

Neil Davidson, 1957-2020

Steve Edwards

Neil Davidson – the most significant Scottish intellectual of the radical left – died at the beginning of May 2020 from a brain tumour. He was 62.

Davidson was a prolific writer of historical sociology and a critical analyst of contemporary politics, particularly the Scottish scene. His learning was immense, his reading power prodigious and his intellect both generous and daring. His book collection installed in a garage at his home, Cauther Ha', West Lothian, actually required library stacks. Davidson was author of three monographs: *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (2000); *Discovering the Scottish Revolution 1692-1746* (2003), which was awarded both the Isaac & Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize and the Saltire Society's Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun award; and the monumental *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (2012). He published three collections of essays and, always committed to collaborative work, co-edited significant works: *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (2008); *Neoliberal Scotland* (2010); *The Longue Durée of the Far-Right* (2014); and *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland* (2018).¹ This bibliography gives only a limited sense of his work, because he published on a wide range of topics in Marxist theory, history and politics in academic journals, the press and the publications of the far left. He was also a frequent speaker on campaign platforms and at socialist gatherings. In an appreciation of Davidson and his work, George Kerevan, journalist and one-time MP (SNP) for East Lothian, observed that he accomplished enough to fill three academic lifetimes.²

This record was all the more noteworthy because it was only in 2008 that Davidson was appointed to his first university position at Strathclyde, moving in 2013 to the Sociology Department at Glasgow and he never occupied a position above the basic lecturer grade. Davidson was born in Aberdeen, into a working-class family, with some

relatives still working the land.³ One grandfather was a farm servant who moved to the city in the 1920s and an aunt worked as a shepherdess (the Scottish peasantry survived in the area much longer than the rest of mainland Britain and Davidson's family history finds its echo in the greatest work of British Marxist modernism: Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* of 1932). Throughout his life he was acutely aware of his class origins; his only academic qualification came much later with an Open University degree (he studied modern art and popular culture). He began his working life as a clerk in the health service and then took the civil service exam. After living for a short period in London, Davidson moved to Edinburgh to work in the Scottish Office, whose functions were transferred to the Scottish Executive in 1999, rising to provide advice on policy implementation to the Permanent Secretary to the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond. Yet while he occupied a position as a state manager, he was also a leading socialist activist, having joined the Socialist Workers Party in 1978. An active member for thirty-five years, he would later break with that group, but its particular theoretical contribution and militant ethos remained enduring influences.⁴

While working as a civil servant Davidson would read and write before dawn. It was during this period that he published his two major studies of the development of capitalism in Scotland.⁵ Scotland was a very uneven social formation: the lowland area centred on Edinburgh was an advanced commercial centre, producing major Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, David Hume, James Steuart and the stadial historians who influenced Marx, but the highlands remained dominated by peasant agriculture under control of feudal warrior chiefs organised in Clans. The consolidation of capitalism in Britain involved the destruction of clan society and the brutal 'highland clearances'.⁶ Employing

categories that would become central to his subsequent work, he viewed the emergence of modern Scotland as an outcome of ‘uneven and combined development’ (Trotsky) and ‘passive revolution’ from above (Gramsci). Scotland was, he said, the very first example of a capitalist modernisation carried out from above. Importantly, for understanding modern Scottish politics, he demonstrated that a national structure of feeling was not based on some enduring ‘*Braveheart* effect’, rather it was a decidedly modern construction. It was only with the Act of Union that the British state eradicated the contradiction of distinct highland and lowland social formations. The British state, he argues, was ultimately only cemented with the defeat of the Jacobite Lords at Cullodan in 1746.



Neil at Ian Hamilton Finlay’s *Little Sparta*.

What might seem like a local matter turned out to be an occurrence of epochal significance in establishing the international predominance of British capitalism.

The rout of the Jacobites eradicated the remaining power base for an Absolutist alternative to the rule of capital. Scotland supplied the British regime, at home and in its colonial forms, with important resources – a key port and industrial commodities in the form of fish, jute, tobacco, and later engineering - but also many of its military and administrative cadre. The Scots played a central role in Imperial project and they conceived of themselves as Britons. As Keravan observes, Davidson may not have been aware of it at this time, but these studies allow for an understanding of current Scottish national consciousness as a distinctly modern development with anti-systemic dimensions that would break the hegemony of Labour and pose a serious challenge to the integrity of the British state. Davidson’s work thus involves a challenge to both defenders of the Union and cherished mythemes of Scottish nationalism. It is said that on being advised that to understand Scottish history he needed to read these works, Alex Salmond was astonished to find that a member of his staff was a Marxist!

