

# Reviews

Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions*, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, ISBN 9780773558731, vii + 436pp

The transnational turn evident in the humanities over the past two decades has led scholars to explore new avenues of research that have emphasised the multifaceted connections that linked ideas, people and organisations across national borders. *Left Transnationalism* offers a timely and wide-ranging survey into the ways this historical approach has affected the study of the communist Third International (Comintern), with a particular focus on what were termed the national, colonial and racial questions.

The collection brings together fifteen contributors from half a dozen countries and covers a wide array of subject matter and methods. Perhaps its most interesting addition to the historiography, beyond providing an international scope, is that several chapters of *Left Transnationalism* work with an expanded and dynamic conception of the Comintern in which we can appreciate the important role such an organisation played in shaping broader debates, personal beliefs, radical networks and cultural artefacts both within and outside the 'shared cultural space' of the communist world. When taken as the 'international expression of the Bolshevik Revolution' (p33), this research points to the ways such a globally significant event left its mark on the various struggles to combat racial inequality or support national and colonial liberation movements. Influential figures ranging from Ho Chi Minh or George Padmore – who ended up breaking with the Soviet Union – were shaped by their interactions with the Comintern. Beyond these figures, the Comintern's influ-

ence spread globally to differing degrees and competed with various networks, through individuals, ideas and debates, and publications.

As well as establishing the context of the chapters to come, the editors' excellent introduction makes the case for studying the Comintern using the transnational approach by reviewing the historiographical debates surrounding the Moscow Rules paradigm. By eschewing the methodological nationalism, as well as the top-down assumptions surrounding the rank-and-file of the various national communist parties, this introduction seeks to move beyond the 'prevailing wisdom' of considering these parties as simply powerless Moscow pawns. In the course of this argument, Drachewych and McKay point to the many Marxist traditions upon which discussions of national, colonial, and racial questions would draw and the role of the Comintern in developing and disseminating these ideas. These topics are then picked up in the four sections of the collection, which present a snapshot of the state of the field.

The chapters of the first section discuss the 'orientations' of the Comintern and the overarching framework of the research to come. Both Lih and Smith conceptualise the International as an extended project, respectively, in terms of chronology and influence. Perhaps surprisingly, the transnational aspect is not immediately apparent in Lih's chapter, which argues for seeing the Third International as the continuation of the Second, albeit with a broader scope and global (as opposed to merely European) reach. S. A. Smith, on the other hand, looking beyond the Comintern, offers a stimulating if broad discussion of the wider appeal of the Bolshevik Revolution to the colonial world and the role of radical networks in the transnational circulation of texts, ideas and people. Riddell's chapter offers a similar broad discussion, although one more focused on the Comintern itself, in his examination of the development of the anti-imperialist united front policy in the colonial world. Finally, Kocho-Williams discusses the diplomatic and trade battle between the Britain and the Soviet Union by focusing on the latter's challenge to British India. Here we see example of the strength of this collection as the chapter explores

the various agencies and agents at work, such as Indian communist M.N. Roy and the Indian émigré networks, being placed in their transnational context.

The importance of individuals who traverse radical networks is explored in the second section. Here, the strongest contributions come from authors who leave aside the structures of Comintern to describe the (often messy) radical networks that people moved through. Pujals' chapter looks at the lives of several 'fellow travellers' in Latin American and the Caribbean who were influential in the creation of a 'culture of modernity' in the region. Though these *poputchiki* had different degrees of engagement with International Communism – ranging from personal friendships to membership in anti-imperialist front organisations – their later works bear the signs of their affiliation, indicating the potential of Communism to act as a global force. Lévesque, using memoirs and other autobiographical writings, explores the multifaceted ways Canadian communists were socialised into a movement that was by its very nature transnational through educational institutes, organisations and international trips. Despite the chapter only briefly engaging with the Canadian national question, the importance of the transnational connections made by these individuals are made abundantly apparent. Closing the section, Xiaofei Tu offers an informed discussion of Japanese communist leader Nosaka Sanzo's links to the Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party, though perhaps their methodology stands a little at odds with the rest of the section.

