
Editorial

While far from being an empty slogan, the concept of ‘people’s history’ or ‘history from below’ is certainly not without ambiguity. The term itself is attributed to Lucien Febvre, a French social historian who had helped establish the *Annales* school of history from 1929. For Febvre, the study of the past was less about empirically cataloguing events and influential personalities, traditionally slanted towards war, statecraft and the interests of elites, than a means through which scholars could develop an understanding of the cultural, political and socio-economic currents which shape the human experience.

It should, therefore, come as little surprise that the notion of history from below has tended to attract those working from a Marxist or other left-wing perspective. A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (1938), discussed at length by Christian Høgsbjerg in the previous issue of *Socialist History*, pioneered its use as historical practice, being one of the earliest attempts to provide a full social and political narrative of British history from the point of the view of the working class. It was only after the publication of E.P. Thompson’s 1966 essay, *History from Below*, however, that this approach entered more mainstream English-language historiography. It is no less surprising that the concept of people’s history has invariably drawn criticism from scholars across the political spectrum – including those on the Left. Among these objections, a common accusation has been its alleged propensity to overgeneralise the attitudes and values of the working class in a manner that risks minimising both its innate complexity and agency as a historic force for collective change.

Three of the articles featured in issue 59 of *Socialist History* therefore seek to further demystify the concept by broadening our current understanding of how different elements of the European working class engaged with, and contributed to, the making and study of history. These contributions were originally presented as papers at *Socialist History*’s fifth biannual conference ‘People’s History?’, that took place in Norwich in February 2020. Hanno Balz begins with a *longue durée* analysis of the changing symbolic political meaning of the red flag and its evolution as the internationally recognised banner of revolutionary socialism. Although originally employed by the Roman

legions as a mark of military dominance, and subsequently used by medieval European nobility to denote their own prowess on the battlefield, the flag, and the colour red itself, were gradually appropriated as a symbol of open defiance by those who would eventually come to identify as the working class. As Balz demonstrates, this was mostly facilitated by the French and German revolutionary traditions of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, by 1900, the red flag has been completely transformed into the international ensign of the radical left.

Shifting focus to Britain, Liam Ryan considers the extent to which British socialists operated within a broader web of European influences and domestic traditions prior to the First World War. Central to this was the question of unemployment and the 'Right to Work' campaigns advocated for by socialist groups and then the nascent Labour Party throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. This drew inspiration from earlier initiatives in France, specifically the ideas of the social reformer Louis Blanc and the 'National Workshops' set up during the French Revolution of 1848 as an early model of a state-funded employment scheme. However, the workshops' historical reputation as a short-lived, economic failure was routinely seized upon by the British Left's Conservative and Liberal opponents in order to undermine the wider campaign.

Pushpa Kumbhat considers the role of historical agency from the perspective of the movement for working-class adult education, which shaped much of the British left at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1914, this had mostly coalesced around two key formations: the ostensibly non-political 'Workers' Educational Association' and the more radical 'National Council of Labour Colleges'. While differing considerably in their approaches and philosophies, both organisations sought to adapt the pre-existing systems and structures of British adult education to meet the diverse demands of the evolving labour movement from 1900 to 1920.

John Callaghan concludes the issue with a discussion on the novelist Doris Lessing, specifically her earlier association with the Communist Party of Great Britain and subsequently the New Left movement that emerged from it in the 1960s. Much of this stemmed from her own experiences of, and opposition to, British settler colonialism and racial injustice in Rhodesia, along with the excesses of the Second World War. At the height of this affiliation, Lessing would strongly identify with the Soviet Union, viewing it as essential to communism's ultimate

victory. Although Lessing later came to distance herself from these stances, this youthful engagement, as Callaghan shows, exerted a profound and lasting impact on her later literary works.

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