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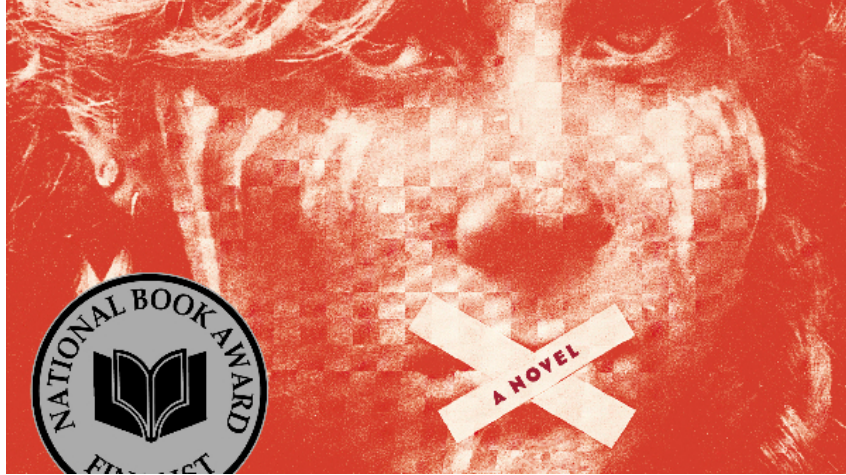
European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Mark Steven

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## *The Global Class Struggle in Five Novels*



**Sources:** Counterpunch

*Translated for Rebellion by Paco Muñoz de Bustillo*

Since class warfare first appeared in radical thought in the last decades of the eighteenth century, it has not stopped evolving through the exchange of ideas between political activity and literary narrative, reformulating revolutionary action through military language. My latest book, [Class War: A Literary History](#), explores this fusion of politics and literature from the Haitian revolution to the Black Panthers. But what about the class struggle and its influence on the literature on revolution in the present present?

Ours is an epoch in which the history of class war is transmitted through literature, emerging from the revolutionary past at a time defined by the death of liberal progress and the proliferation of new crises and new antagonisms. This sense of revolutionary heritage belongs to many contemporary works, but it is exemplified with powerful, if cartoonish, acuity in Thomas Pynchon's immense transhistoric epic, *Tusquets ed.*, which uses travelers

moving from the future (our present, that of the book's publication in 2006) to compare current struggles with those of the beginning of the century in the United States. culminating in the Colorado Coal War, when dynamite-armed frontier workers confronted the Robbery Barons and their thugs from Pinkerton.

But there is something especially distinctive about contemporary literature on class warfare and how it addresses old conflicts in all their national, regional and cultural uniqueness. Rather than in earlier eras, when the rise of militancy was accompanied by a literary efflorescence – from England in the early nineteenth century, through France during the Paris Commune, to Russia in the 1920s or China in the 1930s – today's novels about class warfare interpret their specific conflicts as part of a struggle that has a territorial basis. but also expanding internationally.

The heroes of Pynchon's novel are aware of the expansion of conflict, struggle, and organization not only beyond a certain stratum of society, but also beyond the nation-state. And so, they leave a place of urban struggle in airship, knowing that their struggle is not theirs alone: "These balloon travelers chose to continue flying," we read, "free now from the political illusions that reigned more than ever on land, solemnly committed to each other, proceeding as if they were under a worldwide and endless state of siege."

With an equally broad perspective, the following novels claim a global solidarity that transcends all geopolitical divisions, and that also understands class as a powerful latent force alongside the variables of age, gender, geography, race and religion. At the same time, these novels maintain, in their essence, the vision of a liberating struggle against the exploiters and expropriators.

### **China Miéville: *The Iron Council***

This is the last book in China Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy, three sprawling dark fantasy novels set in what the author describes as "a rather grimy, police-rich capitalist world of industry." By the time I got to the third book I had already been hooked on the ungodly city that is at the heart of the trilogy, with its arcane geography and nightmarish monstrosities, because Miéville's language does much to turn the whole thing into a feverish existence, with a vocabulary that seems as inordinate and mutant as the city he describes. But this ending is also especially captivating in its dramatization of militancy as it is represented and experienced by the individual and collective characters they become. Across fantastic geography, a diverse array of magic-reinforced antiheroes rise together against industrial sprawl, imperial bloodshed, and an increasingly fascist sense of nationhood. I can't think of a better, more glorious, and more imaginative narrative about

the meaning of the obligations of class solidarity in times of conflict. The reader will be excited during the great railroad mutiny, which recreates the railroad strike of 1877, and perhaps feel real anguish when that world of revolt suddenly freezes in time.

