

Book Review

Leo Panitch, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber, eds.
The Socialist Register 2014, Registering Class
New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It seems that, despite the disrepute that Marxism has endured since the implosion of the Soviet Union, the old fellow may have gotten a few more things right than is commonly accepted within briefly triumphant neoliberal circles. These circles have pretty much defined the dominant ideological perspective among Western liberal democracies and also in those developing nations, especially on the Pacific Rim, that have displayed remarkable economic growth over the past few decades.

Mainly stuck away in small fissures in the solid rocks of the North American academy and in the geological crannies and nooks of European intellectual formations, Marxist theory and scholarship is fairly safely contained. It barely intrudes into the world of corporate think-tanks, financial media and the policy development stratagems of mainstream political parties. In fact, it seems no longer to be very interesting to agents of the national security state who are apparently more preoccupied with Islamic *jihads*, Ukrainian separatists and opportunities for covert actions and regime changes elsewhere.

That said, initially in the land where “the Moor” spent his most fruitful years in the British Museum, and now at York University in Canada, one of the most durable intellectual journals devoted to leftist perspectives on events continues to offer refreshing analyses and criticisms of late capitalist political economy. I speak, of course, of *The Socialist Register*. (Another is *The Monthly Review* which has been operating since 1949 and which enjoys convivial relations with *The Socialist Register*, an annual publication printed in North America by the Monthly Review Press and in London, England by Merlin.)

The Socialist Register was begun by the exemplary British historians, John Saville and Ralph Miliband (whose son, Ed, currently leads Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition in the United Kingdom). This year marks its Fiftieth Anniversary and the event should be marked with celebration by any serious student (or teacher) of contemporary political thought whether or not the annual periodical’s expressed views are consistent with their own. You don’t have to be a “socialist” to enjoy *The Socialist Register*; all that’s needed is an appreciation of rigorous thinking and intelligent writing on matters of global political importance.

Each year, *The Socialist Register* addresses a main theme. This year, the theme is social class. And this is where Marx’s prescience becomes pertinent. When I said at the outset that Marx got some things right, I was thinking of his view (controversial within

certain circles), that social evolution required that human societies, like biological species, must follow a logical (but not a predetermined) evolutionary path. Just as humanity could not have sprung fully formed from the loins of “Lucy” or any other Australopithecine some millions of years ago, socialism and ultimately communism could not be created out of the semi-feudal wreckage of Asian societies. So, just as *Homo sapiens* needed interim stages of development to become fully modern humans, so also human social development needs to go through stages to fulfill Marx’s admittedly vague premonition of what might happen when (as it must, all things do) capitalism falls victim to its own “internal contradictions.”

Impatient souls such as V. I. Lenin and Mao Zedong were unwilling to wait for history to take its natural course. They were convinced that they could defy the evolutionists’ creed that *Natura non facit saltus* (Nature does not make leaps), which had been part of scientific thinking at least since Aristotle, made explicit by either Newton or Leibniz (or *vice versa*) and made an essential part of Darwin’s particular theory of evolution. Besotted with the idea of a “vanguard of the proletariat,” both the Bolsheviks and the Maoists insisted that they could make a “great leap forward” or maybe two of them and thus catapult pre-capitalist Russia and China into fully-formed communist societies. In my view of Marx’s view, both were daft to try. First, capitalism had to emerge, develop and fall apart more or less on schedule, and only then could (maybe) something resembling Marx’s view of a just society be formed.

Whether or not I am right in my interpretation of Marx, it cannot be denied that Leninism (further corrupted by Stalinism) and Maoism both pretty much bungled the job and merely set the stage for particularly nasty forms of rude and crude capitalism that combined and is continuing to combine the insatiable lust for private property with local cultural norms and nation-specific forms of authoritarian political control.

Half a century ago and more, independent socialists such as Saville and Miliband (as well as a variety of other “new” leftists from the inestimable Edward Thompson to Christopher Hill and their various comrades) saw the need to refashion Marxism to meet the exigencies and contingencies of the twentieth century. That is, after all, what scientists do; they refine their theories in light of new evidence and neither junk the old paradigm without testing out new possibilities, nor stick to obviously untenable orthodoxies in defiance of new facts.

