

BOOK REVIEWS



John Molyneux. Selected Writings on Socialism and Revolution. Edited by Huw Williams (2022) Bookmarks

Mark Walsh

Most readers of this journal will likely have some familiarity with John Molyneux, either as writer, activist, comrade or friend. While I feel I know John well enough to consider him both a comrade and a friend, I first encountered him while an undergraduate in the late 1990s when I read his pamphlet: *The Future Socialist Society*. During those formative years in my political life, I read avidly books and articles by a plethora of excellent socialist thinkers. John's pamphlet, outlining a possible socialist future, was one that had a pronounced effect on me. I was struck by the boldness required to take on such a task and it occurred to me that its writer must be a person with a powerful imagination, a keen analytical mind and a reservoir of experience in the struggle for a more decent world.

All of this is evident in John's latest book, a collection of his writings over the last fifty years. On first perusing it, I was delighted to see that extracts from that delightful pamphlet on a possible better future had made the cut. The book itself is a tour de force. It draws from John's immense "back catalogue" of writings on a vast array of topics concerning socialism and revolution, climate change, philosophy, racism, trans rights and the practical challenges of building a revolutionary party. Not only does this list not do justice to the variety of writings contained in this hefty volume, it is extraordinary to think there are many subjects on which John has written extensively which are not contained in this collection. The most notable of these is John's lifelong study of art history, interested readers must seek out a copy of his 2020 work: *The Dialectics of Art*.

Readers of *Selected Writings* may prefer to dip in and out, reading select articles as their tastes dictate. However, the book is organised into themed sections. The opening burst, *The Working Class, Revolution and The Revolutionary Party* contain articles dealing with the very practical matter of building a movement capable of overthrowing capitalism and reflections on the lessons learned. Some of these articles are quite recent, such as the opener, a 2018 Irish Marxist Review piece on the working class, while others date back to the 1970s and 1980s. My personal favourite from this opening salvo, is a short article entitled *What is Marxism?* dating from a 1985 book, *What is the Real Marxist tradition?* As someone

who knew nothing of the original book, I found John's disentangling of this knotty problem a hugely informative delight to read. His conclusion, that Marxism is the "theory of the international worker's revolution", is arrived with mathematical elegance.

The fourth section, *Socialism*, contains two pieces, the latter extracted from the above-mentioned pamphlet, making the case for a socialist society. The first of these articles, *Socialism Can Work*, is superb example of how to persuasively argue, in simple language, for a qualitatively better society based on socialist principles. This clarity of writing becomes especially important in the next section on *Philosophy*, dealing as it does with some reputedly difficult topics. For anyone who has found some of the language associated with the Marxist tradition daunting or, like me, tried to read Hegel and could not make head or tail of it, John's article on 'dialectics' is a breath of fresh air. It is in this section for me that John's ability to explain really comes into its own. The hairy topic of 'determinism' is covered with the usual clarity in the next piece but my favourite article of the section concerns religion. Entitled, *More than Opium*, and written in 2008 for the International Socialist Journal, it delivered a much needed antidote to the crude neo-liberal war-serving pronouncements of Christopher Hitchens and the rather naïve analysis of Richard Dawkins on the subject of religion. It also acts as helpful companion when reading Marx's famous writings on the subject in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

The remaining sections of the book include articles on Ireland, (where John has resided since 2010) climate change and a host of shorter tracts concerning issues like trans rights and the plight of refugees, as well as a very important critique of the view that overpopulation is the cause (or a cause) of our environmental crisis. Regarding Ireland, John writes about the issue of partition and the question of a border poll and the rise of racism and the far-right. One article, which appeared quite recently in this journal, and should be a high priority for IMR readers is John's account of the People Before Profit movement. This is a detailed description of how PBP came into being, the struggles it spearheaded and where it finds itself now.

Part of that struggle is of course the struggle to prevent climate catastrophe. Over the last couple of decades John has made the cause of eco-socialism a top priority and has written in depth on the subject. Two of the three articles featured here were written for Global Eco-Socialist Network, an international movement involving some of

the most significant thinkers in the intersection of socialist and environmentalist thought, and a setting for ongoing and lively debates. John has emerged as a major contributor in this field and his views are well worth listening to.

Something which is evident in all John's work, but is particularly important here is the fact that as well as a formidable theorist, John is an activist, a revolutionary. These two aspects necessarily reinforce each other and provide much of the power behind the writing in this book. A collection of writings like this, with its scope and intellectual clarity, is a rare thing and deserves a place on the bookshelf of any socialist. It represents the written culmination, to date, of many decades of a furious commitment to revolutionary struggle both practically and intellectually. Long may that struggle, and the writings John draws from it, continue.

