



Friday 29 June 2012

Seeking salvation, behind society's back

**Two recent books on nineteenth-century radical movements illuminate the victories and numerous defeats of mass struggles to transform society.**

James Heartfield

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Jacques Rancière, these days an august professor of rebel philosophy, was in the 1970s a militant theorist of the far-left Gauche Prolétarienne. Rancière had been a follower of the structuralist and Communist Party supporter Louis Althusser, but decided that Althusser's rigid 'scientific' philosophy 'described the agents of capitalist relations of production as necessarily caught in the mesh of the ideology produced by the system that kept them in their place'. Rancière rebelled against the idea that the working-class people were 'blind, trapped by the dominant ideology, and that only scientists [read, Althusserian structuralists] were able to perceive the logic of this circle and could lead them out of their subjection'.

Reacting against the substitution of Marxist ideas of what the workers *ought* to be thinking, Rancière decided to find out what the workers really were thinking. His studies focused on nineteenth-century workers, perhaps because they had been so pointedly written up by Karl Marx in his celebrated account of the revolutions of 1848, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. (See also Marx's *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*.) Marx explained that the militant workers' movement of Paris had made a revolution in February 1848, only to lose out to the demotic Louis Bonaparte, whose seeming ability to rise above all factions, promising much to all, enabled him to take power in a *coup d'état* and gave Marxists the word 'Bonapartism'.

As it lost out, writes Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the workers' movement 'throws itself into doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks and workers' associations, hence into a movement in which it renounces the revolutionising of the old world by means of the latter's own great, combined resources, and seeks rather to achieve its salvation behind society's back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence and hence necessarily suffers shipwreck'.

Aiming to recover the real record of the workers from Marx's seemingly dismissive judgement, Rancière mines deeply among the archives of the Saint-Simonian socialists of the 1830s, the records of the post-1848 Council for the Encouragement of Workers' Associations, the Catholic labour journal, *L'Atelier*, the records of the utopian Icarian colonies established in America after 1848, and the letters and journals of participants,

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notably Louis Gabriel Gauny and the schoolmaster Joseph Jacotot. 'I set out looking for wild expressions of revolt, but I came across politely written texts that workers be treated as equals', reflects Rancière today, adding: 'For the workers of the 1830s, the question was not to demand the impossible, but to realise it themselves, to take back the time that was refused them... to free themselves from the very exercise of work, or by winning from nightly rest time the time to discuss, write, compose verses, or develop philosophies.'

The result, one has to say, is mixed. Rancière admits that today's reader 'may well ask what a strange object she or he has in her hands' and that 'the book seemed to lose its way on their wandering paths'. This is a very dense text as Rancière, seemingly unwilling to interpret or even distil the great wealth of evidence he has uncovered, gives us it all.

There are some fascinating stories here, though. The extent of the workers' association, their support from the Committee for the Encouragement of Workers' Associations and the account of their eventual failure is remarkable. Critics said that 'mad theoreticians induced workers to believe that they could dispense with masters'. The result was a wide variety of ventures, like the Workingmen's Association of Shoemakers, the publishing company Fraternal Industry, 'with government help in purchasing a print shop, orders for schoolbooks and printings for parliamentarians', the United Industries Company, and associations of iron founders and tailors.

The associations do seem to fit Marx's description of achieving salvation behind society's back, within its limited conditions of existence. 'Our aim is not to improve our present position as workers', declares one: 'What we want is to find ourselves, at the end, in possession of a sum of capital sizeable enough to have a real impact on our position.' The fraternal tailors have the clause 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' in their constitution, with the proviso, 'Until this principle can be put into practice... the inspection committee, at the proposal of the manager, will determine the price of workmanship'.

