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Reviews

Surveying Revolutionary Thought

- Reviews section -

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The book's somewhat disparate chapters are linked to the author's view of the necessity of collective thinking and elaboration as well as organizing. The sense of a "revolutionary collective" across time and space involves both the goal of the struggle for socialism, the way to get there, and how individuals are part of the larger movement.

The figures covered range from Lenin and Bolshevism through the work of well-known representatives of the "Leninist tradition" like Trotsky, Lukács and Gramsci to Rosa Luxemburg and to lesser known authors like Alexander Bogdanov and Karl Korsch, plus more recent revolutionaries Dennis Brutus and Daniel Bensaïd.

The personnel assembled are predominantly male and predominantly white. But so is most of this tradition — at least in its literary-canonical form.

Le Blanc's subjects even include James Burnham "who, after a relatively brief but passionate affair with Marxism, went on to compose a devastating critique," becoming a decades-long partisan of the West's anti-communist crusade. (ix)

Why read another book on these people? Hasn't most been said already? Not quite so. I for one learned new things from the essay on the philosopher Bogdanov, was unfamiliar with poet and activist Dennis Brutus, and got a better idea of the development of James Burnham. And Le Blanc has a very clear and didactical style that helps communicate his perspective on classical figures like Trotsky or Gramsci.

Thus the book can be used as an introduction to the various sources of modern Marxism. And it can serve as a starting point for further debate and clarification on questions of theory, practice and organization. It is not by accident that the collection closes with "Conclusions on Coherence and Comradship," written in reaction to the crisis and dissolution of the International Socialist Organization in 2019.

Le Blanc tries to come to grips with different interpretations of "Leninism" by discussing several authors. He is most content with those authors who stress the continuity of Lenin's approach through the different periods of the struggle to overthrow tsarism, and through the early years of the Soviet state — essentially democratic, based on the capacity of the working class to organize and to conquer hegemony in the fight against tsarism, and firmly grounded in the tradition of Marx and Engels.

Le Blanc agrees with Tamás Krausz in his *Reconstructing Lenin* that the Bolsheviks benefited from real feedback thanks to their close relations with a social base, and that concepts as "vanguard party" and "democratic centralism" make sense only because of this.

He disagrees, however, with the organizational conclusions of the Italian activist and philosopher Antonio Negri. While Negri links the type of organization closely to the organization of workers in the factory, according to Le Blanc organization is more prosaic than this.

Any organization, any struggle will involve the existence of cadres. This generalization goes beyond factories and tsarist Russia. Obviously this is where the Trotskyist Le Blanc and the operaist (workerist —ed.) Negri part company.

Originality, Continuity and Debate

Leon Trotsky was not part of the Bolsheviks before 1917, but when he joined during that year he adopted their approach. When later fighting the Stalinization of the communist movement, he said that all the old formulae of Bolshevism had now been labelled as “Trotskyist.” He identified entirely with the legacy of Lenin’s party.

Was there something then special about Trotsky’s ideas? Paul Le Blanc thinks it is unhelpful to turn Leon Trotsky into some kind of ideological icon with a special set of theories.

In fact, Trotsky stood in the tradition of Marx and Engels, and his most distinctive contribution, the formulation of a coherent framework of permanent revolution, was hardly “original.” Many others from Marx and Engels to Kautsky, Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg contributed to it.

In his chapter “The Unoriginality of Leon Trotsky,” Le Blanc makes similar cases for Trotsky’s analyses of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the necessity of a United Front of workers’ organizations to fight against fascism, and the Transitional Program.

One of the more fascinating people in the Bolshevik party — before the First World War and later outside it during and after the Russian revolution — was Alexander Bogdanov. We know him mainly as the target of Lenin’s philosophical polemics in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, but he was much more.

Bogdanov’s work covered natural sciences, education and culture. He was a founder of the Proletcult movement, and with Lenin the leader of the Bolshevik faction between 1903 and 1909. Bogdanov thought it necessary to develop socialist proletarian culture and science. In political practice his group advocated boycotting the post-1905 Duma elections. Le Blanc’s discussion of Bogdanov’s philosophical elaborations reads like an invitation for further discussion.

In the 1920s, new debates arose in the context of building the Communist International, the stabilization of bourgeois rule in central and western Europe, and the analysis of fascism and bourgeois rule in general. Georg Lukács was one of the Central European minds contributing to this debate, as a philosopher and as a leader of the Hungarian communist party.

His *History and Class Consciousness* is best known as an introduction to the dialectical unity of theory and practice in historical materialism. Lukács later felt forced to abandon much of his most creative positions, “simply to survive politically in the Communist movement (and, finally, to survive physically while living in Stalin’s Russia).” (ix)

Lukács’ manuscript, *Tailism and the Dialectic*, written after the first round of polemics against him in 1924 was published only after its discovery in the archives in 1996. In his discussion of political and organizational matters, the manuscript reveals his continuing attachments to the philosophical positions in *History and Class Consciousness*.