Having built the conceptual context, the third section on 'Race and Colonialism' explicitly starts to discuss the topics in the subtitle of the collection. In their respective chapters, Evan Smith and Drachewych discuss the relationships between the Comintern and the communist parties of Britain and its Dominions. While both chapters use a comparative approach, they use this method in slightly different ways, giving an indication of the potential of the transnational perspective. The latter explores the inconsistencies of Comintern racial policy directives towards the parties of Australia,

South Africa, Canada and New Zealand. The former, on the other hand, utilises the concept of ‘hubs’ to discuss how the anti-colonial rhetoric of the communist parties in Britain and the former two of the aforementioned Dominions were affected not only by the Moscow-centred Comintern, but also by a competing older imperial network centred around London, as well as ‘horizontal’ networks linking Sydney and Johannesburg/Cape Town. The last two chapters shift these questions to Latin America and Southeast Asia. Becker’s chapter engages with the different approaches of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian communists to the ‘Indian Question’ pointing to the degree of interaction between these parties and the Comintern, as well as the role of the rhetoric of indigenous nationalist movements. Xie, on the other hand, seeks to problematise the notion of ‘Chineseness’ in their discussion of the role of China in establishing or inspiring communist movements in the Dutch East Indies, French Indochina and British Malaya.

The fourth and final section examines the Comintern and ‘National Questions’. Here the discussion is dominated by chapters on the communist movement in Canada, which is understandable for a collection published in the *Rethinking Canada in the World* series but might seem rather repetitive for the general reader. Looking beyond the centre-periphery debate surrounding the Comintern, Dyakonova discusses the difficult relationship between the Young Communist League and the Communist Party of Canada as it related to the question of the different ‘language sections’ of the somewhat decentralised Canadian communist movement and the issue of Canadian independence. The question of French Canada is of particular interest and is further explored in McKay’s chapter, which places the issue in the context of the Comintern’s ‘contested legacy’ on the national question as well as the various radical networks that linked Canada to the United States and Moscow. On the other hand, Beaulieu’s chapter offers a more critical, if slightly normative, narrative of Canadian communism and ethnicity at the Lakehead. Belogurova rounds off the section with a discussion on the Chinese

Anti-Imperialist Alliance, a Comintern front organisation active in the Americas that operated with a certain degree of independence. The Comintern acted as a platform for this organisation, which managed to create overlapping, hybrid and horizontal networks in the United States, Canada and Cuba through their conception of national liberation. The collection ends with a brief conclusion and suggestions for further avenues of study.

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**Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, London & New York: Routledge, 2019, ISBN 9780367582500, pp175**

Oleksa Drachewych's book examines the policy of the Communist International (Comintern) on what this organisation called 'the national and colonial question' in general, and in three of Britain's former dominions, South Africa, Canada and Australia in particular.

The topic is important. At the end of the book, in the Epilogue, the author tries to convince his reader that the Comintern's legacy is still relevant today – but there is hardly any need for this, particularly as far as South Africa is concerned. Dominic Tweedie, vice chancellor of South Africa's internet Communist University, starts his list of three documents which, in his view, determined South Africa's history with the 'Comintern's Black Republic Resolution of 1928'.<sup>1</sup> And South African historians of different eras unequivocally call 'the Independent Native Republic' a source of the 'National Democratic Revolution' thesis, which has been the basis of the official policy of the African National Congress (ANC), now South Africa's ruling party.<sup>2</sup> Such influence may be less evident in the other two former dominions today, but there is no doubt that the Comintern's ideas

contributed to the debate around core issues of nationality policy and ethno-national relations there too.

The first two chapters of Drachewych's book present a useful summary of the Comintern's evolving theoretical interpretations of national liberation movements and of its tactics for dealing with them. The author describes fluctuations of the Comintern's approach to colonial issues from its Second Congress (1921) which allowed communists in dependent countries to cooperate with other parties in the struggle against imperialism; to the Sixth (1928) which banned such alliances and introduced the goal of 'independent republics' for colonial peoples, to be inspired and propelled by communist parties alone; and finally to the Seventh (1935) which, in view of the menace of war, demanded that communists joined popular fronts against Nazism. He separates 'colonial' and 'racial' issues in Comintern's policy, probably because the debate on 'race' in the Comintern was started by African Americans and thus required a special consideration. But, of course, such a distinction was artificial, when applied to colonial and dependent countries.

