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Why Unions Matter, 2nd edition

Victor G. Devinatz
Illinois State University

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Book Reviews

Why Unions Matter, by Michael D. Yates. Second Edition. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009. \$17.95. Pp. 240.

At the end of the 21st century's first decade, the U. S. trade union movement is undoubtedly in crisis. Problems abound, with no easy solutions in sight. Elected in 1995 to lead the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO), the “New Voice” team headed by John Sweeney buoyed the hopes of trade union reformers that it would overhaul the stultifying bureaucracy of the AFL–CIO, which Lane Kirkland, the previous federation president, did little to dismantle or significantly alter during his 16 years in office. Additionally, Sweeney promised to beef up the resources devoted to union organizing in an attempt to reverse labor's downward trajectory, although he was unsuccessful in halting the precipitous decline in union density. Moreover, Sweeney presided over the first major schism in decades within the U. S. trade union movement when a number of large unions disaffiliated from the AFL–CIO and went on to form the Change to Win Federation (CTW) in the fall of 2005. Finally, with the worst economic recession confronting the global economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s, U. S. labor still had trouble gaining traction for its program with the citizenry at large, who had experienced the brutishness and nastiness of eight years of the George W. Bush administration. In spite of these substantial problems, which are all dealt with in this short, concise volume, Michael Yates makes an extremely convincing case, in a clear, well-written and eloquent manner, that unions still *do* matter, perhaps now more than ever, and that they are, in fact, our best hope for achieving an egalitarian society in the United States today.

Beginning with the book's new preface, Yates refreshingly adopts a Marxian class perspective in his analysis of what U. S. unions currently do and what they do not do but should be doing to best serve the interests of their members and the working class as a whole. Yates ardently defends unions, but

is willing to criticize them when he feels that they have fallen short of their historic mission. After a brief introduction, in the first chapter, Yates establishes the fact that union members enjoy significant wage and benefit gains when compared with nonunion workers which, as he points out, "directly contradicts the anti-union propaganda with which we are more familiar" (42). Moreover, besides enabling their members to obtain such economic advantages, unions, by serving as a voice mechanism, also provide workers with a measure of dignity in the workplace.

The next four chapters deal with basic information on unions, in a clear, understandable, and readable style. With regard to union organizing, Yates briefly presents a historical perspective on how unions formed, before covering in some detail the process of organizing a union under the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. Finally, he points out the ingredients that go into successful union organizing campaigns: establishment of an organizing committee, house calling, conducting mass and small group meetings among workers, building in-plant solidarity and creating a bargaining committee before certification elections have been held.

Concerning union structure and function, Yates elaborates on the differences between, as well as the roles and activities of, local and international unions. He concludes this chapter with a discussion of union democracy, using the United Electrical Workers as an excellent example, explaining how crucial it is for the effective functioning of unions. A fairly detailed chapter on collective bargaining provides the nuts and bolts of negotiating and administering the contract from the perspective of union members. While Yates acknowledges the gains that workers have achieved through collective bargaining, he recognizes that collective bargaining in and of itself is not enough to "emancipate working people" (110) from all of capitalism's deficiencies. In the chapter on unions and politics, the author deftly discusses why U. S. labor politics are dramatically different from those in Western Europe, also comparing labor politics in the United States during the 1930s and today. Yates points out the problems with labor's current and historical approach to politics, concluding that the U. S. trade union movement must forge an independent labor politics (*i.e.*, creation of a labor party) if its revitalization is to remain on the agenda in the years to come.

The next two chapters — one on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and the other on immigrant workers — cover the diversity present within the union movement. After historical and current discussions of unions and race, unions and women, the intersection of race and gender, and workers of varying sexual orientation, Yates points out both the problems and achievements of unions in these areas. Nevertheless, Yates concludes, these "artificial barriers" which divide the working class must be put aside because of "the egalitarian potential of the labor movement" (167). Immi-

grant workers are crucial, the author contends, not only for the future of the U. S. labor movement but also for building effective labor internationalism. The final chapter discusses the many contributions that unions have made to the working class as a whole, the internal and external forces that have contributed to labor's decline, and the achievements and limitations of the "New Voice" administration in the AFL–CIO, before concluding that labor's revitalization can only occur if political radicals promote an independent labor politics, democracy within unions, and grassroots organizing that culminates in rank-and-file workers controlling their own unions.

Yates' book is a must-read for anyone who has an interest in unions and their future in the United States. Academics, trade unionists, working people, the lay public and students all will benefit from this excellent volume. The book could easily be used as a supplementary text in either introductory labor relations or labor studies courses at the college level. One can only hope that the second decade of the 21st century will lead to developments in the U. S. trade union movement along the lines projected in *Why Unions Matter*.

