

Review: *The British Communist Left, 1914-1945*

Anarcho

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A review of a “communist-left” (Bordigist) book on the British anti-parliamentarian communist movement which developed during and after the First World War. Suffice to say, it is not very good, as befitting Bordigist ideology.

As is well known in socialist circles, Lenin wrote “*Left-wing*” *Communism: An Infantile disorder* in 1920 to counteract those within the fledgling communist movement of those more revolutionary than the Bolsheviks. Most anarchists would be aware that these included those in Germany and Holland who opposed electioneering, the trade unions and the dictatorship of the party. These would latter split to form the Communist Workers Party – KAPD – and eventually become known as council communists, represented by such important writers as Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter and Paul Mattick. The others whom Lenin turned his fire upon were the Italian abstentionists whose leader was Amadeo Bordiga and these became known as the “communist left”.¹

While the German-Dutch left communists eventually rejected all aspects of Bolshevism and increasingly came to the same conclusions as anarchists had decades previously, the Italian “communist left” continued to view Bolshevism positively (if critical of developments in the USSR and Comintern) and maintained a great many of its positions from 1920 – most notably, politically, on the nature and role of the vanguard party and the necessity of its dictatorship.² Bordiga, it

¹ See Adam Buick’s “Bordigism” in *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), Maximilien Rubel and John Crump (editors), for a useful introduction to the tendency. I must note that Alain Pengam’s chapter in this book on “Anarcho-Communism” is somewhat inaccurate as it downplays its influence and importance within anarchist circles.

² Economically, they favour a highly centralised economic system and oppose all local autonomy in the believe that it means “commodity production”. They seem blissfully unaware that such a regime would be a dysfunctional, inefficient, wasteful bureaucratic machine which would create a new class system – such as the Bolsheviks had created by 1920 (Trotsky in *Terrorism and Communism* advocates the militarisation of labour and unsurprisingly it was “republished by the French ‘Bordigists’, who described it as ‘one of Trotsky’s most magnificent texts’” (Philippe Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900–68)* [Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018], 190). Suffice to say, autonomy

should be noted, played a disastrous role as the leader of new Communist Party during the rise of, and resistance to, fascism in Italy after the Red Years.

I will use the term “left-communist” to mean the Dutch-German tendency (who became council-communists) and “communist left” for the Italian faction (who remained Leninists). Lenin’s “Left-Wing communism” could do for both considered together but with the caveat that these two groupings cannot really be united so.

This is to provide some context for this review of Mark Hayes’ *The British Communist Left*³ which I purchased at this year’s London anarchist bookfair. I was initially drawn to the book because I had recently written an article on British syndicalism for *Black Flag*⁴ and have read – and plan to review – Leninist Ralph Darlington’s book on the labour revolt of 1910 to 1914 (spoiler alert: a Bolshevik party is needed!). The period between 1910 and 1920 is of note for anarchists today as it was (probably) the closest that Britain has been to revolution and, not by coincidence, anarchist ideas had become more widely known, accepted and practiced (even if under the more polite label of “syndicalism”).

However, by 1920 the revolutionary wave had peaked and its lasting legacy was the Communist Party of Great Britain and the marginalisation of previous ideas by Bolshevism on the revolutionary left. Thus, for example, workers’ control was replaced with nationalisation – faithfully reflecting the “lessons” of the “successful” Russian Revolution. There was a decline in a variety of promising libertarian traditions (including Syndicalism and Guild Socialism), and their replacement with Russian Bolshevism which built upon the worst aspects of pre-war British Marxism (namely, the SDF-BSP and SLP traditions). In short, an opportunity for libertarians to become a significant – albeit minority – part of the labour movement was lost.

So I had hoped that this book would shed some light on this period and how the various pre-war libertarian tendencies reacted to Bolshevism. I was distinctly disappointed as this was an account by an adherent of the “communist left”, one whose aim I think is to bolster its influence within the British left by trying to rewrite the “conventional wisdom” of this period. In and of itself, this would be a useful goal – I have done this myself in my writings, most obviously with Proudhon and Kropotkin. However, to be valid such work needs to show conclusively the facts which debunk the repeated assertions which have been handed down and this book does not do that – for, as will become clear, the obvious reason that these do not exist.

