

The Politics of Armed Resistance

written by Bill Keach | August 14, 2024



“Class War Now,” the introduction to Mark Steven’s engaging and wide-ranging book, asks us to think about the relationship between “class war” and “class struggle.” This question is connected to the book’s striking sense of immediacy: “Ours is the age of class war. We talk about it all the time. Barely a day goes by without ‘class war’ appearing in one headline or another” (p. 1). Steven’s opening examples are the 2019 *gilets jaunes* (“yellow vests”) movement in France, the 2020 mass protests in the U.S. following the police murder of George Floyd, and recent anti-government resistance in Colombia, Chile, and Haiti. Are these struggles themselves examples of “class war”? Or is “class war” a concept that enables us to see the sustained revolutionary potential of struggles such as these even if they haven’t, in themselves, demonstrated the organized military violence we usually associate with war? “[C]lass war,” Steven writes, “is used less as a technical term and more as an affective catalyst, reframing actions through military concepts and rhetoric without offering so much as a program or practical strategy” (p. 6). Citing passages in Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Étienne Balibar that deploy “class war” in this way, he argues that “the revolutionary invocation of class war” “seeks to recruit and to motivate comrades from a state of contradiction into acts of antagonism” (p. 9). This understanding of class war depends, he insists, on an understanding of class that is “flexible enough to include intersecting social relations” of race, gender, sexual orientation, cultural difference. It foregrounds “[a]ntagonism, in the form of material political combat,” that in practice unites the dominated and exploited across different forms of oppression and exploitation. From this perspective, revolutionary “civil war is itself a social determinant, a quantifiable force of revolutionary becoming” (p. 15).

In what sense can a book with this agenda be called *A Literary History*? Steven’s introductory answer to this question is not as clear as it might be. Each of the ten chapters contains insightful commentary on literary texts that represent and in some cases “actively participated in” particular revolutionary moments. Steven teaches twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature at the University of Exeter and is a skillful, resourceful, critical reader. But his analysis is by no means confined to literary representation or even, as he says, to showing how literature can become “an active participant in the revolutionary process” (p. 19). Instead, the book shows how literary texts contribute and provide access to the broader and more diverse spectrum of revolutionary history. In no way is it confined to exclusively “literary” representations of this history.

Steven begins his historical sequence of ten chapters not, predictably, with the French Revolution but with the Haitian Revolution, a move that radically foregrounds from the outset intersections of race and class and that anticipates the tenth and final chapter’s focus on militant Black struggle in the U.S. from the 1940s to the present. The opening chapter takes us inside the material conditions that led Toussaint Louverture to insist in February 1802 that “we have no other resource than destruction and flame. . . burn and annihilate everything, in order that those who have come to reduce us to slavery may have before their eyes the image of that hell which they deserve.” Steven writes incisively about the differences as well as the connections between a slave revolution and a

proletarian revolution. Louverture, Dessalines, and other leaders of the revolt in Haiti were inspired by the radical republican formulations of the French Revolution but applied them in ways that reflected the absolute denial of human rights to the enslaved: “their violence was not just a mode of attack; it was foundational to their collective being, their commonality as a class” (p. 33). Haitian revolutionaries “emulated and promoted the slogans of the French Revolution” while simultaneously developing their own collective identity” that “weaponized commonality in subjugation, unifying the enslaved into a devastatingly effective guerrilla assault force” (pp. 37–38). “Haiti affirms actual combat” not as the consequence of but “as the forerunner to ideology, and its combat is both locally anti-colonial and systemically anti-capitalist. . . . Haiti’s smoke was visible everywhere within capital’s expanding empires” (p. 43). It was certainly visible in the U.S., where a terrified government under President Thomas Jefferson refused to recognize Haitian independence from European colonial control.