**Rachel Kushner: *The flamethrowers***

Rachel Kushner puts into context the belligerence of Italian workers during the infamous Years of Lead. With an intergenerational narrative that moves at the speed of a turbocharged motorcycle through salt flats, *The Flamethrower* covers from the early years of European fascism, through resource extraction in the jungles of Brazil, to the art world of seventies New York and, finally, the streets of Rome in times of revolt. Its protagonist – a young woman from Nevada – becomes a prism to through which the modern world-system is refracted at a time of transformative upheaval, as well as in a gender perspective from which the oppression of working women both in the factory and at home is again highlighted. And in that electrifying moment when protest erupts into riots, when movement turns into insurrection, Kushner's novel highlights the actions of oppressed women, turned agents of the revolution: "Now it was women who threw the firebombs. Clothing stores. A department store. A lingerie store. They went up the Corso."

**C.A. Davids: *How to be a Revolutionary***

*How to Be a Revolutionary* by C. A. Davids takes the title of his book from a list of useful skills that its protagonist, Beth, wishes to learn from her radical friend, Kay, a charismatic organizer who could teach her "how to kiss a boy" as easily as to "apply the lessons learned from Communist China to South Africa." Focusing on these interpersonal dynamics, this is an elegiac novel about the challenges of sustaining political engagement against the tides of disenchantment: "After his departure, nothing could be considered normal, if it ever had been. The sadness gave me no respite: I waited under my eyelids, I watched when I went to school, when I spoke, I breathed in my name." Set in Shanghai during the Great Leap Forward, in Apartheid-era Cape Town, and in Harlem by Langston Hughes, this novel explores the international and intergenerational connections between old revolutionaries on three continents, who yearn for a better world than this one, but who are haunted by defeat. Steeped in leftist melancholy, it is a narrative that finds its way through an unwavering commitment to an internationalism that demands acts of practical solidarity with comrades known and unknown, with those who have gone before us and with those who will come after.

**R.F. Kuang, *Babel***

I teach literature at a university in the southwest of England. The ongoing culture shock of doing this as a working-class immigrant has fueled in me a critical fascination with the student subculture known as *dark academia*, which seems to revolve around reading old books, wearing knitted jackets, and leaning toward autumnal melancholy (and which, according to Amelia Horgan's characteristic keen assessment, "it is a response to commodification, particularly to the temporary tensions of the neoliberal university.") R. F. Kuang's tremendous alternate history, *Babel*, is marketed as a work of the dark academy, or at least that's the impression given by its cover design and advertising, but it's much more than that. It is a forceful and decolonial critique of institutions of higher learning, of literary achievements, and of all their complicities in the reproduction of class hierarchy and imperial power. At the same time, it combines that critique with the historical actions of those who fought against that system, from the Luddites and Chartists to the dispossessed and enslaved on the peripheries of empire, in China and the Caribbean. As the novel progresses toward its all-powerful, insurrectionary conclusion, the book's subtitle becomes crucial to knowing what it's all about: "Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution."

**Kim Stanley Robinson**, *The Ministry of the Future*

If the environmental crisis is blatant violence perpetrated against the world's poor, a neoliberal holocaust of the dispossessed, literary fiction is right to interpret climate change as a class war. In *The Ministry of the Future*, legendary science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson uses an almost Melvillian sense of ability to explore our collective potential to end capitalist accumulation to save the biosphere. The narrative refers to the diversity of tactics, from legislative reform to sabotage and assassination, as "The War for Land," and that war is presented as resoundingly and necessarily international, organically weaving hundreds of local actions into a global tapestry upon which capitalism would cease to be viable. It is also a war waged by and on behalf of the world's marginalized class. The first chapter, both devastating and catalyzing, is a gruesome description of a massive heat wave sweeping through India and killing millions. What follows is a proliferation of both independent and interrelated actions, with local but also wide-ranging and often symbolic objectives, each geared towards the demolition of capitalist social relations in order to ensure a livable future for all. When asked if this novel is "combat literature," a term by which Frantz Fanon designates writing composed under the force of decolonial insurgency, Robinson suggested why such literature may be necessary, but also why it is not sufficient on its own. "It's going to be chaotic and confusing," he said, "and it's going

to last as long as there's someone alive. We have to get used to it and fight effectively. Combat literature can help give us insights or warn us of repercussions, but it's real-world actions that will matter: laws, norms, behaviors."

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Books reviewed:

*The Iron Council, China Miéville, Editions B, 2018*

*The Flamethrowers, Rachel Kushner, Gutenberg Galaxy, 2014.*

*How to be a Revolucionary, C.A. Davids, Verso, 2022 (there is no Spanish edition)*

*Babel, F.R. Kuang, Hydra, 2022.*

*The Ministry of the Future, Kim Stanley Robinson, Minotaur, 2021.*

Source: <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/06/02/the-global-class-war-in-five-novels/>

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