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Cartoon adapted from Solidarity booklet *Workers' Councils*

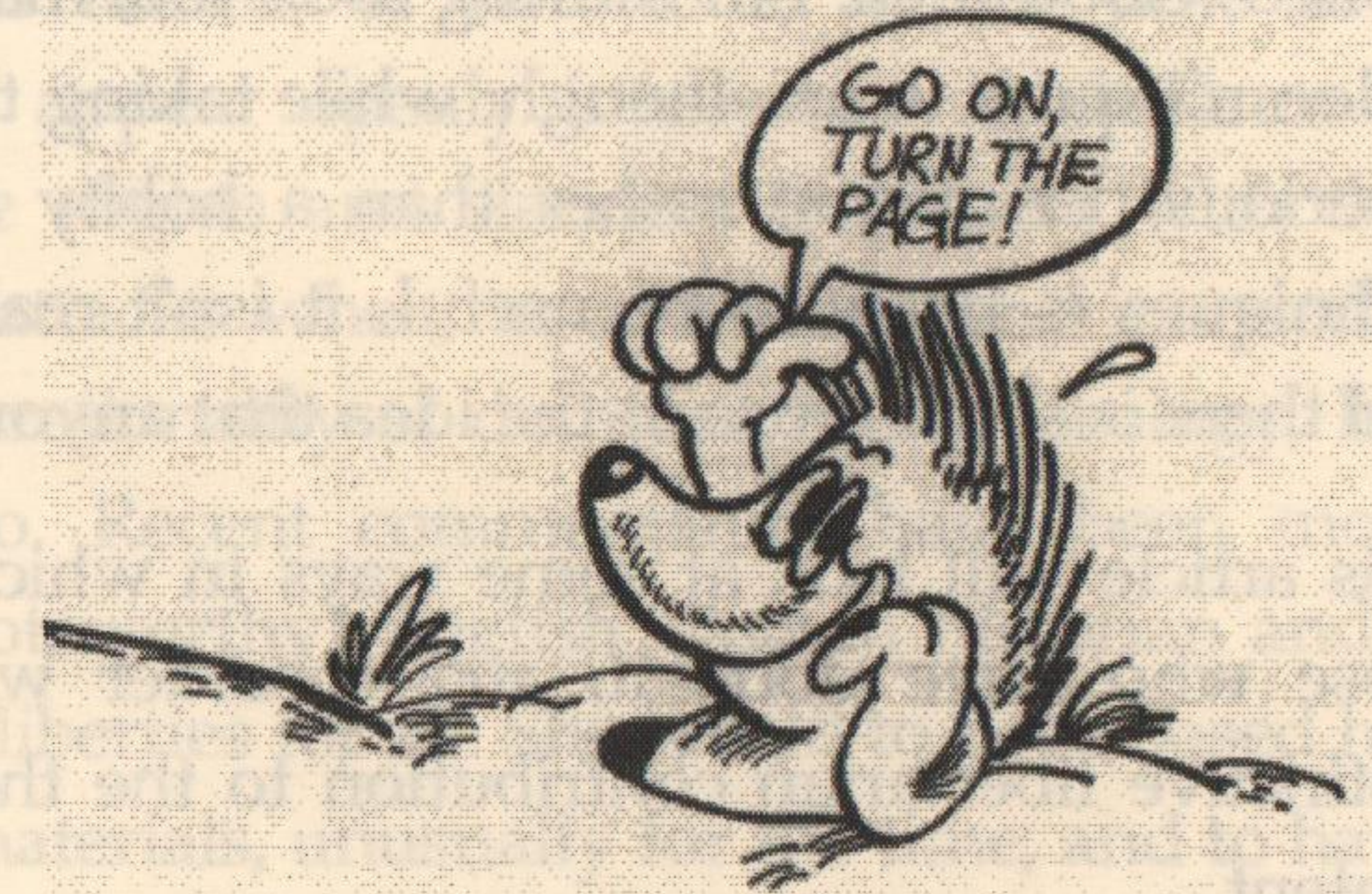
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What is Libertarian History?

by
Liz Willis



Cartoon from Solidarity booklet *Workers' Councils*

Introduction

There are a number of historical contexts which might be expected to attract a libertarian historian looking for a research topic, those times when significant numbers of people did appear to be acting collectively to take control of their lives and inaugurate a fairer, non-authoritarian form of society: the Paris Commune of 1871, workers' councils in the Russian Revolution, Spain 1936-37, and Hungary 1956 spring to mind. A lot of good work has been done on these and there is room for plenty more, not only to draw the lessons – that what was achieved once could be possible again; what went wrong and why – but as a corrective to the disinformative history that the opponents of libertarianism tend to propagate. In the case of Spain, there are still books being produced which manage almost entirely to 'disappear' the anarchists.

