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## Martyn Ives, Reform, Revolution and Direct Action amongst British Miners: The Struggle for the Charter in 1919

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[See table of contents](#)

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War is far from dead, and a few of them unable to see much in Hobsbawm beyond that he was a Communist. At a moment when most Communist Parties are moribund or defunct, this is undoubtedly a method of discounting one of the world's most widely read contemporary historians without acknowledging the importance of his life and work. Hobsbawm never gave an inch to anti-communism, often to a fault. He joined the CPGB following youthful experiences and commitments in Berlin. His CP membership was important at Cambridge in giving him contacts and a community that shared his values and later, in the British CP historians' group and the *Past and Present* team. He stuck with the party until it expired in the 1990s. Through these years, however, he remained his own man, neither zealot nor disciplined militant, often publicly refusing to be tied to the party's twists and turns. His connections with the party were deeply sentimental, deriving from his personal history, and the CPGB leadership was often unhappy with him, sometimes denouncing and more than once coming close to expelling him. Charles de Gaulle, reflecting about what to do about Jean-Paul Sartre's presences at the barricades during the 1968 student rebellion, decided that "one does not put Voltaire in jail." The British CP leadership seems to have had a similar response to expelling Eric Hobsbawm.

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**Martyn Ives, *Reform, Revolution and Direct Action amongst British Miners: The Struggle for the Charter in 1919* (Chicago, Haymarket Books 2016)**

IN DECEMBER 2019, the British Labour Party suffered a cataclysmic defeat in a General Election that led to a Conservative Party majority of 80 seats in the House

of Commons. A significant aspect of the election result was the defeat of candidates in former coal mining districts in places like Bolsover, Mansfield, Leigh, Blyth Valley and Wrexham, that had returned Labour Members of Parliament for much of the previous hundred years. The immediate aftermath of the election led to much debate within the movement of the causes and consequences of the collapse of the Labour vote in what were widely perceived as "traditional working class" localities. Martyn Ives provides a reflective, analytical, and empirically grounded study of the tumultuous year of 1919, another significant period for the politics of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), the wider labour movement, and future development of social democratic politics. This is a substantial and expansive work drawing on national MFGB records, the papers of district coal mining unions, and an extensive array of local newspapers and related sources. It has a sweeping focus that explores the high politics of government policy and trade unionism and the micro-politics of a range of British coal communities.

The author correctly argues that the events surrounding the battle over the nationalisation of coal and political crisis that surrounded the Sankey Commission, that was created to look into the problems of the industry, have not been fully explored in the historiography. For Ives, the Sankey Commission and the dramas that unfolded in the coalfields shaped the future policies of both the MFGB and the Labour Party and effectively stifled socialist alternatives for transforming the politics of trade unionism. The argument here is not that 1919 represented a 'lost British revolution', but neither was the hegemony of Labour gradualism in the twentieth century inevitable. The book challenges historiographical orthodoxies through a deep reading of the sources at both the national and local levels,

presenting a relatively short period in which the politics of mining trade unionism were open to influence from radical currents that momentarily challenged the pragmatism of particular leaders. The overall strength of the book lies in its analysis of specific coalfields such as Fife and Lanarkshire, Lancashire, South Wales, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire.

The first two chapters survey the politics of the labour movement in 1919 in general and the MFGB more specifically. There is rich biographical detail here and there is clear sense of the lives and politics that shaped labour activists and mediated the strategies they developed as miners' leaders. Robert Smillie (Scotland), Herbert Smith (Yorkshire), and Frank Hodges (South Wales) are key players along with a new generation of militants personified by Noah Ablett (South Wales). The federal nature of the MFGB and the specificities of particular coalfields were a constant bulwark against advocates of those proselytising for more socialism and the use of direct action through strikes to secure concessions from the coal owners and achieve the goal of the nationalisation of the mines. Yet, as Ives shows through his spotlight on particular coalfields, there was significant rank and file activity leading to local disputes. The diverse political currents within the MFGB that ranged from cautions Lib-Labism through to revolutionary syndicalism shaped the debates around the Sankey Commission, the dramas of 1919, and the government's ultimate reluctance to nationalise the mines.