VICTOR G. DEVINATZ

Department of Management and Quantitative Methods
 422 College of Business Building
 Illinois State University
 Normal, Illinois 61761
 vgdevin@ilstu.edu

Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists and the Undecided, by Ronald Aronson. Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2009. Paper, \$15.95. Pp. 245.

Ronald Aronson, philosophy professor at Wayne State University (Detroit), describes his most recent book as a "secular guide" for non-believers (19). Taking disbelief as default setting, he dismisses the customary secular impulse to explain or criticize religion. This permits him to focus directly on our real world in which secular minorities coexist amid religious majorities. However much we may disagree on religion, there will always remain areas of potential cooperation that, in the long run, might determine survival or extinction of our species. Aronson thinks criticism has already been laid on too heavily. Characterizing the so-called "New Atheists" (Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens) as belonging "to the time-honored tradition of frontal attack," he specifically separates his own work from that tradition. The real problem for

nonbelievers, he maintains, is not religion itself but the “thinness or emptiness of today’s atheism, agnosticism and secularism” (17–18). Why do these seem empty and irrelevant in the 21st century? Because, Aronson says, they have lost contact with belief in *progress*. The thrust of his book, then, will be to explain in historical terms how this came to be, and what secularists and non-believers can do about it.

For Western culture, the archaic notion of cyclical time was long ago superseded by Creator God narratives — Judaism, Christianity, Islam, *inter al.* — thus imposing on history an upward, linear movement (Pilgrim’s Progress!). In our modern era, however, creator gods have increasingly tended to be marginalized. The Enlightenment simultaneously diminished religion and secularized progress. To construe progress as social improvement rather than heavenly salvation gave to human protagonists — explorers, conquerors, craftsmen, scientists, industrialists, nation-builders — a bigger share of the action. Since they did their business without transcendental interventions, the effect was, on one hand, to push conservative religionists sideways into deism; and on the other, to set radicals delving into classical antiquity (Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius) for a metaphysics of historical materialism.

Both sides at first still took for granted that progress flowed necessarily from natural or divine law. For deists, this simply was what ought to be expected of a benevolent deity. Secularists would rely on cautious reinterpretations of their metaphysic. By mid-19th century, Marxism stood at the cutting edge of secular thought; yet even Marxists (some of them at least) might be tempted to imagine pantheistic superstructures on a material base. A “quasi-religion of Progress,” Aronson tells us, “came to substitute for the comforts once provided by religion” (40). So progress marched hand-in-hand with secularism. Aronson is certainly right to implicate Marxism in the “religion of Progress,” even if he perhaps overstates the degree of involvement.

All this, of course, bottomed out in the 20th century. Two world wars, with the Great Depression sandwiched between, brought progressive belief to its terminal moraine. Secularism fell into decline, while religion boomed back. Aronson’s starting point, he tells us, “is that one-quarter of a millennium after the beginning of the Enlightenment, it is still so very, very hard to be human. Death, loss, suffering, and inhumanity form an essential frame . . .” (19). He titles his opening chapter, “After Progress,” although what the chapter in fact deals with is loss of belief in the *inevitability* of progress. If progress is not inevitable, it must, then — like disaster — be contingent, random, largely unpredictable. So the 20th century, despite its disasters, recorded greater progress (cosmology, for example; and physics, biology, technology, medicine, public health — even social morality) than, probably, the preceding ten centuries. It did indeed contain the holocaust and Hiroshima–Nagasaki; yet also the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights, the American Civil

Rights movement, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, on which Aronson comments from direct observation (201–8).

Episodes of progress that occur contingently and unpredictably can hardly be attributed to divine or natural law. But where does progress come from, then, and what makes it relevant to human needs? Aronson's answer is to replace both natural law and divine intervention with human consciousness. He takes consciousness to be an emergent property of our biologically evolved species. Coming into existence as a *possible* outcome of predetermined sequences, consciousness operates under their jurisdiction, yet is not determined by them. It can generate progressive initiatives, but not assure their outcome. Thus, humans have a hand in making their own history (and culture) although never under conditions of their own choosing. This formulation puts Aronson in sync with Marx and Darwin. At the same time it sets him on a collision course with religion, since religion will be obliged to either reject biological evolution, or attempt to spiritualize it. We can note here a contradiction with his earlier dismissal of religious criticism. Abstaining from criticism may not, after all, be the best route for coexisting with the religious majority. Disclosure might do better than reticence in promoting a politics of human survival, since it will necessarily focus attention on religion's role in the global divide between wealth and immiseration.