Two recurrent themes in the summary are the Comintern's pressure on communist parties in colonial and dependent countries to pay more attention to colonised peoples on the one hand, and the lack of attention to these issues on the part of the Comintern itself, on the other. The first topic stems from the communists' internationalist ideology, the second, from the Comintern's eurocentrism, of which Drachewych repeatedly accuses the organisation.

Drachewych highlights the crucial importance of personal contributions to the national-colonial debate. He refers, for example, to the role of M.N. Roy, an Indian communist, in the adoption by the Comintern of the policy of working with 'national-liberation', rather than 'bourgeois-democratic' parties in the colonies (which was Lenin's original suggestion at the Second Congress). According to the author, such personalities as Roy, Sen Katayama, a future founder of the Japanese communist party, Ho Chi Minh of the Communist party of Vietnam, and Willi Munzenberg, a prominent German

communist and a founder of the League against Imperialism, played a particularly important role in keeping colonial issues on the Comintern's agenda and in developing the Comintern's policies for communist parties in the colonial world.

In his coverage of the three 'cases' of Comintern's relations with communist parties in the British Dominions Drachewych stresses the overwhelming significance of the Comintern's 'prioritisation' of a particular approach to colonial issues in each of them. Prioritisations changed, sometimes abruptly, in accordance with the Comintern's general political line, but the author concentrates on the period between the Sixth and Seventh Congresses. At that time, for South Africa the Comintern prioritised racial issues. It insisted that the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) worked towards the 'independent native republic'. The Comintern's priority for Canada was its status as a 'secondary imperialist power' and thus the need for the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) to work for a revolution in order to achieve 'full independence' and resolve its ethnicity issues (the importance of migrant workers in the party and the difficulties of attracting French-speaking workers of French Canada, rather than to fight for an 'abstract independence' of the country from Britain (p104). For Australia, too, the Comintern prioritised its status as a 'secondary imperialist' power. Thus, its instruction to the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was to oppose the government's 'White Australia' policy, to fight for the rights of the aboriginal and Melanesian peoples and for self-determination for New Guinea. All three 'prioritisations' happened in the wake of the Sixth congress. Before then the Comintern had no particular policy for any of these three countries. The changes were, as the author rightly notes, associated with the Comintern's stricter policies and tighter control of its member parties in the 1930s, the period which the Comintern defined as the third post-war period of the development of capitalism.

Drachewych does not, however, give any explanation of the reasons for the Comintern's prioritisations. He writes, for example, that 'South Africa was an important country for the Comintern

because of the significance of the Native Republic Thesis and South Africa's prominent racial issues' (p98). But at the end of book the reader is no clearer as to why South Africa was singled out either for racial issues and the implementation of the 'independent native republic' thesis or for the Comintern's harsh treatment of the CPSA's leaders. Australia too had many racial problems, but its communist party was not required, nor did it offer, to implement an independent native republic policy. In the USA these problems were no less severe than in South Africa, and the American communist party was required to implement the Black Belt Republic thesis (the request for this originally came from black American communists themselves), but when it did nothing, its leadership was not sanctioned.

There are other inconsistencies in the book. The author praises the Australian party for its implementation of the Comintern's instructions and for doing so creatively by, for example, recognising the Aboriginals as a colonised population, demanding equal rights for them and participating in the Comintern's various local and international campaigns. He gives details of particular party publications on the Aboriginals, aimed at improving their situation and at educating white workers about them. No such praise goes to the South African party for denouncing racism and for speaking up on the need to improve the situation of black South Africans. The party's efforts to recruit them into the party and to work in their organisations long before the independent native republic resolution, are glossed over. The author does not give the CPSA any points even for the fact that it had black members long before 1928 (sources differ on the numbers).

The reader is left with the impression that Drachewych agrees with all the Comintern's policies and attitudes on colonial issues, no matter the repercussions of their implementation. He mentions the Comintern's 'limited knowledge of Canadian conditions' (p104) and the fact that generally 'European ignorance of colonial affairs hampered the effectiveness of the whole Comintern enterprise' (p33). Yet such limitations do not change the author's view that the Comintern's line was 'correct' or 'right', and the position of its oppo-



nents, 'a mistake'. When speaking of this line he seldom puts 'correct' or 'incorrect' in inverted commas. (e.g. pp107, 115).

