

Book Reviews

No Chief, No God

Don't Sleep, There are Snakes. By Daniel Everett. Profile £15.

In 1977 Dan Everett travelled with his wife and their three young children to the midst of the Amazon jungle. They were going to live among the Pirahã people, where Everett was to learn their language in order to translate the new testament into it and so convert them to christianity (he was working for a missionary organisation). He learnt the language but failed to convert any of the Pirahã; rather, they and their culture had a profound influence on his own beliefs, about language, religion and how to live.

The Pirahã, who now number less than four hundred, are typical of pre-state societies. They depend on hunting, foraging and fishing, and a family can acquire enough food for a week by working at most twenty hours each (including the children), though fishing and so on are fun and don't really count as work. They do not plan for the future, and do not preserve food. They have few possessions but no concept of poverty. There is a strong sense of community and of mutual responsibility: an elderly disabled man who could not fend for himself was given food as a matter of course. There are no chiefs, and ostracism and exclusion from food-sharing are the main means of 'coercion' used to control each other's behaviour.

Spirit 'voices' can also influence the Pirahãs' conduct, but they claim to see these spirits regularly and have no concept of a creator god. Their lives are very much in the here and now, and what they talk about is limited to what the speaker or someone they know has witnessed. Consequently, they were completely unreceptive to Everett's religious message, based as it was on books produced by people he had never met. He translated Mark's gospel into the Pirahã language, but they were only interested in hearing about the beheading of John the Baptist!

This led Everett to question his own faith in unseen things, and to a realisation that it was perfectly possible to be contented without believing in sin, hell and heaven. He kept his new-found atheism a secret for many years, and when he eventually came clean it resulted in the break-up of his family.

Everett describes the Pirahã as happy, patient and kind, certainly happier than any religious people he has encountered. It is important not to romanticise them and their way of life: they live in a dirty and dangerous environment, suffer high infant mortality and can be astonishingly violent to outsiders. But the Pirahãs "show no evidence of depression, chronic fatigue, extreme anxiety, panic attacks, or other psychological ailments common in many industrialized societies."

This book shows clearly how life under capitalism is just one means of human organisation, not the consequence of 'human nature', and that life without money and mortgages and god has plenty of attractions.

PB

Globalization

Marxian Economics and Globalization. By Binay Sarkar and Adam Buick, Avenel Press, Calcutta, 2009. ISBN 81-902529-5-X

Is globalization just another word for capitalism? The short answer is yes. A longer answer is

provided in this invaluable book written by two socialists. Using Marxian economics as their explanatory framework, there are chapters on 'Capitalism as a world system', 'What is political economy?', 'The basic categories of Marxian economics', 'The marginal revolution in economics against the labour theory of value', 'The cyclical nature of capitalist production', 'The era of permanent inflation', 'The Bolsheviks and the abolition of money', 'Anti-globalization or anti-capitalism?', 'Why we need global change'. The book is dedicated to "The Working Class of the World".

Today we live in a world completely dominated by capitalist production, where wealth is produced for sale on a market with a view to profit. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx's analysis of capitalism had identified it as an inherently globalizing system. As the Communist Manifesto put it, "the cheap price of commodities ... compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production". The authors look at the globalization of capitalism since his day, as manifested in the ever-widening world division of labour, world wars and rivalry for sources of raw materials, markets and investment outlets, the rise of the multinational corporation and the emergence of global financial markets. They discuss the opposition to these developments and argue that anti-imperialism and anti-globalization are not the same as anti-capitalism, as this has to be a movement aimed at a world socialist society where the resources of the globe have become the common heritage of its entire people.

There are a few quibbles. State capitalism is said to be the "most regressive, dehumanizing and degenerating" form of capitalism (page 55). But this is arguably a judgement on which socialists do not need to take sides; we are opposed to capitalism whatever form it takes. We are told that under state capitalism, "capital remains private property of the state functionaries collectively" (page 56). But this could suggest that state functionaries had a legal claim on capital, which was generally not the case, though they did exercise possession as a class through their control of political power. It is claimed that John Stuart Mill was an "opponent of Karl Marx" (page 90). But though Marx was well acquainted with the writings of Mill, there is no evidence that Mill knew of Marx's existence. But these are quibbles. Hopefully a future edition will have an index, so enabling the reader to easily track down the many fascinating ideas and quotes to be found in this important book.

LEW

Revolutions

Endnotes #1 - Preliminary Materials For A Balance Sheet Of The Twentieth Century. 216 pages. Available from Endnotes, 12 London Road, Brighton, BN1 4JA. £10

The opening issue of this new journal is based around a dialogue between contemporary French ultra-left groups Troploin (Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nestic) and Théorie Communiste (who remain anonymous). Of the contributors Dauvé is probably most well known to English speakers for his tracts written under the pseudonym 'Jean Barrot' - Eclipse and Re-emergement of the Communist Movement, Critique of the Situationist International and Fascism / Anti-fascism.