In any case, it is the concept of *emergence* that takes us to the heart of the matter. A product of recent evolutionary science, emergence dovetails nicely into the older constructs of historical materialism that provided the foundation for Marxist thought. An emergent consciousness finds elbow room to work autonomously. Taking its chances with contingent disasters and laborious progress, it draws out of biological and cultural evolution a value system that remains distinctly human. "Nothing and no one beyond us is guiding the world," Aronson writes. "No historical logic is making the world better" (192).

That I can merely "suppose" what he had in mind brings forward my chief problem with this book, which is that the author's stance toward his obvious source of inspiration — Marxism — remains ambiguous. Aronson grew up in a working-class, marginally middle-class, Jewish community about which he writes with eloquence. The philosophers he principally relies on (aside from Marx himself), were deeply influenced by Marx: Camus, Sartre, Herbert Marcuse, his doctoral mentor. Finally, and I think decisively, the ideological structure of his entire project — positing an egalitarian, non-exploitative social order as precondition for human survival (200) — remains fully, if perhaps not uniquely, in tune with Marxism. If the Marxist critique of capitalism remains relevant to human survival, it seems foolish to say that "Marxism is over" (192). How can Aronson not be aware of this? Earlier, paraphrasing Sartre, he wrote: "To choose not to know is to engage in bad

faith" (144). Yet in his closing chapter (titled "Hope") we find him consigning Marx to the dustbin of history along with religion, Stalinism, and naive faith in the inevitability of Progress. This is choosing not to know. Evolutionary science, together with a critical analysis of capitalism, point to our best hopes for the future. To cut Marxism out of this undertaking diminishes an otherwise powerful and valuable book.

ALEXANDER SAXTON

P.O. Box 827
Lone Pine CA 93545
alexaxton@schat.net

The Dialectics of Globalization: Economic and Political Conflict in a Transnational World, by Jerry Harris. 2nd edition. Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. Paper, \$14.99. Pp. 285.

"Nation-state-centered" thinking has formed an important part of the bedrock of everyday social consciousness for at least the past several hundred years. Dozens of nation-states have obviously come and gone during this time, so it's not that people can't accept the occasional redrawing of the political map; but they insist that any such maps consist of nation-states and that every person be a citizen of one. And for U. S. citizens, in particular, it seems critically important that any future map of the world contain a United States with more or less its current boundaries and no less than its current, however imperiled, hegemonic status. Thus, anyone who sets out to change this way of thinking — to get people to abandon their habitual "nation-state-centered" consciousness for an approach that does not treat the nation-state as a sacred ahistorical object — faces a great challenge. But this is exactly the central challenge that Jerry Harris takes up in *The Dialectics of Globalization*. We should all be grateful he has done so and admiring of his efforts.

Harris boldly asserts that "capitalism gave birth to the nation-state; its economic form is historically bound to its political structure, and the social relations it created" (2). To the reader steeped in the habits of nation-state-centered thinking, this is shocking news. Not only do nation-states have histories in which they can arise and fall, but there are forces in the world that might be more powerful than nation-states — forces that might "give birth" to them. For Harris, economics is that force, and so thought to be important in explaining the rise and fall of nation-states, or even a world of nation-states. This perspective makes Harris a historical materialist. His

approach to understanding globalization, and globalization's impact on the nation-state, make him a particular kind of historical materialist. Adopting his approach — shared with a number of other thinkers associated with what has come to be called the “The Global Capitalism School”; see also work by Leslie Sklair, William I. Robinson, Kees Van Der Pijl, and Carl Davidson — means leaving nation-state-centered thinking behind.

The core idea of the “Global Capitalism School” is that capitalist class relations, heretofore operating more or less within the “container” of distinct nation-states, or societies, are transnationalizing, if not yet completely globalized. This transformative process is at the core of what most people refer to as “globalization,” and according to Harris and others who subscribe to this perspective, this transformation of capitalism “operates in a manner that undermines the industrial-era nation-state” (2). In other words, capitalists created the industrial-era nation-state to serve their interests in profit accumulation and class dominance, but what was once useful is no longer and must be discarded, or at least transformed into a global governance system (a transnational state) that will advance the political economic interests of the capitalist class in a post-industrial world.