Jason Hickel, *Less Is More. How Degrowth Will Save The World* (2021), Penguin Books

Mark Walsh

The British Tory government's most recent economic debacle, where the proposal of radical tax-cuts to enrich the already super-rich led to market panic and the collapse of the value of the pound sterling, was justified on the grounds that it would stimulate "economic growth". And while the spectacular failure of Liz Truss's mini budget led to almost universal condemnation and the ridiculing of her premiership, the underlying notion that economic growth is not only desirable but indeed essential went largely unchallenged. The "need" for economic growth is repeated ad nauseam by virtually every member of the political establishment, both in Ireland and across the industrialised world. Unending expansion is presented by conservatives, liberals and social democrats alike as the only way to end poverty. And while the economic benefits of such expansion are enjoyed disproportionately by the already well-off, most see this as a necessary price for the improvement in living standards, economic growth is assumed to deliver.

There have always been problems with this assumption, something which Jason Hickel's book "*Less is More*" goes to great lengths to describe. A rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which essentially measures a nation's overall economic activity, is assumed by mainstream economists to lead to rising standards in health, education and overall quality of life. In practice, the situation is much more complicated. Hickel explains how on many basic measures such as life expectancy, nations like the United States fall well behind much smaller nations with comparatively tiny GDP: Costa Rica or Portugal for example. A booming economy often leads to all manner of social ill: rising house prices, increased traffic, higher levels of stress for workers and increased levels of economic inequality. Hickel makes the obvious point that when it comes to economic activity, investment in a strong social safety net, say, goes a lot further in improving a population's quality of life than the investment in armaments or advertising. The problem of course with GDP is that it is an overall measure of every kind of economic activity and thus an extremely blunt instrument. Some kinds of economic activity are necessary, some are useless, and some are downright harmful. Thus, using economic growth as a progressive instrument is extremely problematic.

Nowhere is this clearer than when one considers the environmental consequences.

Much of Hickel's book concerns precisely this: the catastrophic ecological implications of unbounded economic growth on a finite planet. Hickel begins with a brief history of capitalism detailing the horrors of its phase of "primitive accumulation" from the enclosure acts to colonialism. He goes on to describe the effects of rampant extraction to feed capitalism's ever-growing need to expand: the razing of forests, the poisoning of our oceans with plastic, the filling of our atmosphere with greenhouse gasses, the wiping out of entire species and, potentially, the complete collapse of our eco-system. Hickel argues, correctly, that simply switching to "greener" methods of production, even ones which are carbon-neutral will not solve the problem. The unbounded squeezing of ever more out of a finite planet will be the end of us either way. Nor, Hickel argues, is it feasible that technology can possibly allow us to continue to extract at an exponentially increasing rate.

The rise of capitalism and the “ideology of growthism” is rooted, Hickel claims, in the fact that the human species abandoned certain “animistic” ideas where humans saw themselves as a part of nature and attributed agency and even a form of personhood to the elements of the natural world. This included trees and rivers for example. In its place, he argues, humans embraced the “dualistic” ideas of thinkers like Descartes and Bacon, seeing nature as separate from humanity and as something to be tamed and exploited. Hickel returns to this notion throughout the book. Later, he describes various Amazonian peoples, such as the Achuar, who he argues have a much more harmonious relationship with the natural world. He writes that:

“... the Achuar know that their existence depends on maintaining good relations with the teeming community of non-human persons with whom they share the forest. They know that they are fundamentally interdependent; that without them they would be nothing – non-existent. Their fates are bound together.”

Hickel insists that a return to some version of this “animism”, where the natural world or its constituents are given some form of “personhood” or “agency” and ultimately respect, where the interconnectivity of the Earth system is at the heart of our economic system, is therefore essential if the human species is to survive. Central to this is the notion of “degrowth”. This means significantly scaling down much of our economic activity (in particular economic activity which is harmful or useless) to achieve a more balanced relationship with nature.

Hickel finishes with a list of demands that the environmentalist movement should make toward this end. These include ending *in-built obsolescence* in capitalist commodities (deliberately designing products to break down early so that consumers must purchase more of them), a significant reduction in advertising, the end of food waste and the scaling down of destructive industries like weapons manufacture or meat production. He argues for government intervention to reduce inequality by, for example, placing floors and a ceiling on wages and calls for the cancellation of large amounts of debt especially those inflicted on the global south.

Much of what I have outlined here seems reasonable. However, as I will argue there are some serious problems with Hickel’s position. The first, and least serious, is that even on the aspects where Hickel gets it right, there is really nothing all that interesting or original about anything he says. Yes, unbounded growth across the whole economy leads to a plethora of very serious problems and Hickel makes this (rather obvious) case convincingly. It is also absolutely true that, under capitalism, the natural world is treated merely as a resource to be exploited. Moreover, capitalist economists assume almost axiomatically that this resource is infinite, in the sense that innovations in technology will always allow for deeper and deeper levels of extraction. The environmental crisis our species faces, and the complete implausibility of a technological solution to it shows in stark terms the folly of this position. Incidentally, this latter point is treated very thoroughly by Naomi Klein in her book *No Is Not Enough*.