In 2012 Davidson published his major work: *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*⁷ In *New Left Review*, Dylan Riley summarised the ambitions of the book:

Epic in scale, *How Revolutionary?* is by any standards a significant achievement. Its intellectual scope is commendably wide-ranging; no one else has put together such a broad field of references on this subject, or conjoined such widely dispersed historical and theoretical arguments. In addition, Davidson discusses virtually every key issue in Marxist political sociology, sweeping from the tributary mode to the nation-state, the differentiation of the peasantry to the revolution *en permanence*.⁸

This assessment is all the more telling, because of Riley’s very substantial disagreements with key aspects of Davidson’s argument. Across 700 pages, Davidson explored the genealogy of the concept of bourgeois revolution along with conditions for the rise of capitalism, arguing that by 1749 capitalism existed as a world system and there could be no retreat to pre-capitalist social relations, only a path beyond to socialism. The book is an outstanding work of history and sociology, commanding a huge literature, but rooted in the idea of uneven and combined development and the distinction between revolution from below and from above (Gramsci’s ‘passive revolution’). He also insisted on demarcating genuine social revolutions

that inaugurated a new mode of production from merely political revolutions, which changed the staff, but left the prevailing property relations in place. The major turning points in the consolidation of capitalism involve both revolutions from below: England in the seventeenth century, France in 1789; and a series of passive revolutions: Bismarck's defeat of Denmark in 1864 and the unification of the German states, the Meiji Restoration and the Risorgimento. One central point of the book is to confront Stalinist mystification that described as 'socialist' or 'on the socialist path' states created without popular upheavals. It was a misconception that gave rise to a devastating catalogue of defeats. As Jamie Allinson noted, 'Even the national liberation states of the latter twentieth century, garlanded with red flags and portraits of Lenin', followed the same pattern.⁹ It is noteworthy that critics of *How Revolutionary?* have largely avoided the challenge of thinking about how these states morphed, without break, into forms of capitalism.¹⁰ Davidson was remorseless in pointing out the contradictions of those who held illusions in these societies and grasped better than anyone that any robust account of bourgeois revolution would have to test the concept against the post-Stalinist societies.

Setting aside World Systems Theory, on the Marxist Left there are currently three schools of thought on the development of capitalism (it goes without saying that they all have implications for current political understanding). One position associated with the 'Political Marxism' of Robert Brenner and his followers, sees capitalism developing uniquely in Southern England (possibly in Holland and Catalonia as well – they disagree over this) as a result of the historic weakness of English feudal property relations that enabled the development of market-dependent free-wage labour to develop. Some Political Marxists argue there was no capitalism in France until after 1871, and, in one extreme case, until the 1950s. International capitalism from this perspective is an effect of British predominance. Although, in his own *Merchants and Revolution* Bob Brenner does speak to the seventeenth-century revolution in Britain, his followers have little use for the idea of 'bourgeois revolution', particularly as it applies to 1789. In *The Origins of Capitalism* Ellen Wood presents the concept as a hopeless mess. Davidson was particularly opposed to purism of the Brenner School, which he felt did not grasp the uneven and combined

character of *particular* capitalist formations. In his final intellectual appearance Davidson organised a large conference on UCD in Glasgow where he debated Brenner. (Part way through that conference, disoriented, he went to hospital and received his diagnosis.)

A second globalist approach emphasises 'trajectories of accumulation' developing within existing non-capitalist societies, which leverage internal transformations, creating centres of capitalism. Here we could cite: Banaji, Beckert, Liu and Van der Linden. For this trend, bourgeois revolution is not essential to the development of capitalism and Maurice Dobb and the British Marxist historians may have done a mis-service in making the category the focus of socialist attention. Davidson's book is the main modern defence of the third approach: the idea that revolutionary upheavals instigated major transformations in modes of production. Rather than a misconceived importation of liberal historiography into Marxism as some suggest, for Davidson bourgeois revolution was a necessary idea for Marx and Engels that allowed them to break with evolutionist schemas. Responding to revisionists on all sides, he argued for a 'consequentialist' position, acknowledging that the revolutions from below were not led by a conscious capitalist class. Consequentialists suggest that revolutions can aid capitalist transformation by removing legal and other state impediments to accumulation and these need not involve consciously capitalist actors. The mass involvement of plebeians in these events have often pushed the gentlemen at the top much further than they would have gone if left to themselves. Right or wrong on any of these points, Davidson's critics all acknowledge that he energised the discussion to the point where Bridget Fowler could describe the exchanges that ensued as 'the Davidson debate'.