It has been well observed that history is written by the winners, and libertarians have not won in the long run (yet), although the proposition is less tenable now that your actual working historians are a comparatively large and varied set of people and many amateurs have access to a range of resources for research and communication. Historians of medicine sometimes tell the story of the brain surgeon who said 'I think I'll take up history when I retire' to a historian, who replied 'Good idea. I'm retiring soon too, maybe I should take up brain surgery!' It doesn't quite work, though: while taking the point that history can claim to be a serious occupation rather than a hobby and a bit of study and training in techniques is likely to be useful, it isn't really rocket science, or brain surgery, and there is some sense in the idea that anyone can decide to do it.

This article will look at some ways in which it has been done, and at some of those who have done it, and consider whether a case can be made for a distinctive libertarian contribution to the theory of the subject as well as to its content.

Rebels and Pioneers

While much of recorded history has indeed been for and about the winners – powerful ancient rulers and imperial conquerors seeking to justify and consolidate their dominant position (and denounce their opponents), medieval chroniclers generally supporting the status quo in church and state – a parallel, contrasting view of the past subsisted in popular memory, transmitted by oral tradition, in stories, songs and rhymes, to emerge as a unifying theme in times of rebellion. The Peasants' Revolt (1381) repudiated the idea that class divisions were divinely ordained 'When Adam delved and Eve span'; the Diggers of the 17th century 'English Revolution' saw their actions as a reassertion of ancient rights, invoking a pre-Conquest age of communal ownership and shared work on the land. Subsequent movements have looked to both of these, not for the historical accuracy of their alternative myths, but for their rejection of the dominant ideology and vision of a different way of life.

The modern kind of history, old-fashioned as it may appear from some points of view, can be traced to the 18th century, located among cultural developments in the wake of the Enlightenment. Edward Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' is the celebrated blockbuster archetype. Less well known, one of the few women writers whom Mary Wollstonecraft could regard with approval or as any kind of inspiration, Catherine Macaulay (1731-91), produced an eight-volume *History of England* and was famed, or notorious, in her time as a prominent 'Bluestocking', daring to appear openly intellectual in defiance of social expectations.¹ As well as the slights and slanders that went with this territory she came in for personal attacks when, as a widow, she married a noticeably younger man. With the irrationality of dominant-male ideology, her reputation as a writer suffered too. Recent commentators have been more generous, hailing her as the first (noteworthy) English woman historian and a proto-feminist who advocated equal liberties for all. She is said to have based her writings mainly on primary source materials, unusually for the time, and to have had a political, rather than a moral, purpose; her work was popular in revolutionary America and France.

Revolutions

Wollstonecraft herself (1759-97) showed an awareness of history in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and an ability to look at it in her own way, from her take on the 'half-civilised Romans' to her analysis and rejection of patriarchal authority, tyrannical rule, and supposedly 'natural' gender roles and values. When she reported on the French Revolution – bringing her intelligence to bear on events which were affecting her and her friends, at a time when her personal life was in turmoil – she was at pains to explain the social and economic background and recognised the deep causes of the repellent violence of the Terror.

Revolutions and uprisings are naturally a favourite subject for libertarians as for socialists (and some reactionaries). Kropotkin wrote about *The Great French Revolution*; a signed copy with an inscription to one of the professors is, or was in 1968, on an open shelf in Aberdeen University library, available to be borrowed by students and shown to the local anarchist group (we did return it). His aim and that of libertarians generally would have been to contest the prevailing historiographical preoccupation with guillotines and massacres, in order to understand the process, including the class realities involved. While underlining the power of collective action, it was also necessary to acknowledge the double dangers of authoritarian revolutionary leaders and post-revolutionary repression.