Hickel’s treatment of this crucial problem ignores decades (indeed centuries) of serious scholarship on the subject. The most egregious example of this is the fact that in a book of just under three hundred pages, seeking to explain the problem of growth under capitalism and its impact on nature, there is not a single mention of the extensive and highly sophisticated work of Marx and Engels on this subject or any other. Marx’s name appears once in the text as the coiner of the term “primitive accumulation of capital” and nowhere else. Despite its exposition by prominent environmentalist scholars like John Bellamy Foster (who Hickel acknowledges as a source of useful conversation), the author seems entirely ignorant of Marx’s theory of the Metabolic Rift. This theory, inspired by the work of the organic chemist Justus von Liebig, elegantly explains how capitalism ruptures the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Hickel’s explanation of this phenomenon, essentially that people were simply seduced by a bad idea, is not really an explanation at all.

It is worth emphasising that Marx, in his writings on this subject in *Capital*, is not unsympathetic to the yearning that many of us feel for a return to a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. While the term “animistic” is not one, I am sure, Marx would invoke, he

does write poetically in *Capital* about the alienating effects of the metabolic rift on the human spirit.

Marx's writings on this show that he profoundly understood the tenderness felt by indigenous peoples, such as the Achuar, toward their forest home. Marx also saw, in the work of chemists like Liebig, the power of modern science to fully comprehend the damage wrought by capitalist methods of production on the natural world and the potential to heal this rift.

All of this leads to a more serious objection to Hickel's thesis. While he does certainly criticise the capitalist system more generally, he concentrates his fire on one feature: uncontrolled growth. Now this in and of itself need not be a problem. However, Hickel seems to view growth not as an inevitable feature of capitalism but as an ideology in its own right, one he calls "growthism". Here Hickel seems to suggest that capitalist growth is simply a bad idea. This has it backwards. The ideology used to defend growth arises out of the capitalist system in the first place. Capitalism does not lead to unbounded expansion because individuals have been corrupted by growth ideology. Rather, growth ideology is used to justify the fact that, by the logic of the system, individual capitalists must ceaselessly grow their businesses, or they will not survive. As Ian Angus puts it in *Fossil Capital*:

"Capital exploits labour and nature to produce goods that can be sold for more than the cost of production in order to accumulate more capital, and the process repeats. Growth ideology does not cause perpetual accumulation – it justifies it."

Hickel's rather idealistic understanding of capitalist growth means that, when it comes to laying out a serious strategy to challenge the system, Hickel has very little to offer. The list of demands laid out towards the end of the book, in a chapter entitled *Pathways to a Post-Capitalist World*, are all perfectly reasonable things to fight for. However, Hickel's approach seems mostly to involve attempting to persuade the political and corporate class of the folly of growth and to encourage them to pass more progressive legislation. To achieve this, no doubt Hickel supports civil disobedience and movements such as Extinction Rebellion. And of course, popular protest and parliamentary struggles for reforms should be supported. But what is needed to avert ecological collapse is the

taking of power into the hands of the great majority of humanity and the setting up of a system where production is organised democratically, based on human need and in harmony with natural cycles. To achieve this, what Hickel proposes is not remotely enough.

The gap in Hickel's strategy is of course the working class. It is workers, whether in factories, on farms, in research laboratories or in the myriad service sectors of the modern economy, that have the power to transform society into something of the sort Hickel wishes to see. Hickel is rather vague on this subject, saying very little about how precisely any of the goals he sets out could be won. Regardless, without a substantial movement of the working class, nothing in Hickel's list could be ever achieved. And it is in this process of building an eco-socialist movement within the wider working class, that the language we use and the issues we emphasise really matter. Terms like "growth" and "degrowth" are problematic precisely because they are not well-defined. At times, some things need to be grown. We may need more schools, hospitals and houses. Other things need to be reduced. We need fewer weapons, less advertising and less single-use plastics. Thus, when we speak of "degrowth", we need to be very careful to explain what we mean.

Of course, Hickel knows all this, and no doubt agrees. But the emphasis on growth above all else leaves our movement vulnerable to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Politicians on the right will of course claim that a strategy of *degrowth* threatens jobs, inhibits technological progress and impoverishes working people. In the important practical work of building the struggles against capitalism, clarity is everything. For so many people, the immediate problems they face are predicated on the *lack* of something: a lack of affordable housing or a lack of access to healthcare. In principle, one can carefully explain the nuanced intended meaning in the term "degrowth". In practice though, with limited time and resources, and competing with other forces doing their utmost to confuse and undermine, attempting to organise a working-class fightback under the banner of degrowth (with all the ambiguity that term contains) seems a hopeless strategy.

For anyone doubting the severity of the crisis humanity faces, or who is under the illusion that enticing large corporations with tax-breaks or incentives to grow the economy is a sensible way to deal with it, *Less Is More* may well be good antidote. It contains numerous examples of the environmental devastation wrought by capitalism and does a reasonable job in debunking illusory claims that there is a technological fix to our environmental woes just around the corner. That said, in the writings of Ian Angus, John Bellamy Foster, John Molyneux, Chris Williams, Paul Burkett and Andreas Malm, to name a few, there are far better places to obtain all of this.