As Endnotes state in their introduction "...we have no wish to encourage an interest in history per se. [...] We hope [...] to undermine the illusion that this is somehow "our" past, something to be protected or preserved. [...] We would go so far as to say that with the exception of the recognition of the historical break that separates us from them, that we have nothing to learn from the failures of past revolutions — no need to replay them to discover their "errors" or distil their "truths" — for it would in any case be impossible to repeat them."

Both groups, and presumably Endnotes, are tied to the concept of "Communistation" - communism is not something that happens after the revolution, it is the "immediate production of communism; the self-abolition of the proletariat through its abolition of capital and the state." Notions of both a "transitional society" and "workers self-management" are rejected. Capitalism is a system of

production, value accumulation can as easily be managed by workers as by private capitalists or state bureaucrats.

The structure of the journal - each chapter is a critique of the one preceding it - makes for a stimulating and engaging read. A wide range concepts and historical events are covered and subject to lively criticism. From the Paris Commune to Argentina 2002 via the Russian and German revolutions, Italian "Red Years", the Spanish tragedy, Paris 68 and the Italian "Hot Autumn" we are taken on a radical train journey of revolution and counter-revolution, though the spirit isn't one of nostalgic reminiscence but firmly rooted in the possibilities of the present moment.

Whilst the politics of both Troploin and Théorie Communiste don't converge with the Socialist Party on all counts there is certainly plenty of food for thought on offer here and a good opportunity to become acquainted with a not overly well known current of contemporary European thought.

DJP

Cartoon Karl

Taro Aso, the current Prime Minister of Japan, is widely known to be a fan of "manga". His love of comic books seems quite genuine (although it may be related to his notorious inability to read even some of the more basic Japanese kanji characters). Setting aside whatever personal reasons he may have, however, it is clear that Aso loves manga for practical political reasons as well, as he is convinced that it can contribute to an expansion in Japan's "soft power." Aso has clearly stated a hope that manga will assist Japanese diplomacy by raising what he calls the "brand image" of Japan, particularly in those Asian countries where people's memories have been branded by the experience of Japanese colonial rule.

The problem for Aso is that not every manga published today conforms to the hollow "cool Japan" marketing image that he is peddling. Around two years ago, for instance, one top-selling manga was a version of a 1920s "proletarian novel" written by the Communist author Takiji Kobayashi, which depicted the harsh life of workers at the time and exposed nationalistic ideology. And now, to Aso's dismay I suspect, there is also a manga version of Marx's Capital available in Japan.

This new manga, published by East Press last December, comes in two pocketsize volumes. Volume one presents a fictional tale of a young man named Robin, who is first seen in the marketplace selling cheese that his father produces on his small farm. Against the wishes of his father, who is a sort of anti-capitalist curmudgeon, Robin accepts the financial backing of a smooth venture capitalist named Daniel (who resembles a young Mick Jagger) to go into the cheese business on a large scale.

The rest of the story depicts how Robin, once he has become a capitalist, must follow the logic of capital, ruthlessly seeking to raise productivity, even it means squeezing his workers dry; and how the workers begin to rebel against their servile position as wage slaves. Instead of an overly simplistic tale of heroes and villains, the story makes it quite clear that the characters are forced to act in accordance with the nature of the capitalist system. However sympathetic Robin might be as an individual, and however pure his (initial) intentions, he ends up acting as a capitalist must act to remain a capitalist.

The second volume concentrates more on the actual content of Capital, particularly the first few chapters where the labour theory of value and the all-important concept of surplus-value are presented; and Marx and Engels appear to explain those and other points. At the same time, the example of Robin's cheese factory is again referred to as a way to clarify how capitalists go about trying to squeeze out more surplus-value as a means of increasing their own profits and driving competitors out of business. On the first page of this second volume, where the cast of characters is introduced, it is clearly stated that, "Within capitalist society lurks an insatiable monster" - and the reader soon discovers that this monster is the insane pursuit of profit that drives capitalism forward.

One might quibble with certain aspects of the books, including what seems to be an idealization of small-scale producers (like Robin's father), but on the whole both succeed in clarifying the most-important aspects of the capitalist system in a vivid way that even young readers can understand.

Currently the manga is only available in Japanese; but the publication generated a number of newspaper reports in the UK and elsewhere, and there is some possibility that it will eventually be translated into English.

MS
Wednesday, 1 July 2009

Source URL: <http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/2000s/2009/no-1259-july-2009/book-reviews>