Drachewych notes that sudden shifts in the Comintern's policy, its 'mixed messages' and 'contradictory policies damaged' the CPA (pp126, 128, 138), though temporarily. No such damage is mentioned in the case of either Canada or South Africa, although there the Comintern's intervention was greater and more damaging. The Comintern continuously rebuked the CPC for lack of initiative in implementing its line. The author agrees with this assessment of the party's activities and even calls it 'reactionary' for lack of 'variance' in following the Comintern line (p109). This despite the fact that his own list of the Comintern's multiple and extremely detailed instructions to the party (e.g. p110) clearly shows that its interventions left little room for local initiative, even leaving aside the forbidding effect of the censure and punishment of opponents of the line.

The Comintern's interventions in South Africa led to the near collapse of the CPSA, which the author barely mentions (p76). It seems that to Drachewych anything that 'radicalised' the parties under consideration was ultimately good for them whatever the immediate result, and the independent native republic policy was the path to such radicalisation. In his view, the late 1920s-early 1930s was a 'golden age of sorts' for the 'negro question' (p45) exactly because of the Comintern's interventions and because of the introduction of the independent native republic thesis. On the other hand, the Seventh congress (which dropped the independent native republic slogan) was followed by 'decline'. Drachevich seems to attribute the rise and ultimate victory of anticolonialism to the efforts of the Comintern, perhaps because for him the 'Comintern' and 'communism' are near synonyms. Sometimes he uses these terms interchangeably (see his 'Conclusion' and 'Epilogue'). He pegs even the success of anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (including the armed struggle) on the 'independent native republic' (e.g. 157).

There are some notable omissions in the book. Drachewych writes that, 'upon its formation in 1919, the Comintern quickly focused on

the National and Colonial Questions. As time passed, the Comintern succumbed to eurocentrism and Soviet policy aims' (p49). But the Comintern's early interest in the national and colonial questions was also prompted by Soviet policy aims, as the Soviet state had at that time to deal with national movements, uprisings and war in the extremities of the former Tsarist empire. More importantly, there is no analysis of the influence of the Soviet state on the Comintern, either in terms of its general political line, or the internal situation in the organisation. There is a section called 'Priorities of the Soviet Union' in the book, but in fact it just repeats the author's view of the priorities of the Comintern.

The book would have benefited from a more detailed survey of local political and social situations in the three countries under consideration. It would have helped the reader to understand the predicament of the parties, whose leadership could see that the Comintern's policies could be disastrous, but it had to accept and implement them.

The author presents the Comintern's communications with the CPSA in much more detail, than with the CPC and the CPA. This, perhaps, is because he attributes a particular meaning to the independent native republic thesis and its implementation or the lack of it by the CPSA. Yet one cannot not but notice that the chapters on Canada and Australia are written on the basis of local party materials only, with no references to the Comintern archives, while such references abound in the chapter on South Africa. The author should have explained this discrepancy.

There are some easily avoidable mistakes in the text. The author consistently misspells the name of Nikolai Nasonov, a Russian communist and Comintern official. He also calls Berdichev, a well-known Russian (now Ukrainian) town, 'Burdichev' (p80). Endre Sik (p54) was not 'the Soviet Union's most prominent expert on race', and he did not 'write as A. Shiek': Andrei Shiik was just the Russian spelling of his Hungarian name. He also taught at the Communist University of Toilers of the East, rather than at the Lenin School.

It looks, though, as if the author generally does not distinguish between different Comintern's universities, calling them all just 'Lenin Schools' (e.g. p152). He writes that the first Comintern's emissary to South Africa was Paul Merker (p86), while it was actually Boris Idelson – a fact prominently covered in *South Africa and the Communist international; a Documentary History*, which Drachewych quotes extensively. The list could be continued.

The book is, overall, a useful and interesting contribution to the subject, but it would have benefited from further work.

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## Notes

- 1 Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2013, p109.
- 2 I. Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy: Soviet Theory of the National Democratic Revolution and South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 64, 3, 2012, p20.

