

## The Davidson Debate

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Neil Davidson at Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta*, 2013

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# The Davidson Debate

*Bourgeois Revolutions in Historical Perspective*

*By*

Neil Davidson

*Edited by*

Steve Edwards



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# Foreword

*Bridget Fowler*

Neil Davidson's extraordinary book *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions* (2012) has a fascinating beginning and end. He starts by introducing two contrasting representations of bourgeois revolution – a Delacroix painting, *Liberty Guiding the People* (on the 1830 Revolution in France), and Goya's etchings, *Disasters of War* (on Spanish resistance to Napoleon's attempted export of the French Revolution). As he argues, these reveal the 'ambivalence of the bourgeoisie towards the revolutions that bear its name [...]'.<sup>1</sup>

He ends by gazing at the Edinburgh memorials to Adam Smith and David Hume, offering a nuanced defence of the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish School had a vision of a social order based on justice and peace, which would control the fissiparous passions – stemming from unbridled lust and violence – that were endemic in feudalism. But, as both Hirschmann and Davidson remind us, they assisted at the birth of reliance on a new passion, untrammelled economic self-interest, manifested by the market.<sup>2</sup> Davidson's concluding words seek to extract and transcend the rational kernel from these Scottish thinkers, to point to the basis of a better-rooted, universalistic order, based on substantive social justice, not just formal rights.

The present book is composed of two parts. First, it brings together accessibly the most authoritative reviews of Davidson's book, those by Heidi Gerstenberger, Dylan Riley and Charles Post. Significant figures in their own right, these historians are influenced by different traditions: Riley, Davidson suggests, represents the 'eclectic mix' of the *New Left Review* Editorial Board, Gerstenberger brings her own historical scholarship on the long history of capitalism, and Post, the 'Political Marxism' or 'Capital-centric Marxism' linked particularly to the Robert Brenner school. An engagement with their distinctive critiques illuminates the various contentious issues and deepens our understanding of bourgeois and capitalist revolutions. Secondly, Neil Davidson responds to his critics; his first reply revisiting many of these themes in the form of an article originally in *Historical Materialism* journal,<sup>3</sup> the second, a theoretically richer analysis, including reconsiderations based on fresh historical scholarship.

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1 Davidson 2012, p. xi.

2 Hirschmann 1977; Davidson 2012.

3 Davidson 2019.

Davidson's initial book, *How Revolutionary ...*, combines two functions, often separated: an analysis of theoretical texts and a historical sociology of bourgeois revolutions. If historical societies are to be approached as totalities – subtly mediated, of course – this procedure is essential. And Neil Davidson is clearly uniquely well-qualified to undertake both. His distinctive assessments immediately catch our attention, for example: 'For our purposes, Harrington is more important than Locke, Steuart than Ricardo and Barnave than Rousseau'.<sup>4</sup> Davidson's wide-ranging discussion of these and other thinkers stakes his claim for provocative conceptual analysis, but, in his case, the dry analysis of categories is always complemented by the breadth of his historical insights.

The initial ground-clearing establishes the well-known but important distinction between merely *political* revolutions – changes in the personnel who govern a society – and genuinely *social* revolutions, when the nature of surplus extraction by the dominant group changes. Social revolutions – of which Harrington was the first theorist – require a set of social relations linked (in his case) to the emergence of both an embryonic absolutist State and to new classes, including the bourgeois industrial class. Preconditions for this did not exist in – say – Ancient Greece or even Machiavelli's Italy. But the concept of *bourgeois revolution* is a very complex phenomenon. In his later reply to his critics Davidson is right to draw on Weber to emphasise its *ideal-typical* character and on Lakatos to indicate the precise nature of appropriate falsifying procedures, with respect to both single theories and entire research traditions. In order to maximise the fruitful application of the notion of bourgeois revolution, he distinguishes initially between two modalities of bourgeois revolution. Thus, the internal transformations '*from below*' – such as the English Civil War and the French Revolution, revolutions that sealed the end of the feudal order – need to be distinguished from the 'passive revolutions' (Gramsci) *from above*. These later movements, such as the Italian Risorgimento, Bismarckian unification and the Meiji Restoration certainly facilitated the introduction of 'sober, bourgeois capitalism', but they did so through governmental intervention, not popular pressure from the streets.

