

The International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present

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Large encyclopaedias linked to online subscription websites which are continually updated seem fashionable today, whether in the high powered form of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in the UK or more commercialised enterprises like Wiley-Blackwell's [*International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest*](#) [2]. A reviewer who has contributed entries to others in this genre is hardly best placed to criticise such enterprises. It would therefore be inappropriate not to offer a critical welcome this latest example. This encyclopaedia of protest and revolution runs to seven volumes with over 4,000 double columned pages and it covers the years from 1500 to the present including an essay by Lawrence Davidson on Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda and entries on popular protests up to and including the G8 Protests at Heiligedamm in June 2007. Reading the whole thing would be a herculean task and beyond this reviewer's capacity or pocket. The print version retails at £750 after the initial offer. I have been given instead one volume (a-bl) and a free month's subscription to roam the website. Fortunately there is a lexicon as a guide and a search page enabling the reader/reviewer to plot different tracks.

This however gives rise to a technical criticism. Whereas the double column format of the printed version makes it easy to use, the online version does not seem to have easy defaults enabling economical printing. You are either stuck, therefore, with online reading or the problem of nearly setting fire to the printer when a substantial number of entries are downloaded to be read in hard copy.

But what of the content? There is an obvious problem in the design of such encyclopaedias. Unless a strong editorial judgement is made to influence entries in the direction of the theme of the encyclopaedia there is a considerable risk of overlap between entries here and elsewhere whether by the same or different publishers. This is most obviously the case with the biographical entries. Eduard Bernstein, the first great revisionist socialist in pre-First World War Germany, is sufficiently important to have his biography appear in many places so it is hard to see how the entry differs from that available elsewhere even though Manfred Steger does a clear enough job of distilling his career and ideas. Similarly, while Beethoven is in one sense a revolutionary figure it is less clear why he should appear here and again how his brief biography differs from that easily available elsewhere and for free. There are, however, many lesser known figures to whom it is a pleasure to be introduced. Naming them risks acknowledging one's ignorance but as an example I might note Anton Wilhelm Arno (1703–1759), a freed slave in 18th century Germany who for a time became a significant intellectual figure before returning to Ghana and disappearing.

The central problems for this reviewer, however, lie elsewhere. The biggest is perhaps the chaotic approach to commissioning pieces. I had hoped to find useful integrating articles outlining and synthesising the bigger debates on types and forms of protest and revolution and how they relate to wider social structures. But although there is a mass of material from which the diligent reader can partly reconstruct these there are hardly any entries that do the work for you. True there are general entries on food riots, forms of non violent protest, unemployed protests, the student movement etc. But there is no synthetic account of peasant protest, no essay on revolt, revolution, revolutionary war. There is a mass of material, on strikes but no essay on 'the strike' or 'the general strike'. 'The sit in', 'the factory occupation', 'the demonstration' etc are also missing. I had hoped to find a piece on the history of consumer protests which some argue go back to sugar boycotts as part of the Abolitionist movement. But while there is a lot on abolitionism there is no single entry on consumer protests. Indeed there is no entry on the category of ostensible 'new social movements' even though entries on individual movements are numerous. What this suggests is a curiously old fashioned approach. The stress is on people, organisations and incidents rather than forms and underlying structures. But this will make it hard, however good the actual entries, for a reader who is not already clear about the bigger issues to get as much as could potentially have been got from a better organised collection of pieces. Thus we can read of the fall of the Bastille but not of the revolutionary crowd nor of debates about the psychology of the crowd and popular movements in general. The *sans-culottes* appear but there is no general discussion of the craft worker and how their protests differ from factory workers, or the role of the dangerous classes or the lumpenproletariat and the many other elements that make up and underpin debates about popular protest and revolution. Even the terms protest and revolution do not have entries of their own.

This makes it easier to deal with the limited number of big theme articles which do exist. In the absence of pieces on feudalism, absolutism, capitalism etc, the best place to start is probably Paul Le Banc's commendable long entry on 'Imperialism, modernisation to globalization' which sets out some of the basic arguments about global development exploring orthodox Marxism, modernisation theory, dependency theory, world system theory and globalization and empire. From this we could then move to Clifford D. Connor's more descriptive essay on 'Imperialism, historical evolution'. The new reader would still lack an adequate understanding of how social structures have emerged in the core of the system but they will at least have a sense of the wider pattern of development. The next stop might then be the piece by Paul Robinson on 'Class, poverty and revolution' which is the closest we seem to come to a general account of social movement theory. Then it would be back to Paul Le Blanc for another long essay on 'Class identity and protest' and then to a surprisingly short and blunt entry for such a big topic as 'class struggle' by Kunal Chattopadhyay. Armed, albeit lightly, with some general sense of the bigger issues the reader can then progress in many different directions – to the classic western revolutions ('successful' and 'aborted'), to perhaps the Taiping Rebellion (Amit Bhattacharyya) or to more recent 'Grassroots resistance to globalisation' (Walden Bello) and 'Food security and protests' (Brenda Biddle). It is possible to search for organised movements or protests with no guarantee that the one you are interested in will be there but with the promise that some entries will surprise you.

This journey from structures to types of protests and individual forms is but one of many that can be taken.