The Socialist Register is in the business of refining and adapting theory and connecting the theoretical to the practical and the political. It has been doing so with energy and excellence since I picked up the original 1964 edition at the urging of a former Liverpool longshoreman who’d won a trade union scholarship and recently graduated from the University of Hill in England, having studied some with John Saville himself. His enthusiasm was a little immoderate, I thought, but upon reading the initial volume and having kept up with every new edition to date, I can’t say that it was misplaced. The journal has maintained a level of intellectual integrity and erudition that is uncommon in any longstanding and much more so in publications that capture immediate

attention, but which are unable to keep up the pace and the quality for a decade, much less half a century.

As an explicitly socialist enterprise, *The Socialist Register* deals with an extraordinary variety of timely topics from the environment to human rights and from domestic to global politics. Of necessity, however, it must regularly revisit the Marxist tradition and engage in creative discussion about the ongoing relevance of Marxian thinking to its preferred political projects. To do so requires considerable effort to connect with the source and the many variations on the themes that derive from the original texts of Marx and Engels.

<p>There's nothing surer The rich get rich And the poor get poorer</p> <p>“Ain't We Got Fun?” American popular song, 1921</p>

It has been to *The Socialist Register's* credit that it has never considered the original works to be akin to the sacred texts of religions. Marx himself was constantly correcting, refining and occasionally jettisoning his ideas and his research interests. It can be expected that anyone working within that tradition would be as methodical, critical and ultimately ruthless in getting rid of theoretical and practical statements that do not square with reality as it can be observed and understood. *The Socialist Register* takes the idea of being an “independent” journal seriously, and is beholden to no orthodoxy and certainly not to any temporarily popular fad. Accordingly, the conversation with Marx and Marxism is built on a dynamic (dare I say “dialectical”) program of respect and scepticism. Marx's insights are to be respected, of course, but the many problems with Marxist analysis must equally be recognized,

Among Marx's problems and, more dramatically, among the problems of his followers are the several points at which his predictions (or, rather, hopes and expectations) seem to have gone awry.

Marx believed that the class struggle was the engine of social change, that the capitalist class would become wealthier and wealthier while the working class became poorer and poorer until, like Yeats' falcon and falconer:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre.
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

Except, of course, that it would not be “mere anarchy” that would be released (we must recall that Marx was no friend to the anarchists), but a progressive revolution headed toward a humanistic society with economic equity, political democracy, individual freedom, unlimited creativity and the “withering away of the state,” a structure of oppression supposedly unnecessary in the new open community of equals and friends.

What happened, of course, is that the working classes, through political agitation and trade unionism improved their situation (or were compromised and co-opted, if you prefer) thus dulling revolutionary fervor, and narcotizing popular culture took over from the anticipated “revolutionary consciousness” and—hey presto!—the “final conflict” that ought to have overturned capitalism and ushered in a workers’ paradise failed to materialize.

What happens when <i>industrial</i> labour in which workers’ productivity can be said to be ... is replaced by <i>service</i> industries in an <i>information</i> society in which most people do not technically produce anything?

What’s worse, instead of socialist revolution, the twentieth century produced fascism and Nazism along with Lenin and Mao’s totalitarian communism. Something had gone horribly and hideously wrong!

In the volume under review, Canadian political scientists Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, with the able assistance of Vivek Chibber, a young sociologist at New York University, take on the crucial question of social class. What does it mean when—perhaps through personal investments in mutual funds or company pension plans—members of the proletariat become (admittedly small-scale) owners of capitalist firms, perhaps including the ones that employ them? What are the consequences when cultural forces from mass entertainment to the temptations of misogyny, homophobia, racism and nationalism deplete any spark of class consciousness? What happens when *industrial* labour in which workers’ productivity can be said to be exploited in traditional terms of alienation is replaced by *service* industries in an *information* society in which most people do not technically produce anything other than chat—the stock-in-trade of lawyers, insurance agents, fast food servers and teachers? And what happens when, instead of what Marx called “the idiocy of rural life” becomes urbanized and encourages a retreat into the idiocy of *private* life, as public discourse, public spaces, public participation in collective decision making are shrunk in a world of useless commodity fetishism, computer screens and the homogenization and trivialization of education and culture? *The Socialist Register 2014* has some answers.

