

## REVIEWS

Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*  
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DYLAN RILEY

### PROPERTY LEADING THE PEOPLE?

The notion of bourgeois revolution—the idea that capitalist development has been intimately linked to the seizure and transformation of the state by rising class forces—has been fiercely contested over the past half-century. The political stakes in interpreting the cycle of events that opens with the Dutch Revolt and English Civil War, and continues with the American and French Revolutions, the Italian Risorgimento, German Unification, the Meiji Restoration and the American Civil War, are correspondingly high. Neil Davidson's *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* is a lively and engagingly written survey of this vast historiographical, theoretical and political terrain. Davidson sets out to provide an intellectual history of the concept, from the first intimations of a 'social interpretation' of the English Civil War—James Harrington's analysis in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656)—to its elaboration in the Marxian tradition and subsequent revisionist and counter-revisionist challenges. But he also offers a running criticism of the ideas he surveys, and in the 150-page conclusion proposes his own reconstruction of the concept, framed in terms of the general dynamics of transition from one mode of production to another.

Davidson is an erudite Scot, the author of *Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (2000) and *Discovering the Scottish Revolution, 1692–1746* (2003), which aimed to establish 'the hitherto unidentified bourgeois revolution' north of the border. He was also, until its implosion in late 2013, a member of the British SWP, a Trotskyist group whose distinguishing feature was the claim,

*contra* Trotsky, that from 1928 onward Soviet Russia should be regarded as a capitalist country; and that subsequent communist revolutions—China, Vietnam, Cuba and so forth—similarly cleared the way for state capitalism. As Davidson frankly states at the outset, the motivation for the present book is, first, to show that these twentieth-century revolutions were indeed, contrary to appearance and self-perception, bourgeois ones. Secondly, he aims to show that the success of the bourgeois revolutions demonstrates the viability of the insurrectionary road for those who wish to see capitalism replaced by socialism. Like their ‘bourgeois equivalents’, revolutionary Marxists today face objective conditions—the forces of production, which for Davidson play an independent propulsive role in historical development—that are ripe for transition to a new form of society. The circumstances in which he first sketched out his views on the bourgeois revolution supplied a third motive: this was a 2004 Deutscher Prize debate, in which Davidson defended the concept against Benno Teschke, who argued along broadly the same lines as Robert Brenner that it had no basis in historical reality. The construction of *How Revolutionary?* is thus dogmatically driven: to prove a set of convictions held prior to investigation of the historical evidence, rather than using that evidence to test a preliminary hypothesis. This leads to a misshapen structure, long stretches of which have little to do with the subject in hand; but it does not deprive the whole of an impressive energy and ambition. As ever, a flawed ideology need not be an impediment to fresh or original lines of thought or research, and may even be a stimulus to them.

*How Revolutionary?* is, as Davidson puts it, ‘an exercise in the history of ideas’, offering a four-part genealogy of thinking on the concept, rather than a fresh analysis of the historical events themselves. The tone is set by an opening meditation on Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. The first section, tracking the pre-history of the concept, identifies a classical idea of revolution, from Aristotle to Machiavelli, as a purely political, cyclical process, in which the rise and fall of successive regimes—democratic, monarchical, oligarchical—leaves underlying economic relations unchanged. The class struggles of seventeenth-century England provided the basis for a new ‘social interpretation’ of revolution, first articulated by Harrington, who claimed that the balance of power depended on that of property. The transfer of freeholds to ‘the yeomanry, or middle people’ had left them ‘much unlinked from dependence upon their lords’, with concomitant political effects: ‘Natural revolution happeneth from within, or by commerce, as when a government is erected upon a balance, that for example of a nobility or a clergy, through the decay of their estates comes to another balance, which alteration in the root of property leaves all into confusion, or produces a new branch of government according to the kind or nature of the root.’

In Scotland where, Davidson argues, feudal relations persisted despite the Union until the defeat of the Jacobite lords at Culloden in 1746, the intellectuals of a nascent bourgeoisie were offered a unique opportunity to theorize a capitalist 'revolution from above' in the absence of a proletarian threat 'from below'; whence Smith's conceptualization of the four modes of subsistence, the ages of hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce. But Davidson singles out Smith's precursor, the ex-Jacobite James Steuart, whose *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (1767) discussed the 'violent convulsions' by which 'a wealthy populace has broken their chains to pieces, and overthrown the very foundations of the feudal system' in England, while imposing new conditions upon those over whom the lords had ruled: 'That revolution must then mark the purging of the lands of superfluous mouths, forcing those to quit their mother earth, in order to retire to towns and villages, where they may usefully swell the numbers of free hands and apply to industry.' Smith, Hume and Steuart were familiar to Antoine Barnave, the Jacobin-turned-Royalist whose 1792 'Introduction to the French Revolution', written in jail as he awaited the guillotine, further advanced the idea of a movement from economic to social to political change:

Once the [mechanical] arts and commerce have succeeded in penetrating the people and creating a new means of wealth in support of the productive classes, a revolution in political laws is prepared. Just as the possession of land gave rise to the aristocracy, industrial property increases the power of the people: they acquire their liberty, they multiply, they begin to influence affairs.