While Harris makes a clean break with nation-state-centered ways of thinking, and even to a great extent with Marxist approaches to imperialism, in other respects Harris, along with Global Capitalism scholars more generally, offers a fairly straightforward (some might say simplistic) Marxism. This commitment to traditional Marxist analysis is represented, for example, in what Harris maintains has *not* changed about capitalism: the drive for profit, for capital accumulation. Indeed Harris argues (Chapter 1) that it was shrinking opportunities for profit-making within the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s that prompted American capitalists — including U. S. Steel in South Chicago, where Harris apprenticed as a machinist — to begin to deploy computers, microelectronics, and various other technologies in an effort to cut costs and undermine gains made by the American working class in the 20 years after World War II. This process was one in which “a highly-skilled programmer turned highly-skilled factory workers into unskilled labor” (12). There is, of course, nothing much new about the use of technology to deskill, disempower, or replace labor in the pursuit of profit. And, as both adherents and critics of the Global Capitalism School have pointed out, Marx and Engels pointed toward the globalized world we are now living in when they wrote: “The need of a constantly expanded market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” But, Harris would argue, while the founders were correct, they were well ahead of their time on this score. Prior to the 1970s, to the extent that capitalists did much “chasing” around the world they did so largely

under the flags of different nation–states, and so did not involve themselves in transnational circuits of production and accumulation to any great extent. Consequently, until fairly recently all capitalist classes were national capitalist classes and there was little if anything in the way of a transnational capitalist class. But global capitalism has now caught up with Marx’s theorizing about it, and the task before those working within the Global Capitalism paradigm, Jerry Harris prominent among them, is to theorize and analyze the specifics and work through the implications of this epochal change.

In *The Dialectics of Globalization* Harris brings together his thinking on the emergence of global capitalism; the role technology has played in its emergence; the rise of the Transnational Capitalist Class that is organizing global capitalism and hopes to profit from it; conflicts between capitalist class fractions over how globalization is to be pursued and managed in the face of resistance; case studies of the rise of the TCC in the United States and Germany; and the prospects for resistance to capitalist hegemony (is another world possible?). While the book itself — written over a number of years, and with only three of eleven chapters not previously published in some form (in this journal and elsewhere) — lacks the overall coherence or tidiness of a treatise, there is no doubt that this book is the product of coherent thinking about understanding and challenging global capitalism. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Harris on specifics, these issues must be discussed, and by Marxists in particular. I expect to be returning to this book many times in the coming years, and look forward to reading whatever Harris writes in the future.

CLIFFORD L. STAPLES

Department of Sociology
Gillette Hall, Room 203
225 Centennial Drive, Stop 7136
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND 58201–7136
clifford.staples@und.nodak.edu

Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville, by Michelle R. Boyd.
 Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. \$18.95.
 Pp. 211.

Michelle R. Boyd’s *Jim Crow Nostalgia* opens with what is, on the surface, a rather strange scene: a Black tour guide extolling the virtues of life on the South Side of Chicago in the era of legal segregation. Drawing a picture of

a united, self-sufficient Black community, the tour guide contrasts the era of Bronzeville with the de-developed South Side of today. Boyd argues that this contrast, between the organic community of the racial past and the fractured post-integration community, has come to play an important role in the way Blackness is imagined today, and specifically in the ways it is mobilized in the discourse of community redevelopment.

Boyd makes her argument in two parts. First, in a history of Black politics in Chicago from the Great Migration to the 1980s, Boyd argues that Black elites in “Bronzeville” primarily responded to segregation in ways that “reproduced, rather than challenged, racial subordination” (17). Second, Boyd argues that middle-class African Americans in present-day Chicago, in their attempt to attract redevelopment money, romanticize the experience of life under segregation. This romanticization functions as a marketing technique to convince investors of the area’s cultural heritage. More importantly, the portrayal of Bronzeville as a golden age of Black community life marginalizes the experience of working-class African Americans, allowing the experience of the Black middle class to stand in as that of “the race.”

Part of the value of Boyd’s study lies in the way it combines two paradigms currently enjoying very different statuses in historiographical discussion: accommodation and memory. Put simply, it is not fashionable these days to write of Black history in terms like accommodation. Indeed, one could trace the decline of accommodation as a framework by examining the historiographical fate of its most famous representative, Booker T. Washington. Once a name linked to gradualist strategies of Black uplift, now Washington is the paradigmatic trickster in the age of Jim Crow, professing subservience to white supremacy while chiseling away at its rule behind the scenes. In today’s histories, accommodation often appears merely as a mask for subversion.

Memory, on the other hand, is currently a staple of historical analysis. In its ability to address both history as it happened and the meaning that people make with it, memory has allowed historians to adopt some of the most productive methodologies of disciplines like cultural studies. By focusing on the status of history in the public sphere, memory also allows historians to examine the interactions between their own labors and the popular understanding of the past.

