

## Remembering Colin Barker

Laurence Cox

It's hard to imagine the world without Colin in it.

So much of my own life has been shaped by the dialogue with Colin. Even when we only saw each other once a year, those conversations and the extraordinary bunch of friends and comrades he gathered round would give inspiration, food for thought and ideas for the other 360-odd days. At other times it was a constant challenge (in the best of ways) to live up to the intellectual and political level he embodied.

Colin Barker, who died earlier this year aged 79, was a lifelong activist and revolutionary socialist, and Marxism's most important thinker on social movements. I don't want to write another obituary here: there have already been several by people who knew him for longer than I did, including Gareth Dale in the *Guardian*, Ian Birchall for *rs21*, John Charlton for *International Socialism* and Keith Flett for his own blog. The Alternative Futures and Popular Protest conference this year held a celebration of his work, which can be watched on youtube.<sup>1</sup>

So this is a personal note, remembering Colin as a friend and for what he brought to social movements.



**Photo: Brecht de Smet**

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<sup>1</sup> Links to most of these are at <https://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2019/04/24/what-you-want-to-say-24-january-2019/#comment-745084>

## **Alternative futures past**

I first met Colin at the second Alternative Futures and Popular Protest conference in 1996. As it was for several other people, AFPP became my intellectual home, a deliberately downbeat and non-“professional” place where ideas and movements really mattered – because there were no status or other rewards to be had from participating. It was sometimes funny to watch career-oriented academics flounder in a space where anyone could talk to anyone, and did. I came back every year afterwards, as often as possible bringing activist students with me. For them, as for me, the contrast to an academia where social movements were marginal and low-status and colleagues knew everything about good schools but nothing about popular struggles was profound. Most participants in those early years were activists first and academics second (if at all).

A huge energy came from the encounter between the different movements and political perspectives of the activists: at first, this was particularly between older Marxist historians of popular struggle and younger anarchist ethnographers on the cusp between the British roads protests and the alterglobalisation “movement of movements”; but also radical researchers from around the world, people from many a different political tradition, movement and generation.

This space was created, and held, by Colin and Mike Tyldesley, deliberately organising things without the hierarchical structure of plenaries and keynotes. All papers were published “as is”, in photocopied volumes that felt like samizdat – right up to the point when a conference needed 4 volumes and they moved to CD format instead. The guiding assumption, not just for the proceedings but the conference itself, was that nobody should be refused, unless they were visibly applying to the wrong conference and needed to be gently directed somewhere more safely academic.

Part of what underpinned this was a fiercely democratic understanding of knowledge, the reckoning that “the literature” in an academic sense did not deserve unique deference. But Colin was also not the kind of Marxist who set sectarian knowledge up as something separate from and above other kinds of movement thought: he was consistently interested in activists’ attempts to think through their own practice in their own languages. The result was a space for genuine dialogue, for holding ideas up to the test of practice and seeing what they actually meant for people in movements.

This was not the result of any hostility to academic research: Colin’s energy for reading was phenomenal and he was always happy to find useful ideas in any context. Until his last year, he continued to read *Mobilization*, the house journal of canonical US social movement studies despite repeatedly complaining how boring it was. A message from May 2018 told a range of friends and comrades that he had just re-read Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* and wanted to know what other people had come across by way of commentary on Thompson – and if any of us had changed our minds about aspects of his work.

## **Romanes eunt domus**

At my first conference I was too awkward and awed to talk to Colin, but the next year we found ourselves skiving off together from sessions at the British Sociological Association in York – the opposite in terms of genuine dialogue and interest in movements from AFPP. Colin enthused about the ducks we were watching, and in a long conversation I asked him what a Marxist theory of social movements might look like.

He took the question on board very fully, leading us a few years later to write a piece he called (with characteristic flair) “What have the Romans ever done for us?” on the relationship between how movement activists theorise about their activity and what academics write about it. Many activists have commented since about recognising themselves and their frustrations in the piece – a recognition due almost entirely to what Colin brought to it.

Neither of us let the question go – as he put it, why does Marxism, one of the main theories developed from and for social movements, have so little explicit theory of social movements, and why does mainstream social movement theory so consistently skirt around Marxism? In 2008 he invited me, John Krinsky and Alf Nilsen to a four-person micro-conference on the subject of Marxism and social movements. On the basis of this we put out an international call, set up a discussion list towards an edited book and eventually got in something like 70 submissions. This became *Marxism and Social Movements*, published in parallel with my book with Alf *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*.

