

## **How to Make a Revolution: The Historical and Political Writings of Raymond Postgate**

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I came across the work Raymond Postgate (1896-1971) because he wrote about the kinds of things I am interested in: labour history, the history of the left, revolutions, and Ireland. What I found particularly attractive, however, was his writing style. Postgate was a skilled journalist and editor.<sup>1</sup> He knew how to grab the reader. This is evident in the large survey history he wrote with GDH Cole in 1938, *The Common People*. The first pages of this book, in which Postgate depicts the final destruction of the old world with the defeat of the clans at Culludon, is a masterpiece of evocation and drama. Following on hard is a tour of Great Britain mapping out the social and economic conditions of the people in 1750. Here the hand of GDH Cole is evident. One feels it would be less laborious to undertake the journey by foot. *The Common People* is often discussed as though Cole wrote the substance while Postgate applied the decoration.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Postgate added much of the style that made it a bestseller, but his analysis is evident throughout.

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<sup>1</sup> "He was the perfect model (and editor) for a young writer, demanding maximum concision and clarity, and severe on any hint of pretentiousness or floridity". Michael Meyer, *Not Prince Hamlet: a life in literary and theatrical London* (Oxford, 1990), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> Gail L Owen, 'G.D.H. Cole's Historical Writing' in *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 11, No. 02 (August 1966), 174.

Postgate's ability to bring to life the past, infusing it with emotional charge, is nowhere more evident than his depiction of the death of Leonard McNally, a scene that brings to a close his 1931 biography of Robert Emmet. Emmet was the 'last of the United Irishmen', executed for his attempting rising in Dublin against English rule in 1803. McNally was a Protestant radical, defence attorney and confidant of the revolutionary United Irishmen in the 1790s. He was also a government spy.

On his deathbed in 1820, Postgate tells us, McNally angrily told his wife to send away the attending Protestant clergyman and to summon a specific catholic priest, Father Smith, elderly, white haired and deaf. When Father Smith finally turned up, McNally snarled to his family "Get yourselves out of this room". Wife and son waited upon the stairs while McNally made his first, last and very long confession. He had, it was evident, many treacheries to confess. Father Smith was stone deaf, and those congregated on the stairs never heard the dying man's tones raised to that strained shout which alone could bring a message to the priest's ears. "It was typical of McNally's whole life," wrote Postgate "that at its end he should try to play this last trick on his God. By sending for a deaf priest he could secure that he should make his confession and yet not make it; it should be spoken aloud and yet not heard; he should receive absolution and yet no man should know for what he received it."

Postgate closes the scene and book thus: "At last the mother, an embittered Protestant, announced that she was going upstairs to save her husband from the Popish priest. A sudden flash of anger came over her son's face. 'Can't you leave him alone?' He said, stretching his arm across the staircase and holding her back. 'Let him go to the devil his own way.'" <sup>3</sup>

Postgate could certainly write. But he was a jobbing author and editor, a gadfly rather than a party man, a wit and a bon viveur. Postgate has, as a consequence, rarely been taken seriously as a historian or political thinker. He has a biography, written with filial piety by John and

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond W Postgate, *Robert Emmet* (London, 1931), pp. 325-26.

Mary Postgate. This worthy volume gives the story of his life but rather limited insight to his political thought.<sup>4</sup> The present article seeks to fill in this gap in part by examining and integrating into some kind of coherence Raymond Postgate's scattered historical and political writings.

### *Postgate Discovers Socialism*

Raymond Postgate was born in Cambridge in 1896, the second child of John Percival Postgate, classical scholar and fellow of Trinity College, who later became Professor of Latin at the University of Liverpool. The Postgate home was rather joyless though Raymond of all the children took best to his father's didacticism in the Greek and Latin languages. Raymond attended a small private school until aged nine when he went to Perse School, then onto Liverpool College. It was about this time that he "became conscious of [his] social surroundings".<sup>5</sup> Postgate's first close encounter with the working class was visceral, and he recalled "the heavy, sour-sweet, stunning smell of unclean humanity that filled buses and trams (and houses) in poor districts."<sup>6</sup>

It was in Liverpool that Raymond discovered the 'labour movement'. He was particularly influenced by the 'hot week' of August 1911, when the strikes of dockers, seamen, railwaymen, tramway workers and the city scavengers combined to produce something close to a citywide general strike. Radicalised, Postgate and a number of schoolboys formed a political discussion group where he was introduced to GDH Cole's classic of engaged scholarship, *The world of labour* (1913). This was a syndicalist call to arms, dismissive of mere parliamentarianism, and in favour of trade union militancy culminating in workers' control of industry. In 1915, "to affirm my socialist and anti-war principles" as he put it,

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<sup>4</sup> John and Mary Postgate, *A Stomach for Dissent* (Keele, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Postgate, 'Class in Britain and Abroad', Richard Mabey (Ed.), *Class: a symposium* (London, 1967), p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 162-63.

Postgate joined the Liverpool (Edgehill) branch of the Independent Labour Party. The veteran members were jokingly suspicious of this well-heeled recruit. “The comrades taking my money said very audibly: ‘Another of these fucking middle-class pacifists’, and the insult lay in the second not the first adjective.”<sup>7</sup>

Early in the First World War, Postgate won a classical scholarship to St Johns College, Oxford. He went up in 1915.<sup>8</sup> It was an Oxford that he first met GDH Cole. “I tried to resist him (I tried to resist everybody) but it was no good. As with every young man or woman of intelligence who met him my mind was partially formed by him.” There was always some distance between the two men, however, even when Postgate’s sister, Margaret, married Douglas Cole.<sup>9</sup>

Postgate actively opposed Britain’s participation in the First World War, later quoting Humbert Wolfe on the ineptitude rather than malice of the British government, “which, like a slattern bringing food, just slipped, and let the whole world smash”.<sup>10</sup> When the Military Conscription Act came into force, Postgate was one of the earliest conscientious objectors. In 1916 a military tribunal rejected his appeal and, after refusing to obey an order, he was sent to Oxford jail. His sister Margaret Cole wrote that Raymond, “being a long, thin, nervous creature”, “fell ill shortly after his conviction. The authorities ... suddenly took fright lest he die on their hands ... and after a brief interval for ‘saving face,’ he was released unconditionally”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Oxford and Cambridge: a book of photographs by RS Magowan*, introduction by Raymond Postgate (London, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Postgate, ‘The man who fashioned men's minds’, *Reynolds News*, 16 January 1959. Postgate Papers, 8/1, LSE.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury* (London, 1951), pp. 150-51.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Cole, *Growing up into Revolution* (London, 1949), p. 59.

