposition of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism.

Some of Hill's critics, however, did not recognise the subtlety, finding it difficult to grasp the difference between his dialectical approach and economic determinism. Much of the criticism, Braddick observes, really amounted to an objection to Marxism from historians who were quite happily deterministic themselves in their own way. Yet Braddick does not totally absolve Hill from the charge, drawing attention in particular to the commonly expressed doubts about Hill's treatment of the social complexion of the religious radicals and the assimilation of Milton to the radical milieu. Some, notably J. H. Hexter in a notorious and vituperative review of a collection of Hill's essays, went much further, accusing him of source mining and lumping together disparate quotations in order to support a preconceived interpretation. Braddick's judicious placing of Hill's work in its historiographical as well as

its political context is a suggestive and thoughtful guide to some of the many issues and controversies that his work stirred up. But it is a guide, not a comprehensive review, and I found myself scurrying back via the footnotes to re-read material from long ago, particularly Hill's occasional but significant defences of his own work. Anyone seeking definitive personal clarity on particular parts of Hill's work, on his methodology or his conceptual framework will need to do the same.

Towards the end of his book Braddick makes the interesting observation that Hill's reputation has survived much less well in the historical world than in the literary one where his studies of major figures are well regarded and those on lesser ones have been instrumental in broadening the field of study. He earned a place in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* from 1985, a remarkable accolade for a historian – and his much praised books on John Bunyan (1988) and the English Bible (1993) were yet to come. But by this time academic historians according to Braddick were paying Hill less attention. In part this was due to the move away from grand narratives and economic explanations of everyday life towards a concentration instead on culture, experience and subjectivity, though this can hardly explain the lack of interest in Hill's later and very cultural works. Braddick also suggests that economic historians, as exemplified by the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure, had developed a more rigorous quantitative approach than that which had informed Hill's work. Hill, of course, was not an economic historian, freely acknowledging his deficiencies in this area. For him the growth of capitalism was a given. He might have pointed up more precisely the ways in which it impacted on political change. Yet others have done this for him and some economic historians who would not describe themselves as Marxists have continued to write in ways which lend themselves to a Hill view. Although the reasons for the development of rural capitalism, which was central to this, have been hotly debated, few have sought to deny its presence nor that of increasingly powerful mercantile interests from at least the end of the sixteenth century.

Braddick is more persuasive when he turns to the impact of the 'revisionist' attack on Hill, supercharged as it was during the Thatcher years by political hostility. Yet Braddick's fairly bald claim that as far as the causes of the Revolution were concerned the revisionists, (who anyway were not of one mind) had the better of it, requires comment. He does not systematically address those planks in revisionist thinking which were most intended to debunk the idea that a major revolution occurred: the claim that there were no long term, (particularly intellectual or religious), causes of the civil war, that all was well until a few years before the execution of the King; that faction was more important than ideology; that local conflicts had little national resonance or vice versa. All these strands of thought have been challenged and remain open to challenge. A more productive alternative view, offered by Conrad Russell and John Morrill, was the idea (in Braddick's words) that the civil war

was preceded by a 'functional breakdown of political institutions'. Yet this perspective could be used to fill out rather than undermine Hill's view of the Revolution and his later formulations about the incapacity of Charles's regime suggests that is what he may have taken from it. It took Russell's subsequent development of the idea of a crisis across all three kingdoms to provide an academically respectable means of circumventing a specifically English Revolution.

That was the aim of the misnamed *Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution*, and given that Braddick edited that volume, his willingness to put Hill back on the stage is striking. He has done so with great sympathy for the man and with a thoroughly fair appraisal of him as a pioneering and controversial historian. He also goes out of his way to rescue him from the ideological and political opprobrium to which he and his work were subject. Is it fanciful to think that his study, coming not too long after Richard Evans' biography of Eric Hobsbawm, might betoken a change in the historiographical weather, a further reconfiguration of the relationship of past and present which Braddick himself deploys to illuminate Hill's legacy? Let us hope so. It is no less than Hill deserves.

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Jo Byrne, *Beyond Trawlertown: Memory, Life and Legacy in the Wake of the Cod Wars*, Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2022; 256 pp.; ISBN 9781800856554, £91.60, hbk; ISBN 9781837644087, £26.39, pbk.

In this valuable book, the author achieves a notable feat: macrotextual, almost global history is married effectively to very localised social history and psychogeography. From the late 1800s to the mid-1970s, Hull (together with Grimsby), was a major centre for the distant-water trawling industry. Hull fishermen were celebrated working-class heroes, braving formidable obstacles and dangers to bring vast amounts of cod back to Hull for processing and selling. Huge numbers of Hull fishermen were killed or maimed at sea. But the fishermen were only part of a gendered workforce that defined a community of seagoing men, dock workers, processors, vessel engineers, railway workers and merchants – Trawlertown, the area around Hessle Road in Hull. This community was obliterated in the mid-1970s. St. Andrew's Dock, a 'taskscape' once unimaginably bustling and defined by organised chaos, is now a desolate, ghostly, silted-over 'conservation zone' largely bereft of character. Byrne's purpose is twofold. First, she delivers a sweeping and comprehensive account of exactly why the fishing industry collapsed in Hull. Britain's final capitulation to Iceland at the end of the Third Cod War in 1976 is only one of a number of factors that caused the industry to end. Second, Byrne engages with local clashes over memory. The fishermen of Hull were notoriously given tardy and inadequate

compensation – various Conservative and Labour administrations are felt to have badly overlooked the lauded but electorally insignificant men of the industry. How are the fatalities and the survivors of the industry remembered in Hull? The answer is complex. So, the book effectively comes in two sections: the first explains how Trawlertown became Notrawler town; the second accounts for Hull communities and their struggles to properly commemorate the lucrative but perilous tradition of distant-water fishing.

In the 'Preface' and in the 'Introduction,' Byrne accounts for the nature of their research. The macrotextual history of fishing in the northern hemisphere is accounted for with reference to various existing historical studies, various archives of trawling firms and federations and periodicals pertaining to the industry. The local history of Trawlertown is informed by Byrne's local knowledge of the area, with reference to historical local media and with forty-three sometimes poignant oral interviews undertaken by the author. Total respect is always shown to these working-class, usually long-retired interviewees – but Byrne is never afraid to point out the occasional disparity between local *assumptions* about why Trawlertown collapsed and verifiable *facts* about why it collapsed.

The book is based on a PhD thesis. The few inefficacious parts of the book betray its origins. There is a small amount of over-complicated faff in the Introduction (confusingly, also referred to as Chapter One) about, for instance, certain types of histories 'supplanting temporal perspectives, ushered by a constantly unfolding future'. (p.10) That, and the largely unnecessary account of methodologies undertaken by previous historians who have processed and analysed local memories are the sort of things that doctoral candidates are told to do at transfer vivas. It is hard to imagine Hessle Road veterans caring too much about the historiographical and sociological methodologies of social historians of the past. There are a few other flaws with the book – but they are minor and they can be dealt with in a few sentences. A bit of extra proofreading would have been helpful. I think that the author will be embarrassed to have missed the misdating of the triple trawler disaster of early 1968 to 1969 in a footnote (p.195, n.52). And in common with a lot of present-day monographs, the Index is inadequate, with many names and places cited in the text not accounted for in the Index. The work of the historian, Daniel James, is engaged with in the Introduction/Chapter One but he makes no appearance in the Index. Similarly, Robin Diaper, seemingly an important mentor to Byrne, is mentioned twice in the text but has gone missing from the Index. But these are very minor issues. Overall, the book is beautifully furnished with extremely useful information. The tables and appendices about trawler numbers and tonnages of catches are helpful, as are the detailed maps of Hull's dock areas and the visual depictions of trawler movements in the Atlantic. Byrne's own monochrome photographs of the now-desolate St. Andrew's Dock are both affecting and informative. The

Glossary of Fishing and Nautical Terms is useful – not everyone can necessarily always remember the difference between Jigging and Klondyking. The Glossary of Vernacular Terms seemed a bit unwarranted to me – but to be fair I know that a Hull man means 'them' when he says ''em' but perhaps an American or Australian reader will not. The Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources is splendid – it is a great starter list for anyone who would want to start researching the topic themselves. And, as revealed in the meat of the book, it is a fascinating and ongoing topic. Because the story of Hull's fishing did not end in 1976. The professional business of Hull's fishing may have ended abruptly – but the world did not end in 1976. The history of Hessle Road did not end in 1976 – it just changed.

