Against capitalism

The crucial obstacle, they conclude, was the fact that the ideas of most participants in the events, students as well as workers, remained within the confines of capitalist reality. In particular, they aspired at most to turn the factory into the collective property of its current workforce rather than into social property.

Part One also includes an account of the student protests that broke out in Yugoslavia in 1968 and the reaction of the Yugoslav authorities to them. Perlman explores the chasm that existed between the ideological façade of ‘self-managing socialism’ and the real functioning of the power structure.

Part Two consists of two excellent essays that in a clear and vivid way explain key concepts in the Marxian critique of capitalism, with special emphasis on capital, alienation and the ‘commodity fetishism’ that makes relations between people appear as relations between things. The second essay, originally published in 1971 as an introduction to the English translation of I. Rubin’s Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value, contrasts Marx with Paul Samuelson, author of the standard economics textbook used in American colleges. Perlman shows that Marx and Samuelson do not give different answers to the same questions; they are concerned with quite different questions. This is because Marx belongs to the old school of ‘political economy’, which studied conflicting class interests, while Samuelson represents the new discipline of ‘economics’ that displaced political economy early in the 20th century. ‘Economics’ focuses on technical issues of resource allocation and is therefore better suited to the justification of capitalism.

In Part Three we find excerpts from a text entitled ‘The Struggle of State Power’. This text, which marshals quotations from Lenin, Mao and Machiavelli, purports to be a guide for would-be ‘revolutionary leaders’ intent upon seizing power. It is really a satire designed to highlight the contrast between the seizure of power by an elite and a genuine popular revolution. Some critics did not realise that it was a satire and took it at face value.

The essay in Part Four exposes the class interests behind movements for ‘national liberation’ and shows that national liberation cannot play a progressive role in the contemporary world. Perlman’s views on this subject fully coincide with those of the World Socialist Movement.

In the last few years of his life Perlman went beyond the Marxian critique of capitalism to assail modern concepts of ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’. Some have accused him of rejecting technology as such – see, for instance, the review of his book Against His-story. Against Leviathan (1983) in Aufheben (https://libcom.org/library/review-history-aufheben-4). The short article on ‘progress and nuclear power’ that makes up Part Five does not suffice to assess his views at this period.

On the whole, the new Perlman anthology is a very welcome addition to socialist literature.

STEFAN

For socialism

Socialism and Commodity Production, By Paresh Chatterdahdhy, Brill, 2018

Commodities are items of wealth that have been produced for sale. Commodities have been produced in pre-capitalist societies but such production was marginal. It is only in capitalism that it becomes the dominant mode of production, where goods and services are produced for sale with a view to profit. Commodities must be capable of being reproduced, and this includes the uniquely capitalist commodity of human labour power, the capacity to work which is sold for a wage or salary.

Because of the incidental nature of ‘simple commodity’ production in pre-capitalist societies, argued Marx, it would be a mistake to claim that there had been a ‘simple commodity’ production society. It is capitalist society which has generalised commodity production. Under capitalism the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour time needed for its production and reproduction. The value of a commodity is equal to Marx’s law of value, generalised commodity production results in money as the ‘general equivalent’ in buying and selling.

In Marx’s writings the abolition of capitalism is the abolition of commodity production, and with it the money-wages-buying and reproducing power that makes up Part Five does not suffice to assess his views at this period.

On the whole, the new Perlman anthology is a very welcome addition to socialist literature.

PARESH CHATTOPADHYAY does a good job of showing why and how the establishment of socialism means the abolition of commodity production.

Socialism and commodity production are two sides of the same coin, and both the abolition of commodity production and the establishment of socialism are essentially the same. It is only to be hoped that a cheaper and more readily accessible version will soon become available.

LEW

Curate’s egg


Cleaver has a novel view of capitalism: that capitalists are not so much interested in profits as in imposing work on people as a means of social control. So, for him, the class struggle is between those who want to impose work (the capitalists) and those who resist work (housewives, students and schoolkids as well as wage and salary workers). It’s a point of view but not that of Marx.

For someone who has taught and written on how to ‘read’ Marx, he makes a whole range of classic errors (workers not being able to buy back all they produce as the cause of crises, taxation as a burden on the working class, secondary exploitation of workers by banks). On one point he is open about ‘revising Marx’ (his words). Marx’s theory of interest was that it is a share of surplus value created in the value-producing sector of the economy and which the capitalists have to go to banks for performing a function that they would otherwise have to tie up some of their capital in doing. Cleaver’s view is that interest is a payment for a service and that it is derived from the surplus value produced by bank workers.

Despite this, Cleaver recognises ‘that getting rid of money and markets entirely is not only a necessary condition for getting rid of capitalism but also desirable in its own right’ (page 238) and devotes six pages to arguing well the case for this. But then it’s downhill again as in the following sixty pages he describes various ways of progressively marginalising the use of money under capitalism which he thinks wage and salary workers (and housewives and students) should struggle for.

Besides free or subsidised services, price and rent controls, lower taxes on better wages, and limits on interest on consumer credit, paradoxically he also includes higher wages and overtime pay on the grounds that the more money people have, either the less time they need to work or the more they can spend on campaigning for the reforms he lists.

Despite having been a professor of economics he appears not to understand the effect of free or subsidised goods and services on wage levels; that if workers don’t have to pay the full price of something then they don’t need to be paid so much by their employer to recreate their labour power and so their money-wage will tend to fall (even if their standard of living won’t). Maybe he is assuming that workers could successfully resist this. That would be in line with the basic mistake of the ‘autonomist Marxists’ of imagining that workers have more power as purveyors of labour power than they actually have.

ALB

Beyond the Suffrage

Sylvia Pankhurst on Socialism. Socialist Party, £1.50. (£2.50 incl p&p inland UK).

(review continues on page 22)