

Ben Harker, *The Chronology of Revolution: Communism, Culture, and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2021)

THE COMMUNIST PARTY of Great Britain (CPGB) was formed in 1920 as the British section of the Communist International, and dissolved in 1991, following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the early 20th century, Soviet leaders, who had inspired the formation of the CPGB, had high hopes and aspirations for the party. Much to their discontent, the CPGB didn't become the mass party as they had envisioned and had little influence in the political arena: membership peaked at 56,000 in 1942 and it never had more than two members of parliament at any one time. Its failure has baffled yet intrigued historians and as a result, the party is among the most thoroughly studied communist parties in the West.

Due to the abundance of literature on the subject, finding new and useful things to say about the CPGB is no easy task. Ben Harker therefore deserves all the more praise for his latest monograph, *The Chronology of Revolution: Communism, Culture, and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*. The book focuses primarily on the period from the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 to 1979. Harker defines his meticulously researched book as a “recuperative analysis of failure, produced at a moment when capitalism faces systemic crisis and the left, making uneven advances, returns seriously to questions about socialist renewal and strategy” (3).

While acknowledging that communist parties in the West such as the CPGB became saturated with Stalinism and degenerated into bureaucracy, Harker argues, rightfully so, that Stalinism in itself

isn't sufficient when trying to grasp communist parties' failure. Instead, he sees their failure as rooted in three interlocking problems. The first was their underestimation of the resilience of capitalism, especially welfare-state capitalism, and its supporting structures and ideologies. Until well into the 1960s, within the British party there was a firm belief that capitalism's final crisis was nigh and therefore an economic analysis of capitalism was underdeveloped. Harker argues that the latter compounded and concealed another major theoretical weakness in the Marxist tradition bequeathed to Third International communism: the absence of a deep analysis of the structures of the bourgeois democratic state, especially representative democracy as a form of class rule, with which communism had to contend in the West. The failure of parties to analyze and respond to the structures of representative democracy – Harker's second key focus – overlaps with his third and most substantial concern: communist parties' tendency to underestimate and under-analyze “culture” or civil society as a location of class power and its reproduction in developed societies.

Drawing on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Harker examines the relationship between the CPGB's initial and unsuccessful political objective, to build the revolutionary party in the Bolshevik model, and its work in spheres outside of the state apparatus, including education, the family, sports, the media, religion, science, and the arts. Paradoxically, he argues, while culture was always seen as secondary by CPGB leadership, the party was probably most successful in this realm.

Indeed, despite their party's small size, British communists' cultural ambitions seemed boundless. Communists, including Eric Hobsbawm, Victor Kiernan, E. P. Thompson, and Raphael Samuel

radically reshaped British historiography, perhaps the party's most prestigious intellectual legacy, notes Harker. Communism also attracted some of the century's major writers and prominent actors, playwrights, and theatre workers, musicians, composers, and visual artists. Communist scientists, most notably J. D. Bernal, who gained tremendous respect for his contributions to the Allied victory in World War II, enjoyed influence during and immediately after the war, while communist architects were central to rebuilding Britain, post-1945. Communist influence was perhaps most visible in education. In 1949, there were 2000 teachers in the CPGB: its biggest professional cohort. They were passionate advocates in the struggle for comprehensive education, which was partially achieved in 1965. Harker also looks at higher education, and campus organization in the post-war period of university expansion. Here too, communists had considerable influence, especially in the early years of the National Student Union and from the mid-sixties onward.

These and other spheres of cultural work are analyzed in five chronological chapters, which are divided in sub-sections. Some of these sub-sections are rather short and as a result some feel a little anecdotal and fragmented. Nevertheless, they oftentimes introduce new and exciting evidence certainly of interest for those who want to do more substantial research into a single subject.