Boyd deftly combines these two frameworks, examining the history of accommodation by Black elites in the past and the role the memory of that past plays in the discourse of contemporary middle-class activists. As stated earlier, Boyd is concerned with highlighting the effects that the maneuvers of Black elites had on the majority of the Black population. While promoting a discourse of “self-help,” Black leaders in Bronzeville often established positions for themselves as the conduits of white philanthropy and social services into the Black community. As Boyd points out, this had the effect of

“encourag[ing] black social and political leaders to prioritize the concerns of whites over those of their black constituents” (18). The reception of this sort of patronage politics varied historically. During the Depression, insurgent political strategies that directly confronted white racism, such as those promoted by the Communist Party, found mass support among Chicago’s Black working class. Traditionally conservative organizations such as the Urban League, however, easily adapted themselves to tactics such as pickets and boycotts while retaining an accommodationist core. The rise of the Black submachine in Chicago Democratic politics similarly marginalized the radical challenge to accommodation, resulting in the triumph of the traditional Black elites.

Boyd’s history of this period in Chicago history is trenchant and persuasive. It would be strengthened, however, by a more direct engagement with those historians and theorists who champion the efficacy of those everyday forms of resistance (often emphasizing the subversive power of cultural forms such as language and dress) that Robin Kelley has described as “the infrapolitical.” While Boyd’s history is convincing in its own right, for accommodation to regain respectability as a valuable framework a more direct confrontation is necessary.

The history of the politics of accommodation forms the foundation for the ethnographic analysis Boyd develops in the second half of the book. Her account is focused around the Mid-South Planning and Development Commission, a community organization that grew out of the controversies regarding gentrification and revitalization in the late 1980s. As a member of Mid-South for two years in the late 1990s, Boyd traces the discourse around race and redevelopment, as well as the way activists drew on the past to legitimate their positions. Mid-South members, she found, made appeals to racial legitimacy in two ways: through personal history and the history of the community. When attempting to frame issues regarding the revitalization of their neighborhoods, activists often drew on their personal racial experiences to authenticate their legitimacy as shapers of the community’s future. As one architect told his audience, “I may be a Negro with a tie, but I also had to eat chitlins” (123). Similarly, activists supporting redevelopment sought to allay the concerns of low-income residents worried about gentrification with appeals to the history of the community. By portraying the period of “Bronzeville” as a golden era for the race as a whole, these activists marginalized the experience of working-class Blacks historically. This rhetorical appeal also worked to construct redevelopment as a matter of duty to one’s racial heritage. In this way, these activists also hoped to marginalize the objections of present day working-class Blacks.

Boyd concludes with a reflection on the place of nostalgia for the Jim Crow era in today’s racial politics at large. Noting the number of books pub-

lished on the anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education* that questioned the achievements of the civil rights movement, she argues that the memory of segregation constructed in such arguments reflects Black discontent over the inability of the movement to address the structural racism that continued after the fall of Jim Crow. Drawing on arguments advanced by Adolph Reed (who, not coincidentally, was Boyd's advisor), Boyd argues that nostalgia for the accommodationist politics that defined segregation represents, at least in part, a "growing sense among some African Americans that the best way to address [this inability] is through the establishment of greater social control by the black middle class" (158).

Boyd's willingness to take a provocative political stand regarding both the past and the present is only one among many virtues of *Jim Crow Nostalgia*. Combined with her willingness to use a diverse array of conceptual tools and her sensitive use of ethnographic evidence, it marks her book as a welcome addition to the scholarly discussion on race and memory.

PAUL R. HEIDEMAN

Program in American Studies
Rutgers University—Newark
175 University Avenue
Newark, NJ 07102
heidpau@pegasus.rutgers.edu

Class and Class Conflict in the Age of Globalization, by Berch Berberoglu. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009. \$65.00; paper, \$27.95. Pp. xxiii, 161.

With this book, the author follows a Marxist approach to explore a crucially important issue, elucidating class structure and conflict as it has historically evolved, on a national and international level, and as currently determined in the age of capitalist globalization. This exploration is appropriately placed within the political economy and sociology of world capitalism, and is closely associated with current debates concerning the globalization of capital, the changing role of the state, and the unfolding of social movements on a national and transnational level.

Chapter 1 provides a useful survey of conventional theories of class and class conflict; chapter 2 highlights the Marxist theory of class and class struggle; chapter 3 focuses on class and class conflict in the advanced capitalist countries; chapter 4 examines more specifically class relations and conflicts in the Third World; chapter 5 looks at the relationship between class and

class conflict within the global capitalist context; chapter 6 examines the links between class, nation and nationalism on a global scale; chapter 7 addresses the impact of religion and fundamentalist religious movements on class and class conflict by focusing on the relevant phenomena in the case of the Iranian revolution; chapter 8 focuses on the relationship of race and gender to class relations and conflict; and chapter 9 explores how class relations and struggles may lead to social change and/or revolution in the age of globalization. The author also uses several figures to visually elucidate the conceptual distinctions and causal or mutual determinations among various class categories and related phenomena.

