

## Communists on the BBC, 1935-39

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During the second half of the 1930s, the Communist Party of Great Britain subordinated revolutionary class politics to a broad-based anti-fascist agenda under the name of the 'popular front'. The new line compelled communists to build alliances with anti-fascists of all political persuasions, with the long-term goal of forming a progressive 'popular front' government. Though a failure politically, the new line enabled the party to enjoy a significant, if short-lived, profile in British cultural life. During these years communists were prominent in the Left Book Club, which would number 57,000 members by April 1939; the communist-dominated cultural journal *Left Review* (1934-38) became a key vector of the decade's crisis-generated cultural radicalisation; coalition-minded communists conducted an apparently more constructive dialogue with Britain's cultural and political traditions and key institutions, including the BBC. This paper, which is based on research for a forthcoming monograph on communist cultural politics, maps and analyses the under-researched communist engagement with the BBC during the popular front years (1935-39).

Communists in this period took radio seriously. The *Daily Worker* newspaper, which reached a circulation of 200,000 in the late 1930s, carried not only detailed radio listings, but extensive analysis of the BBC's uses and abuses of the medium. In journals, books and pamphlets, party intellectuals including George Audit and Charles Madge scrutinised 1930s BBC radio in the light of a better future. Drawing upon these writings, the first section of this paper explains that the BBC was conceived by communists dialectically. It was both an insidious institution exercising baleful influence on behalf of the ruling class, and a ready-made cultural apparatus whose public status and presence in millions of homes made it of great relevance to the 'rising class' and its (communist) political representatives. Analysis will outline some of the skirmishes, critiques and controversies that ensued, from communist criticisms of the BBC's priorities and leadership (Sir John Reith was frequently charged with using the BBC to soften up Britain for fascism), to communist allegations of BBC bias in the coverage of the Spanish Civil War, to controversies around the exclusion of communist leaders from the airwaves.

The paper will argue that these confrontations—which saw the BBC as the location of political struggle between ruling and oppositional elements—were enmeshed in a broader debate about the medium of radio itself. Like more celebrated figures from the international left, such as Bertholt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, communists in Britain repeatedly contrasted the establishment's habitual, inherently conservative, monologic use of radio ('a platform for old men to lecture us', in the words of the *Daily Worker's* George Audit), with the medium's largely unexploited potential for a more de-centred, dialogic and demotic communication (radio as 'the ear and voice of millions'), attuned to a full spectrum of social and cultural experiences. These tensions between settled conventions and creative possibilities were sharpened during the late 1930s. Well-documented technological improvements, such as the BBC's belated acquisition of Dramatic Control Panels and Mobile Recording Units in 1937, created new opportunities for innovation. The mid-1930s expansion of regional BBC staff saw the influx and promotion of permanent employees sympathetic to leftist agendas (John Pudney, Olive

Shapley, D G Bridson) and the entrance into the BBC of individual communists (James Miller / Ewan MacColl, A. L. Lloyd, Joan Littlewood) who established more tentative footholds as casual scriptwriters, actors and presenters.

The second half of this paper turns from broadcasting's harder end—news, talks, institutional structures—to features programmes. Drawing on research in the *Daily Worker's* radio listings, the BBC Written Archives and recently declassified MI5 files, the paper revisits communist critique of programmes considered to espouse reactionary agendas: these include 'An English Pageant for St George's Day' (April 1936), which allegedly repressed Britain's industrial history and radical traditions in favour of a reassuring myth of rural idyll, and 'Revolution in Russia' (December 1937), a hotly contested 'radio panorama' of events close to the hearts of all communists. The paper will also restore to view programmes whose alleged censorship sparked significant debate. These include the radio adaptation of Clifford Odets' agitprop play *Waiting for Lefty*, a key text of the 1930s whose recorded radio adaptation was pulled by the BBC in February 1939, and communist A. L. Lloyd's 'The Voice of the Seaman' (December 1938) which was critically acclaimed on its original broadcast but sidelined and never repeated after complaints from shipping companies. Focussing on a small cluster of programmes also feted by communists, including 'Cold Coal' (September 1938), 'Summer in Wales' (August 1937), and 'Eleven Thousand Whalersmen' (August 1939), I argue that such broadcasts were welcomed by communists as political interventions, especially in their celebration of the political and cultural resources of the working class. These programmes were also, I argue, regarded as innovative creative acts which began to mobilise the medium of radio's full potential, pre-figuring the consciousness-raising, counter-hegemonic function that radical broadcasting might play in the context of the BBC under a popular front alternative to the National Government.

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