An activist to his bones, throughout his life Neil was a committed trade unionist; he was a founder of the anti-war movement in Scotland and, when allegations of predatory sexual behaviour against a leading member tore the SWP apart, he resigned with the opposition and helped to create the breakaway organisation *rs21* (revolutionary socialism in the twenty-first century).¹¹ He was also an anti-nationalist advocate of Scottish independence, expressing disdain for 'left Unionists' who, in the name of abstract internationalism, accepted the continued existence of Scotland within the British state, 'a more

pernicious nationalism’, as he wrote in this journal.¹² Davidson was a leading intellectual figure in the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), the left-wing alliance *RISE (Respect, Independence, Socialism and Environmentalism)* and the Scottish anti-capitalist platform *Conter*.¹³ Several commentators have noted that Davidson and RIC played a central role in the referendum of 2014, taking the independence campaign to the housing estates and turning the referendum into a debate on neoliberal austerity. As he explains in his diagnosis of the campaign, the highest votes for independence came in exactly these working-class conurbations.¹⁴ The Scottish radical left, at least partly inspired by his perspective, came close to fracturing the British state.

Neil was a fine polemical speaker, excelling in irony, though international audiences – and also many English ones – found his Doric inflection challenging. Despite this, he found appreciative audiences from Chicago to São Paulo. Most of all, Neil Davidson was a passionate socialist intellectual, both erudite and militant. Yet he was also one of the least pompous, or self-satisfied, men one could hope to meet, always encouraging to others. His energy was immense, forever writing, speaking and organising; he was continually involved in the next project to revive socialism from below, convinced of immediate possibilities. Deeply committed to working-class politics, Davidson maintained an attachment to intellectual continuity – to the work of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci and Benjamin – yet he was also a theoretical innovator. At first sight, it might be difficult to grasp, but the spectrum of his concerns – bourgeois revolution, the emergence of the Scottish nation, racism, neoliberalism, radical independence, art and literature, and much more – was animated by an approach to uneven and combined development as a strategic perspective for current politics.

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Notes

1. Neil Davidson, *Holding Fast to an Image of the Past: Explorations in the Marxist Tradition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); *We Cannot Escape History: States and Revolutions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015); *Nation-states: Consciousness and Competition* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016). He also co-edited four books: *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings,*

1953-1974, with Paul Blackledge (Leiden: Brill, 2008); *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*, with Patricia McCafferty and David Miller (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); *The Longue Duree of the Far-Right: An International Historical Sociology*, with Alexander Anievas, Adam Fabry and Richard Saul (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); and *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland*, with Minna Liinpaa, Maureen McBride and Satnam Virdee (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2018). At least five further books are in the offing: *Marxism and Conservatism* and *The Meaning of Revolution Today*, both with Haymarket; a reply to critics of *How Revolutionary?* and the major study of *Uneven and Combined Development* in the Historical Materialism series; and a collection of essays on Scotland compiled by Jamie Allinson.

2. George Kerevan, ‘Neil Davidson an Appreciation 1957-2020’, *Bella Caledonia*, 2020, <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2020/05/07/an-appreciation-of-neil-davidson-1957-2020/>

3. Scotland was an independent Kingdom, which joined with England in The Acts of Union 1706 and 1707 to create the state of Great Britain.

4. Much of this information comes from conversations over a long period. The best source for Davidson’s biography is George Souvlis, ‘The National Question, Class and the European Union: an Interview with Neil Davidson’, *Salvage* (2017), <https://salvage.zone/online-exclusive/the-national-question-class-and-the-european-union-neil-davidson/>

5. *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); *Discovering the Scottish Revolution, 1692-1746* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

6. Neil Davidson, ‘Marx and Engels on the Scottish Highlands’, *Science & Society* 65: 3 (2001), 286–326.

7. Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012). Reviewed by John Kraniuskas in *Radical Philosophy* 184 (March-April 2014).

8. Dylan Riley, ‘Property Leading the People’, *New Left Review* 95 (2015), 117. *How Revolutionary?* begins with an account of Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People* of 1830.

9. Jamie Allinson, ‘In memoriam: Neil Davidson, 9 October 1957 – 3 May 2020’, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4697-in-memoriam-neil-davidson-9-october-1957-3-may-2020>

10. Davidson presses home this weak spot in the arguments of his critics – both orthodox Trotskyists and sublimated Stalinists – in his forthcoming *Why Marxism needs the Concept of Bourgeois Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2021). See also Linda Matar, ‘Twilight of “State Capitalism” in Formerly “Socialist” Arab States’, *The Journal of North African Studies* 18:3 (2013), 416–430.

11. Articles on uneven and combined development that form the basis of this book appeared on the rs21 website, <https://www.rs21.org.uk/>.

12. Neil Davidson, ‘“Yes”: a Non-nationalist Argument for Scottish Independence’, *Radical Philosophy* 185 (May-June 2014), 2–7.

13. Conter is organised around a website: <https://www.conter.co.uk/>

14. Neil Davidson, ‘A Scottish Watershed’, *New Left Review* 89 (2014), 5–26.