The book is highly informative and includes a great deal of valid and valuable knowledge, making it worth reading. Considering class and class struggle in general as the prime mover determining both the distribution of power and the potential for social change, the author specifically points out that “class identity and class consciousness emerge from the broader class relations that working people experience in capitalist society that ultimately propel them to become the agents of change” (xv). The author argues that

monopoly rule over the global economy facilitated by the advanced capitalist state, set the stage for the globalization of capital and capitalist relations across the world and led to the consolidation of capital’s grip over the world economy. This provided the political framework for the direct role of the advanced capitalist state in safeguarding the interests of capital and the capitalist class around the world — a role facilitated by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization — global institutions designed to advance the worldwide operations of the transnational corporations as the instruments of global capitalism. (73.)

The conclusion emerging from this perspective sees the evolution of society as always

the result of class conflict and class struggle that has served as the motive force of societal development through time. It is through a succession of civil (i.e. class) wars and revolutions against prevailing modes of class domination and class rule that societies have developed and become transformed over the course of the past several thousand years. . . . in the age of capitalist globalization, social classes and class struggles are a product of the logic of the global capitalist system based on the exploitation of labor worldwide. (129, 131.)

With regard to racial and gender relations and oppression: “racial and gender divisions have come to serve more than the greater profit needs of capital through pay differentials; they have provided capital with the weapon of ‘divide and rule’ to maintain its power over society” (126).

However, following this rather traditional and Third World type of Marxism, heavily influenced by dependency theory, the author appears reluctant

to recognize, first, the transnationalization of capital, and, second, the emerging, even if contradictory, articulation of the political and regulative authority of capital on a transnational level. The transnationalization of capital is simply considered as a transnational expansion (flow) of imperialist (essentially national) capital, and the transnational (or global) state as simply the imperial state of U. S. hyper-imperialism, assisted by international organizations (the World Bank, IMF, WTO, etc.). This becomes evident in the author's over-emphasis on inter-imperialist rivalry (73, 80), the deindustrialization of the advanced countries, international relations among distinct national social classes, and national liberation struggles. In this respect, the book might have benefitted by considering the work of authors such as William Robinson, the Amsterdam Project in international political economy, and the relevant discussions in the special issue of this journal regarding the deep structure of contemporary capitalism (*Science & Society*, July 2005). The author's reluctance to recognize the essentially transnational development of capital and social classes results in failure to provide an adequate theoretical basis for the development of common action and a truly transnational class struggle.

Although the author traces the historical and class roots of the state, he in turn partly reifies the existing bourgeois states, adopts a highly instrumental theory of the state, and stresses as a primary revolutionary task the struggle to take over state power (28, 70, 133), rather than abolishing state power and creating the conditions for the withering away of the state. Thus, apart from the lack of clarity regarding the "imperial state" and "global state," there is an insufficiently nuanced conception of the "workers' state" (29, 37, 70), failing to take into account the relevant experience and misadventures of the working-class movement in the course of the 20th century.

It is to be hoped that the author's next book will provide more original and adequate knowledge in this crucial area concerning the transnationalization of capital and the bourgeois state.

GEORGE LIODAKIS

*Department of Sciences
Technical University of Crete
73 100 Chania, Greece
liod@science.tuc.gr*

The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism, by Kevin Floyd. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. \$75.00; paper, \$25.00. Pp. 304.

Early reviews of Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire* have leveled a certain amount of criticism at the study's dense, academic tone, making the usual disparaging remarks about the book's previous existence as a dissertation and about the contradictions inherent to preaching Marxism from the heights of the ivory tower (see, for example, Owen Williamson's review at politicalaffairs.net). These attacks are, in my opinion, misdirected. Floyd's rigorously historical perspective should be enough to preempt these critiques. The book grounds its admittedly abstract, theoretical central claim that capital's reifying tendency has itself been instrumental in the formation of a homosexual subject position by isolating and expounding upon specific instantiations of this dynamic. To take but one brief example, Floyd includes a series of provocative images from the *Physique Pictorial* magazine of the 1950s and 1960s which, as an "underground network linking producers and consumers of images" had the seemingly paradoxical effect of fostering a "covert sense of collectivity that was one of gay liberation's conditions of possibility" (160).