Those themes were even more forcefully present when it came to writing about the Russian Revolution of 1917. The members of the French Convention in 1792 had consciously made a break with the past to the extent of declaring Year I and inaugurating a new calendar; the Bolsheviks brought only a slight change in dates (from 'Old Style' to new) but were otherwise insistent on their historical mission. The theory of dialectical materialism was taken to justify their seizure and retention of power, and rapid elimination of opponents (including anarchists) of the left and centre as well as right. If history did not support their claim to embody the will of the masses, then history was at fault. Their version did not go uncontested and in the long run the suppression of unacceptable facts was not final.²

George Orwell later denounced the rewriting of history and perversion of collective memory as practised by totalitarian regimes in the fictional but well-grounded '1984' and 'Animal Farm'; his 'Homage to Catalonia' made a major contribution to preserving the truth about events in Spain. For the most part, however, it was left to less widely published, committed writers and publishers such as, in Britain, Freedom Press, or later Solidarity, Cienfuegos, and currently AK Press, to document the libertarian content of revolutions and the fate of anarchist activists.

... and all that

Much of what many normal (non-revolution-minded) people still think of as history – kings and queens, battles and so on, boring stuff laced with scandalous or comic anecdotes by way of light relief – was familiar enough in the early 20th century to be thoroughly satirised in '1066 and All That' (W J Sellar and R J Yeatman, 1930), still a fun read even if getting the full flavour depends on 'common knowledge' which is now far from common. It ended, fans may remember, with America becoming 'top nation' and history coming to a full stop. The focus was obviously on Britain, especially England; other countries had their own national myths equally crying out for debunking.

Ellen Wilkinson – 'Red Ellen' of Jarrow fame, trade union activist, Labour MP and Minister – realised 'how little real history' had been on offer when she went to Manchester University as a student at in 1910.³ Such feelings would have been shared by most of those at the receiving end of formal education at all levels, over many decades. Gradually the situation improved in several respects. Received wisdom was contested; 'social history' – including vast swathes of human experience, work, culture and almost anything to do with women – no longer relegated to occasional chapters, footnotes and brief asides, diversions from considerations of serious (men's) business like running countries and waging wars. Even if the Academy remained dominated by patriarchal attitudes and authoritarian assumptions there were contexts where different approaches could be explored: evening classes for 'self-improvement', public libraries, books and magazines, political groups.

In schools, whether or not pupils were turned on to history probably depended a great deal on the inspirational or off-putting style of individual teachers and the chances of passing exams (Formula: when discussing an event apply the formula 'causes, course, results'; if a personality, say who they were, what they did, why they were important), rather than the content of the curriculum. Traditional teaching had its uses, at its best inducing analytical habits of thought, and equipping students to organise their ideas and develop their own interests. (It also managed to convey a sense of chronology, something which seems to be lacking in latter-day episodic what-it-was-like to be a Roman/Viking etc. methods in use at junior levels.)

Despite pretensions to (social) scientific status, the initial attraction was often, and remains, akin to that of literature, and there's nothing necessarily wrong with liking a good story. Why should the devil have all the best tunes or the ruling class the best stories? – as long as reality is allowed to get in the way when it has to. In the words of G M Trevelyan, 'The poetry of history does not consist of imagination roaming at large, but of imagination pursuing the fact and fastening upon it...' ⁴ Similarly, even outright fiction can have a place in stimulating appreciation of conditions in the past, but should not be confused with actual evidence. In the higher echelons of academe the narrative mode might have been deemed inferior to the study of documents and the compilation of statistics but it persists through successive fashions, controversies and 'turns'.

Revolutionary Theory

For committed marxists who came into the system, the real and earnest, especially economic type of history was preferred among the growing number of options and specialisations, and it was obligatory to fit political events into the appropriate categories.

Two Trotskyist students going into a history exam: one (not a Trot swot) calls to the other, 'Was 1848 a bourgeois revolution?' The other indicates affirmative: sorted. Or up to a point – they may not pass but at least they can write something, more than likely involving the conclusion that what the revolutionaries needed was correct leadership.