Thus, Davidson argues, a proto-theory of bourgeois revolution had been in the making for nearly two hundred years before the term was coined by Louis Blanc and the followers of Saint-Simon in the late 1830s. Yet just at this moment, when 'the proletariat emerged as a wholly distinct class in society'—with the July Revolution in France and the struggle over the Reform Bill in England—'the bourgeoisie began to abandon its self-identity as a revolutionary class.' Indeed, 'the more securely embedded the capitalist system became', the more bourgeois thinkers retreated from social concepts of revolution; Macaulay was typical in describing them as struggles over 'liberty', or the achievement of constitutional government, rather than 'property', or the unshackling of a new economic order. The exception, Davidson suggests, was Tocqueville, who famously described the period of 1789 to 1830 as 'a struggle to the death between the Ancien Régime, its traditions, memories, hopes and men, as represented by the aristocracy, and the New France, led by the middle class.' *How Revolutionary?* ascribes Tocqueville's independence of mind to his aristocratic background, with the 'zeal of a convert' for ideas that were alien to his class.

With the entrance of Marx and Engels in the 1840s, Davidson arrives at the nub of his argument with the so-called 'political Marxists': Teschke, Charles Post, Ellen Meiksins Wood, George Comminel and (though he has eschewed the term) Robert Brenner. As Davidson summarizes their position: Marx and Engels initially arrived at the concept of bourgeois revolution by combining a Smithian account of the rise of capitalism within feudal society with the French liberal historians' class-struggle model of revolution, to explain how the bourgeoisie could overcome the absolutist obstacles to its ascendancy. From the late 1850s, however, the mature Marx's concept of modes of production allowed him to identify the transformation of England's existing ruling class into one that depended on a new, capitalist form of exploitation; the events that Marx and Engels called bourgeois revolutions were irrelevant to this process, the concept serving merely 'to bolster the undeserved reputation of the bourgeoisie as the vanguard of social progress against feudalism', while obscuring the reality that the subordinate classes were subject to more intense exploitation than ever. Brenner, Davidson suggests, thinks that Marx simply dropped the concept after drafting the *Grundrisse* in 1857–58; Comminel that, regrettably, he retained it.

Against this, *How Revolutionary?* argues that, far from being an undigested residue of early liberal influences, it was an application of 'the core principles of historical materialism'—indeed, 'the Marxist theory of history required a concept of bourgeois revolution', which Marx and Engels duly formulated. The brief 1859 Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', which Davidson takes as the central statement of Marx's thought, crystallized a theory of historical development in which 'the material forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production', allowing Marx and Engels to understand the rising bourgeoisie as a historically revolutionary force at the very mid-nineteenth-century moment when the class itself was losing this self-consciousness. Admittedly, they touched on the question sketchily and in passing. In *The German Ideology*, when contradictions arose between 'the productive forces and the form of intercourse', they 'necessarily on each occasion burst out in revolution'. In the *Manifesto*—where 'feudal relations of property became so many fetters' that 'had to be burst asunder'—1848 Germany was portrayed as being 'on the eve of a bourgeois revolution' that would be carried out under more advanced conditions than England in the seventeenth century or France in the eighteenth, and so would be 'but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution'. The 1850 Address to the Communist League declared its task as being to 'make the revolution permanent, until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power.' By contrast, *The Class Struggles in France* argued later the same year that 'it is only the rule

of the bourgeoisie which serves to tear up the material roots of feudal society and level the ground, thus creating the only possible conditions for a proletarian revolution.'

Nevertheless, Davidson salvages a set of Marxist propositions on the conditions of possibility for bourgeois revolutions. First, capitalist forces of production had to be developed to a point where they were being held back by 'feudal' relations. Davidson argues that the mature views of Marx and Engels on the transition to capitalism and bourgeois revolution had developed by 1852, and did not change substantially thereafter. The 1859 Preface, though it emphasized structure rather than agency, essentially took forward the *Manifesto's* non-deterministic concept of feudal fetters burst asunder. The second condition was the existence of a social force capable of removing those relations, which didn't need to be the bourgeoisie itself; Marx and Engels offered varying assessments of the revolutionary vocations of the different national bourgeoisies—the German treated in particularly scathing terms—and after 1852 grew increasingly sceptical about its role.