The deeper problem though, is in Hickel's lack of analysis of the causes of economic growth and of what can be done to control it. It is certainly true that capitalist competition induces an irresistible pressure on the system as a whole to grow. This has long been understood. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*:

"Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty, and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones."

As a consequence, capitalism has bequeathed to us the ability to create great abundance. This is both a blessing and a curse. The real problem is that, at present, humanity has no control over what sort of abundance we create, the way in which this abundance is created or how it impacts our environment. The problem therefore is not growth. It is capitalism. Capitalism obstructs us from rationally controlling our relationship with nature. The obstruction exists at all levels where even captains of industry, powerful as they are, are locked into the logic of extraction, expansion and accumulation. What we need is a system where we can both grow, or degrow, whatever it is we require and in a way which respects and nourishes our place in the web of life.

Leo Zeilig. *A Revolutionary for Our Time: The Walter Rodney Story* (2022) Haymarket Books

Joe Moore

Walter Rodney was born in Georgetown, British Guyana on March 23 1942. He was assassinated by the 'socialist' government of independent Guyana on June 13 1980. He was just 38 years old when he died. In his short life,

Rodney was a political activist, academic, writer and revolutionary. His major work "*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*" was published in 1972.

However, for many on the left, little else is known about Rodney. Leo Zeilig has rectified this with the publication of an in-depth political biography.

Rodney was born into a political family. His parents were members of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The young Rodney helped his parents canvassing and leafletting for the PPP. The PPP represented both African and Indian Guyanese. This was important as both the British ruling elite and the local bourgeoisie continually worked to create ethnic tensions in the country. The African community were descendants of the enslaved plantation workers, while the Indians were the descendants of indentured labourers who were brought from the Indian sub-continent in the wake of the abolition of slavery in the British empire.

The PPP leader, Cheddi Jagan, was seen by the authorities as being too radical and was overthrown by the actions of both the US and Britain. This resulted in Forbes Burnham abandoning the PPP and establishing the People's National Congress (PNC), an exclusively Afro-Guyanese party. The PNC came to power in the independent Guyana and was the party responsible for Rodney's assassination.

Rodney was a bright student and won a scholarship to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He came of age in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban revolution. During his holidays he visited both Cuba and the USSR. These journeys opened his mind to Marxism. After completing his degree, Rodney began a PhD course in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. This is where he challenged the right-wing perspectives of the teaching staff. His dissertation entitled, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800*, was one of the first studies to examine the effects of the slave trade on African societies. Up to that point the majority of slave trade histories concentrated on its impact on Europe.

While in London Rodney sought out various Marxist groups but he felt none of them treated racism as the central issue that it was. He did however befriend CLR James and became an active member of James's study group.

Once his studies in London were completed Rodney and his wife Patricia wished to return to the Caribbean but first, they opted to spend some time in Africa, a continent

then emerging from colonialism. Initially they planned to visit West Africa but when he was offered a teaching position in Dar-es-Salam, he accepted it. The newly independent Tanzania attracted activists and academics from across the world. Its leader Julius Nyerere was admired by many on the left internationally for his proclamation of a socialist country, based on a humanist interpretation of pre-colonial Africa called Ujamaa. This in essence appealed to an egalitarian past as a model for a socialist future.

The Rodneys threw themselves into life in Dar-es-Salam. Walter began what became his hall mark, meeting and interacting with ordinary Tanzanians outside of the university campus. He debated with students and staff and met with liberation fighters from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

When Rodney was offered a teaching position in Jamaica, the family returned to the Caribbean. They choose to live not on the campus but in the community. He was sought out by the Rastafarian community because he had spent time in Africa and was widely regarded as an expert on African history. This brought Rodney to the attention of the Jamaican special branch, who already had a file on him. The leaders of the newly independent Caribbean had made their peace with the former colonial powers and were therefore fearful of the influence of Black Power.

Resulting from his discussions with students, workers and Rastafarians, Rodney published *The Groundings with My Brothers* in 1969. This work covered racism, slavery, colonialism and white-power. The book was rejected by academia because Rodney wrote it for ordinary people, as he said himself in a style that could be easily understood by second level students. Zeilig gives a detailed review of *Groundings* in chapter 4 of his book. Rodney was now regarded as a subversive by the Jamaican government and while on a speaking tour in Canada he was expelled from the country. Such was his popularity amongst ordinary people that many took to the streets to protest his expulsion. These events are referred to as “the Rodney riots.”

The family returned to Tanzania and it was while here that he completed and published his magnum opus, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. The political situation in Tanzania had changed since Rodney was last in the country. There were now debates between Nyerere who was firmly on the reformist road and with those who wanted socialism. The country had become a melting pot

of debate, discussion and argument, with inputs from activists and academics from Europe and the US and members of national liberation movements from across Southern Africa.

Rodney fell foul of Nyerere by using Franz Fanon’s analysis of African leaders that did not have to fight for but negotiated independence, referred to as “briefcase revolutionaries.” Real liberation was still required in these petit bourgeois regimes.