Readers familiar with Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, a text which, in the 1920s, established the importance of the notion of reification within Marxist theory, should quickly recognize the originality of Floyd's central claim. For Lukács, reification signified the mystifying dispersal and segregation of the social under the dominance of capital. The possibility Floyd identifies in his introduction, that "a queer aspiration to totality emerges from within the process of reification" must appear foreign to any adherent of Lukács' theorization of reification for at least two reasons: Lukács' general deprivileging of the sexual, and his conviction that capital's increasing reification of the social renders any such attempt at totality thinking next to impossible. In Floyd's study we find intriguing statements that disrupt Lukács' understanding of reification, statements advocating the idea that the "reification of sexual desire is a condition of possibility for the development of queer forms of critical knowledge" (25).

Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* seems to be one of the only recognizable precedents to this general rethinking of the concept of reification (see also Timothy Bewes' *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, published by Verso in 2002). In Marcuse's study, capital's deepening reification of the social is reconceptualized as setting the stage for a distinctly liberatory moment, when "in suffering the most extreme reification man

triumphs over reification” (quoted in Floyd, 120). However, in the face of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, which effectively actualized Marcuse’s theorization of reification as liberation, Marcuse backed down. Indeed, Floyd observes that “notwithstanding differences in tone between *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, neither of these texts espouses any belief in these mere real-life homosexual subjects who inhabit a ‘mechanized environment’” (144). As such, Floyd’s focus on the historically specific instantiations of reified queer sociality represents an attempt to move away from the realm of the strictly theoretical in order to reach the messy “real-world” manifestations of critical theory’s objectives and debates.

While the book’s rigorously historical focus precipitates detailed discussions of accumulation theory, the history of psychoanalysis, and the regulatory strategies of Fordism and neoliberalism, it also allows room for worthy sections of detailed textual analysis. Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy*, and David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives* are each dealt with perceptively and succinctly in terms of the broader cultural contexts in which they were produced and received. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the chapter-length study “Closing a Heterosexual Frontier: *Midnight Cowboy* as National Allegory,” an earlier version of which first appeared in this journal in 2001. This chapter explicitly participates in Frederic Jameson’s “practice of allegorical analysis,” an analysis Floyd describes as “an interpretive movement outward that articulates relays between distinct levels of a text, levels that ultimately refer to a series of increasingly broad and increasingly mediated social and historical horizons” (154). From this critical vantagepoint, the image of the cowboy in Schlesinger’s film becomes the central focus of what Floyd understands to be a devaluation of American masculinity in the age of the Vietnam War, a devaluation which operates by way of *homosexualizing* the image of the cowboy. The film’s homosexualization of the cowboy does not ultimately hold, however, as its central character eventually abandons his cowboy outfit, “clearly reiterat[ing] the normalization of heterosexuality by trashing the outfit along with the stigmatized desire it has begun to signify” (175–176).

This manner of textual investigation, combined with Floyd’s meticulous attention to broader cultural/historical tendencies, grounds his central thesis about capital’s opening of new subject positions through reification. I hope that I have been able to convey something of the breadth of analysis to be found in *The Reification of Desire*. It also contains detailed examinations of the theoretical work of Foucault and Butler which I have been unable to mention in a review of this length. Yet, the tome’s clearly ambitious theoretical focus

does not seriously hinder its attempt to remain at the level of “real-world” phenomena — preempting the critiques of those who would disparage its scholarly density.

DAVID EMBREE

European Graduate School
611 W. Spruce Avenue
Ravenna, OH 44266
dembree@kent.edu

Apologia for the USSR: A Post-Mortem of an Utopian State, by Anna Makolkin.
Toronto, Canada: Anik Press, 2008. Paper, \$10.00. Pp. 161.

This is an unusual little book. The author, trained in Comparative Literature (University of Toronto), was born in the Soviet Union and spent her first 29 years in that country, emigrating to the United States and Canada in the early 1970s. She is the author of six previous books, on literary and historical topics ranging from “semiotics of nationalism” through Chekhov and Maugham to Italian culture in Odessa.

To get to the essence of *Apologia*, the reader will have to dig through a copyeditorial nightmare; the English language usage and typography are amateurish, at best. The argument has an unsystematic, stream-of-consciousness quality, and is highly personal, emotional and anecdotal. Sources are used in an illustrative rather than an exhaustive manner, and there is no attempt to address the massive literatures from the historical, economic, political science and sociological academies that run counter to the thrust of her argument. The reader will not find here the tools needed to bring down the anti-Soviet intellectual establishment.

Still, the book is worth reading. It is inseparable from the life experience of the author — a work that “could have been written by no one else,” so to speak — even though that life experience is not recounted explicitly in its pages. Its cumulative impact should have a place in public debate, partly because Makolkin is clearly not a Marxist; she accepts without critical processing much of the terminology and conceptualization found in the western mainstream literature, using terms like “Soviet Empire” “Iron Curtain,” and “utopian” to describe the USSR, and this lends authenticity to her account.

