Book Review: 'Survival of the Weakest'

Marxist Iconoclast


"Love, Science and Social Change" says the legend under the title. If these are the three points on Smith's triangle then it encompasses a wide area of knowledge. The book is a virtual political and social encyclopaedia of the twentieth century but, if it proves a point, the author is willing to sweep back to the pre-history of capitalism - especially to demonstrate his favourite theme, that Marx was in error in arguing that capitalism was an essential precondition of Socialism.

Smith lets friend and foe speak for themselves and adds his own bit. A names index of some nine double column pages leave out few of the great, and lesser, thinkers of today and yesterday. Thatcher is given a small voice but the academics who lent intellectual muscle to her assault on capitalism's mean handouts are well represented. Their ideas are expanded upon and repudiated, sometimes by events, sometimes by their own later wisdom.

Equally examined and explained is the fallacious reasoning of those Liberal, Maynard Keynes and Lord Beveridge, who formulated what was to become the basic political and economic agenda of the Left, Right and Centre in Britain and - especially in the case of Keynes - throughout the entire world of capitalism in the post-war years. Smith introduces their critics, their champions and then, with an iconoclastic sweep of history, consigns the Left's dream of a compassionate capitalism to the graveyard of failed hopes.

Unlike those pundits who, with the demise of state capitalism in eastern Europe, underwent an illusion of disillusionment, the author, with a pedigree originating in his earlier work, Free is Cheaper, clearly shows the irreconcilable conflict between Marxism and Leninism. Marx's vision of a socialist,
or communist (for Marx used the terms interchangeably), world was essentially democratically
centred, Lenin's elitism was quintessentially authoritarian and the consequence of this, welded to the
economic reality of Russia in 1917, was to give the world a grotesque and brutal form of state
capitalism masquerading as Socialism.

Smith is a socialist who, despite his peripheral disagreement with Marx, consistently emphasises that
while the wages system and its concomitant, commodity production, continue to exist so will all the
inherent problems of capitalism. One of those problems, currently and correctly, preoccupying most
people is the continuing destruction of non-renewable resources and the general threat to the
ecosphere. The contradiction of trying to reverse this process within the context of a world economy
based on the need for relentless growth is well documented.

Survival of the Weakest is a book you will be loath to lend. We see it as a well-thumbed, annotated,
perhaps, dog-eared reference volume much prized by students and by those who want to know more
about the world they live in.

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