Chapter Two delivers a superb overview of the century of Hull's preeminence as a distant-ground fishing port. Technological changes are accounted for very well – Byrne explains the changes in trawlers clearly. By the Edwardian age, Hull's fishing industry was a behemoth. All of the trawlers were now steam operated. Eighty Hull-based trawlers made regular three-week trips to Icelandic waters. They caught vast amounts of cod, bringing it back to Hessle Road – an exuberant, around-the-clock place of fish processing plants, offal workshops, offices, cafés, shops, bars, clubs and heroic status for the fishermen themselves – the 'three-day millionaires' who were well paid with standard wages and bonus 'poundage' for their cod-gathering ingenuity and their ferocious battles against bitter Atlantic weather. There seems to have been a sense that the cod would last forever – few men seemed minded to save money. Byrne suggests that there was even a sense of fatalism – death might come on the next mission so enjoy the money while it lasts. That might also account for the apparent disinterest in unions. Work was plentiful and, certainly, masses of working-class people were addicted to abundant, cheap, fried white fish – would that fish and chips were so common and so cheap now.

The trawlermen seemed to feel that economically at least, they had no fear for the future. But the sense of a Damoclean sword is constant. As early as 1932, quotas were introduced to arrest stock declines and technological developments made the battle between hunting fishermen and hunted cod ever more one-sided. Radar and diesel engines were available by the 1950s and in the 1960s stern trawlers were replacing the cumbersome side trawlers – and factory ships and large-scale maritime freezing possibilities were changing the international fishing scene markedly. Britain, as usual, was slow to adapt to the new technologies; nor could it accept the confidence of the recently independent Iceland. In 1958, Iceland extended its territorial waters to twelve miles, outraging British trawlermen who, ignoring the claim and Icelandic Coast Guard crews, continued to fish, now with the protection of an armada of Royal Navy ships. It was the First Cod War – the first of three.

The three Cod Wars are explained in detail in Chapter Three. Truthfully, it is the finest summary of the arguably ludicrous confrontations between Icelandic Coast

Guard vessels and Royal Navy destroyers and frigates and/or the heavy trawlers themselves that I have ever read. The First Cod War ended in 1961 when Britain, after spending millions of pounds on Royal Navy support for the trawlermen, backed down and accepted Iceland's new, unilateral twelve-mile limit. The Second Cod War ended in 1973 when Britain, after spending millions of pounds on Royal Navy support for the trawlermen, backed down and accepted Iceland's new, unilateral fifty-mile limit. The Third Cod War ended in 1976 when Britain, after spending millions of pounds on Royal Navy support for the trawlermen, backed down and accepted Iceland's new, unilateral two-hundred-mile limit. The repetitive pattern is almost laughable. But there was no laughing in Hull after the great climbdown of 1976. The British Government accepted that British trawlermen would never fish in Icelandic waters again. With no access to their prime hunting ground, the trawling companies and their employees – the men and women of Hull's Hessle Road – were left almost literally high and dry.

But Byrne stresses that losing the three Cod Wars was, although catastrophic, not the only reason for the collapse of the Hull industry. The British joined the EEC in the early 1970s – that opened up British fishing grounds to previously excluded foreign fishermen. Almost overnight, British trawlermen could not fish cod around Iceland and they faced massive competition from other nations' fleets to fish in British waters. Other factors damaged the industry: for example, oil prices rose dramatically in 1973 and 1974 and, again, later in the 1970s. The reality is that various global crises conspired to stop trawling being a profitable enterprise. The swiftness of the decline is described with sensitivity and with a great sense of place and atmosphere. Many trawlers were instantly decommissioned and left to rust at St. Andrew's Dock – which became a sort of maritime equivalent of Dai Woodhams' famous steam locomotive scrapyard in Barry. But Byrne insists that the trawlers were doomed anyway – they were mainly side trawlers – they were obsolete. And some trawlers were simply life-expired. The decommissioned trawlers seemed to summarise the end of British fishing – but that was merely optical. As explained in upbeat detail in Chapter Four, many trawlers, especially newer models, found new leases of life in other contexts – fishing in various parts of the world, serving the giant new North Sea oil industry. Byrne does tell a few largely unsubstantiated anecdotes about one-time heroic fishermen giving up on life, resigning themselves to the dole and succumbing to drinking cider on Hull park benches – but the overall post-1976 story, accounted for in Chapter Five, is quite a dynamic one. Many one-time distant-water fishermen fished for pelagic mackerel off British waters. They knew that cod stocks were not as plentiful as they were and accepted that the Icelanders had been right to preserve and conserve the fish. Scientists were right: cod was simply being over-fished. Enlightened owners of trawlers and some of their employees knew that: as one former deckhand tells Byrne succinctly, 'We was catching miles too much

fish'. (p.69) But it was hard to tell British consumers that non-cod fishes could be enjoyable dinner-table staples – some of Byrne's particularly witty sentences describe the difficulties of selling 'scabbard, monkfish, rabbit fish [and] rat-tail' to an average British shopper. (p.113)

If one can handle Atlantic Seas and aggressively-captained Icelandic Coast guard vessels cutting one's trawl wires, then one can handle anything maritime. Many physically able and mentally sharp Hull trawlermen found well-paid seagoing work in waters as far off as those of western Africa, Gulf States, New Zealand and the Malvinas. It is unambiguously true that the one-time dynamic community of Hessle Road was gutted – fish processing pun intended. So, Chapter Six is a fairly bleak chapter about the 1980s and 1990s – when Hessle Road and its environs became an ex-fishing port, a deathly, silent emptiness of decay and neglect. Fishing activity continued to operate from the nearby Albert Dock – but on a smaller scale and, there, the focus was on the processing of fish caught by efficient, internationally-minded crews from vessels belonging to other nations. Sometimes workers even processed fish that had been caught by Icelandic trawlers – an irony not lost on some local publicans who refused service to Icelandic fishermen. (pp.136-137) The days when Hull workers processed fish caught by Hull-launched trawlers just ended. After 1976, it was just not the same culture. So, Byrne writes sepulchrally of 'The Death of Trawlertown.' Indeed, on a civic level, Hull seemed content to consign the proletarian, rough world of Hessle Road to a forgotten past. Some politicians and writers in the local media even downplayed the significance of fishing to Hull's cultural and economic history. Planners, certainly, when clearing Hessle Road of its more dilapidated housing had no nostalgia for the heritage or 'character' of slums once peopled with cod-dependent labourers' families.

Some people of Hull have fought to maintain an oral, pictorial and physical memory of St. Andrew's Docks and its environs and the thousands of men who risked everything to bring millions of specimens of the sainted cod to it. It is a determined campaign to push for memory and history 'from below.' It has partially succeeded: although St. Andrew's Dock itself is now a silted-over embarrassment, the general area now has a museum trawler, a mural, a 2017 memorial to men lost at sea and some protected physical remnants on the land. Locally-written literature and drama presents creative versions of narratives from fish-centred workers of the past. Much of this is due to the efforts of a group called STAND – the St. Andrew's Fish Dock Heritage Park Action Group. I confess, though, that I struggled not to laugh when Byrne described the split that led to a breakaway group, the Hull Bullnose Heritage Group. The description of the split between the two factions reads like a parody of a split between factions of an Irish paramilitary group. But, arguably, Irish paramilitary groups had internecine fights for good reasons and those who seek to remember Hull's once-great fishing industry have good reasons for

wanting to remember men and women of the past as well as the remaining physical infrastructure of the Docks in the way they want to. Celebrating fishermen and the women in supporting jobs was important to Ewan MacColl and it is important to Jo Byrne. This is, overall, an excellent, detailed, passionate book about the heyday and extraordinarily speedy decline of a unique working-class community, one that was both of and not of Hull, one that existed on some sort of philosophically liminal world that was as doomed as it was vital. It is a dense, imperfect but compelling book. It takes a long time to fully engage with and to fully comprehend the book's technical information about trawlers and trawling, the statistics, the scale of its global coverage, the comprehensiveness of its attention to local detail, its description of fish shoal behaviour and the range of its oral and written printed sources – it is worth every minute.

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Max Farrar and Kevin McDonnell, *Big Flame: Building Movements, New Politics*, Merlin Press: Dagenham, 2024; 374 pp.; ISBN 9780850367959, £30.00, pbk.