Le Blanc’s take on Lukács seems to me to be a fruitful one: try and unearth the core ideas from these philosophical and polemical texts, in order to find a sophisticated fusion of classical Marxism with the orientation of Bolshevism.

Gramsci, Luxemburg, and More

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Antonio Gramsci was a leader of the Italian Communist Party when he was imprisoned by fascism in 1926. He filled dozens of notebooks, even while “he died a slow death during his ten-year imprisonment.” (ix)

Gramsci had to use code words and obscure formulations, both to fool his jailors and to maintain his connection to an official communist movement that would not have approved of his positions.

Paul Le Blanc notes a variety of ambiguities in Gramsci. But he also notes Gramsci’s idea of revolutionary democracy and the type of party that would be necessary.

Of course it is inevitable that a human being like Rosa Luxemburg could be wrong, but she deserves being taken seriously: for opposing the degeneration of Social Democracy even before 1914; for her battle against reformism but not against reforms; for her analysis of the destructiveness of the process of capital accumulation. She is also notable for her sense of the actuality of revolution, and for her notion of the mass strike as an interplay of organizational leadership with semi-spontaneous mass action.

Paul Le Blanc states, however, that we must realize that Luxemburg or Lukács were referring to a context that no longer exists today. Something like the mass socialist workers movement influenced by Marxism remains to be rebuilt.

Karl Korsch was a leader of the left wing of the German Communist Party in the 1920s. In my opinion his 1923 *Marxism and Philosophy* stands out as a formidable critique of the mechanistic deformation of Marxism in the Second International. Korsch did not see Marxism as a philosophy, how-ever, rather as the anti-philosophy.

Le Blanc identifies Korsch along with Lukács and Gramsci as the foundational trio of “western Marxism,” but sees him as less of a political leader, less durable than either Gramsci or Lukács.

The odd person out in Paul Le Blanc’s lineup seems to be James Burnham, a philosopher who became a Marxist around 1930 and broke with socialism after 1940 to become one of the leading intellectuals of the Right in the USA in the 1950s. So what is he doing here in a “revolutionary collective?”

Le Blanc wants to look at Burnham’s combination of theory and practice. James Burnham was after all geared to political action, both in his Left and in his Right stages. So if we can wonder whether this should have been published in a collection dedicated to a revolutionary collective, it does result in a most interesting presentation of an Odyssey from a conservative background, to the far left, then taking some time to come home to the American Right.

The chapters on these contributions and trajectories are completed with two fine memoirs. I particularly liked the one on Dennis Brutus, who was unfamiliar to me. He paints a vivid image of Brutus, who Le Blanc got to know when the South African poet-activist-in-exile came to work and live in Pittsburgh.

A former African National Congress leader and political prisoner alongside Nelson Mandela, Brutus did not spare his comrades who compromised with the system after the apartheid regime collapsed. When the global justice movement gathered strength he was a passionate organizer and a striking speaker.

The memoir on Daniel Bensaïd is more distanced. Largely based on Bensaïd’s own *An Impatient Life*, it shows Paul Le Blanc’s appreciation of this many-sided French activist and writer. And it certainly fits in here, as shown by a quote from Bensaïd’s *Marx for Our Times*: Marx’s research program remains robust but “it only has a genuine future if, rather than seeking refuge in the academic fold, it succeeds in establishing an organic relationship with the revived

practice of social movements — in particular, with the resistance to imperialist globalization.”

Contemplating the Future

In the final chapter, Paul Le Blanc includes some of his personal experience as well as thoughts of “what are we to do.” His comments are triggered by the “earthquake” that was the dissolution of the ISO but are meant to go beyond it. Other experiences are taken in consideration as well. In that sense it is worth reading not only for former ISO members.

After so many failures of the revolutionary movement, no single-factor explanation (“wrong program.” “not Leninist,” “wicked leaders”) is sufficient. One must look at the specifics in each case. But some patterns are common to many of these experiences.

No organization existing today can possibly be the force we need to lead the struggle, so idealization and deification of any organization is a mistake. And organizational mistakes should be used as learning tools.

Paul Le Blanc makes a number of important points, but in my view steers around at least one question. We can agree with the need for a true democratic centralism. We should realize that only part of the working class is part of a broad vanguard layer, and that within that layer collectives of more experienced people are necessary: cadres.

And we should beware of errors made even by sophisticated leaderships. Do not try to get your organization and its cadres through difficult times by keeping it to the “sole truth.” This only leads to self-ossification. And do not base your perspectives on sweeping predictions. We should know where we are and understand the human factor.

And here I wonder, is it not true that most revolutionary organizations (even if they are more than just a few dozen or a few hundred) are insufficiently rooted in the working classes and the social movements? So could it be that these organizations tend to see only part of reality, but act as if they understand all of it and can draw strategic perspectives?

I have sometimes called this micro-Leninism. It is a far cry from the Leninism that Le Blanc would like to see. But it is one of our challenges to understand this, to find adequate organizational forms, and to work together in rebuilding the workers’ movement and the Left.

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