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# Romancing the Revolution

**A review of Ian Bullock, Romancing the revolution: The myth of Soviet democracy and the British Left. AU Press, 2011**

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This is a very interesting and useful work. It takes you back to when Lenin and Trotsky were unknown and how this changed as the British left tried to understand developments in the Russian Revolution. Inspired by C.B. Macpherson's claim that the USSR while not a democratic system of government could be viewed as representing a "Non-Liberal Democracy" as it aimed to eliminate classes, Ian Bullock's book utilizes an impressive array of primary sources to show "the myth of soviet democracy in the early appeal of the Russian Revolution." (5) As such, it should be of interest for libertarian socialists as well as scholars, particularly as it is full of interesting facts: for example, the Scottish section of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) voted to join the Communist international and for prohibition at its January 1920 conference. (194-5)

The remit of the book is wide insofar as it covers socialists who were initially supportive of the revolution but not explicitly libertarian—although he does include those influenced by syndicalism, such as guild socialists, the shop steward movement and

the de Leonist Socialist Labour Party (SLP). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it concentrates on the main parties and mentions the more diffuse syndicalist tendencies less. There is little mention of anarchists other than in passing, perhaps unsurprisingly given the size of the movement in Britain at the time but he does note that it "is perhaps not surprising that…the anarchist supporters of soviet democracy…seem to have been most resilient" (365) and that in the early 1920s the (by then) council communist Workers' Dreadnought started to reprint anarchist reports and critiques of the Bolsheviks. However, there is much in Romancing the Revolution which libertarian socialists will gain from.

After a survey of the British left at the time—including the ILP, the SLP, the British Socialist Party, the unfortunately named National Socialist Party (formed by BSP members who, like its leader Henry Hyndman, supported the Allies), the syndicalist and Shop Steward movements as well as the Guild Socialists and the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF)—Bullock turns to the matter at hand, with a chapter on the June 1917 Leeds "Soviet" Congress in which these tendencies expressed their support for the Russian Revolution which had ended the Tsarist autocracy along with opposition to the war and which ended with the call to form soviets in the UK.

He then charts the evolution of these parties and tendencies and how they reacted to developments in Russia such as the October Revolution, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the civil war and the changing nature and rhetoric of the new regime. The book recounts how the original meaning of the word soviet—Russian for "council," specifically one elected by workers and peasants—was lost and used solely in relation to the USSR, how the soviets were "the only clear example during the twentieth century—as an alternative to Macpherson's liberal democracy—a distinctly different functioning form of democratic government." (4) He sketches the process by which the promise of a wider democracy became replaced by party dictatorship—in his words, "The Dic-

own conscience, and not according to the views he and others had formed before the debates." This, as a British socialist noted at the time, ran counter to the whole idea of the soviet system. (197) Sadly, Bullock fails to note that Lenin in What is to Be Done? followed the Fabians in opposing "primitive democracy," so perhaps the Social Democratic Federation, which became the BSP, may not have been on "the far side of this" gulf between the two perspectives (22) for in spite of all the pro-referendum and recall comments Bullock lists in the pre-war left, they were in the context a centralized, statist structure. This would make such reforms far less democratic than they appear on paper—as seen in practice with the Soviet state before the creation of the party dictatorship in mid-1918.

As such, developments in Russia should not be viewed in isolation. The Bolsheviks, as Social-Democrats, shared a similar ideological background with much of the British left covered in this book. This means that the BSP forming the core of the CPGB comes as no great surprise. It also helps answer the question of how so many self-proclaimed socialists managed to tolerate the twists and turns of Stalinism, for many had already done so when Lenin and Trotsky ruled the roost.

Bullock's research is impressive and it makes fascinating reading to see how the British left tried to make sense of Bolshevism at the time. Obviously, hindsight is always 20/20, but by the early twenties enough was known to see that the Bolshevik regime was a state-capitalist party dictatorship. That so many on the left embraced this would suggest that pre-war positions on democracy and socialism were not as robust as would be imagined—as anarchists had long warned, what they thought of as socialism was in fact simply state capitalism. Bullock, sadly, concentrates mostly on the political rhetoric of the pre-war left rather than their economic vision (the Guild Socialists being, unsurprisingly, an exception). The book fails to address this critique but it can be argued it falls outside its remit. This should not, however, detract from an excellent contribution to our understanding of the period.



tatorship of the Proletariat: From Class to Party" (312)—for many on the left.

Of course, many of the earliest critics of the Bolshevik regime counterpoised bourgeois democracy to the soviet system, yet this is not the only possible critique. Thankfully, Bullock includes those who criticized Bolshevism from the left as well, It is this aspect of the book which makes it of particular note to libertarians today. Indeed, the problems facing the British left also faced subsequent generations, including ours, faced with revolutions and the regimes that spring forth from them—how to be supportive of a revolution but also critical, particularly of any state structures involved.