Hayes particularly objects to the “anarcho-Marxist” account of Mark Shipway’s *Anti-parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers’ Councils in Britain, 1917-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988) arguing that what we are “dealing here with two distinct political currents; one whose main influence was post-war left-communism, and the other nineteenth century Bakuninite anarchism”. (9) Yet Aldred’s anarchism is well-known while the *Workers’ Dreadnaught* reprinted articles by anarchists. Thus it noted the “Death of Domela Nieuwenhuis” (6 December 1919), reprinting his 1894 pamphlet *Socialism in Danger* in early 1921, a number of works by Kropotkin in 1922-3 as well as an interesting review of Proudhon’s *General Idea of*

(free agreement) is essential for relations within and outwith a workplace to respond to the unexpected and difficult developments any real economy would face and reflects the experience, local knowledge and enthusiasm of the working class which any centralised regime would crush.

³ Mark Hayes, *The British Communist Left: A history of left-wing communism in Britain, 1914-1945*, 2nd Edition, (Old Moles Collective, 2023). The second edition includes reprints of a few original texts from this period which are of interest.

⁴ “Tom Mann and British Syndicalism”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 1 No. 3 (Autumn 2021)

the Revolution by Sylvia Pankhurst after *Freedom* published it in 1923. In terms of Kropotkin, it stated that *The Conquest of Bread* was the “best book on Communism as it will be when it comes, and on the scientific possibilities of realising it” while *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* was “on the science of feeding the people under Communism.” (30 September 1922) and the following year saw “Kropotkin’s Ideas on Communism” discussed at its “Communist Workers’ Movement Meetings”. As for the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation which was founded in 1921, that included anarchists and Marxists united by what they obviously shared in common. Indeed, as Hayes admits, like the council communists, Aldred “began to question its original proletarian character, along with the Communist International and the Bolshevik Party” (131) So there clearly was a coming together of revolutionaries who had come to similar conclusions even if one got there somewhat belated compared to the other.

Given this, Hayes’ notion that anti-parliamentary communism is “an artificial political theory” (9) cannot be maintained. It is the influence of the Bordiga which is missing, not anarchism, and so it is trying to construct a British “communist left” – as opposed to a British “left-communist” or council communist left – which is “artificial”.

Still, Hayes is right to say that these British revolutionaries had arrived at anti-parliamentary communism by different paths. Aldred did come from an anarchist background and Pankhurst’s politics were a response to which she believed was a successful revolution in Russia which had replaced capitalist parliamentarism with a soviet socialist republic. Yet it cannot be denied that both drew the same conclusions, even if Aldred had drawn them much earlier. This explains why many libertarians saw in the soviets a Russian variant of syndicalism and, likewise, initially viewed Bolshevism favourably – it appeared as if the Bolsheviks had come to anarchist conclusions (as some Marxists likewise did, with one former Bolshevik turned Menshevik declaring that “Lenin has just made himself a candidate for a throne that has been vacant for the last thirty years – that of Bakunin.”). That these initial hopes were misplaced does not mean that this was not the case, as can be seen from Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman who went from being early defenders of the Bolsheviks to their most vocal critics after seeing them in action first-hand.⁵ This reflected the path of Aldred and Pankhurst – in contrast, Bordiga was called “more Leninist than Lenin” and had no issues with party dictatorship or State control over the economy.

Part of the problem is that Hayes’ awareness – like that of most Marxists⁶ – of the anarchist tradition seems poor: such as putting anarchist-communist in quotes when discussing Guy Aldred (never mind it has been used since the 1870s), implying Kropotkin’s pro-war stand in 1914 was more widespread than it was (21) when he and the very few comrades he influenced were quickly rejected (*Freedom* printed their arguments for a whole two issues before becoming

⁵ See the articles by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in *To Remain Silent is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia* (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority!, 2013), Andrew Zonneveld (editor); Goldman’s *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970); Berkman’s *The Bolshevik Myth* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

⁶ It is to the “communist left” I owe one of my favourite anecdotes. When looking through one of their diatribes against anarchism, I saw it proclaimed that we anarchists think that the State should be destroyed before capitalism – with an endnote promising a reference to back this claim up. I was excited – I would now discover which anarchist stated this much asserted – but baseless, as far as I could tell from my decades of research into anarchism – claim by Marxists. Turning to the end note in question, I discovered that the source of this assertion was that well-known anarchist Frederick Engels! That a Marxist could consider it sufficient to back up an assertion on anarchism by referencing another assertion on anarchism by a Marxist says all there is to be said about Marxism as a viable and useful theory for radicals.

staunchly internationalist) and that there was a *Freedom* group in 1936 (151-2, 161-2) when any remaining members of the defunct paper like other anarchists supported *Spain and the World* (which took the title *Freedom* in 1945).

