

How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?

Monday 18 May 2020, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2005).

I owe at least two debts to Isaac Deutscher. [1] The first is general: his personal example as a historian. Deutscher was not employed as an academic and, for at least part of his exile in Britain, had to earn his living providing instant Kremlinology for, among other publications, *The Observer* and *The Economist*. It is unlikely that the Memorial Prize would be the honour it is, or that it would even exist, if these were his only writings. Nevertheless, his journalism enabled him to produce the great biographies of Stalin and Trotsky, and the several substantial essays which are his real legacy. For someone like me, working outside of the university system, Deutscher has been a model of how to write history which combines respect for scholarly standards with political engagement. I did not always agree with the political conclusions which Deutscher reached, but the clarity of his style meant that, at the very least, it was always possible to say what these conclusions were - something that is not always true of the theoretical idols of the Left. [2]

My second debt to Deutscher is more specific, and directly relates to my theme: his comments on the nature of the bourgeois revolutions. Deutscher was not alone in thinking creatively about bourgeois revolutions during the latter half of the twentieth century, of course, but, as I hope to demonstrate, he was the first person to properly articulate the scattered insights on this subject by thinkers in what he called the classical-Marxist tradition. [3]

I am conscious of the difficulties I face, not only in seeking to defend the scientific validity of bourgeois revolution as a theory, but also attempting to add a hitherto unknown case (and potentially others) to the existing roster. Since Scotland never featured on the lists of great bourgeois revolutions, even in the days when the theory was part of the common sense of the Left, arguments for adding the Scottish Revolution to a list whose very existence has been called into question might seem Quixotic, to say the least. Therefore, although I will occasionally refer to the specifics of the Scottish experience, my task is the more general one of persuading comrades - particularly those who think me engaged in an outmoded form of knight errantry - of the necessity for a theory of bourgeois revolution.

Bourgeois revolutions are supposed to have two main characteristics. Beforehand, an urban class of capitalists is in conflict with a rural class of feudal lords, whose interests are represented by the absolutist state. Afterwards, the former have taken control of the state from the latter and, in some versions at least, reconstructed it on the basis of representative democracy. Socialists have found this model of bourgeois revolution ideologically useful in two ways. On the one hand, the examples of decisive historical change associated with it allow us to argue that, having happened before, revolutions can happen again, albeit on a different class basis. (This aspect is particularly important in countries like Britain and, to a still greater extent, the USA, where the dominant national myths have been constructed to exclude or minimise the impact of class struggle on national history.) On the other hand, it allows us to expose the hypocrisy of a bourgeoisie which itself came to power by revolutionary means, but which now seeks to deny the same means to the working

class.

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Footnotes

[1] Delivered on 9 October 2004 at the *Historical Materialism* Conference, 'Capital, Empire and Revolution'. This version also incorporates elements of Neil Davidson's response to a paper by George Comninel, 'The Feudal Roots of Modern Europe', delivered at the same conference on the following day. Davidson was cowinner of the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize for his book *Discovering the Scottish Revolution, 1692-1746* (2003). The second part will appear in the next issue of *Historical Materialism*.

[2] Davidson 2004b, pp. 97-9, 101-8.

[3] Deutscher 1972, pp. 17-20.