Apologia has a Preface, a set of (somewhat inconclusive) Conclusions, and nine chapters in between on topics such as education, medical care, the family, Soviet “spirituality,” the Cold War, and the “national questions.”

A few direct quotations will give the flavor of its account, which is hard to summarize otherwise:

For the first time in the history of mankind, a state managed to produce a new *altruistic social class*, the mass of people. . . . This new Soviet class did have something in common with the monastic Christian orders in terms of its complete immersion into the pleasures of the mind and worshipping Reason. (37, boldface emphasis rendered as italics.)

The Soviet allegedly “dictatorial” state hand [*sic*] numerous venues for expressing opinions, constructive criticism and one’s outrage via trade union meetings, professional and public press, complains [*sic*] to the party committees and via ordinary regular meetings in the work place. The Soviet state, governed centrally from above, still had an enormous space at the local level for the mass input, the critique, innovation and betterment. (72.)

The abstract non-representational art could offer neither aesthetic pleasure, nor moral and social guidance to the Soviet romantics. Th [*sic*] indulgence in idle symbols, strange shapes and non-melodic sounds, had been simply dismissed en masse. It was neither the slogan of the Communist Party, nor the Decree of the Supreme Soviet, but the common collective sense of a suffering nation, in the thick of the historic shift, that pleaded to return to the reality-referential and meaningful art. (82.)

Makolkin has little awareness of political economy, or of socialism in the systemic sense. She exaggerates the degree of leveling and shared poverty in the Soviet Union, and her spirituality-based account has little room for whatever material progress did occur. The “dismantling” of the USSR was the result of scheming by the United States and other western powers, a dream promulgated in 1921 but only realized in 1989–91. Stalin’s decision to elevate national identity to official status, in the formulation of the national identity cards, was a crucial error: it led to the separatism and national exclusiveness used by the west to destroy the USSR at a later time. The campaign to encourage emigration from the Soviet Union, initially directed mainly at Soviet Jews, was orchestrated from outside, was based on a well-managed myth about the glories of life in the west, and led to “millions” of people leaving the country. “The millions of the Soviets, who had been living in the state of a comfortable equal poverty, were seduced by the fairytales about the mass wealth” (124). Gorbachev and perestroika were merely steps along this path of dismantling.

Makolkin has no notion of developing contradictions within socialism, nor of the profound impact of the repression and executions during the Stalin era; the ending of the USSR had external causes only. She sees the capitalist west as “evil,” but downplays its own internal contradictions, and this leads to an interesting view of the impact of the Soviet demise:

The West or the USA canary [?] have lost much more — the Iron Curtain had actually protected them against the global instability, potential terrorism and from the exposure to the backward volatile globe. . . . After the USSR fiasco, more and more people and nations on all continents turn away from the capitalist formation and free market setup. (151.)

Makolkin's Soviet Union partakes very heavily of Russian spirituality, renunciation, and cultural traditions, a position that rests uneasily with her (obviously sincere) portrayal of the gains of non-Russian peoples in the Soviet period. It is perhaps not surprising that she has a kind word or two for Vladimir Putin:

Despite the horrific economic destruction and erosion of the moral fabric of the former Soviet State, the expectations of its destroyers have not been completely fulfilled. Putin, and the "putinism" phenomenon have resuscitated the ruined economy, restored the national dignity, helping the people to recover from the shock of the split. Now, the new country, released from the burden of supporting the old satellites and dependant [*sic*] republics, is emerging and acquiring new strength and political acumen. (151.)

Makolkin should compare the current state of Russia, reduced to third-world levels of life expectancy and health indicators, with the "comfortable" poverty of the Soviet Union, which she so eloquently describes elsewhere in the book.

Despite its lapses into idealism and naive conspiratorial positions, *Apoloogia* is a noteworthy contribution to the analysis and reconsideration of the Soviet experience. The often insightful linking of cultural and philosophical dimensions to the recounting of an important history, alone makes the book worth reading. Marxists will of course want to apply their critical searchlights, and so they should. We should also remember, however, that the "simple" factual account of an entire working people — provided, for a time, with material and cultural advancement in conditions of general equality, stability, social participation and hope — is still entirely unknown to the vast majority in capitalist countries. For this reason alone, a clearly non-political (and quirky) account, laden with un-typical insights ultimately based on personal experience, is a useful contribution.

DAVID LAIBMAN

Science & Society
451 West Street
New York, NY 10014
dlaiman@scienceandsociety.com

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