

difficult process of political transformation and struggle.

In discussing Marxist scholars in the Soviet Union, and also those such as György Lukács in the short-lived (1919) Soviet Republic of Hungary, the book highlights the way in which they sought to transform the history still taught in universities and schools, either glorifying ‘national’ character or the glorious transition to ‘liberal’ values, to a study of history that placed at its centre an understanding of class forces and the role of the working class and its allies. A full assessment of their work requires a book on its own. It was difficult and contentious — as was the development of the Soviet Union itself. But collectively these Marxist scholars helped create a mass understanding of the role of the working class in human liberation that was essential for the defeat of Nazi fascism and the Soviet Union’s subsequent resistance to nuclear roll-back by the United States.

For Britain, White provides the same engaged narrative. Here his focus is on the work of the Communist Party’s Historians Group. In the 1930s, these historians sought to recapture history from the chroniclers of Britain’s ‘civilising’ imperial mission to focus on mass popular struggles against exploitation, injustice and imperialism. In doing so they provided an understanding of social change that underpinned the mass Popular Front emerging after 1936. It was this movement that ultimately helped to defeat those who sought accommodation with continental fascism. After the war, the work of these historians was equally important. They faced the extremely difficult political environment of the cold war. But they worked directly within the organised working-class movement to provide a popular understanding of the role of Marxism, the nature of class alliances and of the capitalist state. They therefore helped educate that generation of working-class militants, such as those on the Upper Clyde, who for a period did manage to inflict defeats on Britain’s ruling class and shift the balance of power within the Labour Party.

Making Our Own History is therefore a book that is intended once more, and within the traditions of the Marx Memorial Library and Workers’ School, to help develop the ability of the working people to fight for socialism. On this the author should be congratulated.

**PROMETHEAN
VISION** Eric Rahim



*Promethean Vision:
The Formation of Karl
Marx's Worldview*
Eric Rahim
axis Press, (2020)

David McLellan is president
of the Marx Memorial Library

Marx’s early writings made more accessible *David McLellan*

This short book is one of the very best accounts of how Karl Marx came to develop his materialist conception of history.

Most of Marx’s later writings — the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (of course), the brilliant political sociology of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), even large sections of *Capital* — are readily accessible to the ordinary reader. This is not true of Marx’s early writings in which he was struggling, within the conceptual confines of the Hegelian philosophy dominant at that time, to break through to what became his materialist conception of history. Hegel’s philosophy, said Marx, contained a ‘rational kernel’. Marx did discover this rational kernel, but the process was tortuous and sometimes difficult to follow.

Eric Rahim carefully and accurately follows Marx through these early writings. Concepts such as objectification, alienation, subject/predicate reversal are not readily accessible. But Rahim shows how Marx evolved from his early formation among the Young Hegelians, his journalism as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, his first encounters with communist thought, to the radical humanism of the

manuscripts that he wrote after moving to Paris in the summer of 1844. These manuscripts represent a first synthesis of German philosophy, French socialism and British economic theory — the last being introduced to Marx by Friedrich Engels on their meeting in Paris.

Rahim is a trained economist and he is at his best in analysing Marx's encounter with the political economy of Adam Smith and how he integrated this encounter into a new synthesis of his ideas. Rahim shows how these manuscripts, first published in 1932, formed the basis in Marx's thought for both a new — historical — conception of materialism and for a new critique of classical political economy. When the 1844 manuscripts became widely known in the middle of the twentieth century, many commentators proclaimed a 'humanist' Marx whom they contrasted with his later writings. Rahim, on the contrary, shows the continuity in Marx's thought.

Having dealt with the development of Marx's critique of political economy, Rahim discusses, in the last third of his book, the development of Marx's materialism and its foundation in historical analysis. In a masterful account of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' and *The German Ideology*, he shows how Marx developed a materialism which contrasted with that of Feuerbach. Feuerbach's materialism was a static one in which material reality was taken as a given. For Marx, by contrast, theory — philosophical reflection — must be united with practice. Reality does indeed confront us, but it is a reality produced, in large part, by conscious human activity. However constrained by economic forces, human beings are not their mere plaything, but themselves actively combine to produce, for good or ill, these same forces. It follows that, according to Rahim, 'the materialist conception of history was not intended by Marx to describe social reality; nor was it a model from which social reality could be deduced. It was a conceptual framework or a model used as a guide to interpreting reality — historical development and, in particular, the working of the capitalist mode of production.'