Big Flame was a short-lived (1970-84) but distinctive organization on the British left, variously described as revolutionary, socialist, feminist and libertarian in its organization, perspectives and ethos. Drawing from a range of Marxist traditions, it was always somewhat idiosyncratic and hard to categorize, being neither Trotskyist, communist, anarchist nor Maoist. Emerging in Liverpool in 1970 with a name inspired by the eponymous Loach/Allen/Garnett TV play about workers' control in the Liverpool docks, it subsequently spread to other large Northern cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield as well as to London. Its members included Paul Thompson and Lynn Segal, both of whom later became famous academics, whilst the sociologists Huw Beynon and Tony Lane were briefly associated with the group in the early 1970s though never actually joined.

The current book has been produced by two former members of Big Flame, one of whom maintains the group's website, but it also includes around forty short extracts of up to several thousand words each from many other ex-members, describing their first contact with the group, their modes of involvement and retrospective assessment of their experiences. In addition one of the book's nine chapters dealing primarily with women and Big Flame was authored, appropriately, by three women from the group. The book is organized both chronologically and thematically and is generally well written. There are detailed appendices covering the national committee composition and the group's publications whilst the detailed

evidence in the text is thoroughly backed up by over 500 endnotes as well as two indexes.

Much of Big Flame's worldview was shared with the bulk of the contemporary British far left: the capitalist system was a dysfunctional, destructive and oppressive system which could only be overthrown by a mass revolution emerging from protracted and escalating class struggles, both at the workplace and around broader issues such as anti-racism and anti-imperialism. Consequently Big Flame members were active in the Anti-Nazi League, the Chile Solidarity Campaign and the Troops Out Movement. The group was also committed to the view that a socialist society would be built by workers themselves, not by union or party leaders acting on their behalf, and it could not be created through an incremental process of reforms.

However, Big Flame departed from conventional revolutionary thinking, especially Trotskyist thinking, in at least three respects. First, it was strongly influenced, especially in the early 1970s, by an anti-elitist, Italian Marxist current known as *operaismo* ('workerism'), the idea that the frontline of class struggle was now centred around militant, direct action by the mass production workers of the world's giant car assembly plants. The role of revolutionaries in this context was no longer to act as a class conscious vanguard, directing workers according to party schema, but to engage collaboratively and directly with workers in shared learning and practice, whilst steering clear of involvement in workplace union structures and committees. Big Flame members were therefore especially active in some of the Ford Motor Company's largest plants: Halewood on Merseyside, Dagenham in Essex and Langley to the west of London. Second, Big Flame also engaged seriously with the idea of multiple forms of oppression and whilst not downgrading battles over exploitation at the workplace, acknowledged that other struggles were equally salient. The prime examples involved housing, childcare and reproductive rights and the centrality of women to all three domains suggests why almost 50 per cent of Big Flame's membership in the early 1970s were women. Third, many Big Flame members were committed to an idea of 'prefigurative politics', the notion that the organization of their daily lives should reflect their socialist values such as communal living and shared responsibility for childcare. This combination of features perhaps explains why so many of the recollections of ex-members are exceptionally positive, as they recall the genuine pleasures of shared campaigns, a fair degree of autonomy from centralized structures, the successes (and the setbacks) as well as the comradeship of the close-knit groups and the regular summer schools that characterized Big Flame.

Yet the authors of the book are equally keen to identify the downsides of Big Flame's *modus operandi*: its decentralized and loose structures provided few incentives, or pressures, to recruit and induct members, levy and collect regular dues and sell the group's regular newspaper. Whilst these staple activities helped propel the

contemporary membership of Britain's leading Trotskyist groups (International Socialists, Socialist Labour League/Workers Revolutionary Party and the Militant Tendency) into the thousands, Big Flame's membership probably never exceeded 160 or so and it struggled to break out of its largely white, middle class, ex-student milieu. Moreover as members burned out or moved on with their lives, the organization struggled to replenish, yet alone expand, its membership base. From the mid-1970s it therefore launched a series of initiatives to try and expand its influence, beginning with the 1977 manifesto calling on the revolutionary left to begin discussions on the formation of a new, revolutionary organization. This hopelessly optimistic venture picked up a handful of dissidents from a couple of organizations but was clearly doomed to fail as it collided with the rigid structures and deeply-ingrained sectarianism of the Trotskyist left. A few months later Big Flame and the International Marxist Group launched an electoral coalition called Socialist Unity but after 14 ineffectual campaigns over the next few years it too was wound up. By this time the organization was in the grip of a long-running debate over its relationship with the burgeoning Labour Left and although only a small minority of members switched from Big Flame to the Labour Party in 1981, the group was now locked into a process of decline and disorientation from which there seemed no obvious exit; three years later it was wound up.

Yet forty years after its demise some of the themes pioneered by Big Flame now look quite prescient. Its emphasis on collaborative working in social movement-type campaigns around a range of workplace and non-workplace issues chimes well with much contemporary organizing literature. Its emphasis on women's reproductive rights and sexuality arguably anticipated the growth of movements and identities beyond those of social class. And its trenchant and comprehensive critique of Trotskyism and the Leninist vanguard party – Thompson and Lewis' *The Revolution Unfinished?* – remains as relevant today as when it was first published in 1977. Nonetheless, as the authors ruefully observe towards the end of their text, 'Big Flame is an example of a left group whose politics bore the imprint of the 1960s but was unable to survive the 1980s.'

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John Kelly
Birkbeck, University of London

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John Foster, *Languages of Class Struggle – Communications and Mass Mobilisation in Britain and Ireland 1842–1972*, Praxis Press; Glasgow, 2024; 202 pp.; ISBN 9781899155194, £25.00, pbk.

It is refreshing to see, following too many years of neglect among researchers of history, that class and class struggle are firmly back on the agenda. Clearly, for a historian such as John Foster class has always been a central preoccupation;

undeterred by changing academic fashions, he has ploughed a steady furrow for half a century with his writings on English labour and trade union studies. He was an unflinching critic of the 'linguistic turn' in history a few decades ago, when he made an influential contribution to the debate, in 'The Declassing of Language', an essay published in *New Left Review*.

In his latest book, Foster returns to debates on language and its relationship with class and class struggle, a preoccupation first signalled in his landmark research into the cotton manufacturing town of Oldham, published as *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* some forty years ago. He writes in detail about the Clydeside shipyards in the early 1970s and in 1919, the Belfast General Strike of 1919, the Councils of Action in 1920, and the General Strike of 1842; all examples of acute class conflict and growth of working class organisation that had a lasting impact.

Class struggle, as Foster shows, is always about collective action, the organisation of a mass movement, and represents an acute awakening of political consciousness among individuals who grow to realise their shared interests and that common conditions can only really be modified by engaging in collective struggle. He provides detailed case studies to examine the aforementioned notable episodes of accentuated class struggle in British history where the circumstances provided the conditions that raised the level of consciousness and activity among workers and their communities. He looks at the powers marshalled by the state and the ruling class to suppress and dissipate workers' unrest, the enduring wider outcomes of social conflict, whether real social advances were made, the demands won and how even a partial victory could act as a vital lesson for future action.

The likes of E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart were pioneer social historians who set out to explain changing working-class behaviour, attitudes and culture in all their developing permutations from the era of the pre-Industrial Revolution to the modern consumer society and on towards a deindustrialised present and uncertain future. Writing in this Marxist tradition, Foster explores similar territory as his distinguished predecessors but with an eye firmly fixed on drawing lessons for contemporary political struggles. He shows how any successful concerted action involves a radical shift in attitude among workers. How this change comes about is a central focus, and is the reason for his choice as case studies of five landmark episodes drawn from nineteenth and twentieth century British working class history that form the core of his book.

Foster introduces his readers to the important work of Soviet linguists, such as Volosinov, Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev, who in the 1920s researched how class consciousness was shaped by development of language, experience and social circumstances. Using their theories, Foster discusses how revolutionary transitions within society are brought about by human activity, centred on class awareness and articulation of social grievances from a clear class perspective. He cites Volosinov:

Consciousness takes shape and being within the material of signs created by an organised group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws. The logic of consciousness is the logic of ideological communication, of the semiotic interaction of a social group.

Furthermore, the 'inner dialectic quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes'.

For Foster it is always essential to address the true purpose of studying and knowing your history. With a distinguished reputation for academically grounded research, he never forgets that he is writing for an audience beyond the world of refereed journals and university seminars. The essays in the book are all grounded in the details of actual past and present struggles of working people and their self-made political organisations, movements and social institutions, such as trade unions and parties. He is concerned to explore how working-class activists and leaders of movements succeed in articulating popular demands and communicating effectively with the wider masses.