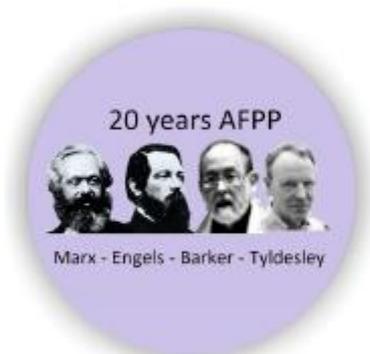
From this point of view so much of my life and work has been bound up with the conversation with Colin, directly and indirectly. In particular, his refusal to defer to academic theory, and his insistence that activist theorising as well as Marxism were worth paying attention to, gave me a confidence I would not otherwise have had. I had become a researcher to answer questions we were struggling with in our own movements, but the institutional pressures towards seeing “the literature” as the sole source of real value were strong ones, and Colin’s perspective was key in helping me in refusing that utterly spurious “argument by authority” and giving voice to my recognition of the febleness of so much academic writing about our own movements. As a very awkward young activist, with eco and anarchist leanings and a growing interest in community struggles in Ireland, Colin’s interest, discussions and friendship made a huge difference to my ability to stay politically active, and to keep researching in an alien environment.

Alternative Futures, of course, provided a strong basis in these islands for a more open and equal form of dialogue; this journal grew out of the enthusiasm of a group of activist researchers at the conference, fired by the encounter between movements that was taking place in the alterglobalisation “movement of movements” and wanting to contribute something real to movements’ own thought processes. This is our twentieth issue; along with other projects, and the combined weight of that generation and the generation of the movements of

2011, we can see a turnaround of what – when I began my PhD in 1992 – seemed an inevitable tide towards the drowning of movement thought by academic logics alone.

Over the years since that, much of my own work has been geared in different ways to bringing out activist thinking, not least in the form of attempts to articulate what Marxism as a form of social movement theory might have to offer both to other movements and to intellectual work. I have been lucky enough to work with a series of extraordinary activist researchers doing PhDs and MLitts using different forms of participatory action research on movement practice – a model inspired by Colin – and to bring them to AFPP.

In particular, colleagues in Adult and Community Education and Sociology with backgrounds in different movements were able to create a masters in activism at Maynooth, again with a perspective of helping movements to develop their own thinking around the issues they were struggling with. For the five years the masters ran, we brought the whole class to Alternative Futures to join in the wider dialogue. Through these routes and more indirectly, Colin's work helped encourage many Irish activists to take their own theorising more seriously and think more radically about the possibilities that were available to them. After his death, an activist I'd brought over as a postgrad back in the last century got in touch to say how much Colin had meant to him in just a few meetings, and another organiser told me how glad she was I'd pushed her to go to the conference.



**Badge and T-shirt image produced by regulars for the 20<sup>th</sup> Alternative Futures and Popular Protest conference in 2015**

### **A radical humanism**

Something clicked for me when I heard that Colin had almost chosen to study theatre in university: his mode of writing and telling stories is always full of human drama, not as a means of reducing complex social relations to banal clichés but rather as a means of showing their complexity, how they change and how people can act and talk in the most creative ways. The titles of his pieces,

too, often bear witness to this capacity to sum up “the concentration of many determinations” in a single moment:

- “Let me through, I’m a social theorist! – some sceptical notes on social movements and academe”
- “Goliath sometimes wins. A strike of community mental health workers in Manchester”
- “Never go to meet the bosses on your own”
- “Fear, laughter and collective power: the making of Solidarity at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, August 1980”
- “A modern moral economy: Edward Thompson and Vladimir Volosinov meet in a North Manchester protest”
- “‘The muck of ages’: reflections on proletarian self-emancipation”

In her book *Grassroots Warriors*, Nancy Naples talks of how black and Latina women community activists extended their caring and mentoring roles out beyond the family and into the community and its struggles. Colin surely did something similar: he and Ewa welcomed so many of us to visit and to stay, and so many campaigns were hatched or supported from the house. Food played a key role in this: Colin was a dedicated cook (and lover of TV cookery competitions). I have fond memories of him making pasta together with my then seven-year-old daughter. When I was on sabbatical, trying to work on a project that eventually became something else entirely, he and Ewa invited me to stay, and I happily shuttled backwards and forwards across the Irish Sea to their house.

In his everyday life, Colin exemplified how to live a radical humanism that doesn’t compartmentalise cooking and revolution, music and theory, but is happy to mingle them both.