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa is one of the key works on Africa, using Marx’s historical method, to be published in the late 20th century. In it Rodney describes development in Africa before the arrival of Europeans, the beginning and expansion of the slave trade and its impact on various African societies, the division of almost the whole of the African continent by the European imperialist powers and how this affected the continent until countries achieved independence in the second half of the 20th century.

The book is written in the accessible style which was now a hallmark of Rodney. To quote Zelig, “it is a full-frontal assault on the academic training he had received and the closely guarded protocols of scholarly life: peer review, references, deference to scholarship and most importantly, the purge of political content.” *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is required reading for all Marxists and anti-racists.

The 6th Pan-African Congress was held in Dar-es-Salem in June 1974. This was the first such congress to be held in Africa, in a newly independent African country and attended by the leaders of newly independent countries, both in Africa and the Caribbean. Rodney led the left-wing opposition to these leaders. Many of these leaders ruled countries that oppressed their own people although they themselves claimed to be socialists. Rodney was supported by CLR James and the Nigerian poet and novelist Wole Soyinka. However, many of the leaders from newly independent Caribbean countries objected to Rodney being in attendance.

Nyerere turned against those who advocated any form of self-emancipation, which resulted in many opponents being deported. It was time for the Rodney family to return to the Caribbean, this time back home to Guyana. Rodney returned to a country rife with political turmoil. The ruling party, the PNC, was still led by Burnham, and represented the Afro-Guyanese community. Burnham

came down heavily on his political opponents. The main opposition, the PPP, had its support in the Indian community. Rodney became active in the left-wing Working People's Alliance. One of its main aims was the unification of the Guyanese working class. The WPA supported workers' strikes and actions by labourers in rural plantations.

Despite the increase in political activity, Rodney continued to study and write. The result was *A History of the Guyanese Working People 1881-1905* which was published after his death. This work was intended to be the first in a three-part series. In it Rodney exposed the roots of the division between African and Indian workers.

After being installed as leader as a result of a CIA/MI6 coup, Burnham changed sides in the cold war and declared himself a socialist. As a result, the WPA was refused support from other "socialist" leaders such as Castro, Mugabe and Grenada's Maurice Bishop. The WPA was isolated. A fire in a government department in Georgetown on July 11th 1979 gave Burnham the opportunity to crack down on the WPA. A number of its leading members were assassinated. On June 13th 1980 Rodney collected a walkie-talkie set from a man who was a government agent. The set contained explosives. When Rodney switched it on, the explosive detonated, killing him instantly.

Zelig's biography outlines in detail the life, work and political activity of Walter Rodney. It analyses how Rodney drew on Black Power as well as the writings of Marx and Lenin to help the struggles of working people in Tanzania, Jamaica and Guyana. The biography highlights the work of a revolutionary who is not as well known as he should be. He remains as Zelig declares "a revolutionary for our time."

Leo Zelig, *Lumumba. Africa's Lost Leader*, (2008) Haus Publishing Ltd

Darragh Adelaide

"Lumumba, Africa's Lost Leader" tells the story of the first prime minister of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, who was executed in 1961 following a military coup supported by Belgium and the USA and aided by foreign

mercenaries. In 2002, Belgium formally apologised for its role in his execution.

Born in 1925, in the aftermath of the Belgian King's reign of terror - which saw over half of the Congolese population exterminated by famine, exploitation and genocide - Lumumba was a bright young child. In the absence of a public school system, few Congolese children were educated. Many worked from young ages so that their villages could afford colonial taxes, and numerous male children were required to serve local mining companies.

Zelig writes concurrently of Lumumba's youth - educated by missionaries, recruited into the civil service, and elevated to prominence by his nationalistic zeal - and of the development of the Congolese independence movement, as the world wars drove the development of industry and urbanisation in the colony. In the strictly racially segregated capital of Léopoldville, Lumumba became an 'évolué', one of the few educated Congolese people considered "evolved" enough to participate in parts of society normally reserved for white Europeans.

Although short, Zelig gives great insight into the development of the Congolese independence movement. The évolués, who were for the most part moderately wealthy and educated Congolese civil servants, sought equality with Europeans, the opportunity to own property, and the right to administer an independent Congolese state. Lumumba in his early years even extolled the benefits of Belgian colonialism, but became an ardent nationalist following time in prison.

In response to the coup he appealed for aid from the US and UN. When this refused he turned for help from the Soviet Union, providing confirmation of his alleged communism. Though the truth is that he was never the "communist sympathiser" as condemned by the United States.

As Zelig describes "*For Lumumba the notion of class struggle was a dangerous idea imported from the north that could only serve to divide a fragile national unity. Why add this divisive concept, he asked, when there was already the potential of ethnic division in the Congo?*"

Zelig gives a short, yet detailed, illustration of brutal regime imposed by the Belgian government, and the radicalisation of the Congolese people into a movement which unravelled Belgian authority in a relatively brief period. Importantly, the failure of the strictly nationalist

Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) - far less radical than the Congolese masses – to construct a programme of social transformation beyond just independence in the end, could not challenge the strength of colonial powers in the region.