Enraged by his son's socialism, meanwhile, Raymond's father cut him off as a socialist enemy "of myself and my household". In January 1918, Raymond had a late-night encounter with threatening pro-war students.<sup>12</sup> Though Postgate was clearly the victim, St Johns made quite clear that his presence was not conducive to good order or patriotism, and he was asked to withdraw. He never graduated.<sup>13</sup> Just before Armistice, Postgate fell in love with and married Daisy Lansbury, daughter of George Lansbury, a hero of the Labour left and editor of the *Herald*. The *Herald* was rumbustious newspaper, strongly syndicalist before the war. In the words of Max Beer, more than once approvingly quoted by Postgate, the *Herald* contained "the noblest aspirations and the basest adjectives in the English language."<sup>14</sup>

In the course of 1818 Postgate undertook in-depth and evidently grinding study of the works of Marx. He concluded his notes with a Latin tag: "At last, an analytical book or commentary about Marx, finally completed with much labour – and not without the most profane words, never before heard – happily finished in AD 1918 by Raymond Postgate, at that time a scholar of the college of St John Baptist in Oxford University".<sup>15</sup> He was now educated in Marxism, if not quite a zealot of the faith.

### *Postgate, Communism and Lansbury*

In 1919, when the *Herald* again became a daily, Lansbury made Postgate sub-editor for foreign affairs. As Postgate recalled, "I got my first job in the classical manner; I married the boss's daughter."<sup>16</sup> The government had won a massive majority in the 1918 coupon election. Postgate was not alone in regarding its mandate, based upon Germanophobic hysteria and an out of date electoral register, as being largely fictitious. The weak Parliamentary Labour

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<sup>12</sup> Postgate fictionalised this encounter in his 1953 novel, *The Ledger is Kept* (London, 1953, 1958), pp. 77-81.

<sup>13</sup> John and Mary Postgate, *Stomach for Dissent*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond W Postgate, *A short history of the British workers* (London, 1926), p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> MS, Raymond Postgate papers, 4/5, LSE.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Postgate, 'A Socialist Remembers - 1', *New Statesman* (9 April 1971), p. 495.

opposition appeared helpless, and many felt that real politics took place out of doors. Postgate associated with ‘the movement’: this was “neither a party nor a defined or organised society, but rather a nucleus of ‘comrades’”.<sup>17</sup> The *Daily Herald* was at the centre. As Postgate remembered later, “We were, though we were damned if we were going to say it, indeed all brothers – not merely making the best paper in the world but also part of the social revolution.”<sup>18</sup>

Postgate was a full-time working journalist. By listening to ‘Soviet wireless bulletins’ he was able to acquire scoops and dismiss the ill-informed rumour-mongering that characterised most British press coverage of the Soviet Federation.<sup>19</sup> Once a *Herald* article regurgitated specious anti-Bolshevik propaganda. “This was the only time that it fell for such piffle on Russia,” Postgate commented, “and I think I might add that it was my day off.”<sup>20</sup>

On top of his editorial duties, Postgate was tasked by Lansbury to write a book-length publication for the *Herald* stable. So it was that Postgate first engaged seriously in history. The consequent book, *Revolution*, is an excellent selection of primary sources from the French Revolution to the 1905 revolution in Russia. In his selection of documents Postgate emphasised political opinions rather than dramatic set-pieces. His essays of introduction were themselves considerable works of historical analysis. In brief, Postgate argued that the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Europe had been a historic watershed. From this point, the bourgeoisie became less liberal as it cut a deal with the old order and turned on its plebeian allies: “from 1848 in Western Europe, dates the definite separation of the industrial capitalists

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<sup>17</sup> Margaret Cole, *Growing up into Revolution* (London, 1949), p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Postgate, *Stomach for Dissent*, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Postgate, ‘A Socialist Remembers - 1’, p. 495.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Postgate, ‘Daily Herald Summaries’, MS, p. 3, Raymond Postgate papers, 4/9, LSE.

from the rising proletariat. It was now certain that when the Revolution came it would be a Socialist and not a Liberal Revolution.”<sup>21</sup>

In the early 1920s Postgate converted his book into lectures for the National Council of Labour Colleges, a network of militant proletarian education.<sup>22</sup> Postgate’s analysis was not fundamentally changed, but its Marxist underpinning was clarified. “This series [of lectures] is not a bundle of unconnected anecdotes. From Mirabeau to Trotsky is not a march past of cinema heroes, but a historical evolution – in Marxist phrasing, the proletarian revolution rising out of the bourgeois revolution. We break off at the beginning of a new chapter – proletarian victory. ... The last chapter ... cannot be written yet; for it is for us to make it and write the chapter, not on paper, but in history.”<sup>23</sup> How to ‘make’ revolution became a consuming concern for Postgate in these years.

In 1920 Postgate wrote the *Bolshevik theory* (1920), perhaps the first serious attempt in Britain to consider the communist phenomenon seriously on its own terms. The Guild socialist ‘movement’ was fragmenting, some supporters moving to the radical-right, some into the Labour Party, some towards communism. Postgate was an early member, in 1920, of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and he served as assistant editor and then editor for its weekly journal, *The Communist*. Under him, the *Communist* briefly reached a circulation of 60,000. As Postgate recalled, its politics was informed by “class war ... [and] the defence of

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<sup>21</sup> RW Postgate, *Revolutions from 1789 to 1906: Documents selected and edited with notes and introductions* (New York, 1920, 1962), p. 361.

<sup>22</sup> For the memories of one who heard them, see Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London, 1992), p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Revolutionary periods in history’, nine lectures for the National Council of Labour Colleges, no date, Raymond Postgate papers, 4/9, LSE, p. 69.

Russia”. His attempts to enlighten the working masses on the internecine divisions of the workers movement overseas, Postgate admitted, had little success.<sup>24</sup>

Postgate brought to the *Communist* a rather elevated intellectual tone. His is scorn for propagandising and bullish approach to personal relations aggravated some working class comrades. Harry Pollitt remembered rushing from the docks bringing news that munitions were being loaded for the Polish war with Russia. “Perhaps I looked rather dirty in my overalls, for I had considerable difficulty in penetrating into the editorial sanctum, where the editors of the *Communist*, Francis Meynell and Raymond Postgate, were at work. ... I told my story and saw at once that they were more interested in old books ... So I went back to my work calling them names their parents would have blushed to hear ...”<sup>25</sup> Postgate was not unaware that his recondite interests were looked at askance. He would later wryly observe that,

The showing of scholarly knowledge is at all times regarded as a vulgar proceeding – though why, when it is permissible to exhibit fine clothes or physical excellence, goodness only knows. Perhaps it is because the possession of an unusual and painfully acquired knowledge of obscure theorists arouses the collector’s spirit, and its possessor becomes as odious an exhibitionist and bore as a stamp collector or a Don Juan. Or it may be that certain faculties of certain universities are overstaffed and underworked and have to make work for themselves; or it may be that the writers of PhD theses are really inspired by a retroactive form of Messiah hunting, which makes

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<sup>24</sup> Raymond Postgate and Aylmer Vallance, *England Goes to Press: the English people’s opinion on foreign affairs as reflected in their newspapers since Waterloo, 1815 – 1937* (New York, 1937), p. 312.