### **Socialism from below**

Still in my inbox is Colin’s last email to his friends, comrades and family, a very honest, funny and thoughtful one which simultaneously read like a farewell but also seemed like a sign of hope in its energy and lucidity. Its final paragraph reads:

Back in the early 1960s I started becoming a Marxist. I think the essay that most influenced me, and whose principles I have tried to follow ever since, and whose ideas I have tried to deepen, was Hal Draper’s ‘The Two Souls of Socialism’, first read in winter 1962 after I’d joined the IS. (It’s on the web. Read it if you never did before.) It placed revolutionary socialism, or what he termed ‘socialism from below’ at the centre of what mattered in politics – against and in contrast to all forms of ‘socialism from above’ whether of the Stalinist or social-democratic/

parliamentarist kind. Some time later, and still in that lifelong process of \*becoming\* a Marxist, a friend from Detroit (who introduced me to CLR James) first showed me the passage in *The German Ideology* where Marx explains that the reason that a *revolution* is needed is that there is no other way that the great mass of humankind can get rid of ‘the muck of ages’ than by actually participating directly in a revolution through which they take direct democratic control of their everyday lives and build a new form of democratic state. As Marx would write later, with Engels’ agreement, ‘the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself.’ Those amazing ideas became a lodestone. Few today agree with them, perhaps, but what a measure they provide for grasping the movement of popular history up to the very present moment. Time and again, those ideas have surfaced, and been knocked back. They will revive again, and again. The wager - that they can win out in practice – has given meaning to my life.

Love and solidarity to all.

From this point of view, the reason for being interested in social movements and revolutions is that *they are how popular power develops* and *they are how people transform themselves in large numbers*.

As so many people take the rise of a new authoritarian right to mean the impossibility of any such thing, we see new pseudo-left technocratic fantasies, a grotesque revival of “tankie” celebration of Stalinism, and “radical” academic obsessions with new kinds of despair. In this context, Colin’s politics of “socialism from below” – and a deep awareness of the many ways in which popular struggles have reshaped the world – is more important than ever.

I don’t want to go too far into analysing his politics or his theory: that is for another time. But I think it is fair to say that he recognised the importance of combining an understanding of class, social movements and revolution into a way of thinking that situated popular struggles in the social realities which they grew out of and sought to change, and that did not exclude the possibility of “revolutionizing themselves and things”.

He was perhaps never quite satisfied with any tight formulation of exactly how these things related. Much of his written work is focussed on grasping the “concentration of many determinations”, the “unity of the diverse” that is the specific moment of struggle. And then he would take off in another piece, thinking through the theoretical implications of such experiences and trying to articulate the best possible way of understanding them.

His interest in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the Vygotsky-derived theory of human learning, and most recently in social reproduction, represent versions of this attempt just as much as did his work on class and social movements – or his late attempts to rethink the perspective of *Revolutionary Rehearsals* in ways that fit with what happened in 1989 and afterwards.

While critical of what he saw as the identity politics of the new social movements, Colin never adopted the unacknowledged identity politics of a workerist blindness to race, ethnicity and gender. The working class as he understood it was never homogenous (a central point in his theorising on class and movements); rather, the “whole movement of society” – as he already knew from his reading of Marx and his engagement with the movements of the 1960s – consisted of many different struggles and campaigns, only some of which were explicitly coded in class terms.

His involvement in the Anti-Nazi League was one of the things he was proudest of in the IS’ record, and he was delighted to tell stories of seeing white and Asian youth come together around anti-racist concerts. Similarly, in his research on Solidarnosc he was both alive to the powerful symbolic politics of holding a mass at Gdańsk shipyard and to the downsides of Polish ethno-nationalism.

As an organiser, he was less interested in assigning a permanent – negative or positive – value to any particular identity and more interested in seeing how it could be used both “from above” and “from below”, within opposing kinds of politics. On a broader historical scale, he consistently understood the US Civil Rights Movement as one of the key struggles of the post-war era – a view that went hand in hand with his love of black American music. Colin’s eventual split with the SWP was precisely over its leadership’s cover up of a rape scandal – a step that cost him many lifelong friends, but which reflected a deep-seated disgust at patriarchal forms of abuse that I had heard him express in other contexts.



***A young Colin trying – and failing – to keep up  
A Serious Intellectual Image***

### **What I’m (still) trying to learn from Colin**

Over the years I brought many activist researchers to Alternative Futures and joined many conversations between Colin and them. Part of what I think I saw in Colin was a lived belief that human beings’ creativity in struggle could be the

germ of a new world that was struggling to be born. He was consistently kind, encouraging and helpful towards people's own attempts to think things through around their movements; more inclined to ask a question than jump straight to a possible disagreement. His questions, too, were asked from a place of equality rather than setting up people for an argument or a trap.

More than many left organisers and most academics, he was genuinely curious about activists' worlds and their struggles; whether across the kitchen table or in books, he was consistently enthusiastic when he felt he had discovered a new movement worth thinking about, rather than seeking immediately to dismiss it, pigeon-hole it or use it to justify some previously-held belief. Colin *learned* more, I think, than most people, and was consistently interested in meeting new activists from different places.