Under the Second International, however, a 'studied ambivalence' took hold towards the whole question of revolution, especially within the hegemonic SPD. If the 1840s debates had focused on the situation in Germany, the coming Russian revolution was the central question by the 1890s. It was Lenin who led the turn toward a more classical conception by interpreting the uprising of 1905 as a bourgeois revolution that 'could not be led by the bourgeoisie', given its reactionary alliance with the Tsarist state; only the proletariat and the peasantry could bring about a bourgeois revolution in Russia. Trotsky of course went further. From Parvus, he borrowed the idea that the Russian bourgeoisie was distinctively reactionary, and the Russian proletariat distinctively revolutionary, because of the absence of any solid middle stratum in the Russian cities; from Kautsky, surprisingly, he drew the idea that a revolution in the East might be the spark that would set off a world revolution extending to the West; critically, however, given Russia's economic backwardness, socialist revolution could only survive there with the material, financial and technological support of socialism in advanced western countries.

With the Stalinization of the Third International, these more sophisticated theories were sidelined. Stalin revived in more dogmatic form the commonsense 'stageism' of the Second International, which held that each country must go through its own national-democratic revolution before passing on to the stage of socialism. Stalin made an absolute distinction between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions, turning these 'stages' into a rigid series of inevitable steps that could not be bypassed. The political logic was to force the young communist parties into alliance with their national bourgeoisies—to catastrophic effect, above all in China in 1927,

where the CCP was politically disarmed as Chiang Kai-shek crushed the workers' uprising in Shanghai. Against this dogma, Davidson pits Trotsky's later theory of combined and uneven development, suggesting a basis for socialist revolution outside the advanced-capitalist core, and—above all—Gramsci's concept of 'revolution from above', offering an understanding of Italian and German unification as alternative versions of bourgeois revolution, in which non-bourgeois forces clear the way for capitalist advance. Yet the Stalinist orthodoxy, Davidson suggests, has exerted far more influence over the 'Marxist notion of bourgeois revolution' than Marx and Engels did. Its theoretical weakness has given opponents—revisionist historians, world-systems theorists, 'political Marxists'—good reason to claim this is the only possible version of 'bourgeois revolution' and to keep the complexities of the classical Marxist tradition hidden from view.

This sets the stage for Davidson's review of post-war debates, classified as 'revisions, reconstructions, alternatives'. The revisionist challenge is discussed by way of two anti-Marxist polemics from the 1950s: Hugh Trevor-Roper on the English Civil War and Alfred Cobban on the French Revolution. Trevor-Roper aimed his fire at Tawney's claim that the English Revolution was driven forward by a rising capitalist gentry, pitted against a court-linked group of creditors; to the contrary, Trevor-Roper argued that Cromwell and his followers represented a declining, traditionalist gentry, and that furthermore, these events had virtually no relevance for the rise of capitalism in England. Those who claimed the Civil War was a bourgeois revolution had to show not just that capitalism was more advanced in 1700 than in 1600 but that the men who made the revolution aimed at that result, and that it wouldn't have been attained otherwise. Cobban pointed to the background of leaders of the French Revolution—lawyers and writers, rather than capitalist businessmen—and suggested that French capitalism in the pre-revolutionary period was more advanced than the Marxist case acknowledged; the Revolution may have slowed its development rather than promoted it. *How Revolutionary?* moves swiftly over 'reconstructions' of the concept—Tom Nairn, Arno Mayer and Perry Anderson are cited, though only the last has addressed the question of bourgeois revolution—and spends only a little longer on Immanuel Wallerstein's rejection of it; world-systems theory is praised for its compatibility with the SWP notion of state capitalism, but scolded for its Smithian account of trade as the generator of a sixteenth-century 'capitalist world economy' and its dismissal of what Wallerstein dubs the 'so-called industrial revolution'.

It is not until Chapter Eighteen that the main target of *How Revolutionary?* comes fully into focus: the analysis of Robert Brenner and his colleagues. In contrast to the broad-ranging but superficial discussion of thinkers up to this point, Davidson here supplies a substantive account and critique,

with a salute to Brenner's work: 'an intellectual achievement remarkable for its internal consistency and explanatory power'; 'no attempt to construct a defensible version of the theory of bourgeois revolution can avoid responding to the challenge it poses.' He sets out Brenner's account of the contingency of capitalism's origins in England where, uniquely, market-dependent 'free' labour and competing exploiters were brought into existence: English lords, unable to re-enserv their peasants after the demographic catastrophe of the fourteenth century or to extract revenues from a strengthened state, instead imposed leases that forced their proto-capitalist tenant farmers into innovative exploitation of landless wage labour. There were thus no 'feudal fetters' left to break by the 1640s, since agrarian capitalism was already in place—the upshot of late-medieval class struggles, rather than of the contradiction between forces and relations of production dictated by Davidson's reading of Marx's 1859 Preface. Wood's *Origins of Capitalism* drives this further, arguing that the concept of bourgeois revolution is hopelessly confused, unclear even whether it is a cause or an effect of capitalist development. Brenner has been more cautious: it would be 'premature' to say there was no connection between 'the rise of agrarian capitalism within an aristocratic and landlord shell and the mid-seventeenth century conflicts'.