<sup>25</sup> Harry Politt, *Serving my Time* (London, 1940), pp. 119-20.

them seek in some dead second-rater the inspiration which their contemporaries find in living technocrats and currency reformers.<sup>26</sup>

Characteristic irony aside, Postgate was convinced that a full understanding of the revolutionary tradition, reaching out beyond the Trinity of Marx and Engels and Lenin, was irreplaceable for any modern movement committed to overcoming capitalism.

Postgate rather quickly came to conclusion that the CPGB was not a serious vehicle for socialist revolution in Britain. He “rather noisily”<sup>27</sup> severed his connection to the party in May 1922, bringing with him the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), which the CPGB had criticised for their operating assumption that a “non-party Marxism” was possible.<sup>28</sup> Postgate had being increasingly at odds with the centralisation of strategic direction from Moscow, heedless, as he thought, of national peculiarities. He went back to work on the *Daily Herald*. The paper was taken over by the TUC and sanitised, and Lansbury retired as editor in 1925. Postgate went with him to work as editorial assistant on *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*.

At this time, Postgate was heavily involved in the class-struggle network for education, the Plebs League and the NCLC. They threw themselves into organising support for the miners, and nearly 600 meetings were held in London alone to promote their claim.<sup>29</sup> In the aftermath of the 1926 general strike, he put together with two others – Postgate undertaking the great bulk of the research and writing – a *Workers' History of the Great Strike*. This was based upon confidential reports received from Plebs League members across the country. “In effect

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution* (London, 1934), p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Cole, ‘Postgate, Raymond Williams (1896 – 1971)’, Joyce M Bellamy and John Southwell (Ed.), *Dictionary of labour biography*, volume 2 (London, 1974), p. 306. Cf. Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London, 1958), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Vol I: Formation and Early Years, 1919–1924* (London, 1968), p. 335.

<sup>29</sup> WW Craik, *The Central Labour College: A Chapter in the History of Adult Working-Class Education* (London, 1964), p. 136.

...” he wrote in the preface, “the writing of this book is a first essay in the form of cooperative enquiry which we believe will be of the greatest value to the workers if it can be extended.”<sup>30</sup> (When the method was employed by Postgate years later in compiling the *Good Food Guide*, it had precious little proletarian input.) With “the expenditure of a great deal of singularly tedious labour”,<sup>31</sup> as he put it, Postgate was able to produce a convincing survey of the solidity of the general strike in different regions. There was not the first-person voice of informants we would expect in such a history these days. But the Postgate quoted at length one informant, a trade unionist tasked with responding to employers begging for supplies from strike committees:

I thought of the many occasions when I had been turned empty away from the door of some workshop ... I thought of the many occasions I had been called upon to meet these people in the never-ending struggle to obtain decent conditions. .... The cap in hand position reversed.<sup>32</sup>

Postgate was delighted to see such raw working class power. In the long run he recognised the general strike as the swansong for British syndicalism.<sup>33</sup> A general strike could only permanently change the balance of power in the workers favour if it forced a general election.<sup>34</sup>

After the collapse of the general strike, Lansbury’s paper slumped rapidly, and in 1927 it ceased publication. Raymond Postgate and his family were now in low financial

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<sup>30</sup> RW Postgate, Ellen Wilkinson, JF Horrabin, *A Workers History of the Great Strike* (London, 1927), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5. The quote is reused in GDH Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People, 1746 – 1946* (London, 1938, 1949, 1956), p. 582.

<sup>33</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 139.

<sup>34</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 139.

circumstances. He struggled on, working for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and acting as European representative for a left-wing American publisher, Alfred Knopf.

Postgate meanwhile gained reputation as a serious writer on labour and radical history. In 1922 he had accepted an invitation from the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, then still committed to Guild socialist ideas, to write their official history. The resulting book, published in 1923, was a formidable piece of scholarship. Richard Price calls it “clearly one of the very best trade union histories ever written”.<sup>35</sup> As the eminent labour historian Royden Harrison put it, Postgate’s pioneer work arrived as “a fresh and exciting way of writing about trade unions in which ‘biographical’ or ‘geographical’ approaches were discarded in favour of a focus upon a cluster of related occupations.”<sup>36</sup> Postgate had to rescue scant sources from oblivion for the period before 1850, and to wrestle with an enormous proliferation of documentation produced by numerous trade societies and unions thereafter. Later he wrote popular but informed biographies – one on John Wilkes in 1930, another on Robert Emmet in 1931.<sup>37</sup> In these years he also acted as amanuensis to George Lansbury, correcting his grammar and prose style in written work. In 1951 he published the official life of George Lansbury. Postgate found that Lansbury gave him direct access to the great traditions of Britain’s working class labour movement founders, and the medium central to British politics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the public meeting. Lansbury, for Postgate, was the last of the great plebeian propagandists in a lineage stretching back through Keir Hardie to Orator Hunt.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Price, *Masters, unions and men: work control in building and the rise of labour, 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Mary Postgate, 28 November 1991, Raymond Postgate papers, 8/1, LSE.

<sup>37</sup> Oddly enough, his biography of Emmett, though extremely popular in Ireland and even translated into Gaelic, is barely referred to in Marianne Elliott's book on Emmett historiography; though in parenthesis she acknowledges it as “the best 20th-century work on Emmett”. Marianne Elliott, *Robert Emmet: the making of a legend* (London, 2003), p. 219.

<sup>38</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, pp. 42, 96-7.

Throughout the interwar years, Postgate was a committed supporter of left-wing Labour. He was an early member in 1930 of the ‘Society for Socialist Enquiry and Propaganda’, established as a ginger group to radicalise the second Labour government. This eventually led to a revival of the Fabian Society. Still, he was always rather peripheral to the movement organisationally. He had no particular ability at public speaking, had little in common with right wing of the labour movement, and was boycotted by the Communist press. As Margaret Cole wrote, “He remained at heart a journalist of the *Daily Herald* in its great and irreverent days.”<sup>39</sup>

Postgate’s metier was a writer and editor. In 1937 a young admirer of Lansbury donated money for Postgate to edit a monthly called *Fact*. This appeared monthly as a small book, each issue containing a long study by a single contributor on the important issues of the day, which would then be criticised by contributing editors including HG Wells, Stephen Spender, Storm Jameson, and Joseph Needham. *Fact* published for just over two years, and was a significant adjunct to the Left Book Club.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Postgate on British History*

In 1938 appeared “the most solid and long-lasting” of Postgate’s historical works.<sup>41</sup> Written in collaboration with his brother-in-law, GDH Cole, *The common people* was an unabashedly socialist but scholarly work, and a critical and popular success. It drew heavily on Postgate’s previous publications. The collaboration with Douglas Cole, it turned out, was not easy: both men’s wives had to mediate a fractious relationship. Intellectually, however, they were close.

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<sup>39</sup> Cole, ‘Postgate, Raymond Williams’, p. 307.

<sup>40</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 602.