In his conclusion, Leo Panitch repeats Ralph Miliband’s frequently expressed opinion that “the Socialist Register ‘should be hard to write for, as well as hard to read.’” He meant that the articles should command a thoughtful audience willing to wrestle with difficult material and reflect seriously on the issues at hand; at the same time, the articles should be written by authors who were committed to writing “free of the academic

rigmarole associated with academic refereed journals” (and, in my opinion, all the better for it), but nonetheless devoted to “making sure that the style of writing was clear and accessible at a time when the opacity and clumsiness of much intellectual discourse [has] affected the left like a plague.” Producing brilliant essays that could be read and understood by working class intellectuals and their associates in political and academic life is no small task. Editing *The Socialist Register* is therefore assuredly the hardest task. Panitch and Albo have done Saville and Miliband proud. They have brought together perceptive and lucid authors, connected them with important topics and brought the project to a successful conclusion. There is little wonder why *The Socialist Register* appears only annually. The care and precision with which each issue is conceptualized, organized and completed makes the production of most other journals from whatever field and with whatever purpose seem like dashing off a flier for a comic opera in the park.

“The Socialist Register should be hard to write for, as well as hard to read.” - Ralph Miliband
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It is common when reviewing any anthology or collection of essays on a common theme to pick a few of the better contributions, summarize the main points and occasionally select one of the weaker ones for a gentle chiding. With *The Socialist Register 2014*, that method is impossible. Far better to mention that the Table of Contents and abstracts of each chapter were available online July 22, 2014 at <http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/issue/view/1472#.U87bZLFcctV> and let people focus on their favourites before ordering the book itself.

I shall just mention that the subjects covered include national studies (Colin Leys on the British ruling class, Virginia Fontes and Ana Garcia on mass protests in Brazil); assessments of the changing character of the working class (Bryan Palmer on “precariousness as proletarianization” and Arun Gupta on “The Walmart working class”) as well as considerations of slightly more theoretical matters (Ursula Huws on “the underpinnings of class in the digital age” and slightly more practical matters (Ian MacDonald on “unions and the city,” a call to move “beyond the labour of Sisyphus,” to open up trade unions to broader social movements and to see that, too often, the narrow interests of workers are self-defeating because they are “deeply implicated in the very neoliberal urban accumulation strategies and governing regimes that are at the root on the problems.

I said earlier that *The Socialist Register* can be enjoyed on its considerable merits regardless of the political beliefs of the reader (provided, of course, that the reader is at least half-way as independent a thinker as the writers who are represented within). I want now only to explain why anyone interested in innovation and in public sector innovation in particular should be drawn to this work.

Public sector innovation exists within a proscribed political culture that reflects social norms and conventions in general and the ideology and practices of the political

authorities. In order to understand not merely a given political culture but also avenues for constructive social change, that culture must be subjected to analysis from a number of perspectives. The dominant culture in most democratic societies is some version of neoliberalism which can describe and assess public needs only from its own perspective and, to some extent, may be the source of the problems that need to be addressed. Issues such as economic equity are, of course, low-order priorities for neoliberal ideologues, but the continuation and worsening of economic inequality poses a serious survival issue. So does the dialogue on the importance of social class as a dominant social structure and source of social dynamics.

In recommending this volume so highly, I have no interest in persuading anyone of the merits of socialism or socialist analysis. I do, however, think that the socialist perspective is one that needs to be understood if a comprehensive understanding of the realities of (post)modern society is to be achieved. Any broad, non-technical public sector innovation directed at solving any social issues from education to health to city planning, to energy and environmental matters, foreign trade or a host of others can only benefit from exposure to all points of view. Reading *The Socialist Register* is an excellent place to start.

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