Foster seeks to examine what it takes to speak in a clear voice that resonates with the people and one that is capable of lifting up people's horizons from the mundane level of existence, 'the daily grind'. He challenges the caricatures and stereotypes of working class culture found in popular television drama and comic strips like Andy Capp, who first appeared in the 'Labour newspaper' *Daily Mirror* in 1957 and is still going strong. The need to critique what the media and education define as working class behaviour is a necessary ideological struggle. It takes on additional significance during periods of acute social conflict, like the episodes discussed in this important book, which has opened up new, vital and necessary avenues of research for socialist historians and made a major contribution towards reviving labour studies.

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Michael Hughes, *Feliks Volkhovskii: A Revolutionary Life*, Open Book Publishers: Cambridge, 2024; 336 pp.; ISBN 9781805111955, £35.95, hbk; ISBN 978185111948, £22.95, pbk. E-book free on: https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0385

Feliks Volkhovskii was one of the lesser-known but important Russian revolutionaries from the 1860s to the early 1900s. First a nihilist, then a Narodnik, he was one of the founders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party – the party which focused on the needs of the peasants for land reform. Volkhovskii until now has tended to be a footnote in the biographies of more prominent revolutionaries, including Petr

Lavrov, Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii and the SR theorist Viktor Chernov, who later served as agriculture minister in the February 1917 provisional government.

Hughes' research is impressive. Using archives held across several European countries and Russia, he traces Volkhovskii's revolutionary career, from his youthful involvement in student unrest collaborating with Sergei Nechaev (he was acquitted of conspiracy) and membership of the Chaikovskii circle in St Petersburg in the early 1870s. Volkhovskii was active in revolutionary circles in Odessa, was arrested and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg, before being exiled to Siberia, where he met the American explorer George Kennan, who was researching for his classic study of *Siberia and the Exile System*, published in 1891. Volkhovskii managed to escape, travelling from the Mongolian border to Vladivostok and Nagasaki in Japan, then on to Vancouver and Toronto where again he met Kennan. He then gave lectures on Tsarist oppression to a wide range of groups before travelling to London in the summer of 1890. London had been the base for Alexander Herzen in the 1850s and 1860s. Lavrov, Nechaev, Bakunin, Stepniak and Kropotkin all spent time in the city.

Stepniak was already active in London's socialist and radical Liberal circles, working closely with the Newcastle-based Robert Spence Watson, president of the National Liberal Federation, to whom he had been introduced by the Fabian Society secretary, Edward Pease. They established the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, which published a journal, *Free Russia*, edited by Stepniak. Spence Watson, a Quaker who was also president of the Peace Society, considered that terrorist acts were justified in Russia given the oppression of the Tsarist regime. Volkhovskii arrived in London in time for the story of his escape to feature in the second issue of *Free Russia,* and he soon became a close collaborator of Stepniak, giving a lecture tour on behalf of the SFRF. After Stepniak's death in December 1895 (he was run over by a train while crossing the railway line near his home in Chiswick), Volkhovskii struggled to keep together the alliance of radical Liberals and socialists around the SFRF and *Free Russia*. He was also affected by a series of controversies around spies and informers in the Russian emigration, including the trial of the Russian London émigré, Vladimir Burtsev, who had published an article justifying regicide in 1897. The nihilists were also caught up in controversies over the actions of various anarchists, such as the German Johann Most and the French Auguste Coulon. The support of Liberals and socialists for acts of terrorism tended to weaken, once they were taking place on British soil.

In 1904, Volkhovskii became involved in the revival of revolutionary agitation, helping to obtain false passports for revolutionaries travelling to and from Russia. He did this with the help of British radicals such as Samuel Hobson and Henry Brailsford; the latter was arrested and fined £100. Working with the Finnish revolutionary and author Konni Zilliacus (father of the Labour MP of the same name)

and N. V. Chaikovskii, he sought to bring together revolutionaries exiled in various European capitals. This led to conferences in Paris and Geneva, which were funded by the Japanese secret service – this being the time of the Russia-Japanese war. Volkhovskii then joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR), comprising agrarian socialists and former narodniks, and became a member of their Geneva-based Foreign Committee. Volkhovskii missed the first Socialist Revolutionary congress as he was ill in Switzerland. He however moved to Helsinki to work with Zilliacus on his newspaper, before returning to London in the spring of 1907. He continued with propaganda activity and poetry – he was not a theorist and so was not involved in the development of the PSR's agrarian theory. He attended the Socialist International conferences in 1904 and 1910, though he missed the 1907 Stuttgart conference, which was attended by a large PSR delegation. As a veteran, he opened the PSR conference in Paris in August 1908 (the more senior Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia was in prison). The party at that time was divided between those who supported terrorism and those who focused on parliamentary work in the Russian Duma. Shortly thereafter Vladimir Burtsev was to expose Evno Azef, the head of the SR military organisation, as a government provocateur and spy.

Back in Britain, in 1908, Volkhovskii and *Free Russia* were criticising the implementation of the 1905 Aliens Act, and campaigning against the planned state visit of Tsar Nicholas to London. The 1909 outrages by Latvian anarchist exiles in Tottenham and at Sidney Street did little to help the cause of the émigré Russian revolutionaries and the PSR's journal *Za Narod* struggled to distance its party from the anarchists. William Melville of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch kept the Russian secret service agents based in London aware of the activities of Volkhovskii and his colleagues. When the Russian Prime Minister P. A. Stolypin was assassinated in 1911 – not at the behest of the PSR – Volkhovskii nonetheless had to be cautious in what he wrote about it, given the risk of further damaging the PSR's standing in British public opinion.

Volkhovskii, who had developed a reputation as the PSR's expert on military matters, died in London in July 1914, just as the First World War was breaking out. While he was less significant than his colleagues such as Stepniak and Chernov, Hughes has used Volkhovskii's life as a means of tracing the narrative of the Russian revolutionary movement, and its relationship with British radical politics, over an extensive period. It therefore provides a useful addition to the existing literature, such as Senese's work on Stepniak in London and Robert Henderson's recent study of Vladimir Burtsev. It is well worth reading and the publisher is to be congratulated for making the study available in paperback at a reasonable price as well as making the book available on-line for free. If only other academic publishers could follow this example!

Duncan Bowie, UCL

Margarite Poulos, *Refugee to Revolutionary: A Transnational History of Greek Communist Women in Interwar Europe*, Vanderbilt University Press: Nashville, TN, 2024; 276 pp., 16 illus; ISBN 9780826507167, $34.95, (pbk), ISBN 9780826507174, $99.95, (hbk).

In *Refugee to Revolutionary,* Margarite Poulos undertakes a remarkable 'act of historical recovery'. (p.161) As she notes at the outset, a few Greek women communists achieved 'iconic status' (p.8) for their roles in the World War II resistance. Yet almost nothing is known about the women who joined the party in the interwar years. Fundamental to Poulos's approach to making these women visible is her insistence on taking them seriously as historical actors.

Drawing on the Comintern files of thirty-one women (usefully summarized in two tables, pp.88-96), Poulos documents their 'critical' but 'by design invisible' (p.120) contributions to the illegal interwar Communist Party of Greece (KKE). This restoration mission does more than fill a gap in the historical record; it reveals the degree to which the party's ability to mobilize resistance to the Axis occupation relied on the women and girls who 'entered the communist movement in the 1920s' (p.166).

Although Poulos tracks her protagonists through the whirlwind of the Great Terror, the wartime resistance, and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), she locates the pivot of their lives in the years between 1924 and 1934, when the Comintern's policy of 'Bolshevization' intersected with the Greek refugee crisis. It was only the Comintern's efforts to 'Bolshevize' member parties – to bring them more fully under Moscow's sway – that pushed Greek party leaders to recruit women. The young women who joined the KKE in this period were 'often poor and semiliterate refugees' from Anatolia; in 1924, the party began admitting them to the 'cadre education program', (p.55) opened three years earlier. Only in 1935 did the male leaders appoint a woman to the central committee, Chrysa Hatzivasiliou, a member since 1925. Careful to affirm that Bolshevization was not a 'feminist panacea', (p.55) Poulos underlines the policy's 'paradoxes': even as Soviet 'conceptions of women's emancipation shrank in scope,' culminating with the recriminalization of abortion in 1936, 'the Comintern's agenda presented new and concrete opportunities' (p.56) for women.