It is hardly the work of an objective historian to write of “elements” (21) of the anarchist movement taking an internationalist stance when the vast majority of anarchists did and, given this, the claim that “those revolutionaries who most intransigently defended the principle of proletarian internationalism in 1914 came from within the social democratic parties themselves” (143) is simply nonsense. The facts are while a small minority in the Marxist Second International opposed the war, the over-whelming majority of anarchists did so. Likewise, it is proclaimed that the anarchists of *War Commentary* “appear[ed] to reveal in its anarchist prejudice against centralised political organisation and intervention in the class struggle” (153) when in fact they organised to achieve that intervention and that they were correct about vanguardism (the author simply has no awareness he has an unfounded prejudice for a centralised party⁷).

This ignorance of anarchism produces some really bizarre comments, such as when Hayes states that it is “the left tendency that has fought hardest against the influence of bourgeois ideology to defend the historic interests of the working class” and lumps the anarchists in the First International who warned about the reformism that would be produced by Marx and Engels advocacy of electioneering in the First International with “the open revisionism of the right and the veiled opportunism of the centre” in the Second which confirmed those warnings! But, then, he mutters about the “anti-organisational prejudices of the anarchists”, showing that he does not appear to know that anarchists then, like now, were advocating federal organisation. (147)

So a better awareness of anarchism would result in recognising that the anti-parliamentary Marxists had come of anarchist conclusions on various issues.

The context for this evolution is important. Hayes’ notion that this was “a struggle between different wings of the same movement, agreed on the same programme and goals” (142) was true as long as ignorance of events in Russia predominated. So we are, rightly, informed that the left-communists were “[a]gainst the nationalisation of industry, [and] counterposed the socialisation and workers’ control of all production, distribution and exchange as steps towards communism” (61) yet no mention is made that the Bolsheviks nationalised industry, destroyed workers’ control and built state-capitalism. Still, we are informed without irony that Trotskyism “defends a state capitalist programme founded on all the opportunist mistakes of the early CI”. (10)

As accurate information began to circulate and experience was gained in working with the Bolsheviks within the Communist International and in Britain, it came clear to the left-communists (and anarchists and syndicalists) that they did *not* agree on programme and goals after all. So, yes, initially, the British left-communists “were in political continuity with Russian Bolshevism” (11) but as they became more aware of the reality of Bolshevism they turned against it – with some taking longer than others to do so (and it is a disgrace that for Aldred this took until 1925). Similarly with the claim that the left-communists were “very much influenced by the experience of the Bolshevik party itself in 1917” (145) or, more correctly, by *accounts* of that “experience” which had varying degrees of accuracy. When the experience became better known, they rejected it.

⁷ Bourrinet has an amusing section in which he noted that its left argued that social democracy degenerated due to a lack of centralisation before admitting that centralisation was used very effectively against them by the opportunists. (27-8) In short, do not give your enemies tools that can be used against you, particularly tools which have historically been used by the few against the many.

This is reflected in Lenin's "*Left-Wing*" *Communism*, with its dismissal of a difference between the dictatorship of the class and of the party, as well as the arguments made by the Zinoviev at the Second Congress of the Communist International:

"Nowadays people like Kautsky come along and say: 'There in Russia you have not got the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party.' You would think that this was a criticism of us. Not at all! We have the dictatorship of the working class and for that very reason we also have the dictatorship of the Communist Party. [Applause.] The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, a characteristic, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class. What is our Party? You should not confuse it with other parties that are made up of barristers. It is made up of between 600,000 and 700,000 of the best workers, the vanguard of the proletariat. And it is clear that the affairs of the working class are well looked after by these, its best representatives. That is why the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party. The supervision of the various organisations and the right to purge them belongs to the party. So it has to be during the proletarian revolution. The role of the party does not diminish after the victory, but on the contrary it increases."