Davidson charges Brenner with adopting a view of human nature close to that of Hayek in *The Fatal Conceit*: egalitarian and collectivist, formed by millennia of hunter-gathering, and only submitting to more productive market relations when forced to do so. A Hayekian Marxism is no advance on the neo-Smithian one, for it means Brenner cannot explain how agents might have seen market participation as an opportunity rather than a form of compulsion, and obliges him to ignore the 'prolonged process of class differentiation among the peasantry' in the late-medieval period which produced the precursors to the commercially oriented tenant-farmers so central to his story. What is more, Brenner's view has devastating political implications for Davidson, since: 'If feudalism did not generate an internal dynamic tending toward its breakdown, then we can forget about the inherent contradictions of class societies, including our own.' Against this, Davidson seconds Alan Carling's claim that European feudalism would 'almost inevitably' have produced capitalism at some point—with the happy implication that capitalism will almost inevitably do the same for socialism.

Having cleared the ground, Davidson sets out his own position on the critical issues of agency and outcome. While not necessarily 'a seizure of state power by a revolutionary bourgeoisie', a bourgeois revolution can be recognized by its two major consequences: a society in which capitalist relations of production dominate the economy, and the construction of a national state committed to competitive accumulation. Viewed in 'consequentialist' terms, the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the

American Revolution and Civil War, the Italian Risorgimento and German Unification are all bourgeois revolutions. Following Tony Cliff, founder of the SWP and its timeless presiding spirit, Davidson then extends the category to include the overthrow of capitalism in Russia, China, Vietnam and Cuba, and of colonial regimes or monarchies in Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. He draws a hard and fast line between social and political revolutions—the first transforming society, while the second merely alter control of the state—although a failed social revolution may result in a political one: Bolivia in 1952, Portugal in 1974, Eastern Europe in 1989 and, presumably, the Arab world in 2011.

In a sprawling final section, *How Revolutionary?* sets out five preconditions for ‘an era of bourgeois revolution’ and offers some historical considerations on each. The first precondition is, predictably, a contradiction between the forces and relations of production, in evidence in Europe since the late thirteenth century, in Davidson’s view. Second is the existence of capitalism as a potential alternative system, even if it is located elsewhere in the world. Third, pre-capitalist states, whether feudal or tributary, must be unable to prevent the development of capitalism as an alternative means of social organization, as the Qing Dynasty was able to do. Fourth, the existence of revolutionary agents, though these need not necessarily be capitalists themselves; ‘non-capitalist sectors’ of the bourgeoisie—lawyers, journalists, cultural producers—could be better placed to articulate the common interests of a rising class. Fifth, some mobilizing ideology was required, though this could crystallize around religion, democratic freedom, national independence or socialism itself.

Finally, *How Revolutionary?* proposes a periodization and a typology: revolutions ‘from below’ and ‘from above’. Davidson identifies three main waves of bourgeois revolutions, punctuated by two somewhat idiosyncratic turning points: 1763, which he claims to be the moment of ‘systemic irreversibility’ when capitalism as world system was secured through the victory of England over France in the Seven Years’ War; and 1928, marking the consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. The first wave came prior to 1763, when the future of capitalism was still uncertain, and were mostly ‘revolutions from below’, where the masses themselves were the main actors: the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War and—bucking the periodization—the French Revolution, which occurred after Davidson’s 1763 ‘moment of systemic irreversibility’, but was nevertheless a revolution from below. By contrast, the transformation of Scotland after 1746 was a revolution from above that occurred before the 1763 watershed. In the nineteenth century, typology and periodization are more closely aligned: the second wave were all revolutions from above, the classic instances being German Unification, the Risorgimento and the Meiji Restoration. Here ‘the dignity

of action' was reserved for the state and the forces that it can bring into play, due to property owners' fear of popular insurgency, 'now heightened by the greater social presence of the working class among the ranks of "the people"'. Davidson's third wave, after 1928, saw the return of bourgeois revolutions from below which, 'suffering from an extraordinary form of "false consciousness"', swept through the ex-colonial world, paradoxically waving the banner of socialist revolution. Davidson ends with some characteristically generous but unstructured reflections on history, mortality and human endeavour in an Edinburgh cemetery, between Hume's mausoleum and a monument to Scottish soldiers who fought for Lincoln in the 'revolution from above' of 1860–65.

