

How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?

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Neil Davidson's substantial and erudite book is a concerted defence of the concept of 'Bourgeois revolution'. (1) It is composed on a heroic scale. Numerous theorists, both historical and contemporary, are laid-out, discussed and critiqued with unflagging intellectual energy. The author implies that he shares with Marx and Engels an epistemologically privileged position: because they adopted the standpoint of the proletariat they understood the bourgeoisie better than the bourgeoisie understood themselves (p. 125). Going even further, he argues that only a socialist perspective can properly engage with the concept of 'bourgeois revolution', if only inadequately this side of the world-consciousness-changing socialist revolution (p. 328). Unsurprisingly, in light of this, Davidson deprecates the 'false impartiality and narrow specialization' of academic life (p. 277) – though he does have time for some 'conservative materialist historians' (p. 464), particularly Norman Stone. Davidson certainly does not seek to flatter an academic audience that might be expected to hold more to Weber's distinction between fact and value. Nonetheless, it would be entirely wrong not to engage with his important contribution to a topic of enduring interest.

'Bourgeois revolution' is not a term we hear much these days, except from those taking issue with it. A problem for the standard Marxist viewpoint was the elision of 'capitalist' with 'bourgeois'. The gentry and nobility who led the long English struggle for a constitutionalism to hem in the Crown – climaxing with the Civil wars of 1640s and more durably with the 1688 Glorious Revolution – may well have been capitalist, in so far as their income derived from farming organised for exchange and profit – but they were in no more a 'bourgeoisie' than the nineteenth-century Prussian Junkers who likewise organised their estates on a commercial basis. Honour, status, and politicking remained their primary determinants of existence. As for the bourgeoisie proper, unless engaged in the American trade most merchants supported the royalists in the Civil Wars. The intentions of the Roundheads in the English Civil War did not differ so radically from the

aristocrat-led rebels of the Fronde. We can legitimately see the English Civil Wars as part of a general crisis of the 17th-century world.[\(2\)](#)

The French Revolution, in contrast, certainly was made by a bourgeoisie, but not a particularly capitalist one. Many were tax-farmers, lawyers, civil servants, and so on, and those few engaged in living by commerce or industry generally had little time for subversion. Karl Kautsky, the chief theorist of Marxism in the generation after Marx and Engels, made just this point in a book published for the Revolution's centenary: those pre-1789 French bourgeoisie most directly engaged in capitalist enterprise were the least likely to be anti-royalist revolutionaries.[\(3\)](#)

Bourgeois modernity, therefore, was not usually an outcome of the middle classes taking over the state. It might be seen as emerging somewhat adventitiously from a conflict between two established social forces. The aristocracy tended to favour a representative parliamentarianism that would inhibit the executive state from interfering with the laws, privileges and rights of the propertied. The crown, for its part, struggled to subordinate over-mighty magnates, open landed estates to the law of the realm, and encourage the prosperity of taxable commerce and trade.

What emerged in 18th-century Britain, after the Glorious Revolution, was a balance. Parliament limited the power of the crown, and the aristocracy were enjoined to observe the rule of law. This constitutional balance protected the productive economy from arbitrary rent-seeking, which in turn increased the tax-base. As fiscal instruments were arrived at consensually through parliament, the state's credit rating benefitted and it was amply financed in its pursuit of foreign and imperial aims. The executive preserved its freedom of manoeuvre in international affairs while the aristocracy continued to dominate governance. As trade, commerce and in time industry flowered, an urban bourgeoisie proper developed, but it did not seek to invade the prerogatives of government. They benefitted from the constitutional balance, knowing that it rested upon the freedom and prosperity of their pursuits. The tax-credit state in balance left the bourgeois goose un-plucked, laying its golden ages.

Britain's success drew envious looks from the continent. It was no easy thing to reproduce its lineaments, however, particularly as land borders made it all the more difficult for governments wary of foreign armies to sacrifice independence from interfering representative assemblies for the sake of economic and fiscal strength down the line. The French Revolution showed what might happen if reform turned into revolution. Here a bourgeoisie already used to involvement in government (being a good deal less commercial than its British counterpart) tried to cut out the aristocracy altogether, but proved inadequate as a genuinely ruling class and fell under the wheels of Napoleonic militarism.