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**Anne Hartmann, *Ich kam, ich sah, ich werde schreiben*. Lion Feuchtwanger in Moskau 1937. Eine Dokumentation, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017, ISBN 978-3-8353-3152-5, 456pp**

German author Lion Feuchtwanger was one of those western intellectuals who visited Moscow in the late 1930s. Feuchtwanger's visit took place from the beginning of December 1936 to the beginning of February 1937. During his visit, Feuchtwanger met plenty of representatives of Soviet culture and tried to promote the publication of his books in Russian. He was also allowed to interview Stalin, and encouraged to participate in the show trials of Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. After his trip, Feuchtwanger collected his impressions

of the visit in a book that came out in German in early summer 1937 and was soon followed by English, Russian and Spanish translations.

The visits of western intellectuals to the Soviet Union in the 1930s have been a popular research topic in recent years. Feuchtwanger's visit and his book have consequently been assessed in others works on the period: for instance, in Michael David-Fox's *Showcasing the Great Experiment* (2012). German linguist Anne Hartmann, who has published several articles on Feuchtwanger, has considered the background to the visit and the account of it that Feuchtwanger published. The new material she found in the Russian and other archives has been a stimulus for her study, and she has also sought to give her readers an opportunity to become acquainted with these documents. The result is an interesting book which attempts to study Feuchtwanger's visit as a biographical event and as making acquaintance with another culture. Hartmann has also wanted to find out how Feuchtwanger became closer to the Soviet Union and how he reacted to his hosts' proposals and attempts to win him over.

Feuchtwanger was not a committed political intellectual after the First World War, and he stressed that intellectuals were not suited to the hardships of politics. In his books *Erfolg* in 1930 and *Die Geschwister Oppenheim* in 1934 he did however express his concern about the activities of the national socialists. Having ended up in exile in southern France following Hitler's rise to power, Feuchtwanger spoke of the temporary victory of barbarism over reason.

The book describes in detail the interest the Soviet and German communists demonstrated towards Feuchtwanger from 1934 onwards. His invitation to the first Soviet writers' congress in August 1934, his persuasion to participate in the international writers' congress in Paris in July 1935 and the Soviet friends he got after the Paris congress proved of the attempts to get him involved in the anti-fascist work. Participation in Paris congress and acceptance to become an editor in a new German magazine-in-exile *Das Wort* published in Moscow from July 1936 indicated Feuchtwanger's own willingness to get involved in the anti-fascist work. In summer 1935,

his considerations of the Soviet Union as a credible counterforce of fascism became stronger and he connected the victory of reason from irrationalism, stupidity and barbarism with the Soviet Union. He also started to write for the Soviet publications. He, though, emphasized that he was not under any party or ideology.

Hartmann's book sheds light on how Feuchtwanger, through his books and events, became known in the Soviet Union, and how he was enticed with promises of further publications in Russian or making a film of one of his books. During his visit, Feuchtwanger took part in many celebrations, theatrical productions and other presentations. All of his visits and meetings with cultural representatives received plenty of publicity in the Soviet press, and he also negotiated actively regarding the publication or filming of his books.

Following the show trials of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Radek, Feuchtwanger found the sessions tiring, partly due to language problems. He was not convinced that the confessions were enough to prove the guilt of the accused. In the Soviet press, however, he suppressed his doubts and was ready to ascribe all manner of things to Trotsky.

The documents in the book also shed light on the discrepancies in Feuchtwanger's behaviour and opinions. In private discussions with Soviet artists and writers, Feuchtwanger stated that there was no freedom of press and no democracy in the Soviet Union. He was also critical of the Stalin cult. In articles published in the Soviet press, on the other hand, he depicted the Soviet Union as a state based on reason. He also explained the need to understand the necessity of the dictatorship in the face of the threat of war.

According to earlier studies of the episode, the publication in 1936 of André Gide's *Retour de l'U.R.S.S* provided the context for Feuchtwanger's visit. In Hartmann's account, it also figures as an important factor contributing to Feuchtwanger's orientation and reception. The documents reproduced in the book reveal how close Feuchtwanger's private criticism came to the opinions of Gide. He did not, however, share Gide's doubts about the rationality of the Soviet Union and distanced himself from Gide's views in his article in the Soviet press.

Michael David-Fox has emphasised that the strong position Feuchtwanger accorded the Soviet Union in the anti-fascist fight was the motive for Feuchtwanger producing his positive account of the Soviet Union. Feuchtwanger, however, had had concerns regarding his intellectual independence. The documents reproduced here on the discussion he had with Stalin indicate that Stalin's answers convinced him of the independent position of the author under socialism and increased his willingness to commit himself to the Soviet Union.

