

An Essential Anti-Capitalist Primer

February 10, 2013

IT'S UNSURPRISING why Trotskyists were annoyed by this book. In one section it depicts a bearded and bespectacled leftist intellectual, in an impeccable illustration, lecturing protesters who are engaged in a confrontation with police that: "I've come to show you how to fight capitalism." Under his arm, is a book with "Trotsky" emblazoned across the front. In another section, it quotes an appealing looking Trotsky as saying: "The Soviets will be able to continue to function: Anyway, real power is already in the hands of the party. Workers' control over production should cease because of its inefficiency. In its place, we the state will name company directors." Of course, most open minded Trotskyists who are capable of being critical of their own tradition rightly reject this particularly unsavory attitude in favor of workers' democracy being central. And while Trotsky's ideas and legacy can't be reducible to a decontextualized quote, the illustrations and text certainly gives vent to the all too common behavior of posturing leftist militants. However, the sheer quality of this little book far supersedes the generalizations it must inevitably offer. To ignore it would be to miss perhaps the best book to convey shortly and succinctly anti-capitalist ideas in such an easily readable and understandable way.

Ezequiel Adamovsky is an Argentine political activist and historian, who has written numerous books, articles and essays, and much of his work can be accessed online in English at *Z Net*. His book *Anti-Capitalism* has recently been translated into English. It is illustrated by *Ilustradores Unidos*, a group of artists who are very much the co-authors in elaborating the ideas discussed, and who add a unique aesthetic flair. As the book describes, they "are visual artists who participate in the *Taller Popular de Serigrafia*, a group that formed during the intense upsurge of political and social movements during the popular rebellion of December 2001. They formed with the objective of "stamping images of support, artistic, and political accompaniment to all kinds of protests." As veterans of the December 2001 revolt in Argentina, this biography gives a sense of authenticity to their illustrations. It also encapsulates the ethos of this book, in that the artists and the author do not represent a political party or line, but are simply committed to supporting progressive struggles.

The book is divided into five sections, beginning with an analysis and disassembling of all the political, economic, social, moral, and intellectual justifications for capitalism. It describes capitalism as an oppressive, classist, imperialist, and globalized system which reproduces itself and its own ideology under the hegemony of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie. So far, so good. Karl Marx explains economic coercion, Mikhail Bakunin tells us that the state "is a fundamental instrument of oppression," and Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and John Holloway, among others, pop up to give their opinions on a variety of issues. One particularly perceptive page, under the heading "a global and expansive system" elucidates: "Even though capitalism arose in Europe only five centuries ago, it quickly spread throughout the entire globe; its expansive logic seems to have no limit." The illustration below then aptly summarizes these five centuries in the drawn black and white palette that is utilized throughout the book. It starts on a medieval sailing ship, with two figures in medieval frocks standing on the bow. One says: "We're going to America to conquer new lands and bring back riches." The other figure replies "and to conquer souls." A few centuries later, the sailor on a steamship explains that: "We are bringing progress and civilization to Asia," while a capitalist in a top hat replies: "and to trade with the natives." And in the modern era, a USAF bomber says: "we are on a humanitarian mission in Eastern Europe," while a fat cat capitalist with a cigar drawls: "and we're going to do great business." The relationship between capitalism and the exercise of state power could not be made clearer. Indeed, as Adamovsky writes later in the book: "the State adopts the form of the capitalist society that it belongs to." Far from promoting democracy, capitalism

undermines it. Adamovsky cites the example of the 1973 coup against democratically elected, socialist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, as a historical example of how whenever elected representatives threaten the power of the dominant class, they are removed by force. In that case, it was organized by the U.S. government and local capitalists. From this, Adamovsky draws the conclusion that: "We can't say that we live in a true democracy; really, we live in a dictatorship of capital in which we can choose representatives and make decisions regarding only minor issues." This will resonate with many who feel little difference between the center-left and center-right political parties, as both adopt almost identical neoliberal programs.

The second section of the book is entitled "from resistance to anti-capitalism" which explores historical developments, pre-capitalist resistance struggles, the emergence of anti-capitalist ideologies, and political revolutions. In the pre-capitalist era, we are introduced to such figures as Thomas Muntzer. A German theologian, he was a rebel leader in the German Peasants' War of 1524-1526, though he himself was captured and decapitated in 1525. The peasants who joined Muntzner in this revolt found inspiration in biblical stories, and "organized themselves into a sect and decided to collectivize property, so as to live life just as they imagined the early Christians had done." After a brief look at the impact of the French and Industrial Revolutions, the basic ideas of socialism, anarchism, and Marxism are discussed. Among the ranks of the early socialists are the utopians Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, while the three main anarchist figures are Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Piotr Kropotkin, and, of course, Bakunin. Beneath a particularly fetching picture of a white bearded Marx, the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat is mentioned but not explained, along with the hoped for ultimate disappearance of the state and inequality in a communist society. In terms of the legacy of Marx's ideas, Adamovsky trots out the familiar argument of blaming Friedrich Engels for distorting Marxist thought by presenting it as "scientific and flawless." A quote from Engels follows: "Marx is the Newton of social sciences; his socialism is the only scientific truth. The rest is nothing but utopian socialism." Adamovsky does concede that "Marxism inspired millions to fight for socialism," but that by then it had converted itself into a dogma, and found itself in difficulty to adapt to changing circumstances. While Marxists may take issue with some of these characterizations, clearly it is not the task of this book to get into the nitty gritty of Marxism and its historical legacy. Generally, it treats socialist and Marxist ideas fairly and seriously. On the very next page, the history of the First International is recalled. In an image sure to bring a smile to the lips of every socialist and anarchist, Marx and Bakunin, looking rather silly, yell insults back and forth at each other.