Though these associations did have official help in the days after the 1848 revolution, they were resented by officials who thought that a 'lack of internal order is superabundant proof that the worker needs an authority imposed upon him'. Struggling to compete with better-capitalised rival concerns, the saddlemakers 'imposed on themselves deductions of 10 and 20 per cent from their salaries'. These economies were not enough, though, as the government threatened to stop buying from them for the cavalry, just as the national institute for the disabled stopped buying from the association of surgical instrument-makers.

The subprefect of Douai judges that the workers 'made themselves employers, and they have replaced the exploitation of man by man with the exploitation of the worker by a subsidised oligarchy'. In time, the associations were taken over by more conventional bosses, like Antoine, the manager of the armchair-joiners who explains, 'I made my own little *coup*

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*d'état*. Similarly, the old patron, Desoye, buys out the iron-founders association to whom he had originally sold his works.

In 1866, an Enquiry into the Societies of Cooperation concluded: 'In 1848, workers misconstrued their business. They thought that labour was everything, and they completely overlooked capital. We have moved away from those ideas ... If we have seen such growth, the reason is that we came to realise that capital was necessary for the emancipation of the worker.'

Still, just five years after this report, the workers were again in control of Paris, after the capitalists fled a Prussian invasion, leaving the city's defence to the Commune of 1871.

Rancière sets out earlier utopian-socialist experiments by the followers of Henri, Comte de Saint-Simon, which prefigured the workers' associations around 1830. The Saint-Simonians worked like a church, proselytising for their new religion, 'the Doctrine', and setting up 'houses of association'. In one projected house of association in the eighth ward, we find that the Bonheurs are nervous that the association will be 'a clever way to exploit them'. The cabinet makers agree that 'for a man who earns a good day's wage, it would not be very logical to join up with a man who cannot or does not know how to earn as much'. The problem that we would today call 'welfare dependency' undermines the associations, as 'many of those who join think that we give out charity, and come to us to get it'. One of the Saint-Simonians, Parent, says the workers 'should not expect alms from the Doctrine, that has come to abolish them', but though 'we know that alms demoralise the people... at the moment we have no other means of helping the unfortunates that come to us'.

The Saint-Simonians were 'young polytechnicians, lawyers, doctors, and other young men of good family who... [were] giving up ready-made business careers and preferments to dedicate their abilities to improving the material and moral condition of the labouring class', explains Rancière, though he also fears that their associations were 'reproducing the ruling class'. The middle-class full-timers get a wage of 80 to 100 francs a month from the Doctrine for their apostolate, but as Rancière explains, they are reluctant to promote working-class recruits. Like the workers' associations that came later, the houses of association failed because while they created a refuge from the 'egotistical' world, they were not strong enough to protect the associates, nor did they prevent similar hierarchies from being recreated within.

Melancholic, too, is Rancière's account of the Icarian communities built in the American West, who fall out over the hard chores and the mismatch between reality and the dreams of liberation that motivate these emigrants. When one Icarian proposes that the community 'must begin to familiarise ourselves with the idioms and habits of commerce', Rancière thinks that this prefigures 'the problematic and rhetoric of the communist state capitalists of 1920', albeit in a ridiculous way.

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Dwelling on the failures of these socialist experiments seems to confirm the judgement that it is not such a bad idea to edit your material down a bit. Still, Rancière's approach does correct that hero-centric view of history that sees only the victors. There is something compelling about the way that these nineteenth-century French workers and socialists kept their dreams alive, even in the face of defeat.

Rancière has a good eye for the apparently fanciful dreams that, all the same, shed light on the possibilities of change. Gauny's hope that aeronautics will free people from the misery of train travel is striking: 'These aerial transports, admirable in their economy and wondrous flight, will soar over the skies like flocks of gigantic birds... Then agriculture, clearing away the ruins of the railroads, will give the world back its sites and its forests... employing workers brutalised by the terrible locomotives... As for the aeronauts, they will organise themselves in accordance with the fraternal pact that will rule society ... then the rail lines, ripped up and covered with vegetation, after a few years will leave behind only the distant memory of their speculations and catastrophes.'