In the chapter that follows Steven turns not directly to the French Revolution itself but to militancy within the emerging working class in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the world’s most rapidly developing industrial society. In August of 1819 a massive crowd of workers, many of them unemployed and suffering from the depression that followed Britain’s long-running and recently ended war against Napoleonic France, assembled on St. Peter’s Field in Manchester to demand relief from starvation and the right to vote. Although the workers remained peaceful, their anger and sheer number threatened the local magistrates, who ordered a battle-hardened cavalry regiment of 600 mounted soldiers to charge and disperse the crowd. Eighteenth of the protesters were murdered, hundreds were injured. The event soon came to be known as the “Peterloo Massacre,” a sarcastic reference to Britain’s imperial victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo of 1815. When the poet Percy Shelley, living in self-exile in Italy, read about the Peterloo Massacre in an English newspaper, it made his “blood boil.” He responded with a visionary reimagining of the event titled *The Mask of Anarchy* that culminates in an appeal to workers that still summons us today: “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number. . . . Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you— / Ye are many—they are few.” Steven understands these lines as a “form of revolutionary romanticism” that (quoting Robert Sayre’s and Michael Löwy’s “Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism”) rejects “both the illusion of a pure and simple return to organic communities of the past and resigned acceptance of the bourgeois present” (p. 47). Whether or not this accurately conceptualizes Shelley’s political position in the poem remains an open question, not least because the poet’s own identity isn’t included in the relationship between the “Ye” of the workers and the “they” of the ruling-class bosses. Steven goes on to comment on an interesting range of other poems from this period of nineteenth-century class war in which revolutionary violence (the “Luddites” or “frame-breakers”) and militant reform (the Chartists) both found their voices.

Having made his way historically into the late nineteenth century with his commentary on British “class war,” Steven opens Chapter 3 with the Paris Commune and an account of how the “Marseillaise,” the French national anthem originally adopted as the national anthem of the bourgeoisie revolution of 1789, was rewritten for the working-class insurgency of 1871. This chapter tracks the evolution of violent class struggle in France from the Fall of the Bastille in 1789 through the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 to the climactic if short-lived experiment in working-class self-empowerment of the Commune. Curiously, Steven makes no mention in this chapter of *terror* and its derivatives *terrorist* and *terrorism*, all words that derive from the Jacobin “Reign of Terror” of 1793–1794. Steven shows how the evolution of class war in nineteenth-century France is differently represented in the novels of Victor Hugo and Emile Zola. Toward the end of the chapter he stresses the influence of Auguste Blanqui on armed proletarian militancy during the Commune. The chapter concludes with the legendary feminist revolutionary Louise Michel, who transformed the “La Marseillaise” into a “The Black Marseillaise” and sent a copy to Hugo with the claim that it “smelled

of gunpowder" (p. 83). Ultimately that same smell also signaled the defeat of the Commune by the forces of bourgeois counterrevolution.

The last of Steven's chapters on nineteenth-century class war, "School of War," is focused on the rise of working-class militancy in the United States from the Civil War through the labor struggles of the 1870s and after. The first great lesson, as W.E.B. Du Bois recognized, came from the political agency of southern slaves whose fight on the Union side constituted a radical new kind of class war. Enslaved Black men were initially "recruited into service for the Union"—that is, in defense of U.S. capitalism—"first working as non-combatant labourers before going on to fill official regiments, entering the field of combat as soldiers in 1862." Once they became Union soldiers, Blacks "recognized themselves as the class on whose labour power . . . military victory would depend, thus presenting a potentially safer route to freedom." Black Union soldiers in effect "went on strike, transferring the labour power of half a million men and women from the Confederate planters to the Northern invaders, for whom they would work no longer as slaves but as wage labourers" (p. 89). As Du Bois argues, the demands of Black Union soldiers "became a general strike against the slave system" itself (p. 90). In this sense the Civil War contained within itself a class war of self-emancipation fought by Black soldiers. From here Steven moves on to look at the violent tactics of multiple interlocking rail strikes in 1877 from a perspective informed by Eugene Debs's 1895 assessment that "a strike is war; not necessarily a war of blood and bullets, but a war in the sense that it is a conflict between two contending interests or classes of interest" (p. 100). Steven illustrates Debs's claim with examples from Jack London's flawed but insightful 1908 novel *The Iron Heel* ("an alternative history of 1877," p. 101), which shows "that a revolutionary class will be doomed to suppression and subsistence if it internalizes a hierarchical division within its own ranks" (p. 104).