Davidson also cuts through widespread misunderstanding, by stressing the importance of 'consequentialism' in relation to these revolutions. Thus he analyses their objective outcomes, with all their historical constraints, rather than the *intended* meanings for the social actors involved, and whether their immediate origin lay with the industrial capitalist class. We might argue that an adequate historical analysis requires *both* the objectivist 'moment' and the sub-

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4 Davidson 2012, p. 5.

jectivist moment, including the historical circumstances.<sup>5</sup> But for Davidson, the main criterion of whether a movement is a bourgeois social revolution is *not* whether there are industrialists or entrepreneurs in leading activist roles. Rather, it is whether, as a long-term result, a *destructive* consequence occurs in terms of removing the fetters inherent in the feudal regimes (such as rules limiting the number of workmen a guild-master might employ), and, secondly, whether a new society is *constructed* in which capitalism becomes predominant, that is, the market provides the means by which virtually all everyday needs are satisfied. Davidson's consequentialism bears, in turn, many implications. For example, addressing the 'historians' battle' (involving Arno Mayer, Eric Hobsbawm and Martin Wiener) over the nature of nineteenth-century European societies,<sup>6</sup> he contends forcefully that the aristocracy may continue to be in charge politically or dominant culturally, but it is the nature of the economy, the pre-eminent mode of production, that is of key importance.

It should be noted that for Davidson, bourgeois revolutions *from below* no longer occurred after the 1860s. Indeed, he presents the bourgeoisie's 'last stand as a revolutionary class' as in the American Civil War (1861–5).<sup>7</sup> This, he suggests persuasively, can be seen as completing, with a social revolution, an earlier *political* revolution: the American War of Independence (1770). Crucially, such revolutions from below have now become vulnerable to the subaltern actors' challenges on the historical stage, with the further radicalisation of revolutionary demands to fit *working-class* needs, as, with the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the failed (1917–23) German revolution.<sup>8</sup> Hence from the 1870s on, the dominant class's preference for state-heralded revolutions 'from above', as in the French Third Republic, hardly engaging the subordinate classes, so as not to let the genie escape the bottle and spark a broader, proletarian revolution.

The wide-ranging erudition of *How revolutionary ...* is dazzling. But there are several specific reasons why historians, social scientists and Marxists more broadly might read it. First, this is a historical materialism premised on a total break with the tired, formulaic 'stages theory' of the Second International and Stalinist Marxism. Yet it also avoids the resort to contingencies so central to certain structuralist approaches, such as that of Alain Badiou.<sup>9</sup> Davidson seeks to revive the classical view that revolutions break out when productive forces

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5 Bourdieu 1990, p. 52.

6 See Mayer 1981; Hobsbawm 1987, 1999; Wiener 1985.

7 Davidson 2012, p. 68.

8 Broué 2005.

9 E.g., Badiou 2007.

are over-constrained by the relations of production and property. But in doing so he insists that the productive forces are also embedded in a set of social relations, a totality. Importantly, he is far from being an ultimate technological determinist of the kind that a simplistic reading of the *Poverty of Philosophy* suggests (the 'hand-mill gives us feudalism, the power-mill gives us capitalism'). Davidson's assessment of the famous base-superstructure metaphor is a particularly relevant test. Indeed, he admits that this is 'somewhat mechanistic'.<sup>10</sup> He (interestingly) exonerates Marx on the grounds that he aimed to use all means to get the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* through the German censor, thus was forced to omit all questions of agency and ideas. This particular metaphor – here he de facto concedes to E.P. Thompson – introduces fatal problems, where for example the 'superstructure' cannot move first, before the base.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as I might add, a bourgeois revolution such as the 1789 French Revolution witnessed significant changes in both educated and popular culture well *before* its 1789 onset, not just after, when the new forms of production emerged.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the *freshness of vision* in this work is ubiquitous. He shows that the Scottish bourgeois revolution – having been made from above after 1745, with English military aid – provoked the flowering of the Scottish Historical School. This in itself is not new. Fredric Jameson, for example, had earlier praised its profound 'cognitive mapping' which – like Lukács earlier – he viewed as coming from these Scottish philosophers' stance at the *apex* of two modes of production, Scottish clan society in the Highlands on the one hand and the encroaching new capitalism on the other.<sup>13</sup> But multiple new insights emerge in Davidson's work; for example, he shows us how Adam Smith has been deradicalized, even hijacked.<sup>14</sup> Despite Smith's view that commerce and primitive capital accumulation are linked simply to human nature, Davidson contends that Smith's model of commercial relations was remote from the neoliberal paradise preached by our contemporary advocates of his thought. In reality, it was much closer to a utopia of small yeomen farmers and enterprises: the mode of production that in fact characterised the northern states of the USA up to the mid-nineteenth century. As Davidson shows,<sup>15</sup> the Scottish thinkers, especially Adam Smith, were extensively taken up by the French. Indeed, the French

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10 Davidson 2012, p. 153.