The Communist Manifesto (K Marx and F Engels, 1848) begins with the assertion that 'the history of all hitherto-existing society has been the history of class struggle.' This proposition was of course more complicated and nuanced than might at first appear, and was elaborated at considerable length in the foundation texts of marxism into a system purporting not only to explain the past but to understand the present and predict the future. So marxist historians and students knew where they were and had a structure to apply as universally as possible: pre- history, feudalism, rise of the bourgeoisie, industrial capitalism; forward to the proletarian revolution, socialism, and the withering away of the state.

You don't have to buy into the whole marxist package to find aspects of this analysis useful, perhaps essential tools of the trade in many historical contexts, but it begs questions that may present themselves to libertarians particularly and suggest alternative or supplementary approaches. What about authority relations generally: people against the state, dissent from dominant ideology, issues of gender, race... ? Some of the subtler and less rigid proponents of marxism could accommodate such elements, even if it took a while for them to get around to doing so, and much ingenuity was devoted to the shoe-horning of examples from multifarious epochs and locations into the overarching framework. The insistence on that framework was the problem, as analysed by, for one, Paul Cardan (a.k.a. Cornelius Castoriadis). Apart from taking issue with the prediction of successive crises leading inevitably to the final collapse of capitalism, he sought in a text published by Solidarity in 1971 as 'History and Revolution: a revolutionary critique of historical materialism' to restore the primacy of human agency, the power of collective action to shape events instead of being stymied in advance by 'objective' economic conditions, immutable laws and pre-determined stages of development.

1960s and after

In the high cold-war era any mention of capitalism, class struggle or even classes, especially in terms like 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat' was often enough to brand someone as an unsound, subversive lefty, acting as a red rag to respectable academics entrenched in university establishments. Such suspect concepts were

discouraged by the ranks of 'bourgeois empiricists' who would examine closely, for example, the opposing sides in the 'English' Civil War or the factions in the French Revolution and discover so much disparity within them that it seemed they were not really sides or factions at all – not only refusing to see the wood for the trees but asserting that so many differences between individual trees meant there couldn't possibly have been any wood.

Meanwhile other things were happening. E H Carr famously argued in *What is History?* (1961) that historians' pretensions to absolute objectivity, to be simply researching and conveying 'the facts', were illusory, and that there was always an element of bias in selection and presentation. The solution was not to give up trying to be objective but to recognise the influences working in the other direction. This book, written up from Carr's Trevelyan Lectures, became the classic introductory text to the theoretical side of their subject for a generation or two of history students, at least.

Another change was that the 'Whig interpretation' of history – roughly, the view of steady progress and successful reform, and judgments of significance based on whether and to what extent events contributed to this – was challenged on various fronts, not only because academic fashions change but because developments such as the women's movement and other liberation struggles meant an increasing number of people were realising how much had been written out of history as they had been taught it. For many, of course, the realisation was far from new, but from the 1970s there was a fresh dynamism in the expansion of 'alternative' and subversive histories, together with an awareness of formerly neglected episodes such as mutinies, anti-colonial struggles and anti-war activism. Bringing out the relevance of these to contemporary society was an important part of the process.

To take a few prominent examples, Sheila Rowbotham uncovered the hidden history of women, with special reference to resistance and revolution; Raphael Samuel's History Workshop celebrated the labour movement; E P Thompson influentially described 'The Making of the English Working Class'. Perhaps rather little of this was of a self-proclaimed libertarian persuasion but the overall tendency was in the direction of wider participation and diversity in theory and

practice. A great deal of it eventually became integrated or co-opted into academic respectability, with more or less resistance from historians of the old school (sometimes in more sense than one), but that establishment too was changing. The scope of studies could be expanded into international comparisons or conversely adopt a regional, local, or even family and personal focus, while approved research topics and papers could range from the interdisciplinary to ever more specific specialisation. By the early 21st century a group of British historians were considering 'What Is History Now?' under the chapter headings: social; political; religious; cultural; gender; intellectual; and imperial.⁵

Then we have on the one hand the increasingly esoteric reaches of post-modernism, leaving no metaphor not unpacked and no concept undeconstructed (Quote from a conference: 'It doesn't matter whether it really happened'), and on the other the popularity of the sillier type of television history restoring royalty to centre stage and endlessly mentioning the war, but let's not go there just now.

