

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, eds., *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956*

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 84, automne 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066558ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0052>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Palmer, B. (2019). Compte rendu de [Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, eds., *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956*]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 84, 362–364. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0052>

Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, eds., *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2017)

IN 2014 SMITH AND WORLEY published an edited collected, *Against the Grain*, which drew together a number of excellent essays by established scholars who drew on their expertise of the mid-to-late 20th-century far left in Britain. The subjects studied included Trotskyism, the New Left, anarchism, dissident developments in the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB], socialist feminism, and struggles against racism, colonialism, and fascism. Smith and Worley might better have stopped while they were ahead.

This subsequently published companion volume, while inevitably containing material of interest, is a shadow of its predecessor. It lacks the meaningful (if not quite comprehensive) reach across the far left achieved in the earlier collection, as well as the substance delivered by researchers with a demonstrable authoritative grasp of the field. *Waiting for the Revolution* has the feel of bringing together the out-takes from *Against the Grain*, although the editor's description of how essays were chosen indicates this was not the case. If the former volume's title conveyed something of the far left's purpose, this volume's designation metaphorically reduces this political cohort to a bystander role.

Smith and Worley introduce the volume in a way that hints at the problem of coherence that runs through the essays that comprise this book. They provide no definition of what the far left actually is. Instead, they assert that the Jeremy Corbyn-led revival of the Labour Party has brought "renewed interest in the far left's history." (1) Perhaps, and among this edited volume's most significant

contributions is an exploration of the Militant Tendency's deep entry into the Labour Party. Led by the South African Trotskyist, Ted Grant, Militant's history inside the Labour Party is an important one. Its coverage in this volume is addressed as part of a well-researched and informative essay on the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1970s and 1980s by Gavin Brown and in Christopher Massey's account of the ways in which Militant was marginalized, its leading elements expelled in various 1980s purges. Yet the actual contemporary left push into the Labour Party and its relation to Corbyn, symbolized by the 2015 Momentum movement, is barely mentioned in the essays comprising *Waiting for the Revolution*.

The lack of clear definition of what constitutes the far left registers in the inclusion of an essay on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament [CND] in the 1980s, an important mobilization in which far left elements were undoubtedly active. But as Jacquelyn Arnold's discussion of CND, the Labour Party, and civil defence in the 1980s reveals, the campaign to stop the nuclear arms race was not particularly "ultra," as her interview with a leading figure in the movement, Bruce Kent, reveals.

With Trotskyism covered fulsomely in *Against the Grain*, its treatment in this volume is understandably less robust. At times, however, it appears downright quirky. It is concentrated in a few essays that tend to isolate this strand of the far left in discrete discussions, without much of an appreciation of how they fit in an overall assessment of the political trajectory of the times. Jodi Burkett's account of the role of the International Marxist Group [IMG] and International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party [IS/SWP] in recruiting students in the 1970s and 1980s is ordered around the interpretive

dead-end of contrasting a supposedly conventional high-water mark of youthful protest in 1968 with the ostensibly more extensive student involvement in revolutionary activism in the 1970s and 1980s. Such an analytic penchant for raising one period's practice over and against another sidesteps too easily the nature of different eras and their campaigns, the significance of radicalism's purchase on those drawn to its causes changing with the times. It also elevates what can tangibly be counted – membership rolls -- over the intangibles and intensities of different kinds of involvements. There could be a world of difference between the street fighting experience of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign's March 1968 Grosvenor Square protest and the selling of an IS newspaper outside of a National Union of Students-organized forum where Margaret Thatcher's proposed changes to financing student unions and their activities were being discussed. Jack Saunders's account of the IS turn to industry, explored through a discussion of the organization's Coventry car works activity from 1968-1975, reveals the potential and limits of revolutionary activism largely restricted to "point of production" struggles. It has the merit of a case study, woven tightly around the experience of an engine-testing militant, John Worth, but the story unfolds within an unduly localized analysis necessarily circumscribed in its understandings of the interactions of a nascent party and its industrial base. One Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Communist Party [RCP], a small split from the International Socialists that ultimately dissolved in 1996 after taking a political detour away from its Trotskyist origins, is given an insider's treatment by Michael Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick (who wrote under the party name of Freeman) presents the group in the best possible light, slides over extremely controversial

policy positions somewhat glibly, offering a rather sanitized version of his group's development.