Granting that the life stories women penned for their Comintern files were often both 'fragmentary and contrived', Poulos nonetheless deems them 'invaluable primary sources' that 'illuminate the agency of people who for the most part remain in the shadows'. (p.13) Thus, for example, she takes Olga Papadopoulou's description of a childhood dominated by relatives who 'did not particularly want me to live' (p.116) as not only a means of claiming a politically expedient impoverished social background, but as motivating a genuine and deeply felt desire to avail herself of the upward mobility afforded by a communist education. Indeed, Poulos's analysis gives more weight to the 'aspirational and pragmatic' goals suggested by the

women's biographies than to their 'varying degrees of ideological conviction'. (p.114)

The book's cover, featuring photographic portraits of a half dozen Greek communists, signals the focus on recovering the lives of women activists. The stories behind the photographs bolster Poulos's argument that experiences of displacement, poverty, and industrial labor underpinned women's radicalization. Among those pictured are Chrysanthi Kantzidou and Stella Vamniazidou, born to refugee families in 1912 and 1910, respectively. Kantzidou's '"middling" Greek peasant family' (p.127) fled from Eastern Thrace to Drama during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913); Vamniazidou's 'poor peasant family' (p.129) left Anatolia for Kavala in the wake of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922). The two followed the same path as many of the party's women cadres from preteen years spent working in the tobacco industry to activism in the Red Tobacco Workers Union to, by the early 1930s, membership in the KKE.

Membership in the party offered young women like Kantzidou and Vamniazidou unique 'opportunities for education, work, and advancement'. (p.164) Although Kantzidou had only one year of elementary schooling and Vamniazidou not even that, the party dispatched both to the prestigious International Lenin School in Moscow, where both successfully completed several years of study before returning to Greece on the eve of the Axis occupation. Poulos argues that for Kantzidou and Vamniazidou, as for the 'vast majority' of Greek students who studied in Moscow, the Comintern's 'universities were without a doubt a vehicle for upward mobility, perhaps the only vehicle available to them'. (p.110) The graduates served as 'mid-level functionaries' and 'underground operatives' in Greece and in the 'Greek minority zones of the Soviet Union' (p. 110) – the areas around the Black Sea to which Anatolian Greeks had migrated or fled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Communist women's life trajectories call attention to what Poulos deems 'the fundamentally transnational character of Greek communism'. (p.3) The Comintern universities connected women from Greece, who were often Anatolian refugees, with so-called Soviet Greeks, people like Lidiia Ivanovna Petrova (Cherman). Born in 1897 in the Donbas region of Ukraine, Petrova was a Soviet citizen, whose native language was Russian, and whose Greek was 'poor', (p.93) but because she was the descendant of Anatolian Greeks, the 'nationality' inscribed in her Soviet passport was 'Greek'. She had taken full advantage of the opportunities that the Russian Revolution opened to national minorities, training as a teacher, joining the Soviet party in 1927, and attending the Communist University for National Minorities of the West (KUNMZ). In 1931, she moved from KUNMZ to the newly opened Greek sector of the International Lenin School. Although 'unable to read Greek newspapers', (p.99) she undertook a Comintern assignment in Greece in 1933-1934. Upon her return to the Soviet Union, she became the head of the Lenin School's Greek sector,

a post she held until 1937, when she was purged. During the Stalinist terror, transnational connections became dangerous, as both Greeks in the Soviet Union and Soviet Greeks 'were regarded as suspicious and unreliable national minorities'. (p.111)

Interestingly, the gallery of portraits on the book's cover includes one non-Greek, the Bolshevik feminist Inessa Armand. Although a generation older than the Greek communists, Armand, with her short hair, austere dress, and serious gaze, appears to be their peer – or perhaps their inspiration. Indeed, the best known of these Greek communist women, the eventual central committee member Chrysa Hatzivasiliou, took the alias Alexandra Nikolai Armand when she studied at KUMNZ in the late 1920s. Poulos uses this invented bond with Armand and the prominent Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai to raise the critical question of how and to what extent communist women aspired to become 'honorary males' or to resist 'the masculinist cast of Bolshevik political culture'. (p.152)

Poulous gives Hatzivasiliou the last word. An appendix with the full text of Hatzivasiliou's 1946 essay 'The Greek Communist Party and the Woman Question' is an outstanding teaching resource. Lamenting the 'many backward perceptions about women that continue to prevail … even among communist men', (p.194) Hatzivasiliou emphasized that during the Civil War, the party 'nurtured' (p.191) Greek women, who effectively 'smashed their own sense of inferiority'. (p.190) The essay never really reconciles the party's 'vanguard' role, communist men's 'backward perceptions,' and communist women's efforts to 'free themselves'. (p.194) A similar tension runs through Poulos's study, which underscores the KKE's vanguard role in offering women education and meaningful work, but explains that it did so primarily at the Comintern's behest. Skeptical that women communists managed to remake the party's masculinist culture, Poulos provides a well-documented and timely reminder that, whatever the immediate outcomes, women's efforts to free themselves carry profound political significance.

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Raphael Samuel, *Workshop of the World: Essays in People's History*, ed. John Merrick, Verso: London, 2024; 304 pp.; ISBN 9781804292808, £25.00, pbk.

Perhaps uniquely amongst the celebrated British historians of his generation, Raphael Samuel is remembered as much for his relationships to others as for the content of his own scholarship. As a tutor for over thirty years at Ruskin College, he inspired generations of students, including the historian Sally Alexander who recalls that 'he scarcely "taught" so much as encouraged, engaged in conversation, led us to the libraries and archives'. (p.15) After launching the History Workshop movement in 1966, Samuel was a frequent collector, curator, and editor of other historians' work,

whether in the proceedings of annual Workshop conferences or in the *History Workshop Journal*, set up in 1976 and now both a print and online journal. More generally, his infectious enthusiasm, intellectual openness, and the warm welcome kept at his Spitalfields home stimulated colleagues in their own work for decades, as is brilliantly rendered in Alison Light's memoir of her marriage with Samuel, *A Radical Romance*. With this legacy, it is unsurprising that Samuel's biographer Sophie Scott-Brown wrote in an earlier issue of this journal that his significance was not the advancement of any 'notable historical argument or theory' but rather that 'he changed what it was to *be* a historian'. (*Socialist History* 61, p.76)

But Samuel was an innovative and compelling scholar in his own right, as Verso's new volume *Workshop of the World: Essays in People's History* makes abundantly clear. Conceived by Alexander and by Alun Howkins, another of Samuel's early Ruskin students, and edited and introduced by John Merrick, *Workshop* brings together five of Samuel's most important journal articles and book chapters and one lecture, all from the period 1971-1985, and some of which have until now been difficult to access. Collectively, they showcase Samuel's eclectic interests, the curiosity and empathy with which he approached his subjects, and the lyrical quality of his prose.

Like many of Britain's left-wing postwar historians, Samuel was concerned with the social and economic history of the nineteenth century. This was, after all, the classic era of industrial and urban transformation, emerging class consciousness and conflict, and the birth of socialism as a means of understanding these phenomena. But Samuel was more unique in his focus on the 'ragged edges' of Victorian society (variations of the phrase appear on pp. 56 and 74), where he thought more revealing discoveries could be made than in the great factories and trading houses of the age. The most famous example of this approach, 'Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain', is the longest chapter in this collection. First published in *History Workshop Journal* in 1977, it surveys fields as diverse as mining, food processing, construction, and leatherworking to show that, contrary to easy assumptions about the nature of technological change, 'mechanisation in one department of production was often complemented by an increase of sweating in others'. (p.126) Steam-driven pumps flushing water from mines did not relieve miners of their pick-axes and railway haulage at quarries did not ease the process of breaking rocks; they simply created more demand for backbreaking labour. Poring over the era's relatively unknown technical literature, Samuel gives thick descriptions of working conditions and showed that steam power was adopted much more slowly and unevenly than was often assumed. Samuel's analysis of late and uneven mechanisation, pointing to employers' reluctance to invest in expensive machinery, the resistance of some trades to steam power (pearl button-making, for example), and customers' abiding preference for quality handmade goods, convincingly

demonstrates the shortcomings of overly abstracted accounts of economic change and remains one of his more notable historiographical contributions.