These were contributions to the debate within the German Communist Party between those favoured by Moscow and those who became council communists. The latter, as Gorter put it, thought "that the dictatorship of a Party, of a Communist Party, cannot exist here in Germany, as it did in Russia, where a few thousand dominated the proletariat. Here, in order to conquer capital, the dictatorship must be exercised by the class itself, the entire class." He linked this to the left-communists in Britain, noting "the dictatorship of the masses themselves... is what the German and English Left Wing, what we ourselves, mean by these words." (*Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*)

An echo is found in Hayes, so we read of "the role of the party was ultimately to take power on behalf of the working class as a whole" (144) but also "the dictatorship of the working class based on the soviets" (61) and "the seizure of political power by the working class, and recognition of the role of the soviets". (36) The proletariat, we are told, must replace the current State "with its own dictatorship based on the soviets or workers' councils (146) yet Hayes is silent about Bordiga's views on "the Marxist principles concerning the dictatorship of the party" (*The Fundamentals of Revolutionary Communism*) and that the "dictatorship advocated by Marxism... will not have the naiveté to abdicate for lack of having a majority of votes... In conclusion the communist party will rule alone, and will never give up power without a physical struggle." (*Proletarian Dictatorship and Class Party*) Unsurprisingly, a 1926 letter from Bordiga to Karl Korsch indicated their differences included that "[w]e agree with Lenin's theses at the 2nd Congress." Lest we forget:

"The declaration by the 'left' Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) at its founding conference in April that it is founding a party, but 'not a party in the traditional sense' means an ideological capitulation to those views of syndicalism

and industrialism⁸ that are reactionary.” (*Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution*)

Bordiga echoed Bolshevik orthodoxy from 1920 decades after the Trotskyists stopped mentioning it (presumably to add in recruitment), an orthodoxy which the German-Dutch and British left-communists rejected during the period Hayes discusses. This awkward legacy undoubtedly results in other contradictions in the book. Pankhurst, we are told, “continued to defend a vision of the proletarian revolution essentially as a coup d’état by a small, determined force of revolutionaries” (144) but, sadly, no references are given for this claim nor how this relates to the earlier praise that her paper had expressed “solidarity with the Bolsheviks against all lies in the capitalist press about a ‘coup d’état’” (37) nor that the strength of the left communists was an awareness of the need “to develop the mass action of the proletariat into open confrontation with the capitalist state”! (145)

All of which shows that the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” is one of the most confused, confusing and unhelpful terms every uttered, doing untold damage to the socialist movement. If by the term it is meant the consolidation, extension, and defence of a social revolution by the masses, then just say so – adding “by the class rather than the party” does not really get to the root of the problem.⁹

The major problem is that the author wants to embrace Marxist and Leninist practice *and* denounce their inevitable outcome while avoiding making any link between the two. Thus Marx and Engels were right, even if subsequent events may suggest otherwise. This is due not to the strategy advocated but rather objective circumstances for “capitalism has entered its epoch of decadence, in which the old struggle for reforms is no longer possible or progressive” (146) and this absolves them for the legacy this “old struggle” produced – although “reforms” in the form of higher wages, better conditions, etc. have been won by direct action and solidarity since 1914 and so are possible and definitely “progressive” in terms of building class consciousness (which explains the Tory anti-union laws as the ruling class is well aware of this educative aspect of social struggle).

Hayes does not discuss in any depth (as if you could) the notion of the imperialist “epoch” which allowed Lenin to dismiss the warmongering, “taking sides” and “defence of the fatherland” comments by Marx and Engels as being correct in pre-Imperialist times but quoting them now was wrong since imperialism had appeared. That Lenin had not noticed this in 1904 – when he took sides in the Russo-Japanese war – is not discussed nor the happy coincidence that the imperialist epoch came into being after Engels had breathed his last.¹⁰ Hayes lets the cat out of the bag somewhat by noting how William Morris had denounced imperialism in.... 1887! (43-4)

⁸ Industrialism was used by many (including Emma Goldman in *Syndicalism: The Modern Menace to Capitalism*) to refer to the Industrial Unionism of the I.W.W.

⁹ We should also remember that when Marx used the term, the proletariat was a *minority* class in Western Europe and America (with the exception of Britain) with the majority of workers peasants and artisans. Likewise, to talk of the “proletariat” implies that there is no simultaneous economic revolution with the expropriation of the owning class by the workers themselves, meaning any political power would lack an economic base to secure it. Finally, the notion that the working class is in power if the leaders of a socialist party form a government is one which was always naïve and after numerous experiences of such regimes really cannot be maintained.

¹⁰ This is discussed by ex-communist Bertram D. Wolfe’s “What Lenin made of the Testament of Engels” (*Marxism, One Hundred Years in the Life of a Doctrine* [New York: Dial Press, 1965]). Wolfe’s move from Communist to (right-wing) anti-Communist should not be used to dismiss his (informed) argument.

This should be of little note other than it allows various contradictory positions to be maintained – thus parliamentarianism was right in 1871 but wrong in 1921 (as shown by the outcome of applying it!), that the degeneration of social democracy was due to imperialist profits allowing reforms to be granted rather than the impact of working within bourgeois institutions, etc.