Had the radicalisation of the Congolese masses been furthered with demands for the expropriation of colonial corporations, national strikes and occupations, could Lumumba have countered the other *évolvés* who betrayed Congolese independence with the support of the US, Belgium, France, and Britain?

Michael Sturza, *The London Revolution: Class Struggles in 17th Century England*, In the Weeds Provocations, New York, 2022.

John Molyneux

From the 1950s through to the 1970s English history writing was dominated by a brilliant cohort of Marxist historians. Their roots lay in the Communist Party Historians Group founded in 1946 which included in its ranks the likes of Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville, Dona Torr, Rodney Hilton, A.L. Morton, Dorothy Thompson, Raphael Samuel and Victor Kiernan. Their main project was to produce between them a Marxist account of English history from the Middle Ages onwards and the crucial period of the English Civil War or English Revolution of 1642-49 was taken on primarily by Christopher Hill in a series of outstanding works such as *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958), *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*, (1961) and *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). Later the baton for this period passed to Hill's pupil, Brian Manning in works such as *The English People and the English Revolution* (1976) and *The Far Left in the English Revolution* (1999). [Interestingly Brian Manning joined the Irish Socialist Workers Party when he moved to Ulster University in the 1980s]

From the mid-1970s a reaction started to set in within English historiography, much as it did in the wider society with the rise of Margaret Thatcher. A series of conservative and anti-Marxist historians came to the fore who rejected all history based on historical materialism and concepts of class struggle. It was a development which paralleled, from a different angle, the rise of post-

modernism with its 'scepticism towards all grand narratives'. For these conservatives the Marxist account of the English Revolution as a bourgeois revolution was a major target. A number of 'revisionist' historians emerged, such as Conrad Russell and Geoffrey Elton, who challenged not only the idea that the Civil War could be understood in class terms (they much preferred to see it as primarily a religious conflict) but even the idea that there was a revolution at all. Similar operations were conducted in relation to the French Revolution and also in defence of the British empire and against the idea that the First World War was an imperialist war.

Michael Sturza's book is an intervention in this debate and a very welcome one, a blow against the conservative revisionists. He builds on the pioneering work of Christopher Hill and Brian Manning, quoting copiously from their books, but adds to this a focus on the mass revolution from below in London in the years 1640-43. Sturza argues that this crucial element was insufficiently studied by Hill, Manning and others and that as a consequence the key agency, the driving force of the English Revolution, was neglected. He maintains that it was this revolution in the streets which led to the Civil War not the Civil War to the revolution. This an overtly Marxist work, replete with quotes from Marx, Engels and Trotsky, which makes few concessions to academic niceties and conventions – a fact which may limit its reception but is far from being a bad thing in my view.

The truth is I lack the detailed historical knowledge confidently to evaluate all or most of Sturza's specific claims. Nevertheless he makes an impressive and convincing case. There are a number of features of the book that I enjoyed. First, the way he locates the events of the 17th century in a longer view of English history highlighting specific events such as the signing of Magna Carta in 1215, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Reformation under Henry VIII, which combined to hinder the emergence of monarchical absolutism in England on a scale that matched that in France and which facilitated the development of capitalist relations of production. 'Thus,' says Sturza, 'before the end of the 16th century England was an *economically* capitalist country, despite the large majority of the population still engaged in agriculture' [p.17].

Second, his sophisticated (and Marxist) handling of social classes and class relations: see for example his account of the contradictory role of the gentry. 'The dual role of the gentry came from having a foot in each of two

incompatible social systems, feudalism and capitalism, which could not indefinitely coexist' [p.43]. Moreover this goes hand in hand with his nuanced analysis of the role of religion, especially Puritanism, which understands its class roots and how it articulated class interests without reducing it to a simple cipher or mask of immediate economic interests. Sturza doesn't lose sight of the fact that these people really believed in the interpretations of God and the bible they were willing to fight and die for.

Third, there is the centre piece of the book, his account of the mass mobilizations on the streets of London. These are not (and couldn't be, working class mobilizations. They are predominantly demonstrations by what were known as 'the middling sort' led by the Atlantic Merchants whom he describes as 'the bourgeois vanguard of the English Revolution' [p.65]. Nevertheless, the scenes he narrates remind one vividly of scenes from much later revolutions such as the French Revolution or even the Paris Commune. Here are a few excerpts relating to crucial events in January 1642.

On 3 January 1642 the king charged five reform leaders of the House of Commons with treason...on 4 January, Charles personally led a retinue of 100 royal officers to arrest John Pym and four other leading MPs on the floor of the Commons... Warned in advance, the intended prisoners hid in a radical district of London. The king was forced to retreat empty handed...

The streets were filled with armed citizens. The same day... the London Common Council set up its own Committee of Safety by order of the House of Commons... The Common Council were now in a position to fight for Parliament against the king, led by its most radical and dedicated men who did not shrink from armed struggle.