19th-century liberalism saw much more clearly the precise function of an individualistic middle class. The aristocracy had traditionally lived by bending local and central government to its will, as an instrument of rent-seeking and fount of status and privilege. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, lived by myriad trans-societal networks: businessmen via the market, administrators via the governed territorial state, professionals via information linkages.[\(4\)](#) They did not wish to seize upon the executive, as they did not make a living from it as such. They would support, not seek to displace, a government that left commerce to fructify.

After 1848, it became clear that the bourgeoisie were destined to be a foundational rather than a governing class. Revolutions 'from above' were common – Bismarck being the most famous 'white revolutionary' – as governments introduced civil and political liberties and representative institutions, the better to foster commercial development and fiscal strength.

For liberals, the hero of the story was not the bourgeoisie as a conqueror, but rather as the class that in quietly protecting its own interests held the balance between government and political faction. It buttressed constitutionalism, reined in the aristocracy, tempered the democracy, and checked the arbitrary state without destroying its efficacy.

Whether 'bourgeois revolution' as such survives such a view as I have put is debatable. Davidson wishes to

defend a much more full-blooded version, though perhaps at the price of minimizing its specifically political content.

Rather than define his understanding of 'bourgeois revolution' at the outset and then systematically defend it, Davidson proceeds by analysing, and often excepting at informative length, those who have built up the intellectual apparatus. Part one of his book engages with contemporaries and near contemporaries of the English Civil Wars (he doesn't have much time for the Glorious Revolution) and the French Revolution, from Hobbes and Harrington to Edmund Burke and his critics. Part two then tracks the Marxist tradition, from Marx and Engels themselves to a body of work he defines as 'Classical Marxism'. This latter category is selective. It scants important thinkers of the Second International, such as Karl Kautsky, while taking Leninism as unproblematically continuous with the founders. Such a definition of 'classical Marxism' obscures more than it reveals. Lenin's himself implied discontinuity when he argued that Marx and Engels' qualified defence of the bourgeoisie as a progressive constitutionalist class, relative to 'reactionary' social forces and state structures, had been rendered out-of-date by the development of 'imperialism' in the advanced countries.⁽⁵⁾ This was an important and controversial break.

In part three, Davidson attacks modern critiques of the concept of bourgeois revolutions. The establishment revisionists are given a chapter, but most of the attention is laid upon heterodox Marxists, such as Robert Brenner, George C. Comninel, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and the World Systems theorists.

Davidson's exegesis and commentary is extremely impressive. He is profoundly well-read and his observations are clearly the fruit of many years' thought. As an archival expert on 18th-century Scotland, he brings to bear a sharp eye for empirical detail and comparative nuance. This book is invaluable as a guide to thorny historiography and societal complexity together. It is also written with an enviable clarity and propulsive energy. No one can fail to learn a great deal from it, and be entertained throughout.

As we go into part four, Davidson finally begins to elaborate his own take on 'bourgeois revolution', which he contextualises as a development of the Trotskyist framework, filtered through the theorisations of Tony Cliff.⁽⁶⁾ Cliff's argument that Communist Russia, post 1928, and all other Communist states from foundation, were 'state capitalist' might seem nothing more than a rather unconvincing saving of face for leftists. Its deeper significance, however, was as an attempt to rescue the Leninist conviction that 20th-century capitalism was no longer supportive of constitutionalism and democratisation. If 'state capitalism' on the Stalinist model represented the *ultima ratio* of modernity under conditions of class inequality, then Lenin's dismissal of the viability of democratic capitalism might be broadly acceded to as true for the epoch at least. In contrast, if Communist Russia shows what is likely to happen when the path to industrial modernity is hewn without use of capitalist markets and the pluralism of bourgeois civil society, then Leninism is in trouble.

Davidson seems to accept the Brenner definition of capitalism as involving a social process of endogenous competitive accumulation that forces both owners of capital and direct producers to continually drive up productivity (p. 400). This sturdy formulation appears almost entirely inapplicable to Communist command economies. I can't see much use in defining such regimes, even though certainly committed to developmental industrialisation, as capitalist in any form, still less products of bourgeois revolution.