Epic in scale, *How Revolutionary?* is by any standards a significant achievement. Its intellectual scope is commendably wide-ranging; no one else has put together such a broad field of references on this subject, or conjoined such widely dispersed historical and theoretical arguments. In addition, Davidson discusses virtually every key issue in Marxist political sociology, sweeping from the tributary mode to the nation-state, the differentiation of the peasantry to the revolution *en permanence*. For all this, he should be warmly thanked. Yet its quality as intellectual history is more uneven. In part this is due to the author's habit of discussing ideas decontextualized from the thinker's overall body of work, while the thinkers themselves are disembedded from their social and historical contexts. The inability to study a corpus of writing as a whole, rather than select quotations from it for the purposes of an argument, is a widespread failing in the contemporary writing of intellectual history; but there are other distortions, too, more closely linked to Davidson's particular standpoint.

Thus the first section of *How Revolutionary?*, dealing with the pre-history of ideas of bourgeois revolution, discusses a broad span of writers from Machiavelli to Tocqueville, via the French Physiocrats, the Scottish Historical School, Paine, Burke, Saint-Simon and Macaulay, across a hundred-odd pages enlivened by long and vivid quotations. But not all these thinkers have an obvious place here: Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Hume and Millar might be relevant to the question of 'commercial society', but had little to say with direct bearing on bourgeois revolution. On the other hand, Davidson scarcely touches on the French liberal historians—Guizot and, above all, Thierry and Mignet—who demonstrably influenced Marx and Engels the most in their conceptions of it. Guizot is dispatched in a couple of minimizing pages, while Thierry and Mignet are all but ignored. An attractive feature of this part of the book is its discussion of successive thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, for whom Davidson displays a national and temperamental affinity that does him credit; but it has strictly speaking only a rather indirect relationship to his subject.

The section on Marx and Engels, and the fate of ‘bourgeois revolution’ within the Second International through to the thirties, is more balanced in terms of the thinkers covered, though it omits both Labriola and Sorel; Benjamin, who seems never to have used or reflected on the idea, is dragged into the narrative, to all appearances purely on the basis of the author’s fondness for him. But how plausible is Davidson’s reconstruction of the ‘theory’ of Marx and Engels? The concept of bourgeois revolution, although certainly present in their work, is hardly central to it. It is conspicuously absent from the place where Davidson most wants to see it: the 1859 Preface to the ‘Critique of Political Economy’. One of Marx’s lengthiest discussions of the term comes as a digression in the course of a swingeing attack on Karl Heinzen, ‘Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality’, published in the *Deutsche-Brüsseler Zeitung* in 1847. Davidson barely mentions it. It is clear that Marx and Engels considered the English and French Revolutions to be landmark events in the consolidation of capitalism; but they never attempted a full historical analysis of them, and their positions on the question of bourgeois revolution remained shifting and contradictory. In this basic sense there simply does not exist a ‘Marxist concept’ of bourgeois revolution. To attempt to reconstruct one from the ‘first principles of historical materialism’, as Davidson sets out to do, would seem a dubious proposition given that Marx and Engels offer so little by way of a starting point. It would be better approached through empirical research and imaginative theorizing, drawing on some of Marx’s ideas.

Further problems arise from Davidson’s treatment of the 1859 Preface. He argues that in describing the forces of production coming into conflict with relations of property, thus opening an era of social revolution, Marx is ‘taking the transition from feudalism to capitalism as his model for transitions or revolutions more generally’—he is ‘clearly thinking of the bourgeois revolutions’. But for the most part, Marx in the 1859 Preface is speaking of the bourgeois economy, as he states at the start; he clearly formulated the concept of the contradiction between socialized forces of production and privatized property relations as way of understanding *capitalism*, not feudalism. As he put it in 1851, in *The Class Struggles in France*, ‘a revolution is only possible when two factors come into conflict: the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production’. In fact, as Perry Anderson noted in 1976, the concept of bourgeois revolution was essentially constructed through a retro projection, whose model was the proletarian revolution. Marx himself never systematically applied the idea of a contradiction between forces and relations of production to pre-capitalist economies. His discussion of the origins of capitalism in Part VIII of *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse*—neither text is discussed in any detail by Davidson—make no significant use of this notion. Instead, he tried to explain the emergence of the two key actors in

a capitalist economy, wage labourers and owners of property, as the result of highly complex class and inter-state struggles. Rather than face this problem squarely Davidson makes the astonishing claim that Marx 'saw no need for a special mechanism with which to explain the appearance of capitalism in England because he did not think that the development of capitalism was unique to England, but a general phenomenon, at least in Europe'. But of course Marx did see the need to explain the emergence of capitalism in England, since he spent a significant part of his most famous book trying to do precisely that.