David Black and Chris Ford's account of the Chartist uprising of 1839 is also written in part to save these agitators from the condescending judgement of an Althusserian, in this case Gareth Stedman-Jones, whose 'fear of agency' cannot recognise Chartism's self-conscious attempt to overthrow 'old Corruption'. *1839: The Chartist Insurrection* is altogether a more rewarding read than Rancière's for its unapologetic focus on people who are making their own history. Black and Ford make the case that the earlier 1839 uprising came closer to overthrowing the existing order than the later challenge of 1848. They situate the movement in the disappointment of the Reform Act of 1832 that gave the vote to middle-class property owners, but not to the working men who protested alongside them.

Black and Ford make a good case that, though the technology they worked with was not for the most part industrial, the core of the Chartist movement was much more than an outgrowth of radicalism. Of course, it was true that their Charter was a series of democratic demands - adult male suffrage, annual elections, paid Members of Parliament. On the other hand, popular among them was Gracchus Babeuf's argument that the democratic revolutions in America and France left 'the institutions of property' intact as 'germs of the social evil to ripen in the womb of time'. The common ambition among the Welsh miners that the owners be made to work their own mines tells us that their struggle for democracy was indeed mixed up with a class struggle between owners and hands.

As the authors show, the movement argued hard about how far it should go if its great petition, the Charter, on presentation to parliament, should be refused - as it was. The Chartist Convention, a national organisation with elected delegates, debated the use of 'Ulterior Measures' in that case.

George Julian Harney - anticipating modern Sinn Fein's slogan 'an armalite in one hand and

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a ballot paper in the other' by 150 years – called on his audience to carry 'a musket in one hand and a petition in the other'. Threatened with prosecution, many in the audience testified that he had in fact said 'a biscuit in one hand...'. Arguing for the Ulterior Measures, Feargus O'Connor promised that 'it would be a war of capital against labour, and capitalists would soon find out that labour was the only real capital in the world'.

Still, Black and Ford do not flatter the Chartists unduly, nor make them into cartoon heroes. All the weaknesses of the organisation are confronted here. Throughout the summer of 1839, there were a number of protests in towns across the north of England, notably Newcastle, and in Wales and Scotland, while many smaller groups took up the call to arm themselves. The planned general strike, or sacred month, though, was poorly executed and patchily observed. In some confusion and disarray, the Convention voted to dissolve itself after a number of setbacks.

As it turned out, the leaders' retreat only opened the floodgates of a movement that was determined to fight on. Black and Ford tell the story of General Napier, who led the militia against the Chartists, though he was himself sympathetic to their cause, if not their methods. On 6 August 1839, Napier wrote: 'The plot thickens. Meetings increase and are so violent, and arms so abound, I know not what to think. The Duke of Portland tells me that there is no doubt of an intended general rising.' But Napier's judgement is compelling: 'Fools! We have the physical force, not they.'

Black and Ford tell a heartwrenching story of attempted insurrections in Bradford, Newcastle and, most pointedly, in Newport in south Wales, where the movement came to a head. The insurrection was led by the tragic figure of John Frost, who himself was hoping to dampen the movement down, explaining at his trial that 'so far from leading the working men of south Wales, it was they who led me, they asked me to go with them, and I was not disposed to throw them aside'. Though the Chartists did succeed in taking the streets and the Westgate, their superior numbers were not enough to beat the special constabulary's better organisation.

All over England, there were risings that failed to meet up, followed by suppression of the movement and a witch-hunt of the organisers. Some escaped, like Devyr, while John Frost was caught and tried – and would have been hanged but that the sentence was commuted to transportation (itself a sign that the authorities feared worse if they killed him). George Julian Harney concluded that 'organisation is the next thing to be looked into.'

**James Heartfield's** [\*Unpatriotic History of the Second World War\*](#) is published by Zero Books in September.

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