The fifth chapter, "Towards a Red Army," is the first in a sequence of five chapters on class war in the twentieth century. Steven's opening focus is on the January 1918 announcement, two months after the beginning of the October Revolution in Russia, that "[t]he seizure of power by the workers and propertyless persons renders necessary the formation of a new army' . . . raised from peasants and workers to protect the newly founded revolutionary state against capitalism's military confederations" (p. 108). He shows how a critical reading of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1867) contributed to Lenin's formulation of the "principles that would later underwrite the Red Army" (p. 111). "The Russian people," Lenin had written in "Tolstoy and the Proletarian Struggle" (1910), "will secure their emancipation only when they realize that it is not from Tolstoy that they must learn to win a better life, but from the class the significance of which Tolstoy did not understand, and which alone is capable of destroying the old world which Tolstoy hated. That class is the proletariat" (p. 112). Both Lenin and Trotsky saw a dynamic connection between working-class self-emancipation and an army rooted in the battle to defend socialist revolution in Russia and, inevitably, in other capitalist countries around the world. As Walter Rodney argues in *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*, the Bolshevik revolution was unprecedented in the international influence of its alliance between the proletariat and agrarian peasants. At the same time the revolution in Russia was contested by the old ruling class and its international capitalist supporters in a catastrophic civil war that, when it was finally won by the Red Army in 1922, left the Bolsheviks and their supporters decimated. Steven gives too little attention to this reality in "Towards a Red Army," and to its historical and political consequences. The point is important because the existence of and organized engagement in class war must eventually be evaluated in terms of its outcome, its degree of success in empowering workers and their allies. Steven's commentary in this chapter on the writer Victor Serge illuminates Serge's efforts to engage his readers in such evaluation through his novels and in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1851). Serge's insights tend to fade away in this chapter's closing pages, however, which surprisingly seem to find no politically decisive difference between the Bolshevik Red Army ethos of 1917-1924 and the later counterrevolutionary militarism

of Stalin's program of "socialism in one country."

Chapter 6, "Protracted People's War," begins with this pronouncement in 1949 from Lin Biao, commander of the Chinese Red Army: "'The Chinese Revolution is a continuation of the great October Revolution'" (p. 128). Steven follows this quotation by saying that the Chinese and Russian revolutions "are radically dissimilar in their approaches to class and war": "Whereas Russia's pre-revolutionary situation was of an absolutism defined by industrial concentration surrounded by rural agriculture, the Chinese revolution took place in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country." Instead of "armed uprisings in the cities" that "spread to the countryside" as in Russia, in China revolutionary forces "won nation-wide victory through the encirclement of the cities from the rural areas and the final capture of the cities." This fundamental difference is critical to any understanding of the subsequent fate of socialist revolution in two of the world's most powerful nations. The revolution in Russia was won by a militarized working class in alliance with peasants; the revolution in China was won by a predominantly peasant army in a country with a relatively small and undeveloped proletariat. Steven surveys eight novels published shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 all of which "foreground the peasantry as the agency of change" (p. 132) and from which "Mao developed a narrative template of class war" (p. 133). According to Steven, that "template" meant that while "the leading force of revolution" was, for Mao, just as it was for Lenin and Marx, the industrial proletariat, the Chinese economy was still "primarily rural" and so "political power belongs to an overwhelming majority of poor and semi-owner peasants" (p. 134). Steven's book acknowledges a fundamental difference between Russian and Chinese class struggle, then, but stops short of drawing out the political conclusions of this difference and their bearing on the future of class war. He ends the chapter by noting that Black Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton "adapted" Mao's thinking by "replacing peasant actors in uneven- and un-developed countries with a racialized vanguard of the working poor from the world's imperial core" (p. 149).

Chapter 7, "For Complete Disorder," foregrounds Frantz Fanon's understanding of how "decolonial warfare" in Africa didn't so much arise from as create solidarities between peasants and workers that hadn't previously existed. In Algeria, such warfare against French colonialism generated a sense of national identity "through social forms that are empowered by conflict" and embodied in the FLN (National Liberation Front) (p. 167). "What took place in Algeria," Steven argues, "might be the formation of a new class through decolonial violence, the mobilization of the colonially dispossessed as a revolutionary army." A different kind of decolonial process took place in Cuba in the 1950s, as Steven explains in Chapter 8, "The Armed Nucleus." The title refers to the 1959 revolution against the U.S.-supported dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista launched by ex-lawyer Fidel Castro and a small group of militants whose ideology was initially more populist than socialist and whose eventual victory was made possible by a form of guerrilla warfare that, according to Steven, "contain[ed] within itself the form of a new sociality" (p. 174). Steven's argument that "guerilla combat" in Cuba "epitomizes class war" leaves open a number of important questions, including the central question of the degree to which either the agrarian peasants or the working class in Cuba actually came to hold state power, as opposed to giving their support to a self-perpetuating leadership headed by Castro and his revolutionary followers. Such questions are posed in the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Regis Debray, as Steven shows. In this chapter these questions are never answered.