<sup>41</sup> Cole, ‘Postgate, Raymond Williams’, 307. Geoff Eley called *The Common People* “the best general account of British social history ‘from below’ until after the 1960s.” Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005), p. 64.

They wished to establish the continuity of working class experience which, Postgate said in the mid-1920s, persisted from a nineteenth-century world “not too different from ours.”<sup>42</sup>

Postgate’s was a history that insisted upon the importance of working within British reality.

“It has been the misfortune of the British revolutionary movement to depend too greatly upon foreign object lessons, American, French or Russian”, he wrote.<sup>43</sup> Postgate traced the emergence of the politics of the common people back to the agitation of Wilkes, who he admired for his roguishness and humour as much as for his politics (though he did hold him responsible for the introducing the British prejudice against fine French wine).<sup>44</sup> The Wilkes agitation ended, of course, in the Gordon Riots, and episode for Postgate represented the dark side, not to be whitewashed, of popular politics. The anti-Catholic or anti-Semitic pogrom, Postgate insisted, was inseparable from the history of the common people.<sup>45</sup>

Postgate was rather dismissive of various revolutionary conspiracies and Luddism of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> From the early 1830s to the later 1840s, Postgate argued, class struggle was the dominant theme of British politics. “The opposition between the middle-class ... and the working class was more universally taken to be the key to current history than it has ever been since or before, except perhaps in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia.”<sup>47</sup>

Postgate was most impressed by Robert Owen’s 1834 Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. He saw it as representing a proto-syndicalist alliance “between socialism and trade

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond W Postgate, *A Short History of the British Workers* (London, 1926), p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Postgate, *That Devil Wilkes* (London, 1930), p. 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18. Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> In this Postgate and Cole were following the lead of the Hammonds, and attracted the ire of EP Thompson who thought such ‘Fabian’ works read “at times like a brief prepared on behalf of the Whig opposition, and intended to discredit the exaggerated claims made by the authorities as to the conspiratorial and revolutionary aspects of the movement.” EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1965), pp. 478, 482, 575 (quotation), 592, 650. For a discussion of the evidence, see Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 13-60.

<sup>47</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 261.

unionism.”<sup>48</sup> Not Robert Owen but JE Smith, a lecturer and clergy man, and James Morrison, a bricklayer, were for Postgate the heroes of this movement (notably both were editors of newspapers). They developed sophisticated “strategy and tactics of the class struggle,”<sup>49</sup> and tried to “force upon the imbecile executive [of the Union] a policy of forbidding all small strikes and gathering funds and energy for a serious general strike.”<sup>50</sup>

They failed, as did the Union itself. Its weaknesses were not repaired, but if anything aggravated in the Chartist movement. This was inevitable. “Psychologically, the great majority of the British working class was in those years ... diseased ... Unable to find any rational methods of escape, it turned to irrationality.”<sup>51</sup> By about 1850, Postgate argued, a new conservative but realistic working class psychology was developing. “British labour entered upon a long period of comparative material comfort and extreme intellectual stagnation.”<sup>52</sup> The worker movement was now led by the Junta of amalgamated trades unions, with leaders such as Applegarth, Coulson, and Odger. While the previous generation had rebelled against wage-slavery, the current generation accepted it. “In doing so they responded to the needs and desires of their generation.”<sup>53</sup> In this work and others, Postgate understood his history of the common people in terms of generational transition. Between 1850 and 1875 the trade union movement “was wholly remodelled by what today would be called a youth movement”, but “it was a revolt in favour of prudence, respectability, financial stability and reasonableness, and against pugnacity, imagination and any personal indulgence.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> W Postgate, *A Short History*, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 268.

<sup>50</sup> RW Postgate, *The Builders History* (London, 1923), p. 108.

<sup>51</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 270.

<sup>52</sup> Postgate, *Revolutions*, p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Postgate, *A Short History*, p. 58.

<sup>54</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 367.

The renewed socialist movement of the 1880s sprang directly from the radical wing of liberalism.<sup>55</sup> But liberalism itself was in crisis. When Britain dominated the world market, trade unions could benefit as a labour aristocracy. The imperialist rush to colonial acquisition came in the 1870s and 80s as a side-effect of increased international competitive pressure on Britain. It coincided, therefore, with renewed pressure on wages. This was pretty much an inversion of the Leninist theory of imperialism and labour aristocracy, which saw reformism as being a product of imperialist super-profits. For Postgate, “as external [intra-imperialist] conflict became sharper, the employers’ resistance to the skilled workers unions hardened.”<sup>56</sup>

As GDH Cole estimated it, wages actually began to fall behind prices from 1900. So began a new period of revolutionary agitation, rising in the Edwardian period to be interrupted by the Great War. “The period from 1900 to 1914 is like the first two acts of a play the third act of which was never written.”<sup>57</sup> Trade union syndicalism, the Ulster crisis and female suffrage militancy emerged because Liberalism had reached an impasse. Though his wife, Daisy, had herself been herself a suffragist, Postgate does not appear to have been entirely sympathetic to feminist militancy: “the militant suffrage movement was largely psychopathic”.<sup>58</sup>

There was, Postgate wrote, a revolutionary moment immediately after the First World War, but it was quickly snuffed out by rapid demobilisation. The stabilisation of wages in the 1920s, and their notable increase in real value in the 1930s was the fundamental reason for the decline of revolutionary agitation. The 1926 General Strike “was for many a dazzling revelation of the workers’ real power”,<sup>59</sup> but also a definitive defeat.<sup>60</sup> The 1930s was the ‘decade of the lie’, and increasingly it was foreign policy that took centre stage. This

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>56</sup> Postgate, *Builders History*, p. 339.

<sup>57</sup> Cole and Postgate, *Common People*, p. 450.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 582.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 585.

ultimately overcame the sharp division between workers and middle class. With the Second World War the history of the British common people merged into that of the nation.<sup>61</sup>

### *The Second World War and After*

As early as 1934, Postgate had been revising his opposition to war. He asked then whether the labour movement could seriously threaten a general strike in the event of war with Hitler's Germany. "Probably not", he answered.<sup>62</sup> When war came again, he was clear that this time the lesson of 1914 did not apply. While "the German state under the Kaiser was essentially of the same character as the British, and certainly more democratic than the Russian," the Axis powers were a profound threat to civilisation.<sup>63</sup> In 1940, George Strauss and Aneurin Bevan decided to pull the *Tribune* from the control of its Communist fellow-travelling staff. Postgate was invited to take over the editorship and run it "as a journal of socialist resistance to Hitler."<sup>64</sup> Postgate served as editor for only a year, but had considerable success in energising the publication, and it became something of a left version of the *New Statesman*.<sup>65</sup>

Postgate did not regret his earlier conscientious objection, but as is frequently the case he enjoyed a psychic release in joining a mainstream from which he had so long felt alienated. Early in the war, he wrote to a friend, "The thing is so near that all one can do is be tormented by regrets. Why didn't I learn to shoot? Why am I useless, fat and 45? Why didn't I train myself like a stupid Tory, physically?"<sup>66</sup> He all the more enthusiastically joined the all Home Guard soon after its foundation. In 1942 he joined professional society too by becoming a

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.