Those at the 'ragged' edge of the economy were often highly mobile. 'Comers and Goers' focuses on nineteenth-century Britain's 'wandering tribes', from navvies, pedlars, and builders to Roma, Irish, and Italian migrants. Seasonality was central to the practices and explored in the chapter, and Samuel traces life patterns determined by the warmth and relative plenty of summer and the search for shelter and relief in the lodging houses, soup kitchens, night refuges and other 'nooks and crannies' (p.75) of the city during winter. Pairing the findings of social investigators like Mayhew, Booth, and Rowntree with working class autobiography, Samuel peers into lesser-known corners of the Victorian economy, recounting the strategies of migratory thieves and the existence of 'fugitive callings' (p.104) like street-selling. For Samuel, tracking fugitive callings required 'fugitive sources' (p.124). 'Headington Quarry: Recovering a Labouring Community' was a pioneer work of the then-marginal field of oral history. An 'open village', Headington grew up unplanned as an economic satellite of Oxford. This liminality was reflected in its physical layout as its 'sand pits, working and abandoned, twisted and turned the physiognomy of the village into ups and downs'. (p.49) Since such 'open villages' were by nature 'so deficient in records', Samuel argues that they could only be studied through local oral tradition. The essay therefore concludes with interviews Samuel conducted with casual labourers, squatters, poachers, 'vagrants', Roma, and other transient or marginal figures of Oxfordshire, many of whom were introduced to him by Howkins. It thereby demonstrates the potential of marrying archival sources with oral tradition.

In the 1980s, Samuel was dismayed and fascinated by Thatcher's political ascendancy and by popular support for the Falklands War. His work therefore began to grapple with popular belief, eventually resulting in the only sole-authored book produced in his lifetime, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (1994). Early indications of this shift can be seen in 'People's History', Samuel's introduction to *People's History and Socialist Theory* (1981), the proceedings of one of History Workshop's most infamously acrimonious conferences. As part of *Workshop*, the chapter is sometimes an awkward fit, referring to contributions which are collected in another volume and delicately managing the conference's divisions on the merits of continental structuralist theory. But it is also an engaging piece of intellectual history, tracing lineages of conservative, liberal, and socialist writing on the history of 'the people' that include Guizot, Thorold Rogers, and Marx. And one catches a glimpse of Samuel's growing interest in the folkloric with his observation that the 'remote origins of people's history in England are lost in that no-man's land of ballad tradition where myth and historicity cross'. (p.43)

Identity and belief are also at the heart of the final chapters of *Workshop*. 'The Roman Catholic Church and the Irish Poor', is an exploration of Catholicism's

function as 'a national church for the Irish poor' (p.218) in Britain. Priests served as social as well as spiritual authorities, while Catholic schools and services sustained Irish community and identity in exile, even helping to preserve the Gaelic language. Moreover, Catholic belief provided an intellectual framework for criticism of the Protestant British, denounced as both persecutors and heathens. For those 'stigmatised alike by religion and by race', faith and national identity 'reciprocated one another's claims'. (p.230). Samuel subjected his own political milieu to similar analysis in his lecture 'A Spiritual Elect? Robert Tressell and the Early Socialists'. Driven by the electoral defeats of the Thatcher era to think of socialism as being for but not quite of the people, Samuel highlights the tendency of socialists to see themselves as a 'minority elect'. (p.196) From the Jacobins and Owenites to the early history of the Labour party, 'socialism was conceived as a kind of moral cleansing of society' (p.207) in which the ordinary worker was not always interested. If 'Spiritual Elect' is much more about the intellectual and moral culture of socialism than its programmatic responses to the economic hardships described in 'Workshop of the World' or 'Comers and Goers', a winking connection between Samuel's earlier and latter interests can be seen when he refers to many socialists, with their earnest if heterodox religiosity, as 'spiritual vagrants'. (p.209)

Merrick and Alexander recently discussed *Workshop of the World* on the *History Workshop Podcast* (28 February 2024). They emphasised Samuel's foresight as a historian, noting his focus on migrancy in 'Comers and Goers' and interest in technology in 'Workshop of the World'. One might also add to these his defence of oral history in 'Headington Quarry', concern with the climate in 'Comers and Goers', the 'four nations' approach in the 'Roman Catholic Church and the Irish Poor', or his discovery of the religious roots of socialism in 'Spiritual Elect'. But Samuel's conviction that history 'was far too important to be left to professional historians alone' (p.1) has dated differently. Current claims of historians' obsolescence resonate on a political right determined to decimate an ailing higher education sector. Meanwhile, Britain's professional historians are overworked, underpaid, and often on strike. Nevertheless, eager to engage with the public and seeing history as a collaborative and democratic pursuit, many of them are ultimately the products and inheritors of Samuel's legacy.

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Helena Sheehan, *Until We Fall: Long Distance Life on the Left*, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2023, 357 pp.; ISBN 9781685900274, £15.99, pbk.

The cover of part two of Helena Sheehan's autobiography, *Until We Fall: Long Distance Life on the Left,* is inspired by Geliy Korzhev's iconic painting 'Picking Up the Banner'.

It is an apt image for a remarkable and courageous woman who remained resolutely on the Left despite the many defeats inflicted on the cause to which she devoted her life. Hers is an epic story. This second part of her autobiography – the first covered her journey from anti-communist Catholicism to empathy with communist causes and activism in Cold War America – interweaves personal history with social and political upheavals. It begins in the late 1980s when hopes were high owing to glasnost' and perestroika. The story then proceeds through the bitter disappointments of the subsequent brutal counterrevolutions, before proceeding to address ensuing world-shaking, transformative events right up to the present day. Perestroika, intended as the renaissance of socialism, initiated a dizzying series of events that culminated in its demise. Sheehan became a front-row witness to the retreat of socialism on all fronts. She succinctly captures, and provides compelling insights into, the multifaceted transformations that turned the world upside down. She writes with verve, passion, and humour, making impressively detailed recollections a riveting read.

Intellectually committed to the Left, Sheehan was also a staunch activist constantly engaged in a wide range of leftwing struggles for justice, freedom, equality and the eradication of poverty. She became a veteran anti-war campaigner deeply opposed to western imperialism from the Vietnam war on. She stood firmly against the imposition of neo-liberal austerity and the devastation it wrought at home and abroad. She inadvertently found herself embroiled in the Arab Spring. She chose to be directly involved in the Occupy movement. Her research trips to South Africa and the activism she undertook there, provide profound insights into the post-apartheid regime's descent into corruption and cronyism. Sheehan incisively dissects and critiques South Africa, never neglecting context and history and, of course, western culpability, from colonial exploitation and neglect to present-day misunderstanding and misrepresentation. The latter evoked her acid wit. Sheehan's wealth of knowledge and experience made her a sought-after political commentator, even though she was a trenchant critic of western media. She particularly derided the Irish media's approach to the African continent: 'Make sure to mention Bob and Bono and Live Aid. Great Irish angle here: our guys telling world leaders what to do. Sure, where would Africa be without them'. (p.238)

Well-known and respected in left-wing circles, Sheehan's scholar-activism and international standing facilitated access to key players in the socialist arena, as evidenced by her inimitable insights into the era's tumultuous history as it unfolded around her. The narrative reverberates with astute observations about the impact of triumphalist capitalism. Revelling in 'victory' and consumed by hubris, the United States moved swiftly and recklessly to consolidate western hegemony. Sheehan poignantly captures the psychological havoc wreaked on the Left by the unanticipated 'defeat'. She revealingly reflects on the myriad responses of her comrades as the system crumbled around them, first in Eastern Europe and then the USSR.