On 5 January, with the shopkeepers still on strike, and the armed people "standing in their doors" the king appeared in front of the Common Council... As the king left, a large group of "ruder" people unanimously chanted "Privileges of Parliament". Thousands besieged [the king] in the house of the City Sheriff where he had gone for dinner, and followed his carriage with the same cry... After escorting the king safely home, the Lord Mayor and some aldermen were knocked off their horses, women called him traitor and pulled his chain of office of his neck. The officials had to walk home being taunted all the way...

The following night, 6 January, a rumour quickly spread that soldiers on foot and horse were approaching the city. The citizens again went on the alert, Tens of thousands of thousands of armed men went into the streets while women built barricades and prepared pots of boiling water to use against the enemy. [pp.114-15]

The combination of clear Marxist analysis and such exciting narrative makes this book both a very useful and enjoyable read.

Oliver Eagleton, *The Starmer Project: A Journey to the Right*, (2022) Verso.

Stewart Smyth

The stage is festooned with Union Jack images, the leadership plod out in front of them, stand to attention and start singing "God Save the Queen". This was the opening of the in-person Labour Party conference under the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer.¹ It wasn't long before there were social media comments and posts likening Starmer's patriotic, monarchy-loving spectacle as more akin to a BNP meeting from the mid-1990s.

The point of this show was to (yet again!) nail the message to the British establishment that Labour is (again) a safe pair of hands – any future Labour government under Starmer's leadership would not challenge their wealth and power.

This is just one vignette of the British Labour Party under Starmer, and why Oliver Eagleton's book is so welcome. I had two questions in mind before reading Eagleton's book – first what did Starmer do earn his knighthood; and second, how did he navigate his way to becoming leader?

Eagleton's book gives answers to both questions.

Starmer – the Lawyer

Starmer has curated something of a myth that he is working class lad made good. His mother was a nurse but he often mis-represents his father as a tool-maker, which was his trade, but Starmer's father owned the tool-making factory. I highlight this point to illustrate the character of

the man, even when he worked as a lawyer, including becoming Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), he was a political operator seeking to present himself in the most appropriate light.

In 2013 Starmer was awarded the Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) for services to the Law and Criminal Justice. If you looked at what was included in the supporting case you would have thought Starmer was some sort of a progressive campaigning reformer that had changed the nature of the criminal justice system in Britain and around the world.

The official government case supporting Starmer's KCB includes the following:

"His achievements include successful appeals leading to the abolition of the mandatory death penalty in certain Caribbean countries; persuading the House of Lords that evidence obtained by torture should be inadmissible in British courts; and achieving the CPS's highest rate of conviction for domestic violence and for those charged with rape or serious sexual offences."ⁱⁱ

One of the strengths of Eagleton's book is that he looks beyond the headlines of each of these claims, often discovering a more complex context or straightforward contradictory evidence. For example, Eagleton reports that from 2011 to 2014 the numbers charged with rape declined by 14 percent, following a change in charging guidelines instigated by Starmer.

Eagleton shows how at each turn, on each issue Starmer has chosen the side of power and the existing state. Starmer willingly allowed US secret services to engage in rendition of a UK citizen; he dropped any potential charges against police officers involved with attacking protesters; he encouraged a white-washing report of the Spycops scandal (where undercover police officers infiltrated left-wing and activist groups, some having long-term relationships and even fathering children); he cosied up to the Coalition government, enthusiastically implementing their austerity agenda in the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). This is far from a complete list of the choices and actions Starmer carried out while at the CPS.

The Belfast connection

Any progressive impulses the young lawyer may have had (Starmer assisted the two defendants in the McLibel case) disappear as his legal career took off. A good example of

this comes in the legal work Starmer did in Northern Ireland. The young Starmer had been part of a group of socialist lawyers who carried out a fact-finding mission in 1992, investigating police brutality and the use of the Diplock trials. Their report was scathing and called for an end to the use of such trials.

Yet, Starmer was also to defend British soldier Lee Clegg, who shot dead Karen Reilly in West Belfast in 1990. Clegg was originally convicted of murder but after several retrials, throughout the 1990s, Starmer helped get Clegg cleared.

After the Good Friday Agreement Starmer was hired as an adviser on human rights law for the newly formed Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). As Eagleton points out this was a great opportunity for Starmer to implement the recommendations of the 1992 report he had helped produce. Yet when the NI Human Rights Commission criticised the NIPB for a "lack of accountability, transparency and community engagement"ⁱⁱⁱ, Starmer sided with the NIPB uncritically praising the policing body for its commitment to human rights.

In concluding his analysis of Starmer's legal career, Eagleton quotes a former colleague of Starmer's saying he (Starmer) identified with "a strong statist tradition", and for the "effective use of the criminal justice system to provide for effective state". Or as Andrew Murray said, "He stands for the state, its servants, its perquisites and their protection from the toils of democracy".^{iv}

This is why Starmer is now *Sir Keir Starmer*.