Many people have mentioned how kind, generous and gregarious Colin was. It was infectious stuff and helped to bring an extraordinary range of people together at Alternative Futures in particular, learning from each other across many different movements and political traditions, something we then tried to keep alive in other spaces like this, which wouldn't have existed without Colin's inspiration. What struck me was the friendliness and curiosity he brought to the encounter with people whose movements, countries or political traditions he didn't know: he was always open to the possibility that this new thing might represent a different kind of expression of popular struggle. It was a wonderful way to embody the spirit of Marxism, and never stopped him disagreeing or asking challenging questions.

Some people have spoken of Colin as being unfailingly optimistic; that wasn't my experience of him, and of course his own experience had been one of seeing many defeats and unfulfilled expectations. But – in a society where it remains true for many people that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – he consistently saw revolution as a real possibility that could be achieved from within our own societies. From this point of view, the new discoveries made by movements in struggle and the mistakes and blind alleys are all of a piece: the practical implication of a Marxism without guarantees and without despair, or as he put it “the wager that these ideas can win out in practice”.

Maybe because of this, being around Colin was to inhale a great feeling of confidence rather than of optimism – that as Marx wrote in 1859, “humanity only sets itself problems that it is able to solve”, and a broad historical and internationalist perspective that refused to give up in the face of overwhelming *local* odds. I remember him talking about the pleasure of being involved in anti-war protests in 2003 when after decades of being a small minority on the losing side of many arguments suddenly the vast mass of the population agreed.

For Colin, the potential for social transformation and revolutionary change was not a matter of theory, but one that drew on his own direct and indirect experience. He regularly told stories of his experience of local strikes he had been involved in, as well as of the highpoints of struggle in Poland – along with

many another story. Talking to him, or listening to his stories, you were reminded that yes, we had faced defeats, even for long periods, but then we came back and had another go. As his comments about “Two Souls of Socialism” and the self-emancipation of the working classes underlined, he knew as a matter of lived experience and theoretical insight that popular agency never really goes away. Even when it is defeated, appears in hard-to-recognise forms or does flat-out stupid things (he was not a blind optimist), people would still struggle against the bosses and the state, and sometimes they would win.

### **Keeping on after Colin**

Two final books are in the pipeline. One is a sequel to *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, looking at what revolutionaries can learn from revolutions since the mid-1980s: *Struggling to be Born? Revolutions in the Neoliberal Era*, edited by Colin Barker, Gareth Dale and Neil Davidson, to be published with Haymarket. The other is a selected works or as he called it “Greatest Hits” – which will certainly have more of the variety of form, style and energy of a rock album than a typical edited collection.

In the meantime, much of what Colin wrote except the books (some of which are available online in pirated editions, or can be found second-hand without difficulty) is on his website at <https://sites.google.com/site/colinbarkersite/>. It is a fantastic record of an extraordinary mind – and of his intense activist engagement, although it includes only a fraction of the many talks he did for socialist and other organisations.

The Alternative Futures and Popular Protest conference is in safe hands – Colin and Mike arranged its transfer to the University of Manchester’s department of sociology, where Kevin Gillan, Simin Fadaee, Luke Yates and others organised a solid opening to this new series. *Interface* too continues on.

In the bigger picture, the project of “socialism from below” remains an open question: people continue to resist oppression and exploitation, to articulate their own “good sense” against official “common sense”, and to come together in struggle. The search for the best organising forms, and for theoretical articulations that help, remains a living one.

We left too many conversations hanging. In the introduction to *Why Social Movements Matter* I had talked about the debt I owed him for showing me “how to think dialectically about social movements”. When I visited last October, he asked me what I meant by that. It took a little while to gather my thoughts, but the next morning I was able to say something semi-sensible about the centrality of relationship, process and conflict – that different social actors don’t start out separate from one another and then engage in conflict and alliance but begin from (often conflictual) relationship – and that they are themselves internally complex fields of struggle ... or something. I was a bit embarrassed – but of course the real point was that Colin’s own intellectual practice drew on a dialectical vision of the world.

Around the same time, he sent me and others a draft of his introduction to *Struggling to be born?* for comments. Among other things, I asked him why he only saw the October Revolution as a genuine revolutionary success, and not (for example) the Zapatista or Rojava revolutions, but he did not get the chance to answer. Conversely, he saw and appreciated a piece I'd written for *ROARMag* about the revolutionary challenges of the long 1968 – but felt that I needed to think more about the “Lenin moment”. Personally and politically, I would have loved the opportunity to finish those conversations – and no doubt start new ones.

My heart goes out to Ewa, Hannah and Nancy who have lived through Colin's appalling and horrible disease and are now coming to terms with his loss. Thank you for sharing him with us.

Colin was a truly remarkable human being, and my life was so much richer for knowing him. He inspired, supported and challenged people involved in struggles of many kinds.

### **About the author**

Laurence Cox was a friend of Colin Barker's and a founding editor of *Interface*. He can be contacted at [laurence.cox AT mu.ie](mailto:laurence.cox AT mu.ie)