Some were simply overwhelmed, some silent, others apologetic, guilty. There were suicides. Tellingly, however, as power shifted, so did people, indeed whole parties: 'some left parties moved so far to the right as to jump centre, learning not only to live with the market, but to love it'. (p.33) Nonetheless, for many the sense of loss was profound. Personally, Sheehan notes she grieved for something in herself. She did not grieve the likes of Honecker or Ceausescu, 'or the lesser-known cynics or careerists who kept them in their place', but she 'grieved for the honest communists who lived and died for this movement'. (p.34) Sheehan vividly recalls both the pain and confusion as well as the opportunism and apologism, that marked this period of turmoil inflicted on the Left world-wide. Communist regimes were deeply flawed and far from the utopian societies to which socialists aspired. Nonetheless, the systemic collapse crushed deeply held convictions that socialism promised a meaningful alternative to the capitalist order. It punctured post-Second World War aspirations that the consequences of capitalism, slump, fascism and war, could be overcome. The Czech Marxist philosopher Jindřich Zelený told Sheehan: 'We have to admit failure, but it was failure of an attempt to make something great'. (p.56)

Further understanding of the significance of these unprecedented events derives from Sheehan's accounts of her various encounters at numerous international conferences. Sheehan never shirked an argument or a cerebral challenge. A celebrated philosopher who made groundbreaking interventions in the philosophy of science and the history of ideas, Sheehan's views on the prevailing research methodologies such as positivism and post-modernism, mattered. Her assessments carried weight. Whatever the academic trends and intellectual conceits of the moment, Sheehan never relinquished her convictions concerning the strength she discerned in the explanatory power of Marxism. Her passionately argued papers and publications provoked notable responses. Sheehan skilfully supplements revealing conference discussions with the stimulating conversations and exchanges she conducted with an array of leading intellectuals, activists and academics. Her acquaintances were a veritable *Who's Who* of leftwing intelligentsia, political activists and serious scholars from across the globe. Forthright and fearless in speaking out, Sheehan inevitably courted controversy. At a time when former comrades and colleagues were either abandoning Marxism or concealing their adherence to it, Sheehan maintained that Marxism remained 'the most coherent, credible, and comprehensive mode of thought, capable of coming to terms with the complexity of contemporary experience' (p.18). She deeply regretted what she perceived as the decline of class analysis and class struggle with the shift toward what were categorised as universal human values, along with a 'de-ideologization of culture, politics and economics' (p.19).

Now a professor emeritus at Dublin City University, Sheehan clearly relished teaching and the opportunities university life entailed. However, she became a severe critic who openly resisted the marketization of universities, and the cuts imposed

upon them. It was a stance that brought her into direct confrontation with management as she bombarded them with written complaints, mobilised students and appealed to external examiners. Her concerns will undoubtedly be shared by numerous academics who experienced the process of intense neo-liberal commodification reflected in the transition to a discourse of strategic plans, the emphasis on innovation, networking, entrepreneurship, external funding, patents and commercialization projects, performance management, full economic costing, and so forth: all accompanied by a plethora of unfathomable associated acronyms. Sheehan bemoans how the quantity of research rather than the quality became the path to promotion, leading to 'bland, trivial, useless' studies, driven by market demand and fast track careerism. She is scathing about the impact on theory, much of which she considered 'obfuscatory, postmodernist nonsense' (p.162). She opposed what she viewed as the downgrading of epistemological and ethical norms, their displacement by market norms, the undervaluing of teaching, the overvaluing of inconsequential research, 'driven by questionable priorities' (p.158). These she felt led to a waning of philosophical and historical consciousness and an erosion of public service ethos, along with a lot of baloney.

Sheehan was possessed of an indomitable will and indefatigability, searing honesty and immense generosity. She was determined that her book record the stories of others whose lives converged with hers, especially those who left no accounts. She concludes her history with an expression of gratitude to the international Left: 'for the community of enquiry and endeavour that is unrivalled in intelligence and purposefulness, giving each of us strength we could never have alone' (p.343). With a strong sense of her time running out, Sheehan unsurprisingly longs to see the Left rise again. She insists its presence remains a source of light and hope amidst a decadent yet still dominant capitalist system. With reference to Gramsci, she observes the old is dying and the new cannot be born, giving rise to a time of monsters. She counsels against despair and leaving the terrain uncontested, advising the battle for truth and justice is the only life worth living.

An inspirational book that is informative and entertaining and ought to be widely read. Highly recommended.

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Mike Squires, *Class Against Class*, Manifesto Press: London, 2025; 190 pp.; ISBN 9781907464553, £17.50, pbk.

Back in 1993, Mike Squires wrote a short article for *Socialist History* entitled 'The CPGB and "Class Against Class"'. In it, he argued against the then prevailing opinion that the policy of 'class against class' – enacted by the Communist Party of

Great Britain (CPGB) as directed by the Communist International (Comintern) between its sixth and seventh world congresses (1928 and 1935) – was a flawed theory and a failed strategy. Presented as a response to a proposed 'Third Period' in capitalist development since the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, and following a designated 'second' period of relative capitalist stability worldwide and the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the Soviet Union, the slogan of 'class against class' was underpinned by an analysis that predicted capitalism was entering into crisis. Communists, in response, were directed to work tirelessly in revealing the treachery of social democracy and 'reformism'; to build and develop an independent leadership of the working class; to support the Soviet Union unreservedly as it defended against capitalist and, increasingly, fascist aggression. In other words, the class war was once more deemed to be approaching its height and, especially in the wake of Wall Street's crash in late 1929, revolution was again at hand.

The fact that fascism/authoritarianism more often than communism won out in the 1930s – and capitalism elsewhere remained in place – meant that the politics of 'class against class' have rarely been given credence. Stalin's brutal trouncing of his adversaries and the upheavals of rapid industrialisation and collectivism ensured that the Third Period has often been interpreted as a mechanism for Stalin to assert his unassailable authority over both the Soviet communist party and the Comintern (not to mention the people of the USSR). Communist parties across the world entered a period of internal conflict, mirroring the power struggles inside the Soviet party. As a result, communist memberships often suffered from decline in the late 1920s, while the label of 'social fascist' levelled against social democrats who held fast to gradualist/reformist/parliamentary politics further antagonised already fraught relationships between communists and the wider labour movement. More generally, the policy has been seen as a major contributing factor to the left's inability to resist the rise of Nazism in Germany; that is, working class disunity in the face of fascism was the fault of Stalin and the supine communists who bent to his will. Indeed, from 1933, with Hitler in power, communist policies and perspectives were necessarily (if somewhat protractedly) realigned by the Comintern. United and Popular Fronts were on their way.

Against such a reading, Squires argued for the validity of the Comintern's analysis of the Third Period and to posit that the years of 'class against class' saw membership increase overall. Rather than bow easily to Stalin's will, Comintern sections – including members of the CPGB – recognised the analysis that informed what was then called 'The New Line' and engaged in its development and application. In terms of party growth, moreover, the years between 1930 and 1933 were actually 'very good ones' for the CPGB, Squires argued, reversing a downward trend evident from late 1926 (i.e. before 'class against class' was implemented). Now, in *Class Against Class*, Squires extends his argument via a detailed reconstruction of the Third

Period's evolution. Using newspapers and party documents, he moves from resolution to resolution, conference to conference, plenum to plenum, recording the ebbs and flows of the theory and the expected practice. Again, his objective is to show first that 'class against class' was not simply imposed on the CPGB at the whim of Stalin and without its basic premise chiming with the perspective of many in the party; and, second, to point to an upswing in party support from 1930; that is, once the line was fully implemented.

In the time between Squires' article and this Manifesto Press book, work by me and by Andrew Thorpe has endeavoured to afford complexity and nuance to the Third Period and the associated policy of 'class against class'. While not concurring with Squires, our accounts nevertheless sought to avoid any overly reductionist reading of the 'period' and to circumnavigate the big-P political sideshow of subsequent political 'battles' across the left. Others, too, have looked at the party in and around these years in ways that do not fall into the binaries of right/wrong, good/bad, correct/incorrect. Even so, Squires evidently feels more can be said on the party's experience and campaigns during the late 1920s and early 1930s, emphasising the 'struggle against imperialism' and the campaigns for the unemployed. To this end, his underlying broadbrush points remain valid: the CPGB did not adopt 'class against class' in a wholly unquestioning manner (as 'dupes of Moscow'); the party did recruit and enact campaigns during the late 1920s and 1930s that kept its presence visible to workers and others in Britain and abroad. At the same time, Squires shows little interest in more recent work on the CPGB nor on critically engaging with questions as to the measurement of CPGB 'success'/'failure' or the ways by which Stalin and his allies undoubtedly did use and abuse shifts in Comintern theory and practice for their own ends. The book, then, recovers materials from the archive and lays them out. But wider interpretation remains the preserve of the reader. Ultimately, too, the marginality and limits of the CPGB's appeal are never seriously considered against the admirable energies of its active members.

All in all, *Class Against Class* will not convince anyone that the Third Period was anything other than a difficult one (at best) for the CPGB and communists everywhere. It does provide a wealth of factual information; it scratches an itch that has long irritated Squires. In many ways, therefore, the book might best be seen as an exercise in attempted justification rather than a critical analysis. Squires offers a blow-by-blow account of the CPGB's ebb and flow into the 1930s as the world all around it buckled and bent.