The section on revisionists, reconstructionists and alternatives has problems of a different sort. Revisionism is handled patchily and arbitrarily. While touching on the 1950s and 60s work of Trevor-Roper and J. H. Hexter on England, and Cobban and George Taylor on France—that is, early, sketchy versions of what would come to be called 'revisionism' in this field—Davidson completely ignores the detailed and sophisticated body of work that actually produced this application of the term some twenty years later: Conrad Russell, Kevin Sharpe, John Morrill, John Adamson on the English Civil War; François Furet, Denis Richet, Jacques Ozouf on the French Revolution—to name only a few. When it comes to the 'reconstructionists', as *How Revolutionary?* calls them, the general weaknesses of the book in handling the history of ideas are given such a sharp political twist as to wrench the field entirely out of shape. Anderson's texts on Britain from 1964 and 1987 are quoted, critically, but without any mention of the essay specifically addressing the bourgeois revolutions, dating from 1976—which thereafter receives a single sentence, with no explanation of its argument, a hundred pages later. Likewise, Arno Mayer is enrolled in Davidson's list of culprits, though he was innocent of any thought on the concept, simply because cited by Anderson.

The treatment of Brenner is distorted on quite different lines. Firstly, Brenner's school is the main intellectual target of the book, berated even before Davidson gets down to Marx and Engels, and then again in the middle of his treatment of the 1859 Preface, some two hundred pages before he gets to Brennerism itself. He then returns to the attack a hundred pages later, claiming that more recent work—he cites the parish-level research on late-medieval markets in land and labour by Byres, Whittle, Outhwaite, Woodward, Wordie, Duplessis, Overton, Hoffman—has shown that market opportunities helped to generate a layer of rich peasants in the villages of pre-modern England, who went on to form the capitalist tenant-farmer stratum that would transform the agrarian economy from which the gentry landlords drew their rents. Davidson's argument here would be open to Brenner's retort that it merely reinstates the Smithian assumption of trade and markets as drivers of development, and so does not advance beyond the

positions of Sweezy and Wallerstein that Davidson himself attacks. Brenner himself might be open to the same objection, however, since the English commercial agriculture that is the pivot of his case always depended on the market for wool in the cloth industries of the Low Countries and on the demand for grain from the urban population of London. And Davidson's suggestion that Brenner seems to embrace an implicitly Hayekian view of the unnaturalness of market exchange, while hardly proven here, is an intriguing insight.

Astonishingly, though, *How Revolutionary?* all but ignores Brenner's magisterial *Merchants and Revolution*, perhaps because Davidson felt it might weaken his overall indictment of 'political Marxism', since there Brenner demonstrates how critical a classically bourgeois force, of entrepreneurial merchant capital operating on a global scale, was to both outbreak and outcome of the Civil War, and to its epilogue forty years later. Instead, Davidson concentrates his fire on Brenner's followers, Wood, Conninell and Teschke, who—unlike Brenner—have gone to great lengths to dismiss any notion of bourgeois revolution whatsoever. This branch of the school, which has popularized the notion of 'political Marxism', might in fact be charged with being *unpolitical* in its vision of history; not only have its adherents had strikingly little to say about the contemporary world-political landscape—again, unlike Brenner—but they have offered no explanation of the reason why the history of capitalism should have been punctuated for three centuries by these great political upheavals. If Brenner has been more prudent, never engaging in the same historical negationism, he too has so far avoided any explanation of them.

Does Davidson's account of his own position transcend this flawed treatment of the history of ideas? Not really. At no point does the book answer—or even broach—the question posed by its title; we never do learn 'how revolutionary' they were. Davidson has remarkably little to say about the bourgeois revolutions themselves, which are never directly treated, as opposed to merely invoked, in the course of the book's seven hundred pages. Not one of them is ever actually analysed, even in a cursory fashion. What Davidson offers instead are observations on two, interconnected general issues they raise: the composition of their agents, and the consequences of their advent. On both, he confronts an awkward problem, namely that the theoretical positions he takes were set out some forty years ago by Anderson, the source which for political reasons Davidson most wishes to avoid, while largely repeating his arguments, since Anderson spoke unpardonably of state socialism. (Brenner, though intellectually more distant, can be tackled directly, since on the political spectrum his 'bureaucratic collectivism' is a first cousin to Davidson's 'state capitalism'.) Briefly, the claims set out in Anderson's 'The Notion of Bourgeois Revolution', later collected in *English*

*Questions*, were first, that for a series of structural, not contingent, reasons—the character of feudal production, the dependence of both lords and capitalists on surplus producers below them, the heteroclitite nature of the bourgeoisie as a class, with its core of large capitalist owners and penumbra of professionals and administrators, who share similar life conditions—no such revolution was ever led simply by a bourgeoisie; peasants and workers typically entered the fray and partially shaped the course of revolutionary crises. Second, that while none of them produced the pure model of a modern capitalist state or society, all were decisive in laying the foundations for these. Third, that they divide into two groups, with two temporalities: revolutions from below in the Netherlands, England, the Thirteen Colonies and France, before the arrival of modern industry; and revolutions from above in Italy, the American Civil War, Japan and Germany, after its arrival.