There is, of course, an element of truth in the notion because objective circumstances can and do have an impact on tactics and strategy.¹¹ Yet this materialist perspective was ignored, for by 1921 the lessons drawn from experiences in an advanced industrial nation were replaced by those gathered from one which was still primarily feudal in nature, which had no functioning parliamentary system and so no experience of how utilising electioneering lead to the reformism and opportunism as well as undermining mass direct action from below. As such Gorter and Pannekoek were right to note how the differences in objective circumstances experienced by the Bolsheviks and the left-communists had to be taken into account in order to explain their different perspectives and tactics.

Yet this does not mean that Bolshevik electioneering, modelled on German Social Democracy, were right in Russia as the impact of certain tactics – parliamentarianism – would be the same regardless even if specific objective circumstances may change the speed of degeneration. And, indeed, that has been the case with parliamentarian tactics in a whole host of different times and places – even if the word “revolutionary” is stuck in front of it. Whatever the apparent short-term gains of the approach, in the long term it has been a failure – as seen when Hayes indicates the necessity for communists to fight the opportunist and reformist legacy of social democracy. In short, symptoms are denounced but their root causes are embraced.

Perhaps unsurprising, anarchism being completely correct about Social Democracy seems to count for little for Hayes. Indeed, we are told that the Communist Abstentionist Fraction of the Italian Socialist Party “clearly distancing itself from the anarchists” while advocating what the anarchists had long been arguing, namely “renouncing electoral and parliamentary action.” (47) Presumably this is a case of anarchists being premature abstentionists due to their correct predictions?

Gorter, for example, once suggested that the “difference between [anarchist Domela Nieuwenhuis] and us Marxist revolutionaries is that we are for revolutionary methods in a period of revolution, while he wanted them prematurely”¹² (Antonio Gramsci said something similar in his “An Address to the Anarchists”¹³). Yet how do you move towards a revolution without advocating and utilising revolutionary tactics in non-revolutionary times? And, needless to say, during

¹¹ For example, how Spanish anarchists organised in the 1870s, the tactics of British syndicalists in the 1910s and those of libertarians today would not be identical even if the overall strategy of promoting working-class self-organisation and self-activity in workplaces and communities are the same.

¹² Quoted by Bourrinet, 24. Bourrinet states that “[u]nlike the Marxists, Domela Nieuwenhuis came to the conclusion that the workers should abandon the struggle for reforms”, (26) which seems unlikely. Nieuwenhuis being against reformism by political action, yes, but against direct struggle against capital for better wages and so on seems unlikely and, as such, some supporting evidence other than a quote by Gorter would have been appropriate.

¹³ Gramsci complaints against the anarchists in this article seem ironic given the creation of the Communist Party and its lack of success in displacing the Socialist Party in the allegiances of the Italian proletariat. Irony also springs to mind in his berating the anarchists for holding to the same tactics given the typical Marxist embrace of electioneering in spite of experience confirming the anarchist critique. As for his notion that for “anarchist workers the advent of the workers’ state will be the advent of the freedom of their class, and thus also of their personal freedom”, it suffices to note that this was written at a time (1920) when the Bolsheviks were exercising a party dictatorship over the working class, breaking by force all protests and strikes, while anarchists and other socialist and working class critics were being thrown into the jails and prisons camps of the new regime.

the revolutionary periods which did arise, the dead-weight of the parties and unions produced by the advocacy and utilisation of non-revolutionary tactics was something which needed to be overcome, making the process even harder as Hayes implicitly acknowledges. Rather than defend a flawed tactic, would it not be easier to simply admit that Marx and Engels were wrong and the Federalist International was right?

This is a conclusion Hayes is at pains to avoid for that would throw “into question the whole experience of the workers’ movement”. (9) Yet given that this experience surely shows that that social democracy *was* a dead-end, perhaps we should question it? Likewise, the outcome of the Bolshevik revolution should be cause for concern for socialists but no, for by “dismissing the whole experience of the Russian Revolution”, Guy Aldred was “in danger of throwing into question the entire history of the workers’ movement, along with its political lessons”. (131) Yet the “communist left” prides itself on drawing “political lessons” which include rejecting electioneering.