Hartmann's beautiful treatment of the readerships to whom the book was addressed gives a nuanced picture of Feuchtwanger's intentions. Feuchtwanger hoped that his book would strengthen the anti-fascist united front and to win doubtful western intellectuals to the Soviet cause. In this respect, the book obviously enjoyed a degree of success – or at least Feuchtwanger expressed his satisfaction with the influence of the English version. On the other hand, the book deepened tensions among German emigrants, despite the support that Feuchtwanger received from his old friends. In France, he did not get his response to Gide published. Feuchtwanger hoped that the Russian version would have a critical influence on a Soviet public, and this was also a reason for his willingness to make changes to his manuscript.

In the course of revising the Russian version, Feuchtwanger diminished the merits of Trotsky and strengthened those of Stalin by decreasing or adding the number of adjectives. This, however, did not alter his original idea of presenting Stalin as an organiser and man of the moment, and Trotsky only as a writer. In addition to this, comparisons between Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and between Stalin and Hitler were removed. Feuchtwanger was also willing to leave out his complaints about the fate of political prisoners and to soften his criticisms of Soviet art. The book still presented Stalin and Trotsky side by side, which was contrary to the Soviets' insistence on removing Trotsky's name and pictures everywhere. The characterisation of Stalin was also of a type that Soviet writers were unable to publish. In spite of Feuchtwanger's editing of the text, the book remained a western travel account.

The book came out in an edition of 200,000 copies at the end of November 1937, and the edition sold out in a week. Feuchtwanger was proud of being the only western author who had published his travel account in Russian. He was also satisfied with the fact that he had been able to publish his criticisms of Soviet conformism and censorship. His book, however, quickly disappeared from public view; although not officially banned, the circulation and reception of Feuchtwanger's books in the USSR became soon unsafe. Needless to say, this put paid to Feuchtwanger's hopes of having an impact on the culture of the Soviet Union.

Based on diaries, on reports written by his Soviet hosts, and on articles in a range of publications, Anne Hartmann has drawn a fascinating picture of the development of Lion Feuchtwanger's balancing act between independence and commitment, and between criticism and praise.

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**Alison Light, *A Radical Romance*, London: Penguin Random House, 2019, ISBN: 9780241975350, pp229**

**Sophie Scott-Brown, *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: A Portrait of a People's Historian*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2017, ISBN: 1760460362, pp266**

What is it like to live with someone who in their 'communist unconscious' was apt to wake in the middle of the night to reassure his partner that 'darling, the working class is advancing across the globe'? To cohabit with someone who had been a communist since he was eight years old, had been heavily socialised across the dinner table by numerous communist aunts and uncles (in what he later described as 'family communism') and whose early friendships and personal relationships had been formed almost exclusively by 'the party'? A historian

and intellectual who had written extensively – better than anyone else – about the ‘lost world of British communism’, and long after he left it (in 1956) continued to call friends, students and lovers ‘comrade’?

In this beautifully written memoir, at times deeply moving, at other moments very funny (and a gripping read throughout) Alison Light recounts her relatively short life with Raphael Samuel. Of course, she had to contend with more than his ‘communist unconscious’: he was twenty years older than her and had already lived several lives as communist activist, New Left intellectual, ground-breaking social historian and long-standing tutor of working-class students at Ruskin College. The book reveals his influence on her, and crucially, Light’s influence on him. Initially the relationship was not without difficulty; the generational and class divides between them brought angst and arguments. It took time for her to become accepted by some of his friends (not without condescension on their part), while her mother was sceptical of him and his motives. It seems that neither his friends nor her parents expected the relationship to last. Her time with him included the formative period in her emergence as a writer, but it is also a deeply personal account of the changes in her life from working-class Portsmouth to once-working-class-soon-to-be-gentrified Spitalfields; her feminism and his communist unconscious enjoined in what they hoped would be a ‘shared philosophy of life’.