<sup>62</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 132.

<sup>63</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 158.

<sup>64</sup> Cole, 'Postgate, Raymond Williams,' p.307.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Jones, *The Russia Complex: The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 1977), p. 48.

<sup>66</sup> Postgate, *Stomach for Dissent*, p. 211.

temporary civil servant at the Board of Trade. He remained in post until 1950, all the time railing against the obscurities of civil service jargon.

Postgate had always been a lover of good food and drink. In 1948-9 he conceived the idea of setting up an amateur guide based upon the French *Club des Sans-Club*. His idea was that a team of volunteer enthusiasts would visit, sample and report upon the food and drink provided in British hotels and restaurants. He hoped thereby to shame proprietors into higher standards. The first *Good Food Guide* appeared in 1951. This made him, for the first time, very well known in his own right, and he even appeared on television giving guidance on how to eat spaghetti.

In 1965, Postgate was prosecuted for libel by Babycham, the producers of light sparkling perry. He had warned unwary drinkers in *Holiday* magazine that while it “looks like champagne and is served in champagne glasses” Babycham was made of pears. No doubt Postgate recollected the words of Andrew Hamilton, defence attorney in the case of John Peter Zenger who had been tried for libel by the English governor of New York in 1735, a case he had written about in his 1925 book, *Murder, Piracy and Treason*: “The practice of information for libel is a sword in the hands of ... [the] wicked ... to cut down the innocent.”<sup>67</sup> Postgate stuck to his guns and won the case.

In 1962, Postgate handed the *Good Food Guide* to the Consumers Association. He continued as editor to the autumn of 1968, when serious illness forced him to retire. After a short illness – like George Lansbury, the serious nature of his ailment was kept from him by doctor and family – he died of cancer on 29 March 1971. His wife, remembered by her sons as a lifelong neurotic, died four weeks later by her own hand. Both sons survived their parents, one a senior microbiologist, the other the inventor of the Clangers and Bagpuss.

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<sup>67</sup> Raymond Postgate, *Murder, Piracy and Treason: a selection of notable English trials* (London, 1925), p. 139.

## *Postgate and Socialism*

Labour historiography before EP Thompson is often characterised as Fabian. Postgate, in fact, was always grieved by the authoritarianism of Fabianism. “I care only for a fundamentally democratic and libertarian change”.<sup>68</sup> He was always something of a Marxist historical materialist. Postgate always saw his history writings as breaking from Victorian standards, at least as had been taught in schools:

In the textbooks ... we were presented with a history which was partly untrue, partly – in the theological sense – inapprehensible. ... nothing but a ‘great man’ theory of history which solaced vicariously the oppressed individuality of neglected authors and professors. ... This ... was in truth inapprehensible; the mind could not hold it, and the moment we left the schoolroom it fortunately fell right out of our heads.<sup>69</sup>

More scholarly history, even if satisfactory in its own right, was ignorant of the working class and the farmers.<sup>70</sup> More so than GDH Cole, however, Postgate insisted upon the agency of individual men and (less often) women.<sup>71</sup> He continually drew attention to “The strength of will, the ability, the courage and even, perhaps, the arguments” of his protagonists.<sup>72</sup>

Postgate, indeed, took great pleasure in treating history as a detective story in which motivations and mysteries had to be unravelled. He was himself an authority on detective fiction, and in 1940 published an imperishable classic of the genre, *Verdict of twelve*. This was a brilliant courtroom drama in which the social backgrounds and individual

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<sup>68</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> RW Postgate, *Karl Marx* (London, 1933), p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 107.

<sup>71</sup> As Cole characteristically put it regarding the origins of British labour, “All these movements were, of course, the product less of outstanding leaders than of the powerful economic forces which were driving society irresistibly towards a new classification of the people...” GDH Cole, *A short history of the British working class movement, 1789-1947* (London, 1925, revised and enlarged, 1948), p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> Postgate, *Marx*, p. 56.

circumstances of the jurors – businessmen, radical students, the Jewish widow of a husband murdered in an anti-Semitic brawl – shape their judgement of culpability in a fatal tragedy. As an epigram he took Karl Mar’s famous words on how ‘conditions create consciousness’, in so doing advocating its heuristic flexibility. This kind of investigative approach – history as detection and psychology – characterised Postgate’s own non-fiction.

Postgate was convinced that ever since the failure of the liberal bourgeois revolutions of 1848, only the working classes were consistently to be found on the side of progress. As he wrote in his 1933 book for the Hogarth press, *How to make a revolution*,

All reform movements ... whether for free milk in schools or for a large remodelling of society, henceforward find most of their support in working class circles, and less and less elsewhere. Individuals might behave eccentrically, but practical politicians knew the facts. The questions they asked were simple: ‘what voters would support better education for all, social services in the cities, minimum wage laws, extension of the franchise, liberty for the colonies?’ ‘What voters would demand reduction of the rates, stopping of ‘demoralising pampering’, putting of ‘niggers’ in their place, and so forth?’ You could walk around Ebbw Vale and Surbiton, St Denis and St Germain, and write your own answer.<sup>73</sup>

He was not unaware of proletarian xenophobia and backwardness, once referring to “the ancient injunction: “‘E’s a blinkin’ foreigner; ‘eave ‘alf a brick at ‘im.’”<sup>74</sup> A formative experience for Postgate was the popular success of anti-German propaganda during the First

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<sup>73</sup> Raymond Postgate, ‘The principles of 1848’ in George Woodcock (ed.), *100 years of Revolution: 1848 and after* (London, 1948), p. 107.

<sup>74</sup> Postgate and Vallance, *England goes to Press*, p. 91.

World War. The *John Bull* newspaper edited by Horatio Bottomley was a particular bête noire.<sup>75</sup>

Postgate wanted to educate the labour movement. He saw himself as mediating Marxism and Guild Socialism. In his early research on the International Workingmen's Association of the 1860s – he was the first to consult its records in London – Postgate disinterred with approval the influence of French anarchistic socialism.<sup>76</sup> He was always suspicious of mere statism, and he recorded approvingly George Lansbury's insistence upon individual freedom.

The more intelligent of his adversaries told him that, despite his socialism, he was a great individualist. It was true: but he did not merely value his own individual independence, he wanted independence and dignity for every working man and woman. ... Socialism was for him above all a means of ensuring security, and therefore independence, for the ordinary man: of all the attacks which conservatives made upon it, only one ever disquieted him, and that was the charge that state socialism, as the Webbs and the older Fabians advocated it, might make men slaves of the state as soon as they had escaped from being the slaves of the employer.<sup>77</sup>

There is no doubt that this reflected Postgate's own views. In 1920, he poked fun at GDH Cole's use of Rousseau's 'General Will':

I have a horrible vision of the anti-smoking league expressing my 'real will' for me, and of myself unable to protest, as my tobacco pouch is looted, 'because it is done by my consent.' If we are allowed to presume that people are always consent to what is good for them, then the argument becomes less of a jest. But that is a wicked, wicked

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>76</sup> Postgate, *Revolutions*, p. 392.