What does Davidson add to—or subtract from—these conclusions? His account of both agency and consequentialism is distinctly weaker, since he offers no structural framework for either exploring or understanding the necessary heterogeneity of the vectors of such revolutions, merely observing that the ‘non-economic’ bourgeoisie played a more important role than the ‘economic’ one—in effect repeating, without now acknowledging, Kautsky’s proposition that it was bourgeois intellectuals rather than entrepreneurs that took the lead. While Anderson’s account identified the economically unspecified character of the bourgeoisie—by contrast to the feudal nobility or industrial proletariat—as the explanation for the ‘unintended’ nature of bourgeois revolutions, Davidson’s methodological consequentialism remains unjustified. Davidson’s reproduction of the taxonomic contrast between revolutions from below and above also wrenches it away from its structuring condition, the advent of modern industrial production, and links it instead to the year 1763—a periodization not unlike Wallerstein’s emphasis on capitalism as a dynamic commercial system, and dismissal of any special significance to the industrial revolution, which Davidson himself attacks. As for additions: Davidson lays great stress on a distinction between ‘social’ and ‘political’ revolutions, the first transforming the nature of society, the second merely altering control of the state. Only the former is admissible as a bourgeois revolution, but Nairn and Anderson unwarrantably included the latter, arguing that the original bourgeois revolution in each leading country had so many sequels in subsequent, violent transformations of the state, from within or without: 1689 in England; 1830/48/71 in France, 1861–65 in the US; 1945 in Germany, Japan and Italy. Second, of course, Davidson introduces his ‘state capitalist’ theory, to extend the category of bourgeois revolutions to the overthrow of capitalism itself.

What is to be made of these glosses? Historically speaking, the distinction between a ‘social’ and a ‘political’ revolution is rarely clear-cut, for the

original 'social' episodes to which Davidson accords the title of bourgeois revolutions did not, and could not, lead to a complete transformation of society, as he himself elsewhere concedes: they required violent sequels which did not just change rulers, but also affected the structure of the state and of the social order. Indeed he cites, without demurring, Lenin's immediate characterization of the overthrow of the Portuguese monarchy as a bourgeois revolution, despite the fact that it did not involve any major social transformation; likewise the Young Turk regime, which did not even abolish the sultanate. As for the extension of the notion of bourgeois revolution to the advent of communist regimes in the USSR and China, as ushers of state capitalism, it is unlikely to persuade anyone outside the ranks of the converted. Davidson's attention to it leads to massively disproportionate disquisitions on Trotsky's writings on permanent revolution and their correction in Cliff's theory of 'deflected permanent revolution', not to speak of another SWP stalwart's 'doubly deflected permanent revolution', warping the structure of *How Revolutionary?*. Davidson's attempt to make these distinctions into a theoretical litmus-test leads only to contortions within the SWP camp itself. For Davidson, the Cuban Revolution does not rise to the status of a social revolution, unlike the Chinese, because the country was already capitalist; likewise the ouster of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. For fellow-thinker Chris Harman, the Chinese Revolution too was merely a political upset. Again, Davidson considers the Nasserite coup d'état in Egypt to be a social revolution, unlike the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, a mere political revolution even though it involved 'a far greater social upheaval'. These parts of the book form an enclave that may be set aside for consumption by the faithful, mere lay readers skipping blithely ahead.

Davidson's more significant contribution lies in two claims that do bear on problems of the bourgeois revolution, less stretched to destruction. The major consequences by which such a revolution may be defined, he argues, are the dominance—not the emergence—of capitalism, as organizing principle of economy and society; and the construction of a national state, capable of performing a number of vital tasks in capital's interests. On the first, Davidson weakens his case by construing 'dominance' as the passage from formal to real subsumption of labour to capital—by which, as Callinicos has pointed out and Davidson conceded, Marx did not mean the spread of wage-labour, but the arrival of machinofacture. But he also contends that bourgeois revolutions did not accelerate capitalist development as such, at least for a considerable length of time, as in France—exposing him to mockery from Wood and others on the grounds that, if the consequences of such revolutions can be either to quicken or to retard economic growth, they can scarcely be relevant to the development of capitalism at all. What is most striking here is that Davidson makes no attempt to verify

the actual economic record in post-revolutionary France, Italy, or any of the other relevant countries, in order to seal his case. And how, after all, are we to distinguish between the 'origins' of capitalism and its 'rise to dominance' empirically? The discussion, which recalls the Althusserian distinction between social formation and mode of production, remains unmoored from any empirical historical analysis.