Before meeting him, she had had spells as a cleaner, tutor and BBC studio manager; had voted for Mrs Thatcher in the 1979 General Election, became the *Spare Rib*’s TV critic and in general had spent time ‘learning the varieties of the English middle classes, fathoming their tribes, their diets, their native habitats’. For those familiar with Raphael Samuel’s research on the Headington Quarrymen, Morris Dancers, communist rituals and the changing aspirations of the inter-war middle classes, we get new insight here on his own habits and customs. Some of these will not surprise those who knew or came across him; always rushing and frequently late for tutorials or meetings: early morning (or late night) phone calls out of the blue, and his natural propensity for collaborative work, often interrupted



by shared meals (and more phone calls). Then there is his propensity for starting new projects and putting on hold unfinished ones. Even his irregular sleeping patterns, often waking at night to carry on writing will not surprise many (he regularly slept in his tutorial room at Ruskin). His 'capacity to listen' and the 'seductive attention' he offered his new and old friends while often appearing 'spellbound' by their answers was something Alison Light experienced on their introduction at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. That was an unusual venue for their meetings which in the early days were often at History Workshop gatherings at Ruskin or in his house in Spitalfields. One of their first dates was spent at the Lumiere cinema to see Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxembourg*.

For Samuel, their love affair (he told her) was a 'new experience'. Given the centrality of 'comradeship' in his intellectual and political activities, getting married was for him 'counter cultural', while one of her friends joked that she had 'embourgeoisised' him. In fact, the marriage liberated them both from previous conventions. For the first time he took regular holidays (and not just, as for their honeymoon, to the Shetland Islands which he combined with a talk to the local Labour Party). They went to Crete, the Canary Islands and Cornwall. Marrying an Englishwoman, he told her, made him feel like a foreigner for the first time in his life: she was helping him to become English. In his writings he had suggested that for interwar Jewish communists, joining the CPGB was partly their way of becoming English. Even if he was sceptical about his religious ties, it remained an important part of his cultural identity. To her he was 'wonderfully foreign'; she enjoyed his cooking, especially the Tzimmes and Borscht, and was moved by his gesticulations and occasional Yiddish inflections.

One of the biggest transformations in her lifestyle was when she moved into his home in Elder St., Spitalfields in the heart of the old 'weaver's parish', where he had been living since 1962. In the prologue to the book, Light sets down the recurring images of that imposing building steeped in social history – as well as the memories of Samuel's more recent past – as she mourned his death in 1996:

I used to dream of Spitalfields more than I ever did of Raphael, in the tormented months of early widowhood. The tall, narrow houses looming over each other, the shadowy alleyways and courts, featured as the monochrome backdrop to a landscape of anxiety and menace, part Fritz Lang, part Hollywood noir, where I wandered distraught (p3).

Samuel had arranged the house to suit his needs: his study, the only room on the ground floor, was next to the front door: a kitchen with small fridge and ancient cooker was the meeting place in which he entertained countless friends, students, and left-wing intellectuals; a spiral staircase led to more rooms with bare wooden floors and bookshelves to the ceiling; elsewhere there was more evidence of his life as historian with prints and pictures, political caricatures, Turkish rugs and a London Corresponding Society coin (symbolising the demand for the reform of parliament) that he had discovered under an old floorboard. She described the house as having a 'Dickensian' feel. The toilet was outside, there was no TV, and central heating was only put in as one of his wedding presents to her.

Light's memoir was published shortly after the first in-depth study of Samuel's work. Sophie Scott-Brown's extensively researched biography provides great context for Samuel's distinctive contribution (despite the absence of an index). She carefully situates his approach as a historian within a broader assessment of his intellectual and political development from precocious schoolboy to student communist and First New Left intellectual through to the History Workshop and his later two volume works, *Patriotism* and *Theatres of Memory*. Drawing on interviews with family members, former students, social movement activists as well as his published writings, she captures his enormous range of enthusiasms, his concern for 'living' history and, of course, his commitment to history from below as a democratic principle. For Samuel, history was a collaborative endeavour, and his contribution went well beyond his own research and writings to encompass numerous workshops, conferences, unofficial supervisions of students and reading groups at his kitchen

table. This last habit was a family tradition; much of his early schooling in Marxism and history was at the house of his uncle Chimen and Aunt Miriam (Abramsky) whose salons in their Parliament Hill home for family and friends were legendary (and described in Sasha Abramsky's *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*).