Considering this is primarily an analysis of the CPGB's cultural activities, the communist and non-communist consumer's perspective on these cultural expressions is missing. It is also not always clear in what ways visual artists, musicians, and actors carried out their political beliefs and whether they were expected to have a clear communist agenda when exercising their profession. Was being a Communist Party member enough

to gain support from fellow communists? The addition of the consumer perspective would have added balance and a variety of voices to Harker's somewhat top-down approach. Additionally, since women were initially underrepresented in many of the cultural spheres discussed as well as in the CPGB itself, the first couple of chapters appear male-focused. Harker hits his stride in his last two chapters which discuss the long 1960s – a lost decade in terms of historical analysis – and the 1970s. In these chapters, sub-sections are longer, more detailed, and more diverse voices are represented, including those of women. In this period, the CPGB, which had been deeply censorious and culturally conservative throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, became increasingly aware that civil society and culture were indeed significant locations for politics. However, it was a case of “too little too late” for the CPGB, which, regardless of its new framework for engaging with the contemporary cultural scene and support for Eurocommunism, couldn't halt its rapid decline.

Nonetheless, much can be learned from the CPGB's failures in this context, according to Harker. By providing a thoughtful examination of the CPGB in the cultural arena and what he calls the “countercurrents” within British communism, Harker doesn't just offer an alternative history of the CPGB, he also shows that, had the chronology of revolution been adapted to the British context, there would have been potential for success. Instead of following the “ideal” chronology, i.e., build the party, seize the state, and then transform society, Harker makes a convincing case that revolutionary advances could have been made had the CPGB seen culture as a facilitator of socialism, rather than an impediment. And within this observation lies an important lesson for the contemporary left, according to Harker. He suggests that

instead of dismissing 20th-century communist parties as irrelevant and rotten with Stalinism, they should be viewed as difficult but unavoidable predecessors in anti-capitalist struggle that need working through to realize a superior total form of modern civilization.

Harker's book is a clever interplay between culture and politics and relevant to those who study the communist movement in the developed West, as well as those who are pondering questions related to the future of the left in the 21st century.

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Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2019)

IN THE 1920S AND 1930S, French railway workers (*cheminots*) gravitated in significant numbers towards a communist-affiliated trade union, the Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU), and constituted a key bastion of support for the French Communist Party (PCF). Yet these *cheminots* have been largely overlooked by historians, in part because of the reluctance of railway workers to engage in strikes and work stoppages during this period. Thomas Beaumont's meticulous new book rectifies this oversight; it not only stands as the first monograph-length study of communist railway trade unionism, but also offers a complex and nuanced portrait of interwar French communism more broadly.

The initial three chapters of *Fellow Travellers* link the experience of railway workers in World War I to their subsequent radicalization in 1919 and 1920, a

failed general strike in May 1920, and the ultimate schism between communist and "reformist" unions in 1921. The war years placed enormous pressure on France's railway workers, who laboured long hours for increasingly stagnant wages. Beaumont argues that the shared sacrifices and relative impoverishment of the *cheminots* during the war years helped fuse them together as one national body; he also suggests that the war raised expectations that the end of the conflict would produce a transformed workplace, including the nationalization of the private railway companies (50). When post-war reforms were slow to materialize, many *cheminots* grew frustrated with the railway workers' union and its parent body, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), and increasingly gravitated to more confrontational voices. The failure of the May 1920 strike exacerbated these fractures; the majority of unionized French rail workers eventually joined the new FNCU, which was created in 1921 as a part of a more radical general union, the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), and which soon became tied to the fledgling French Communist Party.

In these early years, the FNCU was particularly strong in areas where *cheminots* were concentrated (e.g. the workshops and depots near Paris) or in areas with a strong communist political presence. The fourth and fifth chapters of *Fellow Travellers* examine the realities and limits of *cheminot* militancy in the years before 1928, in the face of employer pressures and heightened police surveillance. Beaumont argues that the lack of railway strike activity does not indicate that the *cheminots* had internalized the railway companies' claims to have created an "apolitical professional community" (127). To the contrary, the FNCU championed an alternative view of railway labour that was laced with class division