That the RCP was marginal in the history of the British far left might be debated in some circles. Less likely to cause disagreement is the isolation and small numbers involved in a direct action grouping, the Angry Brigade, that receives a detailed exploration in J.D. Taylor's study of bombs detonated by a decentralized "movement" likely composed of two score or so of individuals, thirteen of whom were prosecuted in three state trials in 1971-1972. Not unlike the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, West Berlin's Tupamaros, or Canada's Squamish Five, the Angry Brigade conceived of themselves as urban guerillas engaged in an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist offensive. Taylor provides one of the most deeply-researched essays in *Waiting for the Revolution*. His defence of the "bring the war home" politics of the Angry Brigade is unconvincing. Yet Taylor's outline of how political violence grew out of the transition from the late 1960s into the early 1970s, resulting in escalating police attack, state coercion, and legal repression reminds us of how constituted authority was willing to use "any means necessary" to stifle dissent. (43)

This turn to violence and the state's appetite to suppress emerges clearly as well in Daniel Finn's discussion of the far left and the "troubles" in Northern Ireland, as well as in a number of reflections on the miners' strike of 1984. Sheryl Burnadette Buckley backgrounds the struggle of coal communities with an account of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the National Union of Mine Workers from 1956 into the mid-1980s. The networks of solidarity that the far left generated in London to support the miners are the subject of Diarmaid

Kelliher's contribution to this volume, which widens and elaborates on the story of metropolitan gay and lesbian support (admittedly not necessarily far left) for the 1984 strike, recently depicted dramatically in the film, *Pride* (2014). Miners and Communists figure in two accounts of left-nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales by Daryl Leeworthy and Rory Scothorne and Ewan Gibbs.

Waiting for Revolution concludes with Lawrence Parker's "Understanding the Formation of the Communist Party of Britain," which readers should appreciate is an account of a split from the older, larger, and fractured Communist Party of Great Britain. Adhering to a version of the old CPGB *British Road to Socialism* program supposedly linked the Communist Party of Britain [CPB] to an established Communist base in the trade unions, but the new organization largely failed to secure much in the way of industrial support. At its founding conference in 1988, the breakaway body claimed a membership of roughly 1500, which placed it at approximately 15 per cent of the size of its counterpart, the mainstream Communist Party. By 2015, the CPB had atrophied to less than 1000 members, although it continued to retain a public presence through sustaining the long-time Communist publication, *Morning Star*. Clinging to Stalinist understandings of Party building and the virtues of both the defunct Soviet Union and the age-old traditions of the CPGB, the new CPB was destined to make a small contribution to the political world of the far left.

Parker's account of the CPB seems a fitting endnote to this book, outlining the recent history of a marginal group, an atavistic hanger-on of a disintegrating Stalinism that managed to avoid confronting Stalinism. The CPB waits revolution without conforming to or confronting the revolutions in politics

that swirl around it and that constitute its own making. If we are to understand and appreciate the far left, we need writings on aspects of the history of dissenting communism that situate themselves differently than do most of the essays in this volume.

BRYAN D. PALMER
Trent University

Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions* (London and New York: Routledge 2019)

THIS MONOGRAPH BEGAN life as a McMaster PhD thesis. The author, currently at Western University, offers us a careful textual reading of the Communist International's (CI) shifting and developing positions on colonialism, imperialism, race, and ethnicity from its 1919 origins until its demise in 1943. He then analyzes these policies against the statements and behaviours of the Communist parties of Australia, Canada, and South Africa (CPA, CPC, and CPSA), respectively. His motive in doing so is to test the perennial question of national cps' relationship to CI directives. Were national cps simply subservient to the CI or did they operate with some degree of local autonomy? An old question obviously, but Drachewych's comparative methodology offers a fruitful strategy to pursue insights into a more subtle answer than much previous work.

The work's structure contains two parts: Part I contains two chapters providing an in-depth survey of the Comintern's evolving positions on first the national and colonial question and then on race and ethnicity. Part II provides three, somewhat parallel, case studies of the CPSA and "The Native Republic Thesis," the CPC and the national question, and