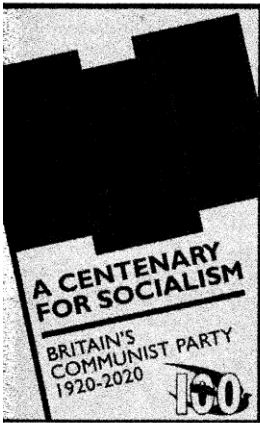
An important consequence of this is that historical development does not follow a definite pattern in which, through some internal necessity, one mode of production inevitably follows from the previous one. Marx did not produce some general historico-philosophical theory, but a conceptual framework for historical investigation. This allows for the flexibility that Marx later showed in his writings on the possibility of socialist revolution in Russia, based on the rural communes, and on the Asiatic mode of production in general.

The outcome of socialist revolution more widely is dealt with in the final chapter of Rahim's book. Here he considers what Marx has to say about both the political and the socio-economic organisation of a future communist society. For the former, he goes to Marx's comments on the potentialities of the Paris Commune in his 'The Civil War in France' (1871) — a decentralised government in which all political authority was elected, mandated and at all times revocable. For the latter, he links the transitional programme of the *Communist Manifesto* with Marx's sketch in the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' (1875) on the two stages of post-revolutionary society: the transitional stage in which 'bourgeois right and equality' still hold sway (you get out what you put in) and a higher stage of communist society whose banners proclaim 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs'.

Although it is beyond the scope of Rahim's book to explore in detail, this latter idea is particularly relevant in the opportunities that the present pandemic and, more importantly, the growing environmental crisis give us to rethink the

fundamental shape of our society. A society based on want is at odds with one based on need. Wants are unlimited, needs are not. Capitalism cannot exist without continuous growth. Socialism has no such imperative. Marx's materialist conception of history has provided us with a way to think through these alternatives and there is no better guide to Marx's conceptions than Rahim's excellent book.

New contributions on Britain's communist history *John Kelly*



A Centenary for Socialism: Britain's Communist Party 1920-2020
edited by Mary Davis
Manifesto Press, 2020

John Kelly is emeritus professor of industrial relations at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research interests include trade unions, industrial conflict, labour movements and the political far left, and recent books include *Comparative Employment Relations in the Global Economy* (2nd edn, 2010), *Contemporary Socialism* (2018) and *Ethical Socialism and the Trade Unions* (2010).

Britain's Communist Party has been the subject of a number of book-length studies, the most well known being the four single-author volumes commissioned by the CPGB leadership and written by James Klugmann and Noreen Branson, covering the years from 1920 to 1951. Two subsequent volumes, by John Callaghan and Geoff Andrews, took the story up to 1991 and, although branded as volumes of five and six of a 'comprehensive history', they were not commissioned by the CPGB or the CPB and were considerably more critical in their tone and overall approach than their predecessors.

A Centenary for Socialism, according to its editor, Mary Davis, is not *the* single-volume history of the CPGB/CPB, but a history with multiple contributors, different viewpoints and a thematic rather than chronological structure. Its authors are mostly CPB members, including academics, journalists, union officers and officials as well as CP officers, and their 24 chapters are organised under the headings of political, economic and ideological struggle. Many of them document the high points of communist influence in Britain, starting with the 1926 general strike and moving on to the 1930 launch of the *Daily Worker*, the International Brigades that fought against fascism in Spain, the election of communist MPs in 1935 and 1945, the development of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) in the 1960s and the fight against anti-union legislation and state incomes policies from the 1960s through the 1970s. The chapters generally complement material in the six-volume history and often provide significantly more detail on policies themselves or on their political background, such as the development of the AES and its connections to wage struggles and union collective bargaining rights. Other chapters explore themes that were less well developed or only briefly discussed previously, such as the significant roles played by the many Jewish party members until the mid-1950s, or the remarkable numbers of painters, novelists and poets associated with the party between the 1930s and 1950s.

Several chapters go well beyond previous work, critically exploring particularly difficult and complex issues. Davis notes that, from as early as 1922, the CPGB was criticised by the Comintern for its neglect of theoretical and practical work around women's issues and for its tendency to counterpose 'class struggle' to bourgeois feminism. Fifteen years later, the *Daily Worker* opened a 'Home page' with material on... recipes, knitting and childcare! The lack of theoretical work on women and class significantly hindered the party in dealing with 1970s debates on gender, sexuality and intersectionality, despite the party having launched the National Assembly of Women in 1952.

Robert Griffiths's chapter on nationalism is equally analytical and critical, noting the long-standing tendency for party activists to frame 'nationalism' and