Towards a Conclusion

'Celebrate our history, avoid repeating our mistakes', the slogan of the Radical History Network of North-East London (RaHN) suggests two important elements of a libertarian history project. A third might be the effort to understand what our history has been up against, in particular the behaviour of those in power, 'What's bin did and what's bin hid' by the state to pre-empt or counter any revolutionary threat, or the routine disregard of people's lives and liberties in the alleged 'national interest'. This thread is recommended for those with a taste for detective work; the National Archives open new files all the time, and Freedom of Information requests can sometimes dig out more. The results can include useful exposés and demonstration of fallacies and distortion in official versions of events, and may sometimes show the effectiveness of protest and persistence of dissent, as well as many bureaucratic absurdities.

The 'celebration' endeavour – of past struggles, movements, groups, lives, ideas – can be pursued in a variety of contexts according to choice, interest and access to resources. The point is not to claim that 'our history' was all brilliant; accentuating the positive is fair enough, but not to the exclusion of the negative, even if the latter often seems to have received more than its fair share of attention

already. If past mistakes and flaws are denied, they can hardly be avoided in future. Nor is all struggle, dissent or revolt equally relevant. Just as looking at 'A Century of Women' (Rowbotham, 1999) can force an uncomfortable assortment between the same covers, so the idea of 'rebel' can concoct a marvellous hodge-podge.⁶

Without attempting to draw up a table of tick-boxes to assess the libertarian credentials of historians and their work, the foregoing bits and pieces may suggest some criteria. Easier, perhaps, to say what libertarian history is not: productions featuring the glorification of militarism, adulation of heads of state and national heroes, denunciation of popular movements or denial of their existence and so on, not hard to spot. Libertarians will probably tend to let other pens dwell on the fads and foibles of the ruling class, or on its guilt and misery for that matter, and are not likely either to indulge in the game of making up counter-factual, what-if tales, wishful thinking for reactionaries.

On the positive side, those who are aware of authority relations in all sorts of contexts (in all hitherto-existing society?) and can perceive the plight of history's underdogs will have insights to offer; they will be well placed to interpret and comment on generally neglected subjects and sources. They may be professionals or not but will not be holed up in ivory towers, preferring to make their work accessible and to interact with others, not least those involved in current struggles, and not forgetting the need to document those struggles too.

Notes

1. Jane Robinson, *Bluestockings: The remarkable story of the first women to fight for an education*. Viking, 2009; pp. 6-7.
2. Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917-21: The State and Counter-Revolution*. Solidarity, London, 1970.
3. Biography at www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk (follow links or search Ellen Wilkinson).
4. G M Trevelyan (1876-1962): inaugural lecture, Cambridge, 1927.
5. David Cannadine, ed. *What Is History Now?* Palgrave, 2002.
7. David Horsfall, *The English Rebel: One Thousand Years of Trouble-making from the Normans to the Nineties*. Viking 2009/ Penguin 2010.

*Article first published in two parts in **Black Flag**, Nos. 232, 2010/11, and 233, mid-2011, under the titles 'The history of history itself' and 'History turned on its head by class' respectively.*

Continuing the Debate...

History and Revolution: Solidarity Discussion Bulletin No. 1. London: c1972 14pp. Contains 'A critique of Cardan's critique', by Bob Potter; 'On unhistorical materialism', by M Brinton.

From Potter: *'In conclusion, Cardan offers us some general views on history and philosophy that are not basically at variance with Marx, although the document is written in such a way as to imply that Marx held views to the contrary.'*

From Brinton: *'Marxism, in its day, gave us many profound insights... Other aspects of marxism are today of lesser value... Marxist economics and the materialist conception of history are suspect, because deeply permeated in their most fundamental conceptions by the capitalist mentality prevailing at the time they were written.'*

Suggestions for further (lighter) reading

Paul Manning, *1984 and All That*. London, Futura Publications, 1984, 123pp.

John O'Farrell, *An Utterly Impartial History of Britain: or, 2000 years of Upper-class Idiots in Charge*. London, Doubleday, 2007, 498pp. Quotes:

... even 800 years after Magna Carta, the majority of British people still do not have very much control over the governance of their own country... (pp.86-87)

the philosophies that stand the best chance of prevailing are usually the ones that allow those in charge to make more money. (p.152)

A whole nation may have been at war, but only the remembrance of the men counted afterwards. (p.383)