The Russian Revolution, "the first anti-capitalist revolution," as Adamovsky calls it, is examined sympathetically, starting with the activities of the soviets. The Bolshevik party is credited with gaining support "from the majority of sectors struggling for revolution." Adamovsky lists the immediate achievements of the Bolsheviks as treating national minorities in a far more egalitarian fashion, and new rights for women. It might have been pertinent to mention the Bolsheviks' most popular policy — removing Russia from the horrific conflagration known as World War One. Unfortunately, these achievements quickly disintegrated in the course of invasion and civil war, and Adamovsky sees the growing authoritarianism and brutality of the Bolsheviks as part and parcel with Leninism as much as anything else. He does not detail just how severe the impact of Tsarism, World War One, imperialist invasion, civil war, and the backward development of Russia had on the aspirations of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, he does not relate the belief of Lenin that the only means to save the infant Russian workers' state would be a revolution in a more developed country like Germany. As that failed, it doomed the Bolsheviks to failure. However, it should be remembered that both Lenin and Trotsky did make queasy theoretical justifications for centralization of power into the hands of the state, despite also elucidating ideas for human liberation and having a revolutionary and democratic rhetoric. To romanticize them in any way is to do them and history a disservice. It can't be denied that the Bolsheviks acted appallingly, at times, when they thought it served their

interests — the real question is, were these inherent traits of Bolshevism, or the inevitable results of monstrous circumstances? Could the soviets have survived? Could any kind of socialism have existed in the conditions of the time? Did the non-Bolshevik socialists or the anarchists really pose any kind of successful alternative? To answer these questions, a closer examination of the period in other texts would be required. Democratic centralism is viewed by Adamovsky as contributing to how "Lenin's party ended up imposing on society its own centralized and hierarchical structures" which saw the rise of the bureaucracy which replaced capitalists as the dominant class, but was just as oppressive. He then cites how there were similar results for other countries which implemented the communist model, "far from the ideals of equality and emancipation," but does not mention the pernicious influence of Stalinism, colonialism, imperialism, poverty, and underdevelopment. Despite this, Adamovsky's criticism is well founded, and effectively challenges assumptions while providing a quick history lesson.

Adamovsky is keen to make a distinction between the "traditional Left" and the "new anti-capitalism," a somewhat amorphous term for a movement with amorphous qualities. Adamovsky does try to quantify some basic aspects that distinguish the "new anti-capitalism," with particular regard to power and autonomy. Adamovsky judges that, historically, most Leftist traditions have had one common feature — that is, whether reformist or revolutionary, their aim was to "use the State as a tool to emancipate society." The illustration below this text depicts a goateed male and a female with short hair and an eyebrow piercing, who represent the people emblematic of the ideas and values of the "new anti-capitalism." The man explains that power is not only political and not just concentrated in the state, while the woman reinforces his point by questioning whether state power is really in the hands of nation-states. The man continues: "The state is a machine that divides, disciplines, and subordinates people. And one can't create a new world with a machine like that." A worthwhile and necessary observation, to be sure. Adamovsky clarifies his position through the proxy male figure: "The new anti-capitalism tries to avoid being taken over by power. It's about creating social relations where power disappears or is limited. It's more about "disempowering" the state than it is about "taking over" it. This has been labelled "popular power," "anti-power," or "counter-power," and "refers to the struggle to extend autonomy to the oppressed." As such, it has links to the ideas of Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Holloway especially. While Adamovsky's aversion to state power is clear, he does take a nuanced position, explaining that elections and occupying the state can sometimes be useful, but it isn't the overall political tactic. Autonomy beyond the state is the goal, and in that noble aspiration lie the seeds of a new world.

The last two sections explore contemporary anti-capitalist movements and some ideas as to how to change the world. The Zapatistas are prominently featured, along with illustrations and quotes from Subcomandante Marcos. Environmentalist, feminist, workers' control, immigration, anti-privatization, and alternative media movements show both the ingenuity, diversity, and perhaps, most importantly, the scale of the struggles occurring worldwide. This is very important to express, as many activists often feel isolated, and this section shows just how much they are connected to a global movement. Helpfully, website links to these organizations are also provided. The ideas in the final section, which is the shortest in the book, shows ideas in action, and posits realistic proposals that can be fought for right now. Some are familiar, such as the "immediate cancellation of foreign debt and the abolition of the IMF," an unconditional universal basic income, and global citizenship. Ideas about participatory and direct democracy are considered, as is non-commercial exchange, market socialism, libertarian municipalism, and anarchist Michael Albert's participatory economy model.

The sheer level and scope of the history, concepts, and contemporary political debates that manage to be covered in this little book make it an invaluable resource. Not only is it useful to those beginning to become politically active, but it even manages to offer something for grizzled old

veterans. Indeed, *Anti-Capitalism* is the kind of book that deserves to become a classic of the Occupy movement, as it is easily digestible, quickly read, sharp in its criticisms, and expands the horizon of anti-capitalist possibilities. In its rush to excoriate many ideas from the past, it may end up throwing off a cliff some excellent ideas that are still worthy of debate and consideration. It would have also been nice for Adamovsky to include in his book discussion of libertarian Marxist figures like CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and the constantly overlooked Anton Pannekoek. Indeed, Pannekoek is perhaps the best Marxist critic of Lenin and Leninism, and his book *Workers' Councils* deserves to be as widely read as Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Overall, *Anti-Capitalism* is easy on the eyes, refreshing, and never dull. The book ends with the exhortation: "Bye. We'll see you in the struggle!" And it is in that struggle that the dreams inside our raised fists can finally be unclenched, and fly free.