To the Finland Station

Belinda Weaver takes a fresh look at 'To the Finland Station', by Edmund Wilson

In suppressing the Paris Commune of 1871, the first workers' government, the French ruling class killed and exiled and imprisoned more people in one week than the three years of the Robespierre terror had done. Yet which is still held up today as an example of unvarnished brutality?

Facts like this point up how crucial the socialist historical tradition is to us. Our movement has suffered millions of casualties, but they lie in unmarked graves, those class-war martyrs whose names have been wiped from the record of history. We need to mark the places where our dead are buried; we must record how and where they fell. We too have our anniversaries.

The Paris Commune was the point from which two strands of history, bourgeois and socialist, separate and run in separate channels. There was official history, serving the ruling class, and our history, marginalised and little known.

If official history bored us, with its dry recital of dates and dynasties, it's because something was left out — the people. All those buried generations need a voice which can take us beyond understanding into a world of fellow feeling and kinship. That is why we need history. It rarely does. Apart from feeding us distortions and lies, official history kills our curiosity. We don’t seek to understand or endure (and pass exams) is enough.

Without knowledge of our history, we’re like dachis in a shooting gallery, compelled to go round and round in a well worn, purposeless groove. Understanding of history, coupled with a materialist analysis, helps us to break out of the rut. That can be daunting. When you are new to this, it is hard to know where to start exploring the vast range of books, pamphlets, papers, and magazines. If only there was one book which summed it all up!

To the Finland Station comes close. It is an incomparable exploration of how socialist ideas developed.

One little known date, January 1824, turned out to be crucial for the socialist historical tradition. In that month, a young French professor called Jules Michelet saw a reference in a book to the writings of an earlier Italian historian, Giovanni Vico. So interested was Michelet in Vico, a writer whom little known had been translated into French, that he set about learning Italian so he could read him.

He could only admire his determination, and be thankful for it, since it inspired Michelet, one of the earliest social historians, to develop Vico’s ideas further. Michelet wrote:

"From 1824 on, I was seduced with frenzy caught from Vico, an incredible intoxication with his great historical principle."

Vico had begun to write history in a new way, to study the past as scientists like Bacon had begun to study the world. No longer would history be written as "a series of biographies of great men or as a chronicle of remarkable happenings or as a pageant directed by God". Social history — the study of societies — had begun.

What Vico taught Michelet was that "societies...like individual human beings...have passed through legal phases of growth...the social world is certainly the work of men..."

This was not exactly a new idea. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the writings of Voltaire and Montesquieu, had done much to explain the origins of social institutions. But "Vico, by force of an imaginative genius of remarkable power and scope, had enabled him [Michelet] to grasp finally for the first time the organic character of human society and the importance of re-integrating through the various forces and factors which actually compose human life."

When Michelet, influenced by Vico, began his History of the Middle Ages, he hoped that for the first time would be heard "the whispers of the souls who had suffered so long the wrongs who were smothered now in the past."

Vico and Michelet put into the historical record what, up till then, had always been left out — the people.

Some centuries later, Edmund Wilson describes the elation he felt reading Vico: "the fogs that obscure the horizons of the remote reaches of time recede, the cloud-shapes of legend lift. In the world there are no longer monsters; the heroes and the gods float away...the myths that have made us wonder are projections of a human imagination like our own."

No wonder Michelet was inspired. Michelet’s writings began in the Middle Ages. He felt the drag of the long, dark, unenlightened centuries, making him impatient for the Renaissance, through to the French Revolution of 1789, and beyond. In Michelet’s study of the French Revolution, he found the sense of humanity creating itself anew, taking steps to build a better world. Michelet accepted the idea of the French Revolution being primarily the work of a few prominent men like Danton or Robespierre.

...the people were usually more important than their leaders... It is quite wrong to take these brilliant and powerful talkers, who expressed the thought of the masses, for the sole actors in the drama... The principal actor is the people...

Excited by the French Revolution, Michelet no longer wanted to be on the sidelines recording the action; he wanted to use his knowledge to act upon society. He was a precursor of the socialist tradition of men like Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, who wanted to change the world.

Edmund Wilson’s book, To the Finland Station, is subtitled "A study in the writing of history of the moment". Beginning with Michelet’s discovery of Vico, it closes with the arrival of Lenin at the Finland Station in Moscow in 1917. With that historic moment, says Wilson, the writing and act of history became one.

From Michelet to Lenin, we cross a crowded terrain of ideas and personalities, with the early socialists, Saint-Simon, Belousov, Fourier, Owen and later Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, as markers on our journey. Complex as it may is, it is not that. The writing sparkles. No other book quite generates the intoxication of ideas.

Wilson, an American literary critic, was briefly married to the writer Mary McCarthy. Both were on the periphery of the American Trotskyist movement of the thirties, when Wilson started to write on To the Finland Station. It took him six years, in which he read over a thousand books.

It was an immense task. To write up as easily, as clearly and as simply as he does required tremendous knowledge and familiarity with his subject. The book is a towering labour of love, it retains its freshness and vigour all through. Wilson’s enthusiasms are not small ones; his excitement over Marx’s Capital peels the springs off his pages. Reading him, you feel both the magnetic pull of the ideas he is explaining, and the counter attraction of the book he inspired him. You want to finish Wilson, but you want to read the others too.

Wilson’s enthusiasm for Capital is infectious. He praises Marx’s book for "its power of..."
SURPLUS VALUE

In the late nineteenth century, the development of capitalism and the growth of industries led to a period known as the "surplus value" era, where workers were exploited to produce goods at a lower cost, enabling capitalist owners to accumulate wealth. This concept was central to Karl Marx's economic theory, as he believed that the surplus value created by labor was the source of the wealth that drove the capitalist system.

Marx's work, "Capital," is a comprehensive treatise on political economy and economics. It explores the relationship between labor and capital, the means of production, and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The book is divided into three volumes, with the first volume focusing on the theory of capital.

Through his analysis, Marx argued that the surplus value was not shared with the workers but was instead appropriated by the owners of capital. This exploitation, he believed, was the driving force behind the class conflict and the development of the capitalist system.

In summary, the concept of surplus value is a fundamental aspect of Marxist economics, providing a framework for understanding the dynamics of the capitalist system and the ongoing struggle for economic and social justice.

— Karl Marx