<sup>77</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 44.

presumption, which is only made by members of the Fabian Society and by family doctors when prescribing for the children.<sup>78</sup>

He regretted, as did GDH and Margaret Cole, the decline of the Guild socialist spirit after the First World War. “If it had been remembered in the late 1940s,” he wrote in 1951 of the Attlee Labour government, “it might have lessened some of the troubles of nationalisation”.<sup>79</sup>

Postgate was always an internationalist. The Socialist International broke up in 1914 just as he was becoming aware of it. It remained, however, inspiring “as an idea” in his mind.<sup>80</sup> He did not condemn its fragmentation in 1914 as a betrayal, acknowledging that it had always supported the right to defensive war.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, its collapse into competitive bellicosity meant that the International had become, as he said in 1918, a “rotting corpse”. If this sounded Leninist, his high praise for Camille Huysmans, secretary of the rump International Socialist Bureau, for his unremitting toil to find a basis for a compromise peace, did not.<sup>82</sup>

On 9 May 1917, the Petrograd Soviet announced its intention of holding a conference in Stockholm on 8 July to seek international socialist agreement on acceptable terms on which the war might end. The conference was sabotaged by French and British politicians and press. For Postgate this was the last great missed opportunity. It would have been possible, he wrote in 1918, for “the socialist parties of all the belligerent and neutral countries” to “agree upon a

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<sup>78</sup> Postgate, *Bolshevik Theory*, p. 159.

<sup>79</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 149.

<sup>80</sup> Postgate and Vallance, *England goes to Press*, p. 282. Cf. Postgate, ‘The principles of 1848’, pp. 117-19.

<sup>81</sup> RW Postgate, *The International during the War* (London, 1918), p. 149. This book, Postgate’s first, was “supervised” by Camille Huysmans. Raymond Postgate, ‘A Socialist Remembers - 2’, *New Statesman* (16 April 1971), p. 527.

<sup>82</sup> RW Postgate, *The Workers International* (London, 1920), p. 93.

common program which they could force upon their governments and so bring about the end of the war.”<sup>83</sup> History had taken the wrong turning.

Postgate, therefore, was rather ambivalent about the formation of the Communist Third International. He was not entirely happy with its stated intention to bring not peace but a sword, to replace the imperialist war with the social Civil War. “It is ... at least arguable that ... here in Western Europe ... we may arrive at [socialism] by more peaceable means.”<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, mostly because communist principles were “an offence to the British ruling class”, he joined the Communist ranks.<sup>85</sup> His aim, however, was to shape an indigenous British communism building upon the syndicalist traditions he traced back to the 1830s. “Like many other fertile devices,” he wrote “the Soviet idea originates in England, and was carried into practice elsewhere.”<sup>86</sup> The Russian Soviets, he admitted in 1921, “are not democratic; they are ‘ergatocratic,’ to quote a new and singularly hideous word of Scots manufacture.”<sup>87</sup> This term – ergatocratic – meant ‘workers' rule’. It had been coined by Eden and Cedar Paul, fellow founding members of CPGB.<sup>88</sup>

Postgate saw in the Soviets, at least in potentia, an active democracy based upon existing groups arranged into manageably small electorates.<sup>89</sup> Communism, in turn, would counterbalance Guild Socialism’s naiveté about the true nature of the capitalist state. “Mr Cole speaks of the state as an independent thing being bent by capitalism,” Postgate wrote “just as Jones minor is bent over by the classics master.”<sup>90</sup> What supporters of cooperative

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<sup>83</sup> Postgate, *International during the War*, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63.

<sup>85</sup> Postgate and Vallance, *England goes to Press*, p. 19.

<sup>86</sup> Postgate, *Bolshevik Theory*, p. 132.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>88</sup> *Creative Revolution: a study of communist ergatocracy* (London, 1921).

<sup>89</sup> Postgate, *Bolshevik Theory*, p. 117.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

societies failed to realise is that they could never fully prosper unless “given enormous privileges and ‘unfair’ advantages by the state.”<sup>91</sup>

For Postgate, this emphasis on the capture of the state derived less from Marx than from other 19<sup>th</sup>-century revolutionary traditions. Virtually single-handed, he rescued the French revolutionary, Auguste Blanqui, from obscurity. The pre-war socialist Second International, he argued, on the one hand talked of the socialist revolution as a once and for all event –“they would have the moon, the whole moon and nothing but the moon”– but, on the other hand, they had no realistic plans for taking power. Blanqui, in contrast, saw the construction of socialism as a drawn-out process, but requiring as a preliminary organised and tactically aware efforts to bring about a political revolution to transform the state.<sup>92</sup>

Postgate rejected Second International and Labour optimism that there could be a natural electoral majority for socialism. There were too many whose immediate interests lay on the side of the bourgeoisie. Workers in the luxury trades, for example, relied upon elite prosperity. The poorest workers lacked class consciousness. “The slum proletariat will follow the existing power. It cannot reason. It is the trump card in the bourgeois hand.”<sup>93</sup> Overall, “with the workers, unintelligent and unenlightened as they largely are, there is absolutely no reason why society should not end in a sort of capitalist feudalism.”<sup>94</sup> Under parliamentarianism, the crucial floating vote was suburban and dominated by “middle-class opinion”. In Britain, the most industrialised country, Postgate reckoned that the maximum number of seats that might be won for socialism was about one third. This analysis, positing

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<sup>91</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 109.

<sup>92</sup> RW Postgate, *Revolutionary Biographies: some revolutionary sketches* (Madras, 1922), pp. 107-08. Cf. Postgate, *Marx*, p. 53.

<sup>93</sup> Postgate, *Bolshevik Theory*, p. 50

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

the impossibility of democratic socialism, was first implied in Postgate's the *Bolshevik theory* in 1920, a book brought to Lenin's attention by HG Wells, and apparently winning his approval. Lenin sent a signed photograph to Postgate, which he kept the rest of his life.<sup>95</sup>

For Postgate, the key point was for the proletariat to become the ruling class. The art of establishing the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', in Postgate's view, was not to be found in Marxist thinking, but in the practice of Blanqui, a fundamental if unacknowledged forerunner of the Bolsheviks. Blanqui had most insistently argued for the necessity of a revolutionary dictatorship to clear the path to socialism. "Marx's great work was the analysis of the class war; the advocacy of the dictatorship was Blanqui's."<sup>96</sup> Blanqui's "formulation of revolutionary tactics," Postgate wrote in the early 1920s, "has been largely justified by events, and to it ... Russian Communists owe much, more indeed than they know."<sup>97</sup> In particular, Blanqui had developed the idea of the select Revolutionary party, one which was adopted and adapted by the communists.<sup>98</sup>

Postgate later said that he left the Communist Party when he admitted that insurrectionary revolution was impossible under modern circumstances. The state was simply too strong, and in particular the socially elite airforce was impermeable to radical subversion.<sup>99</sup> More frequently, however, Postgate explained his break with the Communist Party in May 1922 by reference to the Comintern's 'Bolshevisation' policy, led by Gregory Zinoviev. This Bolshevisation insisted upon the uniform application of tactics across countries. Communist Party members were put under suffocating and intrusive control by the leadership and required to infiltrate labour movement organisations, using deceit and bureaucratic

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<sup>95</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, pp. 46-9.