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Mike Taber, ed., *The Founding of the Red Trade Union International. Proceedings and Resolutions of the First Congress, 1921*, Brill: Leiden, 2024; 766 pp.; ISBN 9789004712850, €182.00, hbk.

The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, aka *Profintern*), was founded in Moscow in July 1921. It was by far the most significant of the auxiliary bodies spawned by the Communist International (CI), although it has generally been dismissed as a political failure. Mike Taber disagrees. He considers that RILU was an 'important international movement', (p.3) and has collated the proceedings and many of the documents of RILU's founding congress into an admirably solid and scholarly volume. In his editor's introduction, he sets out the historical background, summarises the discussions of the congress and makes a political case for taking RILU seriously. The volume is copiously annotated, with a chronology, potted biographies of congress participants, a bibliography and a detailed index.

The RILU project was conceived at a conference in Moscow in July 1920, attended by G. E. Zinoviev for the CI, Bolshevik trade union leaders including S. A. Lozovsky (Dridzo), a delegation of Italian trade unionists, and two prominent British communist trade unionists, Robert Williams and A. A. Purcell. The CI and Zinoviev were particularly concerned about the reestablishment in 1919 of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), headed by non-communists and based in Amsterdam. To Zinoviev, the IFTU was 'a political weapon in the hands of the Entente, the strongest the Entente has ever possessed', (p.674) and the need to destroy 'Amsterdam' is the central preoccupation of almost every speech and document in this volume. Zinoviev's initial proposal, for a trade union section of the CI, was amended by Williams to a call for a congress of revolutionary trade unions which would itself decide on its organisational form. (p.678) This opened the door to non-communist currents, such as the revolutionary syndicalists. It also ensured that RILU's founding congress was the site of a genuine political struggle.

The Russian Bolsheviks wanted a vehicle for spreading communist ideas and influence in the international trade union movement. They had come to believe that their experience in Russia provided a template for the impending proletarian revolutions across the capitalist world, and that correct (i.e. communist) political leadership was paramount for the success of these revolutions. In party politics, the CI since 1919 had been gathering those revolutionary socialists around the world who were willing to accept Moscow's lead, and organising them into communist parties, on a 'take the best and discard the rest' basis. But that approach, which often entailed splitting existing organisations, made little sense in trade union politics.

The RILU project faced a dilemma. It needed some revolutionary trade unions outside of Russia to affiliate to it. But tiny 'revolutionary' breakaway unions were of little use. In parts of Europe there were individual communist-led unions with some mass support. However, the largest 'revolutionary' unions, particularly in Spain, were

syndicalist rather than communist, and were not prepared to accept the political tutelage of the CI. Ideally, RILU needed a major national trade union federation to affiliate, but nearly all of them already belonged to the great enemy, Amsterdam.

So the RILU congress brought together sundry communist trade unionists, and representatives of various non-communist trade union organisations. The largest of these was the Italian trade union confederation CGL, which was affiliated to the IFTU but whose leadership stood some way to the left of the Amsterdam majority. The CGL delegation was there 'for purposes of information'. (p.311) Then there were the syndicalists, most notably the main Spanish trade union body CNT, but also the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA. Finally, there were the breakaway revolutionary trade unions created mainly in Germany during the up-heaval of 1918-1920, associated with the 'ultra-left' Communist Workers' Party (KAPD). Most of them were tiny groups with huge pretensions.

The ringmaster of the frequently chaotic debates was the 'indispensable' Lozov-sky. (p.12) An urbane veteran Bolshevik and trade union functionary, well acquainted with West European labour movements, he had the authority, and occasionally the tact, to navigate through the political disagreements, to try to win over any awkward delegations which represented significant bodies of workers, and to quash those who did not. If Lozovsky was, as Taber suggests, (p.30) ultimately unsuccessful in winning over many syndicalist organisations for RILU, it was surely because the communists did not want to *co-operate* long-term with syndicalism, but to *destroy* it as a rival revolutionary current and win its adherents for communist ideas.

The congress itself held seventeen sessions over two weeks, consisting primarily of policy debates. A few questions took up most of the time: RILU-CI relations covered five sessions, tactics took up three sessions, while two were devoted to the 'Italian Question'. The Russians sought to force the issue for the Italian CGL: Amsterdam or Moscow? The CGL stayed with Amsterdam, but the obligation to choose one centre or the other created a different problem: what should communist members of Amsterdam-affiliated unions do? To the delegates from the breakaway German unions, the answer was clear: 'out of the trade unions – your place is in the factory committees', (p.365) as Arthur Bartels, the main spokesman of this ten-dency, put it. However, most delegates rejected this call for communists to detach themselves from the main bodies of organised workers. British delegates such as Tom Mann and J. T. Murphy argued successfully for communists to work in the mass unions and attempt to win both their members and, eventually, their structures for RILU's positions.

The debate on the relationship with the CI was the most contentious. The inde-pendence of trade unions from political parties was a fundamental principle of syn-dicalism, and although all the syndicalists who had travelled to Moscow were pre-pared to *co-operate* with communists, most of them were not prepared to take orders

from the CI. The Spanish CNT was a genuinely mass organisation, it was keen to affiliate – but not at the cost of its own political independence. Its lead delegate Hilario Arlandis made a case for an 'organically independent' RILU, (p.197) and was as conciliatory as possible towards the pro-CI majority at the congress, but in vain: the Bolsheviks wanted RILU as a CI subsidiary organisation. After the congress, the CNT rejected affiliation. The statute eventually adopted by the RILU congress not only established the closest connection with the CI, but the conditions for membership included points about 'submission to international proletarian discipline' and 'recognition and application of the decisions' of the RILU congress. (pp.650-651) This was not an autonomous international of revolutionary trade unions. Instead, in countries where communists could work openly in the labour movement, RILU fostered the development of party-led factions which affiliated to it, such as the National Minority Movement in Britain, headed in the 1920s by Harry Pollitt.

The resolutions of the congress, on workers' control, factory committees and so forth, reflect the underlying Bolshevik view that the Russian revolution provided a template for others to follow. It is also very noticeable that the Russian trade unions were hardly discussed at all, and where they were mentioned, they were presented as a model of revolutionary organisation. In reality, during the civil war the Russian trade unions had been completely subordinated to the Communist Party and the state, becoming part of the apparatus of labour mobilisation. How far the foreign delegates understood this is not clear. There was, however, one issue which gave rise to serious criticism of the Soviet hosts – the arrest and incarceration of a group of Russian anarcho-syndicalists from the *Golos truda* group, who had declared a hunger strike in protest. The French syndicalists and others – including Tom Mann – had taken up their case, and so N. I. Bukharin came to address the congress on behalf of the Bolshevik Central Committee. In a brazenly disingenuous speech, he tried to conflate the prisoners with Nestor Makhno's armed bands in Ukraine. This led to uproar among the delegates. (p.522) In riposte, the French syndicalist Henri Sirolle observed: 'now we have been shown we have no right to be trustful'. (p.524)

Despite everything, the RILU congress did succeed in establishing a trade union international embracing some communist-led unions and communist minority organisations. It also helped clarify the differences between Bolshevism and syndicalism, which in Spain in particular had been poorly understood. But its primary goal of destroying and replacing the Amsterdam International was unfeasible. It was also at odds with the logic of the CI's new 'united front' line, and before long the Soviet trade unions themselves were seeking relations with Amsterdam affiliates.

The volume is part of the *Historical Materialism* series, which means it will soon appear in a much more affordable paperback edition. It is a welcome and worthy addition to the published documentation on the early years of the CI.

Francis King

The Socialist History Society

The **Socialist History Society** was founded in 1992 and includes many leading Socialist and labour historians, both academic and amateur, in Britain and overseas. The **SHS** holds regular events, public meetings and one-off conferences, and contributes to current historical debates and controversies. The society produces a range of publications, including the journal *Socialist History*.

The **SHS** is the successor to the Communist Party History Group, established in 1946. The society is now independent of all political parties and groups. We are engaged in and seek to encourage historical studies from a Marxist and broadly-defined left perspective. We are concerned with every aspect of human history from early social formations to the present day and aim for a global reach. We are particularly interested in the struggles of labour, women, progressive and peace movements throughout the world, as well as the movements and achievements of colonial peoples, black people, and other oppressed communities seeking justice, human dignity and liberation.

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