For Davidson, Trotsky's theory of 'Combined and Uneven Development' is the most 'important discovery in C20th Marxism' (p. 286). Basically, this theory amounts to the claim that once integrated into an international division of labour, a national economy is likely to comingle reservoirs of rural backwardness with cutting-edge industries. In a 'backward' country seeking to 'catch-up' with great power rivals, the state forces the pace of defence-related industries at break-neck speed. Consumer spending is suppressed and the peasantry burdened with taxes. Politically and socially, therefore, we can expect to see a wracked traditionalism cheek-to-jowl with hyper-modernity. Any notion of stately 'stages of modernisation' becomes inapplicable. The relevance of all of this to Tsarist Russia is evident, though it might have been fair to note that Trotsky owed these observations to the analyses of liberal historians such as *Paul Miliukov*.⁽⁷⁾

Davidson wishes to demonstrate that ‘combined and uneven’ development helps to account for the various paths to ‘bourgeois revolution’. A ‘backward’ country with a weak middle class might well seek to destroy the remnants of feudalism – guild restrictions, usury laws, a recalcitrant peasantry attached to micro-farms, aristocratic privileges, and so on – in order to catch up with geo-political rivals. The result is state-driven revolutions from above more often than from below. The first such example, Davidson argues, is the transformation of Scottish society from above in the 18th-century. In like form, socialism can begin to push beyond capitalism even in countries where the proletariat is numerically weak, as in Russia 1917.

Trotsky (as Davidson acknowledges) was not alone amongst Marxists in re-thinking the inexorable rise of bourgeois liberalism before the advent of socialism. From about 1870, the seemingly inevitable association of modernity with liberalism became more doubtful. This owed much to the organisation across continental Europe of mass conscript armies backed by large-scale munitions industries. It became much more difficult for liberals to keep the state on slim-rations and still able to stay ahead of threatening rivals. Hypertrophy of the militarised state, moreover, helped provoke the growth of rhetorically revolutionary socialist movements of the working-class, that in turn made the bourgeoisie even more wary of promiscuous political and civil liberties.

Second International Marxists, who cleaved to economic determinism, were inclined to explain declining liberal animal spirits by reference to the economically driven statizing of capitalism. Nonetheless, Marxists and socialists still broadly accepted that the bourgeoisie were progressive at least relative to aristocratic and militaristic cliques that continued to hold disproportionate political power. For Lenin, however, at least from 1914, ‘bourgeois liberalism’ had become untenable, and the only alternatives left were authoritarian ‘imperialism’ and ‘proletarian dictatorship’.

Davidson holds to the Leninist-Trotskyist view in rejecting the proposition that bourgeois constitutionalism was still a progressive ‘stage’. He identifies ‘stages theory’ with the Kautsky era. Right-thinking Marxists, Davidson says, have only ‘revulsion’ for such Second International determinism (p. 521).⁽⁸⁾ This contempt for the Marxism of the ‘Golden Age’ is unfortunate, as Davidson is a skilled guide through the thickets of theory and interpretation elsewhere. Second International theorisation of ‘bourgeois revolution’ is rather caricatured. This is a pity, as it contained nuances that anticipated later revisionist critiques, as we saw with Kautsky above. Kautsky also (as Davidson notes) readily acknowledged the possibility of socialists seizing power in Russia as early as 1905, even if he thought that an attempt to transcend capitalism on an immature material basis would prove disastrous.

Davidson’s most substantial diversion from the classical interpretation of ‘bourgeois revolution’ is to empty it of its specific political content. For Second International socialists, the development of constitutionalism was intrinsic to ‘bourgeois revolution’. The Danish socialist Gustav Bang, in 1909–10, wrote that the bourgeoisie ‘more and more consciously ... strove for a new constitutional form, a republic or a constitutional monarchy, where the centre of gravity would be in a *representative assembly, where the wealthy bourgeoisie had the upper hand*’.⁽⁹⁾ This emphasis upon the constitutionalist tendency of bourgeois political thought was a channelling of Marx.⁽¹⁰⁾ Marx had often enough made the point that bourgeois liberalism was promoted and honestly avowed by its partisans as transcending narrow class interest, even as he sought to uncover the sordid class interests lurking beneath. Davidson does not and from his point of view cannot accept the centrality and authenticity of political reform and ideology to his theorisation of bourgeois revolution.

Davidson does not set out his view of what constitutes ‘bourgeois revolution’ in any sustained way. He does, however, state it on page 420:

The theory of bourgeois revolution is not ... about the origins and development of capitalism as a socioeconomic system but the removal of backward looking threats to its continued existence

and the overthrow of restrictions to its further development. The source of these threats and restrictions has, historically, been the pre-capitalist state, whether estates-monarchy, absolutist, or tributary in nature.