<sup>96</sup> Postgate, *Revolutionary biographies*, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>99</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, pp. 49, 152.

manoeuvre.<sup>100</sup> Always alive to the historical parallel, he condemned such techniques as being akin to those employed by Bakunin's following of anarchist conspirators in the First International.<sup>101</sup>

Nonetheless, Postgate continued to adhere to the concept of a revolutionary vanguard. In 1934, in *How to make a revolution*, Postgate proposed that a select cadre of militant socialists – an “organisation of storm troopers or ironsides” – should organise openly in the Labour Party as a revolutionary club determined to press for a de facto regime of proletarian dictatorship. The “next Labour government” must take a “hold on to office as firmly as Stalin's or Mussolini's” ; it must “not quit until it has founded a socialist state so firmly that an appeal to the electorate is quite safe”; “It should control radio broadcasting and other forms of propaganda, including the press”; “it should remove swiftly any technical constitutional obstructions, such as the House of Lords”; “It should be prepared to offer an immediate palliative to existing sufferings”. And as Britain was exposed to blockade it “should accumulate food stocks, and grain in granaries.”<sup>102</sup>

By the 1930s – and in particular in response to the show trials of 1936 – Postgate had lost faith in the destiny of the Russian Revolution itself. From the first, he had been acutely aware of the socially backward and often brutal nature of Russian society. This had been the most obvious theme of his discussion of the 1905 revolution in Russia in his 1920 edition of documents on *Revolution*.<sup>103</sup> By the late 1930s, Postgate was still of the opinion that in 1917 and 1918 the “organisation of the Soviet was probably the only efficient one amid the inert

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<sup>100</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, pp. 176-76. Cf. Postgate, ‘The principles of 1848’, pp. 114-15; Raymond Postgate, ‘The revolutionary who stopped world revolution’, unpublished MS, n.d., Postgate Papers, 2/7, LSE, pp. 2-3. Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 237. Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 104.

<sup>101</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, pp. 100-03.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

<sup>103</sup> Postgate, *Revolutions*, pp. 341-61.

and tangled mass of competing parties and interests”.<sup>104</sup> But Lenin’s regime “had to conform to the permanent and indestructible forces in Russia,”<sup>105</sup> and this meant that dictatorial rule, which may have been justified by the exigencies of civil war and counter revolution, melded with the brutality of Russian society, and was adopted as the norm by the Soviet regime.

There was also a problem with Marxist theory, however, which provided no firebreak between revolutionary necessity and institutionalised dictatorship. It was crucial, Postgate had concluded by 1948, that the modern revolutionary internalise the non-Marxist traditions of limitations on state power.<sup>106</sup> He had abandoned his early defence of ‘ergatocracy’ – rule by the workers. The revolution was weaker for being conducted on the class dictatorship principle of exclusivity rather than universality.<sup>107</sup>

Postgate’s criticism of orthodox Marxism had become more fundamental when he read *Marx, Lenin and the science of revolution*, published by Max Eastman, an American Trotskyist intellectual, in 1926.<sup>108</sup> He adopted Eastman’s criticism of the Marxist inheritance from Hegel. Hegel’s application of the dialectic to the development of ideas was crude but not intellectually dangerous in itself. Hegel simply argued, as Postgate summarises, that ideas each contained “within itself its opposite and implying it. Life implies death, justice implies injustice.”<sup>109</sup> But the method became positively dangerous when applied to the material and social world under the guise of ‘dialectical materialism’. “‘History,’” Postgate wrote, “is not the whole mass of past facts ... but an excerpt from these facts made by the historian. Every historian however diffuse, only selects from past life such facts as interest him.” So, if triadic dialectical patterns of thesis – antithesis – synthesis are found in history, “that proves nothing

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<sup>104</sup> AJ Grant, Harold Temperley, *Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (1789 – 1939)* (London, 1939), p. 597. [The chapter on Marxism was written by Postgate].

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 596.

<sup>106</sup> Postgate, ‘The principles of 1848,’ p. 113.

<sup>107</sup> Raymond Postgate, *Communism and the government machine* (Bombay, 1953), p. 8-9.

<sup>108</sup> Postgate, *Marx*, pp. 91-2.

<sup>109</sup> Grant, Temperley, *Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, p. 584.

more than that is mind has been trained to move in a dialectical pattern”.<sup>110</sup> Dialectical materialism failed to qualify as an objective science. “It does not add at all to our ability to analyse a situation if we use the dialectic.”<sup>111</sup> Marxists, however, having worked so hard to learn the dogma, were loath to abandon it.<sup>112</sup>

At first, Postgate followed the young Max Eastman in arguing that Marxists should abandon any idea of the inevitable victory of the proletariat as proven by dialectical materialism, wherein the proletariat negates capitalism and generates a new synthesis in socialism. Instead, revolutionaries should admit the importance of social psychology and will. In this he was again following the work of Cedar Paul, and through Paul’s translation, presumably, Hendrick de Man’s influentially revisionist if overrated 1927 book, *The Psychology of Socialism*. “To those who like to use the names of men as symbols,” wrote Postgate, “we may say that the next great task of revolutionary philosophy is the reconciliation of Marx and Freud.”<sup>113</sup>

It was on the basis of this interest in voluntarist agency and psychological finesse that Postgate revised his pessimism about the possibilities of majority-supported revolution. He did this in his book, *How to make a revolution*, published in 1934. Here he argued that the widely defined middle classes – hangers-on of the bourgeoisie, small businessmen, technicians, white-collar workers and so on – were, as Trotsky described them, ‘human dust’ without firm volition or political orientation. They were the raw material for fascism and Nazism. In time of crisis, however, they could be appealed to by radical socialists, if socialists were prepared to offer the kind of “firm and adventurous leadership” that appeals to this most feckless of strata. Technicians and professional men in particular could be attracted

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<sup>110</sup> Postgate, *Marx*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2.

