

Review*Party Animals:**My Family and Other Communists*

by David Aaronovitch

London: Jonathan Cape, 2016 [ISBN 9780224074711]

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This is a strange book, it's a biography; it's political, but not a political biography. Ostensibly, it's about David Aaronovitch's parents and growing up in a communist household in the sixties. It briefly sketches the history of the Communist Party of Great Britain from its foundation to its low point following the General Strike of 1926, and on to the highpoint it enjoyed for a year or two after the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. This was followed, by decline, stagnation, fracture, and finally, by dissolution.

David Aaronovitch's, father, Sam Aaronovitch was a leading member of the Party, who'd fought his way out of the grim poverty of London's Jewish East End in the nineteen thirties for a life of penury as a Party full-timer. An autodidact, Sam Aaronovitch was an impressive character, he'd haunted the public libraries as a teenager, and he read and read throughout his life; writing, lecturing, and organising for the Party well into middle age. Eventually, when passed over for promotion to one of the Party's top jobs, as London District Organiser, he decided to try for a formal education, and astonishingly, in 1967, at the age of 47 without a qualification to his name, he was accepted at Balliol to study for a PhD in economics.

Although David is still plainly proud of his Dad's achievements, he is reticent on the contribution that Sam and his Mum, Lavender, made towards his own ascent through university, the National Union of Students, to life as an award-winning journalist and litterateur. This is an aspect of the communist life he could perhaps have written more fully

about. The Communist Party was overwhelmingly a working class organization, which went to great lengths to train and educate its members. True, its points of cultural reference were narrow, even conservative, but those of us who grew up in the Young Communist League and in the adult party, know full well that we have much to thank this milieu for in giving us a start that was not easily available anywhere else in the late fifties and early sixties.

It's an interesting, if little explored, aspect of life on the left, particularly on the far left. It is, of course, one full of ironies (perhaps, even embarrassing ironies), that our politics, our interests, and our organisations played such a leading role for many of us in what the sociologists call the process of "embourgeoisement". Between the late nineteen forties and the mid eighties, well before the huge expansion of university education, a great many socialists and communists from the working class joined the ranks of administrators, officials, and educators. For those of us who failed the 11-Plus, the Party and the movement became our grammar school, and our route into the universities, the professions, and the middle class.

David Aaronovitch, no doubt extremely bright and capable in his own terms, nevertheless benefitted from a life with people who, without money or position, raised him to respect learning, and all that it has to offer. So, it is disappointing, but nevertheless, fascinating that so much of this book is taken up with Sam's infidelities, the tense unhappiness of his life with Lavender, and the damage done to David and his siblings. This is not the surreal world of comic obsessions and displacement catalogued by Alexei Sayle's *Stalin Ate My Homework*, but one of family life in the fifties and sixties saturated with frustration, and unhappiness borne of the entrapment and thwarted ambitions of all concerned. In this sense, the life described by David is not dissimilar from that of millions of working class and lower middle class homes of the period. It was different only in that Mum and Dad were communists, and young David became a communist too.

He makes much of the bizarre effect of being a communist when all around capitalist society was barrelling along apparently impervious to both the threat and the promise offered by Soviet Russia, and its network of communist parties strung across the world. The Communist Party in Britain was small and isolated and being a member of it when prosperity and white goods were pouring off the production lines, when ‘the sixties’ were starting to swing, was a strange experience indeed. Particularly, when the Young Communist League attempted to get in on the act with “The Trend, The Trend to Communism” and the *Daily Worker* became the *Morning Star* in a rather lumbering attempt to move with the times.

David seems to be grieving still, for the manner in which this upbringing in a world of ideological commitments so evidently out of kilter with the spirit of the times, excluded him from the life of society at large. This, I think explains the lack of attention paid throughout the text to his own political development, his life as an active communist, and the way in which he appears to draw a veil over the manner in which he journeyed from the Stalinist orthodoxy of his parents, through the eurocommunism of *Marxism Today*, his term as president of the National Union of Students, to the life of a bourgeois democrat and fulsome supporter of military intervention writing regularly for *The Times*.

So, it’s a patchy book, with a patchy story to tell. If you are looking for a developed history of communism in Britain or for an analysis of Stalinism, and the intrinsically utopian aspirations of the comrades, you’ll have to look elsewhere. But, it’s an interesting read, David has a story to tell and he tells it with a lacerating honesty that he reserves for his Mum and Dad, and becomes somewhat softer and more forgiving when dealing with his own part in the drama. But it is worth reading, if only to get a feel for the texture of a particular kind of life and the commitments that shaped it, which have now vanished from our national life almost without trace.