Broadly speaking, therefore, Davidson is a ‘consequentialist’: revolution need only promote capitalism in the future to be classified as ‘bourgeois’. It does not require an ideology that promotes commercial civil society as vital to the body politic. When revolutionaries talked of ‘religious or constitutional liberties’ this was only a kind of ‘false consciousness’ (pp. 565, 619). In 1640s England, 1790s France, 1860s United States, etc., ‘leaders, consciously or unconsciously, had to mobilize the masses under ultimately deceptive slogans of universal right’ because otherwise workers, peasants etc. would fail to stir themselves simply to swap old feudal oppression for new capitalist exploitation (p. 145):

In no bourgeois revolution did the revolutionaries ever seek to rally popular forces by proclaiming their intention to establish a new form of exploitative society ... but did so by variously raising demands for religious freedom, representative democracy, national independence, and, ultimately, socialist reconstruction ... (p. 510)

This last reference to ‘socialist reconstruction’ is because Davidson – not very convincingly – sees all communist seizures of power (except Russia 1917) as instances of bourgeois revolution. The last bourgeois revolutions, therefore, were in 1973–5: the Communist ‘Derg’ coup in Ethiopia, US defeat in Indochina, and decolonisation of the Portuguese Empire (p. 621).

This surely stretches the concept of bourgeois revolution far beyond breaking point. Such ideologically disparate movements cannot be grouped in this way. It makes more sense to see the liberal constitutionalism of the modern era, inflected though it was by mass democratic impulses, as rooted in the real conditions of commercial civil society. The ideological content of capitalist civilization is not a mere crutch for crude economic rapacity. Bourgeois revolution is motivated by, and eventuates in, a settlement that seeks to discipline the state via constitutionalism and the enveloping fiscal mesh that connects government, national debt, and capitalist markets.

True, exasperated middle class loyalty to constitutionalism has often been brought to the brink and beyond of repudiation. The crisis of constitutionalism peaked in the 1914 to 1945 Age of Catastrophe, when militarism was endemic and communism seemed to threaten bourgeois civil society. After the defeat of Nazism, however, liberal capitalist constitutionalism regained the upper-hand, and from the collapse of communism became the near default setting on a global basis. It is not difficult to understand the Arab Spring as an iteration of ‘bourgeois revolution’. Rather than the era of bourgeois revolution having ended with the unlikely champions of Mengistu’s Derg, it is perhaps with us yet. This consideration alone would make Davidson’s important and stimulating book well worth reading.

Notes

1. It follows Henry Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (London, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A position recently re-stated impressively by Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2013). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bertel Nygaard, ‘Karl Kautsky and the French Revolution’ (2006), <
http://pure.au.dk/portal/files/2455820/Kautsky_article.pdf [2]> (accessed 15 March 2013), p. 16. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jerrold Seigel, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics, and Culture in England, France, and Germany since 1750* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 14–5. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Lenin, ‘Under a false flag’ (1915), in *Collected Works*, vol. 21 (London, 1970), p. 146. [Back to \(5\)](#)

6. Cliff founded the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP). We can see Davidson's filiation in some SWP stylistic tics – references to theoretical 'stick-bending', for example, or quoting Shakespeare on the 'flood-tide of human affairs' as a literary warrant for vanguard-led revolutionism (pp. 174, 283–4). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Melissa Kirschke Stockdale, *Paul Miliukov and the Quest for a Liberal Russia, 1880–1918* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), pp. 69–70. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Davidson is an avowed Leninist. The Leninist revolutionary party was a great innovation and is as necessary now as ever (pp. 223, 504, 629). Not least of Stalin's crimes was to adopt the position of the Second International and Menshevism (p. 249). One might think that Stalin's flirtations with 'Menshevism' – in the period of NEP, during the Popular Front against Fascism, the quasi-reconciliation with democratic parliamentarianism after 1945 – though undoubtedly disingenuous, compare positively to his bouts of collectivisation, Third Period ultra-leftism, the Great Terror, and collaboration with Nazism. Davidson identifies with the Trotskyist position. So, Popular Frontism against fascism was 'entirely reactionary' (p. 434). A rather unexceptional version of Marxist thinking on the 'bourgeois revolution' is summarily dismissed as absurd because of its Stalinist provenance (pp. 254–5). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Gustav Bang, *Crises in European History*, trans. Arnold Peterson (New York, 1916), p. 38. Emphasis in original. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See, for example, Karl Marx, 'Bourgeoisie and the counter-revolution' (1848), *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, (Vol. 8, London, 1977), p. 159. [Back to \(10\)](#)

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