Another journey would be to follow through on a country. If we take Russia as an example we can move forward from the Pugachev Revolt of 1773–5 through the Decembrist Uprising (1825) to the Cholera Riots of 1830–1. Then there is a jump, with nothing extended on peasant protest in Russia despite its significance and the debates surrounding it. There are some references to Russian populism but Lawrence Goodwyn's main entry on 'Populism' is about the American version. We pick up Russia again with the revolution of 1905–7, the pre-war labour upsurge, several entries on the Russian Revolution and Civil War, then revolutionary figures (with movements less well covered). Then we have the rise of Stalin, the fall of the USSR and so on. Anyone unfamiliar with the history of protest and revolution in Russia will find much here with considerable detail in places. But these entries raise another issue. Who do you ask to contribute – an insider or an outsider? In the case of Russia several of the key entries are written by David Mandel. Mandel is the author of a major study of working class activity in the Russian Revolution and his later works include discussions of the collapse of the USSR and he has remained engaged with members of the Russian democratic and popular opposition. His entries are, therefore, as one would expect, to a high standard. But since we already have his writing on these topics it is not clear what is gained from asking him (and several like authors) to produce an additional synthesis of what is easily available in their work rather than asking instead for a view from a younger figure. This is perhaps a perennial problem in such compilations. The famous 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and its appendix volumes were so good not only because they were written by the greatest experts of the time but because they produced elegant essays and sometimes significantly advanced arguments. The articles in this edition on the events either side of 1914 in Russia, controversial though they are, are still immensely valuable. But the format in the *International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest* does not allow the same level of detail or development.

The observant reader so far will perhaps note that the cast of authors includes some major writers on the critical left. Given the themes and the nature of the current global crisis this might not be unexpected. After so much academic discussion which has tried to play down traditions of popular protest and revolution, a self-confident and, at times, even angry view from the left is welcome. But I for one would have liked to have seen the argument with critics carried forward more openly and in a more engaged way, rather than left implicit or even, on occasion, aggressively asserted. There was surely scope for some discussion of the more dismissive approaches found in the historiography of protest and revolution but historiography doesn't figure much at all, including the absence of a general discussion of the historiography of protest and revolution themselves.

But if the entries come broadly from the critical left there is still an inconsistency in the way that major issues are approached. The crude narrative of protest and revolution is that it has contributed to the movement towards the eventual transcendence of capitalism by a socialist society. Class struggle exists, it is positive, and in the long run moves society forward. Every strike, argued the Industrial Workers of the World, is a small revolution and a preparation for the big one.

But for several generations this new society was identified with the self-defined socialisms of the Soviet bloc, China and some post colonial states in poorer parts of the world. The collapse of the USSR, the shift in China and the weakening of 'third worldism' have all served to undermine this narrative. For liberals and conservatives the result has been some version of the Fukuyama thesis where liberal democracy is the best we can hope for. For the critical left, defined in part by its opposition to simply identifying socialism with the societies that claimed this title, this dominant narrative has always been a problem. The entry on 'socialism' does set out some aspects of this but by itself is too little. Paul Le Blanc adds a little more in the essay on 'Joseph Stalin and "revolution from above"', where, although he does not engage directly with the debates on the left about Russia recently set out by Marcel van der Linden, it is clear that he does not see Stalinism as either a necessary outcome of the Russian Revolution or a legitimate form of socialism.⁽¹⁾ He quotes Roy Medvedev to the effect that Stalin's victories 'turned out in fact to be defeats for socialism'. In his entry on Marxism, Le Blanc sets out further elements of this debate on the left. There are also entries from which it is possible to reconstruct more parts of an alternative narrative including on Trotsky, Cornelius Castoriadis and the 'Socialisme ou Barbarmisic group' although the uninformed reader would hardly gain a sense of the richness of the debate outlined by van der Linden. But if they turn to other entries they would

have no idea at all. For example, the entry on ‘Albania, socialism’ by Dalakoglou and Halili simply assumes that the terms socialism and communism can be used unproblematically to describe Albanian society after 1945 even though on anybody’s account it was highly aberrant, even in an aberrant group of self-defined socialist societies. Unfortunately the same is true of many other entries. This again then takes us back to the lack of another general entry – this time on communism – to help frame debates as well as the lack of a more considered theoretical approach more generally.

We are left therefore with a chaotic richness alongside the criticisms. The editors have looked to have a genuinely global coverage. Some 150 entries, for example, relate to Africa (though carping again – where is the essay on forms of colonial and post-colonial resistance to frame them?) Anarchism gets a good treatment, in some ways more systematic than socialism. Having recently read a brief history of the United Fruit Company I am happy to find out more about the Banana Plantation Worker Rebellion in Colombia in 1929. Readers in Britain will be surprised at the lack of a specific entry on ‘the general strike’ or ‘the miners’ strike’ but welcome the entry on the Brixton riots. They may be puzzled though at the inclusion of Ian Paisley and Unionism, and especially in the absence of a general entry framing the issue of more reactionary forms of protest. It is good to see that art and culture gets a strong look in though again the selection is eclectic to say the least. Punks are there but I might have sacrificed the entry on the irrepressible Slavoj Zizek for one say on protest and the counter-culture of the 1960s, perhaps more than three mentions of Bob Dylan and the odd reference to Joe Hill, Pete Seegar and the American folk tradition? But is this a judgement informed by a sense of historical significance or simply that of the personal views of an aging reviewer? I suspect that most professional historians will not be rushing first to this encyclopaedia to back up their teaching nor will it be the first thing that comes to mind to suggest to students but few will not enjoy browsing it even if they share this reviewer’s sense that an important opportunity has been lost, at least in the printed version – to produce a really powerful guide that will have a longer life. Perhaps this can be rectified over time in the online version, assuming that the system we live in, and commercial publishing, is not overcome by more protest and revolution – a suggestion which some readers will think smacks of ‘utopianism’, a topic on which they will find several interesting entries here but not the basis of a real evaluation of how the past of revolution and protest might inform our future.

Notes

1. Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917* (Leiden, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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[3]

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