The substantive chapters on coalfields such as Fife and Lanarkshire, Nottinghamshire, South Wales, Yorkshire, Lancashire are most impressive. The sheer range of source material that is used here to reconstruct the lives and politics of miners' leaders conveys the sense of drama, conflict, and crisis in the

British coalfields. The shifting industrial cultures of specific districts had ramifications for the governance of the nation given that the MFGB had around one million members and in 1919 "roughly one in eight of the population either lived in, or came from a mining family." The chapter on Nottinghamshire poses a challenge to simplistic characterisations of the region's moderate trade unionism. In 1919 the "coalfield defied all stereotypes and expectations, as an emergent unofficial leadership led three mass strikes against local and national officials." (112–113) And yet, such militancy was soon diluted by the ability of the district officials to convey to local miners that they were receiving better pay and working under more favourable conditions than in other British collieries. The conundrum of the Nottinghamshire would continue to imperil the unity of the MFGB in 1926, and in the devastating defeat suffered by miners in the strike of 1984/5.

Chapter 9 provides a detailed account of the strike in 1919 in the Yorkshire coalfield, neglected in the historiography and overshadowed by events on the Clyde. For Ives, this was a pivotal dispute which laid rest to the long-term viability of 'direct action' as a political strategy. The second half of the book focuses on the processes of selling the report of the Sankey Commission to the nation's miners. This was a means by which both the government and the MFGB sought to avoid further conflict in the industry. Yet disputes in 1921 and 1926 proved that consensus in the industrial relations culture of coal was brittle and contingent on a range of local and national factors. Nonetheless, for the MFGB it pointed to the possibility that change could be enacted through parliament with the election of a majority Labour government. In the aftermath of 1919, the MFGB remained a federal union that contained political cultures and traditions that spanned the traditions

of Lib-Labism and those that continued to advocate the use of the strike weapon to build a socialist Britain. For Ives, “the turn from direct action towards electoralism ... was a crucial element in the stabilisation of British society in the post-war period.” (317)

The book is a significant addition to the historiography of the British coal industry. However, it has limitations. Behind the sophisticated reading of sources and the deep understanding of the politics of specific coalfields there remains a tendency to view ‘direct action’ advocates and militants as victims of a trade union bureaucracy prone to stifling alternatives to what is described as the politics of Labourism. Moreover, the text suggests that the direct actionists were themselves “hamstrung by their parochialism.” (319) Such value judgements often mask complexity, nuance, and agency. This is one of many problems with the kind of counterfactual history that is advocated in the introduction and with particular narratives that have bedevilled Marxist perspectives on labour history throughout the twentieth century. As the author notes, giants of coal mining trade unionism such as Arthur Cook, Arthur Horner and Nye Bevan made compromises “in the name of pragmatism which as younger men they had scorned.” (313) One can only wonder what these men would have thought on the evening of 12 December 2019, when former mining seats such as Bolsover, Leigh, and Wrexham elected Conservative Members of Parliament.

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**Sébastien Rioux, *The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2019)**

IN HIS NEW monograph on the political economy of food, Sébastien Rioux traces the emergence of a modern and dynamic system of food distribution in a critical period of social and economic change in modern Britain. Where other scholars have traditionally looked to production patterns and cheap imports to explain rising living standards, Rioux focuses on the infrastructures and labour practices that made possible the mass distribution of food commodities to Britain’s expanding population. *The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914* is a concise yet compelling book that accounts for large structural change in the distribution sector without neglecting the diverse experiences of the working-class actors whose labours were essential to its functioning.

This study presents two related claims. First, Rioux argues that economic development in the period produced “a food-related underclass in the distributive sector capable of delivering the means of subsistence cheaply.” (8) Second, he claims that the expansion of distribution was vital to the establishment of a cheap, reliable food supply, which in turn enabled a rise in real wages and working-class living standards across urban Britain. By examining the importance of distribution to the political economy of food, the author uncovers an important link between cheap food and cheap labour that captures the dynamics of capitalist reproduction.

The first chapter of *The Social Cost of Cheap Food* provides some useful historical context and situates the emerging food distribution system within broader