11 Thompson 1978.

12 Darnton 1982.

13 Jameson 1984.

14 Davidson 2012, p. 633.

15 Davidson 2019, pp. 251–4.

Jacobin, Roederer – who, unlike many active in the Great Revolution, was an entrepreneur – *critiqued* Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* for its view that humans had concerns *outside self-interest* that enabled them to gain vicarious experience of others' suffering and injustice. 'For Roederer', Davidson notes, 'incredible though this may seem in an age when Smith has been repackaged as the high priest of market fundamentalism – the author of *The Wealth of Nations* was insufficiently hostile to the nobility and insufficiently committed to the market'.<sup>16</sup>

Amusing clarifications like this abound, both in *How Revolutionary ...* and in the present collection, where he retains his learned and irreverent sense of humour. Nor does Davidson omit some censure of figures usually sacrosanct in this nuanced version of Marxism: for example, is criticised – following Said's strictures – for holding the pernicious belief that Czechs, Irish or Scottish Highlanders, amongst others, were 'unhistorical' people incapable of national autonomy.<sup>17</sup> And, despite stressing the importance of capitalism's unleashing of productive forces, he also acknowledges that Marx, too, was guilty, at times, of oversimplification, especially on India. Indeed, he accepts Kevin Anderson's view that Marx became much more sensitive to issues of race and nationalism and more *multilinear* in his analysis of social development towards the end of his life. Further, as a dissident Trotskyist, critical of Trotsky's theory of post-1925 USSR as a degenerated workers' state, Davidson gently ridicules those who believe that 'since Trotsky could obviously not have been wrong in any respect, reality would once again have to conform to the theory'.<sup>18</sup>

This new volume presents some of Neil's most thoughtful critics, whose specialisation matches his own. The first, Heide Gerstenberger, seeks to distinguish the dead 'historical philosophy' (or metaphysics) from the living socio-historical analysis of Davidson's book. In relation to the latter, she especially emphasises the shift, with the bourgeois revolutions, from personal, absolutist power to 'impersonal power'. Indeed, in somewhat Habermasian terms,<sup>19</sup> she argues that Davidson underestimates the concrete advances of new regimes of impersonal power in terms of universalistic liberties, reducing the State too much to a body acting solely for the functions of capitalism. In other words, she addresses what Weber regards as the distinctively modern elements of impersonal power (or rational-legal authority),<sup>20</sup> or Simmel's social levelling pro-

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16 Davidson 2012, p. 65.

17 Davidson 2012, p. 150.

18 Davidson 2012, p. 454.

19 Habermas 1984.

20 Weber 1978, pp. 212–26.

duced by the reign of money.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, rather like Bourdieu,<sup>22</sup> she argues that Davidson should make more of the concrete political liberties established by the revolutions from below, arguing that it is precisely this political equality that permits exploitation within the productive sphere. For example, the rescinding of the feudal estates order, and the use of offices for private appropriation 'thereby established a bourgeois state, the form of which legitimated not only the labour relations that were present at the time of the Revolution but also the capitalist labour relations that were to become dominant in the future.'<sup>23</sup> More controversially, she goes further to question the entire categorisation of 'revolutions from above' as *bourgeois* revolutions.

Dylan Riley shares with Heide Gerstenberger the view that Davidson pays scant respect to the political heritage of the bourgeois revolutions. Indeed, he contends that Davidson's neglect of the democratic consequences of these revolutions is nothing short of scandalous, whilst, in contrast, Perry Anderson has been exemplary in this respect. Riley also takes issue with what he calls, dismissively, Davidson's 'flawed ideology' – in relation to Marxist theory and methodology. Specifically, for him, Marx and Engels on this area are 'shifting and contradictory' – the bourgeois revolution for them was apparently only a 'retroproject' (Anderson) *after* they had delineated the coming proletarian revolution.<sup>24</sup> Riley also accuses Davidson of inconsistency, for it appears, according to Davidson, that the bourgeois revolution in France can either accelerate or retard the emergence of widespread capitalism. He nevertheless does concede that Davidson's distinctive approach *has* produced 'fresh and original lines of thought and research'.<sup>25</sup>

Charles Post is perhaps the most constructive of Davidson's 'critical critics'. Post interrogates particularly the ideal-type of the transition, especially the status of England's transition, introducing a new audience to a rich analysis not just of the 'Peculiarities of the English', but the 'Peculiarities of the Americans'.<sup>26</sup> Like Davidson's other discussants, he also poses the key conceptual issue of the 'state capitalism' problem, given that for much of their history the USSR post-1925, China post-1949, Vietnam post-1973 (etcetera) do not possess a structure of competition tied to a national market system.