Ultimately, the problem is the need to defend the tactics which produced the degeneration being denounced. Hence the contradictions and the fear, repeated time and time again, that the “logic of the ‘anti-Leninist’ line of argument is to reject the whole experience of the working class and its painstaking efforts to build mass parties and trade unions to wage a struggle for reforms within capitalism during its ascendant phase” (143) Can we not draw obvious conclusions from this “experience”, namely that Marxism put the working class onto a path away from socialism?

Yet we should not confuse, as Hayes does, building mass parties and trade unions. One, as anarchists stressed, conducted a direct struggle against capital while the other worked within capitalist structures and became enmeshed within it. That trades unions did not automatically become revolutionary organisations goes without saying but Marxist prejudices on “political action” and centralisation undoubtedly worked against such tendencies. It may be easier to electioneer than strike, but that does not mean that the latter is not more fertile in terms of class consciousness and socialistic tendencies.

In short, the First World War simply exposed the rot which existed within Social Democracy long before 1914, which exposed it in a way that no longer could be ignored or denied by Marxists within it. So, given the actual experience of the workers movement, perhaps it is correct to reject “the proletarian nature of social democracy itself”? (142) For Hayes, Guy Aldred being right about social democracy before 1914 becomes “disdain for the workers’ struggles and the organisations so painstakingly built in the preceding period” before immediately admitting these were “degenerating”! (27) Surely a genuinely scientific socialist would base their politics on the whole experience of Marxism rather than cherry-pick a few periods and individuals?

This position reflects the strange notion that “remaining inside” social democratic parties and unions is utterly important before 1914 and then “breaking with the social chauvinists” makes it essential to leave them after 1914. (27) Why this is not “disdain” is not explained beyond vague comments over ascendant and declining periods within capitalism. And how do we know that capitalism is now decadent? Because the degeneration of Marxist parties into opportunism became so obvious with their support of the war (bolstered by appropriate quotes from Marx and Engels, lest we forget) that even Lenin could no longer deny it. Hence the search for the new epoch so that a general re-evaluation of Marxism is not needed (why should it be, it is the truth!).

The same can be said of the Bolshevik Revolution which is also viewed as being above reproach during its ascendant phase in spite of its subsequent degeneration clearly being influenced by these earlier tactics and ideas. That this degeneration was reflected within the Com-

intern should be obvious but Hayes clearly agrees with Bordiga in trying to stay within it and wished that the British left-communists had decided to become “a fraction of the centralised International [and] to accept collective discipline and attempt to work within it for a change in policy”. (142) This position completely ignores the awkward fact that the Comintern, like the Profintern, was dominated by the Russian party and its interests. It also ignores that far too many of the members of the new Communist Parties were prepared to ignore their own experiences and ideas in favour of following the Bolsheviks for they had had a “successful” revolution. That this subordination was hardly revolutionary can be seen from the twists and turns needed to maintain “collective discipline” once Stalin secured his power.¹⁴

Lessons are there to be learnt from this period and I hoped that this book would contribute to drawing them. Sadly, this was not to be. To be fair, the author makes it clear that he is writing from a “left communist” position (although he does not really make clear what this really means – hence no comment on the dictatorship of the party, for example). However, this does contribute to why the book has little to recommend it, reflecting the authoritarian politics it is trying to sanitise and the contradictions and omissions this cannot help but produce.

Which raises an obvious question: why are Bordigists at an anarchist bookfair given their lack of libertarian ideas. Trotskyists are not welcome so why are these dissident Leninists? Perhaps this is evidence of, as was said in *On the Poverty of Student Life*, that “since the anarchists tolerate each other, they would tolerate anything”? Or perhaps this is an expression of anarchist lack of confidence in their own ideas which makes “ultra-leftism” more influential in British anarchist circles than it deserves to be? Whatever the reason, they were there and their texts appear in libcom.org and elsewhere. Still, how irrelevant must you be to be parasitic on the British anarchist movement?

Leaving that to one side, this book is a wasted opportunity and Mark Shipway’s account is far better. It is clear that more research is needed about the period of 1910 to 1925 for that remains the period when the UK was closest to revolution. That the replacement of “infantile” anti-parliamentarianism (whether anarchist, syndicalist or Marxist) with Bolshevism on the far-left of British politics has seen the possibility of socialism retreat further and further into the distance should make any serious revolutionary reconsider the whole history of the labour movement. Why Hayes appears to fear this being done should be obvious.

¹⁴ This is not to deny the need for collective agreement and action, simply to note that “discipline” is used to describe both this conscious cooperation between equals and unthinking submission to a few leaders, a distinction made by Bakunin long before Rosa Luxemburg’s famous comments on the subject in *Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*.

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