Part of the problem was the lack of reliable information from Russia, not to mention the deliberate lies spread by the capitalist media. There was also an understandable desire "to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt wherever possible." (149) The Bolshevik's opposition to the war helped them gain an audience in Britain but it also meant that myths were readily accepted, particularly if they chimed with the hopes of the audience. So, for example, it was reported that while British workers were "demanding the democratic control of industry" the Russian workers "have it," according to a 1918 article in the ILP's newspaper the Labour Leader. (149-50) As we have known for some time, the Bolshevik regime was then already in the process of crushing any embryonic developments towards this in favor of one-man management and centralized planning.

As with any revolution, many on the left wanted to believe the best. As Bullock notes, many dismissed negative accounts due to bourgeois hostility and trying to reconcile what originally attracted them to the Revolution and the regime that it produced. Yet enough was available—not least from eye-witness accounts as well as interviews with, articles from and speeches by leading Bolsheviks themselves. Bullock indicates this steady flow of warning signs, such as Zinoviev proclaiming that the dictatorship of the proletariat was the same as the dictatorship of the Communist Party at

the second congress of the Communist International in 1920, (313) Lenin's defense of "dictatorial" one-man management (185, 204) as well as his comment that it was "natural that revolutionary workers execute Mensheviks." (205) Some managed to accept Lenin's advocacy of dictatorship because they believed it reflected working class support but Bullock, rightly, quotes Bertrand Russell (186) from his book The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism on the fallacy of this:

Friends of Russia here [in Britain] think of the dictatorship of the proletariat as merely a new form of representative government, in which only working men and women have votes, and the constituencies are partly occupational, not geographical. They think that 'proletariat' means 'proletariat,' but 'dictatorship' does not quite mean 'dictatorship.' This is the opposite of the truth. When a Russian Communist speaks of a dictatorship, he means the word literally, but when he speaks of the proletariat, he means the word in a Pickwickian sense. He means the 'class-conscious' part of the proletariat, i.e. the Communist Party

The issue is that many on the revolutionary left somehow managed to convince themselves of this nonsense—presumably by invoking that magical word "dialectics" at some stage. This can be seen even from those who later broke with Moscow to remain advocates of soviet democracy. Thus, for example, the WSF's Workers' Dreadnought in July 1920 reported and justified Bolshevik suppression of soviets—peasant ones, where the poor peasants apparently voted for their rich neighbors in the "Left Wing Social Revolutionary Party" (113) and published an article by a member of the Aberdeen Communist Group which proclaimed that any Soviet system "must come under the dictatorship of the Communist Party." (181) While the WSF had just created the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) and later the same year helped form the Moscow-approved Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), it finally realized the error of its ways by early 1921.

They Were not alone. The book ends recounting how the ILP and the SLP refused to merge into the CPGB, leaving the BSP as the core



of its membership—joined by various Guildsmen, syndicalists and others—while the anti-Parliamentarian communists like the WSF's Sylvia Pankhurst found freedom of discussion in the CPGB to be much less than originally promised. The anti-Parliamentarian communists soon left and found the German and Dutch council communists who had likewise become disillusioned with Bolshevism, even promoting the original Fourth International, but the Workers' Dreadnought had ceased publication by 1924.

As well as showing the slow evolution of many from defending the revolution because it had produced a widening of (functional delegate) democracy to defending the Bolsheviks and their dictatorship, the book also charts the decline of the diversity of the pre-war left with organization after organization disappearing (such as the WSF, the Guild Socialists) or becoming completely marginal (SLP). Yet this diversity is of note, given the wide range of views in the pre-war left. Libertarian ideas on industrial or functional democracy had obviously spread quite widely in the British left—not least with the Guild Socialists. Even Ramsay MacDonald raised the possibility of replacing the House of Lords with an industrial Parliament.

The first chapter also notes the differences in perspective on the left. On the one hand, there were the technocratic Fabians who, in 1906, noted that Democracy is a word with a double meaning. To the bulk of Trade Unionists and labourers it means an intense jealousy and mistrust of all authority, and a resolute reduction of both representatives and officials to the position of mere delegates and agents of the majority. (22)

Others on the left, not least the syndicalists, argued that "real power would be put into the hands of the citizens—or members, in the case of the unions—rather than an elected representative." (23) Needless to say, the Fabians opposed such "primitive democracy."

Interestingly, these debates resurfaced during the debates on the Russian Revolution. Bullock, as an example, quotes the chair of the Russian Communist Party, Kamenev, on how his party rejected mandated delegates and every delegate "must vote according to his