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21 Simmel 1978, pp. 297–303, 457–63.

22 Bourdieu 2014, pp. 98, 359.

23 Gerstenberger 2019, p. 202.

24 Riley 2015, p. 118.

25 Riley 2015, p. 110.

26 Cf. Post 2011.

One may take issue with some of the criticisms of Gerstenberger, Riley and indeed Post, but it is thanks to them that Davidson has been motivated to elaborate on his main conclusions in the 2012 book. In doing so he has substantially altered his position in certain areas and, in my view, improved it. Whilst not entirely persuading me of every stance he adopts, he has made certain highly valid points, for example on interstate competition from the Battle of Plassey (1757) on. He has successfully elucidated the highly disputed nature of the French Revolution, recategorising it as an *intermediate*, with elements from below and above. It is noticeable that in the article beneath he clarifies what the essential requisites for capitalism are: viz, free wage-labour, the extraction of surplus value and competition. All well and good. Yet competition in this later work tends to mean *interstate competition*; Davidson denies that a market at the internal societal level is essential. Much hangs on this in relation to the former USSR from 1925 on; I, for one, see it neither as a workers' state (however degenerate) nor as a full-blown market society but rather as an authoritarian bureaucratic collectivism, albeit with surplus value extraction.

There are other key arguments that Davidson now elucidates further. He has succeeded in clarifying his view of the French revolution and its consequences, in a way that is compatible, in my view, with Marx, Brenner, and the more recent research he introduces: Harvey, Aminzade, Byres, Marzagalli, and Wolfreys, to which I would add Noiriel and Rancière.<sup>27</sup> It may muddy the simplicity of the above/below distinction, but to see the French trajectory as an *intermediate* one seems to me justified.

Finally, Dylan Riley dismisses Marx and Engels on the grounds that their views were 'shifting and contradictory',<sup>28</sup> 'Contradictory' no, but Davidson is fully aware that Marx was working with an ideal-typical analysis. He says regarding the *Communist Manifesto* (1948) that – as Hobsbawm has shown – England was much less far down the road of this revolutionary mode of production than Marx and Engels had given us the impression, but nevertheless the elements of the pure type were there.<sup>29</sup>

I would even go further and emphasise Marx's remarkable *prescience* in seeing, as early as the publication of *Capital* Volume I (1867), the role that exchange value would come to have in modern bourgeois capitalism. He argues, famously, that C-M-C would be replaced by M-C-M', 'value valorizing itself'.<sup>30</sup> A

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27 Marx 1973d, Brenner 1987, Harvey 2005, Aminzade 1984, Byres 2009, Marzagalli 2015, and Wolfreys 2007, to which I would add Noiriel 2002 and Rancière 1997.

28 Riley 2019, p. 118.

29 Davidson 2019, p. 246.

30 Marx 1976, p. 1060.

historical example might help clarify this. When, in Marx's time, a firm like the Glasgow company, Collins (1819–), produced Bibles and religious literature, the company began to do on a large-scale what William Collins, an impoverished Calvinist, had done with his partner, printing and distributing Bibles up and down Britain, driven by his faith. This was production for the sake of the use-value; at his death, William Collins (1789–1853) left assets worth only £71, having lived his life with an austere and rigorous discipline and given most of his profits (exchange-value) to set up churches in Glasgow's East End.<sup>31</sup> Nor was his son, also William, very different: 'Water Willy' got the name because, as a rigorous tee-totaller, he banned all alcohol at civic functions when elected Glasgow's Lord Provost.<sup>32</sup> It was only his grandson, who also ran Collins, who, by the end of the nineteenth century, lived a life of luxury, consuming munificently on a level to match the great wealth made by Collins' sale of Bibles to the Empire, from India to Africa.

In sharp contrast to the actions of the original William Collins, the book business, since the 1970s, has been ruled by what Marx (and Weber) call *'profit for its own sake'*. As André Schiffrin<sup>33</sup> and John Thompson<sup>34</sup> point out, a work of literature can be rejected even from reputable publishers, whatever its literary use-value, if it is unlikely, as an individual item to make sufficient *exchange-value*. It is this instrumental rationality – only fully developing subsequent to Marx's death – that he grasped as early as *Capital* and that has increasingly come, since then, to colonise the whole of life. Davidson understands this with amazing acuity; his latest book reveals how this logic came into being.