There is fresh insight on his writing and teaching methods, and the convergence of his intellectual and political commitments at defining moments in left politics, including the birth of the First New Left; the inaugural Women's Liberation Conference in 1970 (Light dates it as 1967) the epic clash in an Oxford church in 1979 between E. P. Thompson and Richard Johnson in the wake of Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike.

It is fair to say that Samuel has sometimes been neglected in comparison to other Marxist historians though his status as (what we would now call) a public intellectual should not be in doubt. He took his work to the public through the *Guardian* 'Agenda' pages, in BBC radio broadcasts, in talks to local history groups and workshops and through his participation – of which he felt a duty as historian – in important debates on the teaching of history in the national curriculum. Scott-Brown makes the point that one reason why Samuel has not had the attention he deserves is that his approach as historian and publication record did not fit easily into academic convention. This, of course, says more about the narrow world of academic life – which has worsened in the years since his death – than about him. He would not have had to worry about 'impacts'. His research and writings were vast – as evident in his enormous archive at the Bishopsgate Institute near his former home. Some criticisms of an overly sentimental view of the working classes have merit, while it would have been stimulating to hear his views today on the ongoing arguments about the historical significance of statues and public memorials to which the Black Lives Matter movement has given a renewed sense of urgency.

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Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers. Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-78962-080-1, 272pp.

Both at home and abroad, French railway workers have a formidable (some might say irksome) reputation for industrial militancy. Their great strikes, which paralysed the national rail network in 1947, 1968 and 1995, were an important and spectacular feature of the wider socio-political upheavals of those years. However, it has been the historians' settled view that, between the wars, French *cheminots* were much less militant than other workers, most notably the coal miners of the north-east and the metalworkers of the Parisian *banlieue rouge*. Indeed, Thomas Beaumont's new study of communist railway workers is bookended by humiliating defeats: the spectacular failure of the 1920 strike, then the futile attempt, in November 1938, to stop Edouard Daladier from decreeing the abolition of the 40-hour week, one of the great gains of the Front populaire only two years previously. Railway workers had obediently served the French occupation of the Ruhr and were conspicuous by their absence from the euphoric wave of strikes and factory occupations that followed electoral victory in May 1936. During this period, *cheminots* bore the brunt of an authoritarian management enthusiastically backed by state power, as illustrated by abundant police surveillance documents.

However, Beaumont shows that communist-led militancy was a feature of industrial relations on the French railways during this time, and took forms other than strike action. Certainly, the vote at the Congress of Tours in 1920 to adhere to the Third International did not lead to communist domination of the French left: like the PCF, the breakaway CGTU trade union federation was dominated immediately afterwards by the socialist and reformist *frère-ennemi*. However, Beaumont explicates how, in the course of the 1920s, communists on the railways moved from workplace propaganda campaigns about distant struggles in China or the United States to building up their influence by engaging with the immediate concerns of workers,

starting with the very urgent issue of safety. One of the many valuable revisionist points made by Beaumont is that the ‘class-against-class’ period, far from being divisive and debilitating, galvanised communist militants who adopted a successful policy of ‘hostile participation’ on the consultative management committees that had been set up in 1921 with the aim of creating a consensual ‘social contract’ between employer and employee. Although in a minority nationally, communist railway workers gathered influence in hubs that would soon become strongholds of the PCF: Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, highly symbolically a suburb of Tours, returned a Red mayor until 2020. The CGTU’s federation of *cheminots* also provided historic leaders of the PCF, most notably Pierre Semard, who represented a new kind of ‘bolshevised’ proletarian cadre. By 1936, communist *cheminots* were well placed to move from ‘hostile participation’ to playing a highly influential role in the creation of the nationalised SNCF. If they were absent from the wave of strikes and occupations, this was in part because they had been pioneers of the sort of industrial democracy that the Front Populaire endeavoured to generalise.

This is a very rich and stimulating study, which draws upon an impressive range of sources. One aspect of communists on the railways that could merit further investigation is the place of the *cheminot* in the communist imaginary. We normally think of the miner – embodied by *le fils du peuple* himself, Maurice Thorez – or the metal worker as Promethean figures of the Proletariat. What is it about the figure and function of the *cheminot* that makes him (and occasionally her) worthy of a place in this modern pantheon?

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