

Revolution from below

confounds those who desire to lead it from above

Martin Comack

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a review of

El Socialismo Salvaje: Autoorganizacion y democracia directa desde 1789 hasta nuestros dias (Wild Socialism: Self-organization and direct democracy from 1789 to the Present) Charles Reeve. Virus Editorial, 2020

What Paris-based author Charles Reeve calls *socialismo salvaje*, “wild socialism,” is the demand for direct democracy and popular control of social institutions by workers, peasants, and citizens in periods of social and political upheaval appearing throughout modern history.

What American activist and historian Staughton Lynd has defined as “the horizontal, decentralized organizational forms based on solidarity, which...explode from within the working class in moments of crisis.” This persistent current of anti-hierarchical action and thought has never had the advantage of an unbroken and connected narrative such as Reeve provides in this volume.

These movements have faced the hostility not merely of conservative and reactionary defenders of the old order, but equally from self-appointed revolutionary vanguards like the French Revolution-era Jacobins and the Bolsheviks.

Reeve notes the manipulation by self-proclaimed tribunes of the people, channeling popular energies into support for autocratic bourgeois regimes or Leninist dictatorships. The French revolutionary rallying cry, “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” or the Bolsheviks’ “All Power to the Soviets,” remained mere slogans to mask the rule of the few over the many. Even socialism, under ostensibly democratic forms is what the author terms “el socialismo de los jefes” (socialism of the elite).

Reeve begins with the radical energies unleashed in the 1789 Great French Revolution, the economic and social demands of the common people, the sans culottes and enrages, that were contained and finally suppressed under the Jacobins and Napoleon.

But what was called the Social Question, a fear of popular rebellion, became a major preoccupation of Europe’s ruling oligarchies into the 20th century. In 1871, the short-lived direct democracy established by the Parisian communards was violently crushed by a conservative republican regime.

In the late 19th century, the struggle between the followers of Marx and those of the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, sharpened the distinctions between statist and libertarian conceptions of socialist democracy—the centralized and authoritarian political party versus the spontaneity and autonomy of popular movements. Rejecting the Marxist conception of a socialist society as the product of mechanical historical processes, guided by an enlightened elite, anarchists and mutualists looked to the self-activity of people capable of creating their own leagues and associations for their emancipation.

By the turn of the 20th century, these tendencies took more definite ideological and organizational appearance in industrial societies with the spread of anarcho-syndicalism—revolutionary unionism. In place of electing socialist politicians to national parliaments, “el socialismo de los intelectuales,” radical workers looked to the de-

fense of their interests and eventual overthrow of the capitalist system by strikes and other direct action in their workplaces—often in opposition to the conservative or reformist bureaucracies in the traditional trade unions.

In the new cooperative commonwealth they envisioned, industrial unions would replace political institutions and assure all an equal voice in the control of production and distribution and in the direction of society at large.

Reeve (b. 1945) is the pen name of Jorge Valadas, a name he chose to honor a revolutionary syndicalist imprisoned for opposition to Australia's participation in WW I. Reeve served as an officer in Portugal's navy until he deserted in 1967 due to opposition to Portugal's colonial wars. In exile in Paris, he was active in the May Days of 1968. He is the author of several books including *Le Tigre de Papier*, and *China blues: voyage au pays de L'harmonie*.

In the early 20th century, under the pressures of war and social upheaval, this syndicalist current emerged in more concrete functional form as workers councils, soviets, arbeiterrate, and factory committees mushroomed throughout Russia, Germany, Italy and other European states. Although all were to be eventually overcome in fighting for social control against an assortment of right wing, social democratic, and Bolshevik forces, their experiences and experiments in direct democracy exerted a considerable influence upon traditional conceptions of revolution.

Dissenters from orthodox Marxist ideology like Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter and Paul Mattick regarded workers councils as both the most effective and practical engines of class struggle, creating the bases for a new social order.

El socialismo salvaje demonstrated its greatest possibilities, however temporary, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and Revolution in the 1930s. The million-strong anarcho-syndicalist Confederation Nacional de Trabajo (CNT) initially led the armed resistance to General Francisco Franco's fascist coup against the democratically elected republican government, and followed through with the socialization and collectivization of enterprises, factories and landed estates. While Franco was immediately supplied with arms and resources from Hitler and Mussolini, England and France refused aid to the anti-fascist resistance, fearing the spread of radical revolution from Spain and aiming to avoid entanglements with the aggressive Axis powers.

Since only the Soviet Union would send armaments to those fighting Franco, the Communist Party soon assumed control of the anti-fascist armed forces and eventually dominated the republican government itself, allying with conservative elements to halt and finally reverse by force the popular social revolution led by the anarchist CNT.

Stalin was desperate to forge an alliance with the Western powers against Germany and Italy, and to present himself as a moderate ally of bourgeois democracy. The Spanish Communists launched an internal civil war within the larger struggle, purging and imprisoning those who opposed their dictatorship. The anarcho-syndicalist revolutionaries were fatally caught between two fires.

Nevertheless, Reeve goes on to chronicle the subsequent anti-hierarchical movements opposed to capitalism and Stalinism that persisted throughout the rest of the 20th century and into the following decades—the Hungarian rebellion, the May Days of 1968 in France, the Polish Solidarity movement, the Portuguese Revolution, the Zapatista insurgency in Mexico, the Occupy movement in North America, the Arab Spring—global social struggles the like of which the author is confident will break out again in the immediate future.

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