His argument on the national state that must emerge as a consequence of bourgeois revolution specifies three basic functions. The state ensures that competition between capitals does not lead to a war of all against all, and that struggles between capital and labour are resolved in the interests of the former; it provides basic public goods like roads, ports, schools, welfare services, required for capitalist reproduction; and it aggregates capitals across a determinate national territory, defending their interests against external rivals, while also integrating the working class through ideological nationalism. Is this a satisfactory specification? Davidson essentially avoids any discussion of the modal type of state that must fulfil the three functions he attributes to it. There is a complete neglect of representative institutions, which he sees as largely unnecessary for capitalist class rule. One reason for this might be that it would compromise the claim that the classic bourgeois revolutions were once-and-for-all affairs, needing no sequels, since clearly none of them established bourgeois democracy as we know it today. Another is political: *How Revolutionary?* is determined both to reject the Stalinist 'stageist' theory of history, which identifies the establishment of a democratic republic as a principal 'task' of the bourgeoisie, and the idea that the rise of representative democracy has rendered socialist revolution obsolete. The argument that revolutionary movements are unlikely in contexts of representative democracy was 'superficially plausible in the early years of the third millennium', but is no longer convincing because 'democracy is now in retreat'.

Davidson falls back on the claim that bourgeois democracy was brought about by working-class pressure (so perhaps should not be called 'bourgeois democracy' at all?). He claims that 'adherence to the criteria of democracy' as a benchmark of normal bourgeois rule, shared by both Lukács and Barrington Moore, was a sign of their inability to break with orthodox stageism. He chides Paul Ginsborg, who contrasted absolutism with 'bourgeois democracy' in his essay on passive revolution; praises Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn's *Peculiarities of German History* for arguing that bourgeois revolution should be defined by the existence of 'unimpeded capitalist development' which 'did not necessarily entail democracy'; and recommends Callinicos's view that bourgeois revolution be understood as a process that establishes an 'autonomous centre of capital accumulation, even if it fails to democratize the political order.' But while the bourgeoisie rarely pushed for

universal suffrage on its own, the argument, however politically attractive, that the working class was the main force behind representative democracy has been dramatically overstated on the left.

There are two problems with Davidson's approach here. First, on consequentialist grounds, the fact that bourgeois revolutions did not always establish representative institutions should not exclude them from being counted as central features of a fully consolidated bourgeois state. Second, these institutions seem to have been at least as important as nationalism to the consolidation of capitalist rule. To deny any connection between capitalism and the competitive elitisms that have come to be called democracies in the capitalist core is a form of blindness. As Lenin and Luxemburg recognized, and as Przeworski's *Capitalism and Social Democracy* has perhaps most brilliantly argued, participation in the electoral struggle tends to dissolve rather than strengthen working-class organizations, as their parties appeal to groups outside their class core and, more generally, relate to their followers as electoral masses rather than classes. Further, as Kautsky (in *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*) and Therborn (in *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*) have both recognized, parliaments are an extraordinarily effective instrument for negotiating the serious intra-class differences that fragment capitalist power. Of Davidson's three requirements for a capitalist state, that of structuring of intra- and inter-class struggle would seem virtually to require representative democracy.

*How Revolutionary?* does introduce one structural, as distinct from functional, attribute of the state that emerges from a bourgeois revolution: it must be a *nation-state*, 'because of the need for capitals to be territorially aggregated for competitive purposes'. For Davidson, capitalism 'as a system of competitive accumulation based on wage labour' expresses itself as interstate competition in the international arena. In a text written after the book was published, he has argued that capitalism positively requires a multiplicity of states, since capitalists need special protection of their interests against competitors; if there was only a single capitalist world-state, none would have such protection. The weakness of this argument—a kind of ontological proof of God—is self-evident. The historical record clearly shows that the inter-state system arose in the seventeenth century in continental Europe, forged through centuries of warfare that followed a fiscal-feudal logic of territorial accumulation. Rising bourgeoisies had to adapt themselves to this pre-existing reality, which they took as given, but did not create.

Davidson's commitments to the theory of state capitalism on the one hand, and to forces-of-production determinism on the other, produce a basic tension in his analysis. He repeatedly stresses that capitalism has been instituted by a set of decisive political transformations, but at the same time endorses the view that it was 'almost inevitable', gestating unstopably within

feudalism, not just in England but across Europe and beyond. Revolutionary voluntarism jostles uneasily with evolutionary determinism in the book, to produce many acute local readings but massive overall structural tensions. Despite these weaknesses, *How Revolutionary?* does raise, although it does not answer, an absolutely central question: what is the relationship between the development of capitalism and the formation of national states? Progress on this will require a critical, non-dogmatic reworking of the Marxist tradition, a more rigorous conceptualization of the basic historical problem and, perhaps most importantly, a plausible model of what a capitalist state actually is. Although Davidson's analysis suffers from serious shortcomings, it is not as if there exists a set of plausible answers to the questions that he raises. The notion of bourgeois revolution remains as politically central and as enigmatic as ever.