As is well-known, Max Weber, too, had an unexpectedly disenchanting conception of capitalist modernity for all his antipathy to certain 'devout Marxists'.<sup>35</sup> As he put it: 'The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so ... Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'.<sup>36</sup>

Curiously, in rather the same vein, Davidson makes his final remark on the Stalinist counterrevolution (in China and elsewhere): 'Puritanism in revolutionary England sought to establish the rule of saints and ended up facilitating the rule of a very unsaintly, landed, mercantile and banking elite; [...] Stalinism sought to establish state capitalist societies and succeeded in doing so, but

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31 Keir 1952, p. 154.

32 Keir 1952, pp. 187–8.

33 Schiffrin 2000.

34 Thompson 2010.

35 Weber 1995, p. 69.

36 Weber 1962, pp. 181, 182.

mistook – in most cases, it seems quite sincerely – what they had achieved for socialism'.<sup>37</sup> However, he concludes his most monumental book by elucidating this: 'But what we fight for is not to accomplish the outstanding "tasks of the bourgeois revolution" in the sense I have rejected throughout this book ... We fight rather for the universal principles of freedom and justice that the bourgeois revolutions brought onto the historical agenda, but for all their epochal significance were unable to achieve'.<sup>38</sup>

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37 Davidson 2012, p. 619.

38 Davidson 2012, p. 656.

## Editorial Note

At the time he was taken seriously ill Neil Davidson was, rather typically, working on multiple new projects. We are extremely pleased to publish this book in which he responds to critics of his *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (2012). As Neil notes in the text published here, *Historical Materialism* – as journal and conference – was a significant vehicle for his work and the debates around his major book.

Neil was working fast, trying to complete as many projects as his remaining time allowed him, and his text published here is quotation heavy. It is evident from editing this work that this was his working procedure; he structured his argument around citations, but there is no doubt that he would have trimmed at least some in a final version. In some parts, the manuscript I received was little but quotations. In section 3.2 of Neil's essay, several paragraphs were repeated from earlier points in the text. These have been deleted. While His argument retains its sense, it may be more fragmentary, and transitions more abrupt, than is ideal. I've kept my interventions to a minimum, merely adding linking sentences or phrases. The second half of the text possessed footnotes, but no bibliography. With *HM* footnote style this has proved a challenge finding his sources. Where possible citations have been checked, but under conditions of pandemic 'lock down' this has been difficult and, not doubt, many errors remain. We felt it important to publish Neil's final contribution to this important debate, so we have accepted that this book is necessarily imperfect. Page references in footnotes refer to the original contributions. We could have standardised them for this volume, but have decided to leave the contributions as they appeared. This also applies to Riley's review, which was published in *New Left Review* without footnotes, as is often the wont of that journal, and we have reproduced it in that form.

As indicated, the current book was edited during the period of 'lockdown' for the Covid-19 pandemic and that has meant I have incurred even greater debts than usual in producing this volume. Unable to access a library, I have depended on friends and comrades to find sources and check quotations that weren't among my own books. I am extremely grateful to Neil's long-term partner Cathy Watkins who, at a very difficult time, supplied drafts of his text and responded to questions. Special thanks go to the authors: Dylan Riley, Heide Gerstenberger and Charles Post who kindly allowed their work to be republished in this volume and allowed Neil the last word, at least for now. Neil's colleague Bridget Fowler supplied the Preface, reworking an earlier review of the book. I'm grateful for Bridget's commitment and readiness to put other work aside.

Alex Anievas, Duncan Thomas of Haymarket, Pete Green, and Mike Haynes all checked material. Sebastian Budgen helped find people who could find other sources needed. Charlie Post is more than a contributor to this book. In this debate, Neil and Charlie sit on different sides, but that didn't stop them being firm friends and comrades. While editing another of Neil's unfinished projects, Jamie Allinson has been incredibly supportive.

*Steve Edwards*

## Acknowledgements

Bridget Fowler's Preface is based on her earlier review: Fowler, Bridget 2014, 'Review of How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?', *History of Political Thought*, 35, 1: 206–9.

Other contributions to this volume appeared as:

Riley, Dylan 2015, 'Property Leading the People?', *New Left Review*, ii, 95: 109–25.

Gerstenberger, Heide 2019, '“How Bourgeois Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?”: Remarks on Neil Davidson's Book', *Historical Materialism*, 27, 3: 191–209.

Post, Charles 2019, 'How Capitalist Were the “Bourgeois Revolutions”?', *Historical Materialism*, 27, 3: 157–90.

Davidson's response is a much expanded version of an initial reply published as: Davidson, Neil (2019), 'Capitalist Outcomes, ideal Types, Historical realities', *Historical Materialism*, 27, 3, 210–276.

We are grateful to the authors and editors of journals for allowing this material to be republished and adapted.