

Stephen Hastings-King, *Looking for the Proletariat: Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Problem of Worker Writing* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

The book is about the history of the group from 1949 to 1967, and its aim is to present the movement “as something other than a merely sophisticated variant of revolutionary Marxism” (p. 3). *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is considered in its specific historical context, when communism is already declined in a political paradigm (Stalinism) and takes shape in bureaucratic structures and institutions. In the first two chapters of the book, the author shows how the Hegelian framework of Marxian writings and its abstract laws are called into question, together with their Stalinist and Trotskyist interpretations. In France, the former give birth to bureaucratization: there is a separation between *dirigéants* and *exécutants*, and hierarchies are built according to the role performed inside the PCF (the French Communist Party) or the CGT (the General Work Confederation, that is the communist trade union). The Trotskyists, on the other side, go against the Stalinist falsification of Marxian writings, but they are not revolutionary enough, since they have lost contact with their proletarian basis.

In the third chapter, Stephen Hastings-King points out how *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, through a historical and sociological interpretation of Marx, makes a phenomenological operation. It tries to assume the point of view of the worker and to analyse production, relations, and language from this perspective. According to what Lefort argues in ‘L’expérience prolétarienne’ (1952), one can say that “only workers can know and write about their experience: revolutionary theory must be confined to analysing and interpreting what they write” (p. 108). *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is fundamentally an intellectual movement, which tries to redefine revolutionary theory through a new reading of Marx and his Leninist interpretation. However, every reflection will remain on an abstract and decontextualized level, if it does not refer to reality: in this case, the latter is represented by the productive life of the working class.

Giving his book the title *Looking for the proletariat*, Hastings-King wants to show that all the efforts of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* are aimed at understanding the workers, helping them to acquire class consciousness and to shape political actions. This is the reason why the movement gives prominence to worker writing. The fifth chapter of the book shows how the group, through the newspaper *Tribune Ouvrière*, tries to give a voice to the collective at the factory of Renault Billancourt, whose political context is clearly defined in the fourth chapter. Hastings-King points out similarities and differences with another worker newspaper, the Detroit-based *Correspondence* project. After that, the author writes about *Tribune Ouvrière* and the role that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* plays in the process of its production, printing, and distribution.

Stephen Hastings-King, *Looking for the Proletariat: Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Problem of Worker Writing* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

In the sixth chapter, the identity of Daniel Mothé is analysed. His true name is Jacques Gautrat and he works at Renault Billancourt. His experience as a *métallo* and his revolutionary ideas lead him to write several articles, all of them published in the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* review. His literary identity is very interesting from a phenomenological perspective, since each “version of Mothé is hyletic: a view from a particular position. Each position is shaped by a certain number of directional social relations. [...] The most important of the predicates, the one on which the others rely, that organises and enables them to exist, is the narrative function” (p. 249). Mothé reflects on Gautrat’s experience through the lens of Marxism in its *Socialisme ou Barbarie*’s interpretation. Sometimes it is not clear if Mothé or Gautrat is speaking, but it does not matter: the idea of a “natural” or “ingenuous” way of writing, supported by the *Correspondence* group, is rejected by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Every text is a product of self-reflection and self-consciousness.

Mothé’s ‘Journal d’un ouvrier’ is very important to understand how Marxist ideas are experienced by the proletariat: it shows the impact of Fordism on the rhythm and condition of workers, the conflict between the latter and the trade union, which is manipulated by the Communist Party, the attempt to act through independent collectives. The language spoken by the Party has no meaning for the proletariat and sometimes it is used to justify anti-revolutionary actions. According to Mothé and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the only way to save Marxism is to take the point of view of the worker, to support direct-democratic collectives, and to help proletariat in organising its future political actions.

Stephen Hastings-Kings is very precise and punctual in describing the life of the movement, through continuous references to their historical, social, and political context, and an efficient use of their written sources. There are also a bibliography and a clear index, helping the reader to find his way through the book. This work is theoretically well supported by references to Marx and Marxism, and to pivotal authors in phenomenology, especially Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. One should also give credit to Hastings-King for the smoothness of his language.

Share this:

- [Share](#)