to a program emphasising state-led rationalisation. Should socialists fail to appeal to petty-bourgeois psychology, they would lose them to any radical right that offered them “at least the simulacrum of intelligent and confident direction”. The Socialist vanguard, therefore, must be prepared to be flexible in time of crisis. “In such a time a sure and drastically minded revolutionary socialist party can command success: if it is hesitant and formalist it will be precipitated into bloody ruin. Such a time is planning-time or Hitler-time; it depends on ourselves which it is.”<sup>114</sup> Postgate ultimately felt that this opportunity finally came through a different kind of cataclysm: the antifascist mobilisation for national survival in the Second World War. His widely read 1942 pamphlet, couched as a debate between a Labour socialist and a white-collar technician sceptic, emphasised rationalisation, the continuity of civil liberties, and the preservation of the space for private enterprise where appropriate. Even here, Postgate refused entirely to tow the party line on nationalisation: “Myself, I would prefer to see some of the methods of the old guilds revived.”<sup>115</sup>

In later years, Postgate went further to criticise Marxist and his own earlier historiography. The application of the dialectical model, he now felt, explained the failure of the liberal 1848 revolutions by the positing a tension between the thesis and antithesis of maturing capitalism, one pole embodied by bourgeoisie and the other by the proletariat. As the bourgeoisie betrayed their liberalism for fear of accommodating proletarian socialism, dialectical materialists concluded that the only possible synthesis of which capitalism had become socialism rather than liberalism. Whether this owed much to dialectics or not, it certainly echoed the early Postgate. But in 1955 he had changed his argument: the ‘revolt of the proletariat’ played only a small role in 1848, and failure must be found in the follies of the

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<sup>114</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, pp 46-9.

<sup>115</sup> Raymond Postgate, *Let's talk it over ...* (Tillicoultry, n.d), p. 15.

revolutionaries and the divisive impact of nationalism.<sup>116</sup> Liberalism as such had not been discredited.

Finally, Postgate rooted the political degeneration of Stalinism in the Marxist inheritance of dialectical materialism. If socialism was seen to ‘negate’ bourgeois liberalism, then it was little surprise that the elimination of personal and political liberties could be justified by Communist regimes by reference to Marxist theory. This fatal flaw prevented anti-Stalinist Communists such as Trotsky from appealing to the libertarian revolutionary tradition that Postgate cleaved to.<sup>117</sup> The bourgeois Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, he wrote in 1962, “is the chief monument of the first phase of the age-long revolution which is leading us to Socialism.”<sup>118</sup> For Postgate, dialectical materialism obscured the trans-historical relevance of liberalism.

How much was Postgate’s drift from Marxism a result of demoralisation? There was unquestionably a certain demoralisation in Postgate by the mid-1930s. He felt out of time. “Most men, once they have passed 40,” he wrote later, “have fixed minds and change their ideas with difficulty”.<sup>119</sup> Robert Emmet, it seems, reminded him of his youthful certainties. “Those who in their youth have been wholly devoted to a cause or an ideal, can see in the young Emmet the boy that they once were, or, at least, hope that they once were.”<sup>120</sup> In an unpublished manuscript, written post Second World War, Postgate compared disillusioned revolutionaries, and implicitly himself, to Emmet:

The French Revolution went, to some extent, the same way as the Russian

Revolution, and I have been looking for a parallel. Bonaparte was the successor of the

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<sup>116</sup> Raymond Postgate, *Story of a Year: 1848* (London 1955), p. 187.

<sup>117</sup> Preface (1962) to Postgate, *Revolutions*, p. v.

<sup>118</sup> Postgate, *Revolutions*, p. 13.

<sup>119</sup> Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 242.

<sup>120</sup> Postgate, *Robert Emmet*, p. 138.

Republic, as Stalin is the successor of Lenin's commune. [Bonaparte] disillusioned the Republicans throughout the civilised world; but there were still many who ... could not all the same reconcile themselves to the corrupt world of George III and Metternich. You can see what they thought if you study the history of the Irish revolutionary Robert Emmet.<sup>121</sup>

Robert Emmet in his famous speech from the dock had expressed his dismay at the outcome of the French Revolution whilst renewing his commitment to enlightenment revolution in Ireland. Postgate – who painfully reconstructed Emmet's famous 'speech from the dock' from multiple fragments – clearly identified with Emmet unillusioned refusal to abandon his revolutionary faith.<sup>122</sup>

It is true to say that Postgate had never been entirely without illusions in the Russian Revolution. Rather, his earliest fears were realised – that the barbarity of the country must overwhelm the libertarian potential of the revolution. Near the end of his life, in a book on 1798, he drew a parallel with Napoleon's occupation of Egypt. Here modern enlightenment had been rejected by Oriental barbarism, as he thought. It was the final stage in the cauterisation of Napoleon's revolutionary instincts. For Postgate, the parallels were evident: "probably the present generation is the first that can easily understand Bonaparte; only those who have lived through the days of a later revolution and for whom Stalin has been a contemporary can quickly comprehend him".<sup>123</sup> Napoleon's faith in rational enlightenment had been defeated by the ineradicable backwardness of the Egyptian masses. "The man who had left Toulon harbour [for Egypt] had been a revolutionary soldier; the man who returned next year was perhaps, as Wellington said, a Jonathan Wild [an early 18<sup>th</sup>-century boss of

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<sup>121</sup> Raymond Postgate, 'The revolutionary who stopped world revolution', unpublished MS, n.d., Postgate Papers, 2/7, LSE, pp. 5-6.

<sup>122</sup> Postgate, *Robert Emmet*, pp. 290-305.

<sup>123</sup> Raymond Postgate, *Story of the year: 1798* (London, 1969), pp. 81-82.

London's criminal underworld], or maybe rather a Stalin."<sup>124</sup> Postgate, himself of impeccably bourgeois background, never felt himself able to idealise the 'common people'.

In the 1930s, Postgate had argued that the socialist must now bank upon an alliance between worker and technical middle class in particular. Then he had thought this could only be formed in periods of acute crisis.<sup>125</sup> As it turned out, it was the Second World War and the imperative toward national unity that bound together an alliance of workers and the technical middle class. On this basis, a 'semi-socialist society', as he called it,<sup>126</sup> was built from 1945; a great victory no doubt but one which Postgate always felt missed the libertarian potential inherent in the traditions of guild socialism and worker self-organisation. And in the post-war world the continuity of working class history had been broken. He never surrendered socialism, but by the mid-1960s was sure that the age of proletarian class politics was coming to an end. "In Britain class is declining; in the United States it is almost extinct," he wrote 1967.<sup>127</sup> Margaret Postgate, his sister, saw grounds for optimism in the revival of workers' control ideas in the movement of 1968. Postgate made no such connection. But then, as he once put it, he was historian, and "fortunately, we are none of us prophets and we are spared such decisions."<sup>128</sup> But as a historian he had uncovered a rich legacy with which to think.

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p 113.

<sup>125</sup> Postgate, *How to Make a Revolution*, p. 139.

<sup>126</sup> HG Wells, *The outline of history*, revised and brought up to date by Raymond Postgate and GP Wells (Two volumes, New York, 1949, 1956, 1961, 1971), II, p. 1009.

<sup>127</sup> Postgate, 'Class in Britain and abroad', p. 163.

<sup>128</sup> Postgate, *Communism and the government machine*, p. 7.