Starmer – the Politician

As for how Sir Keir became leader of the Labour Party, many will remember the role played by the right-wing in the Labour Party in undermining Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and sabotaging their election chances in both 2017 and 2019. In spite of the coup attempts (Starmer was part of what has become known as the "Chicken Coup" attempt to oust Corbyn as leader in 2016), the endless briefings against Corbyn (as a Russian stooge, a terrorist, etc.) and the weaponising of the anti-Semitism allegations, it was ultimately Brexit that meant Labour lost the 2019 general election and with it Corbyn resigned the leadership.

Central to Labour's post-2017 election Brexit policy was Sir Keir Starmer, in the role of Shadow Brexit Secretary.

Following the surprisingly close election result in 2017, the Corbyn leadership was moving towards a position on Brexit that not only respected the result of the 2016 referendum but saw the opportunity to steal a march on Theresa May's dithering, and reframing Brexit in radical Left Populist terms – not just a jobs first Brexit but one that allowed greater state intervention for social purposes and, crucially, policies based on the re-distribution of wealth as a guiding principle.

Starmer was having none of this but recognised that he need to stay within the Shadow Cabinet to exert enough influence to wreck the Corbyn project. For example, Corbyn's leadership team were to make a major announcement of their new position on Brexit in February 2018. In the run up to that announcement Starmer was losing the argument about the new policy in internal meetings. In one such meeting Eagleton reports, Starmer exploded "Enough, ... this is completely outrageous"^v, claiming he had not been given prior sight of the new policy and threatened to resign if the policy was not re-written with major input from his own team.

Eagleton concludes that this episode highlights Starmer's inability to argue about policy, and quotes one of Starmer's former aides that such behaviour was "typical of Keir. He can't argue from a political standpoint; it always has to be about process".^{vi}

Following mediated talks between Starmer and Corbyn a compromise was reached that Labour would commit to 'a customs union' with the EU. Corbyn's leadership team knew the importance of making it clear that a customs union was a means to an end, so as to avoid the charge of being seen as "remain-y".

On the Sunday before the new policy was to be announced Starmer appeared on the Andrew Marr Show, having been explicitly told not to mention the new policy and "a customs union". Eagleton explains what happened next:

"Within the first minute of the Marr interview, Starmer not only announced the customs union policy, he made every effort to collapse the distinction between "a" customs union and "the" customs union."^{vii}

The effect of this was to prime the press to interpret Corbyn's new Brexit policy as a concession to the Remain camp, and "the opportunity to reframe the Brexit debate on Labour's terms had been lost".^{viii}

It is also noteworthy, that if the roles had been reversed with Starmer in the leadership and one of his Shadow Minister's deliberately contravening a direct instruction on policy communication in the media, he would have been sacked – as happened to Sam Tarry who turned up on picket line to support rail workers in July 2022, only to be sacked immediately by Starmer.^{ix}

The customs union manoeuvre was just one of a series that Starmer (and others) engaged with including supporting the People's Vote campaign for a second referendum and changing Labour Party policy through a conference motion, which meant that by the time the 2019 election came around, Labour was seen as the party of Remain. Johnson and the Tories relentlessly exploited this and the seats in the Red Wall fell.

Eagleton's book goes on to cover *Starmer – the Candidate* and *Starmer – the Leader*, that further explore how Sir Keir came to the leadership of the Labour Party and what he has done in office.

Understanding Starmer

So how can we make sense of how such a faithful supporter of the British establishment came to be leader of the Labour Party. For this we need to go back to Lenin's understanding of the British Labour party, a party that is mostly comprised of workers in both membership and through its link with the trade union movement. However, Lenin argues, it is not enough to look only at the membership, it is the leadership, actions and tactics that decide if a party is one of the proletariat:

"Regarded from this, the only correct point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries, and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act in the spirit of the bourgeoisie."^x

Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein neatly summarise Lenin's insight by stating "the Labour Party is a 'capitalist workers' party'."^{xi} After the brief hiatus of the Corbyn leadership, where for once a non-reactionary (if not a revolutionary) socialist led the party, normal service has been resumed.

Eagleton's book gives us the evidence and examples of just how establishment and reactionary a figure Starmer actually is, and what a future Labour government under his leadership would look like.

ⁱ [“Labour conference: National anthem sung in tribute to Queen”](#), BBC News, 25 September, 2022.

ⁱⁱ [“The New Year Honours List 2014 – Higher Awards”](#) (PDF). [GOV.uk](#). 30 January 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eagleton (2022), p. 17.

^{iv} Eagleton (2022), p. 59.

^v Eagleton (2022), p. 90.

^{vi} Eagleton (2022), p. 90.

^{vii} Eagleton (2022), p. 92.

^{viii} Eagleton (2022), p. 93.

^{ix} “Sam Tarry fired for making up policy on the hoof, says Keir Starmer”, BBC News, 28 July, 2022.

^x Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International, Thirteenth Session, August 6, 1920.

^{xi} Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein (1996), *The Labour Party: A Marxist History*, Bookmarks.