Chapter 9, "Fighting after Fascism," begins with Gramsci and the rise of Italian fascism in the 1920s and 30s but quickly moves forward to the post-war period. "Italy's reconstruction preserved fascism within its civil if not its political governance," Steven argues, in terms that are sharply relevant to Italy today, "so any resistance would find itself conjoined with revolution" (p. 200). The climax of that resistance came in Italy's "hot autumn" of 1969, when a massive strike wave that lasted well into 1970 threatened to break the post-war political dominance of the Christian Democrats and to

drive Italian fascism into oblivion. Steven traces the rise of working-class militancy advancing under the ideological formations of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, the terrorist tactics of the Red Brigade, and the depressing move to the right toward Eurocommunism of the Italian Communist Party, which was dissolved in 1991. And he explores literary manifestations of the rise and fall of this great wave of working-class militancy in literary texts such as Nanni Balestrini's 1971 novel *We Want Everything*, Alfredo Bandelli's 1973 poem "Ballad of Fiat," and Elena Ferrante's more recent and internationally popular feminist novels of Neapolitan class struggle. The decline of that militancy has now reached a point with alarming implications for the argument of this chapter: Steven's *Class War* seems to have been completed shortly before the election in October 2022 of the neo-fascist Georgia Meloni as Italian prime minister.

In his final chapter Steven resumes and extends the revolutionary emphasis on race and class of Chapter 1. He returns to Du Bois, who was tried and exonerated in 1951 of charges that he was "the agent of a foreign principal." The chapter's title, "Army of the Wronged," comes from Du Bois's 1952 reflection on his acquittal, an outcome that set him apart from the "thousands of innocent victims . . . in jail today"—so many of whom were Black—"because they had neither money, experience, nor friends to help them" (p. 219). Du Bois understood that incarcerated people of color had come to constitute an "underclass of the imprisoned, around whom revolution should reorient itself" (p. 220). Two decades later Angela Davis recalled Du Bois's insight during her imprisonment for supplying guns used in Black Panther Jonathan Jackson's armed assault on the Marin County courthouse. Davis identified what she called the "prison-industrial complex" and emphasized its function in sustaining racism as an intrinsic feature of American capitalism. Other Black Panther leaders, such as Fred Hampton in Chicago, emphasized that their fight against racism was inescapably bound up with class struggle. They understood that their armed defense of Black people against police violence in the U.S. connected them with "the decolonial fighters in Africa, the guerrillas in Latin America, the autonomists in Italy." This understanding moved the Panthers "from a political program of Black nationalism to one of revolutionary internationalism" (p. 223). But as Assata Shakur acknowledges in her *Autobiography* (1987), the Panthers had been unable to create the kind of broader mass movement and revolutionary organization necessary to challenge the system of racialized capitalism. Writing in the 1980s from self-exile in Cuba, Shakur argues that neither the Panthers nor their sequel, the Black Liberation Army, were adequate to challenging the system of racialized capitalism in the United States: "you have to have the way as well as the will, an overall ideology and strategy that stem from a scientific analysis of history and present conditions" (p. 236). She "cautions impatient comrades who would substitute military for political struggle": "[T]he most important factor is that armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution. Revolutionary war is a people's war. . . . Armed struggle can never be successful by itself; it must be part of an overall strategy for winning, and the strategy must be political as well as military" (p. 237; *Assata: An Autobiography*, p. 242). Steven ends the chapter by looking at how, in 2020, Black Lives Matter "became a movement of urban revolt" and, in the process of doing so, "went to war against the material forms of racism, but not of racism alone" (p. 240).

Class War: A Literary History ends with a "Postscript": "No War but Class War." The latter phrase has become a slogan widely available on T-shirts, buttons, stickers, and posters and has its origins in a 1975 British TV series called *Days of Hope*, in which a young working-class enlisted soldier in World War I deserts the British army to fight for socialism instead of for colonial and imperial domination. Steven sees the phrase as "itself a literary form" in which the repetition of "War" exemplifies the "production of difference" as well as of "similitude" and thus "opens up an ideological fracture within the space of language" (p. 245). You don't have to be persuaded by this momentary foray into post-structuralist lingo to find the force in asserting that the fight for working-class self-determination is fundamental to the rejection of war motivated by capitalist exploitation and oppression.