

Book Review

Stanley Aronowitz (2014)

The Death and Life of American Labor: Towards a New Workers' Movement. New York: Verso. ISBN 9781784783006

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Most observers of labour movements around the globe have noted the erosive nature of neo-liberal regimes, and Stanley Aronowitz is no exception. It seems that especially for the academic old guard, who have lived through decades of change in labour/capital relations, the urge to decry the death of labour movements is often too strong and pressing to ignore. Again, Stanley Aronowitz is no exception. Yet, unlike many other “armchair Marxists” who have, to their disgust, witnessed the relentless march of neo-liberalism and its seemingly all-inclusive squashing of once-powerful labour unions, Aronowitz goes beyond explanation and autopsy towards a reconceptualisation of the contemporary workers’ movement. Included here are important redefinitions of worker, movement and labour as a whole.

By focusing on American labour in the United States, the author does interesting work imagining the situation of the precariat within advanced capitalist countries. In many ways, the American case is a pivotal one – the symbolic home of neo-liberal ideology, the most powerful nation on Earth and one that constantly exerts its influence across the world, a primary site of cultural production, the world’s biggest consumer, a great example of the failures of representative democracy, and an extremely interesting case study in the evolution of labour movements and historic capitalism. One could argue that this book is necessary reading for the American citizen, as well as an important addition to the collection of any global labour advocate’s library.

The first chapters of Aronowitz’ book introduce important ideological points against the backdrop of the “victory of liberalism”. The foundations for his later arguments emerge from a critique of economism, or the primacy of place that we give to economic actions and events. For Aronowitz, neo-liberal hegemony has grown out of and resulted in a dangerously misconceived idolisation of the economy. He takes inspiration from Marx and Engels, hinting that communist and socialist thought is largely what is missing from today’s economic imaginary. Invoking the field of political economy, the author claims that the economy is a dependent variable and that economic policies are informed by social and political formations. He sees economic practices along classical lines as those actions that take place at the Marxian base, but redefines paid work as the production and reproduction of real life. The post-Fordist and consumerist mode of life in the United States necessitates paid work, yet macro changes to American work as a result of neo-liberal policies and various spatial and technological fixes by factory capital have signalled an unprecedented increase in precarious forms of work. He draws inspiration from Karl Polanyi, and simply states that the mass suffering caused by market forces is alterable through political means.

The author then begins a closer examination of American society by looking at where it is today. He describes American life as “hopelessly fragmented” (p. 27) and marked by great levels of personal suffering. He notes the sad traits that characterise the working class, namely that they are beholden to “economic masters” (p. 27) who have been prescribing the same bad medicine for decades and a remarkably non-political political process that sways only between economically liberalist poles – the Democratic and Republican parties. Later, he emphasises the effects that this political white-washing has had for those excluded from the gains of capitalism by focusing on those features of the American working class which both feed into and result from neo-liberal thinking. The author makes it clear that the negative trends which have been followed for the past forty years have coincided with the disintegration and deradicalisation of labour movements and the left in the United States.

Aronowitz turns back to pivotal moments of American history, beginning as recently as the Madison protests, to show that the labour gains that were won in the early twentieth century came out of a radical social spirit that has since been extinguished. As the author ties social well-being to the health of labour movements, he invokes the successful protests and strikes of the 1930s as the more-or-less forgotten and distant legacy of current American left. Through an examination of McCarthyism, Aronowitz reveals how the communist and socialist thinkers who carried that legacy into the political and activist arenas of the 1950s were eliminated via state terrorism. The liberal and imperialist thought which emerged from that period resulted in concessionary and demilitarised bargaining practices from union representatives.

Aronowitz does indeed pronounce the death of labour as we have known it for so long, and does a better job explaining how that “death” has come about than I can summarise here. Yet, laced into his scathing indictment of American politics, American capital and American labour institutions is an urgent and hopeful message relating to the current strategic needs of American society. Herein lie Aronowitz’ most compelling arguments concerning the nature of the American labour movement and what the current stagnation of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Unions (AFL-CIO) truly signals. Central to Aronowitz’ thought process is the notion of the labourer citizen, and through that notion the author arrives at a broadened definition of the working class, expanded to include all of those millions who struggle for basic needs. For the author, labour gains are equated to social gains, and the relative halt of the American labour movement is intricately tied to the ills that permeate standardised American life for what he calls “the new middle class” (p. 67) – professional, salaried workers who struggle to reproduce their lives against the backdrop of a privatised American society.

As many Americans have, Aronowitz takes inspiration from the Occupy movement, praising first and foremost the unifying message of the 99 per cent. The link between the haves and the have-nots is an important one, as the vast majority of Americans can then be included. This message provides the conclusion to Aronowitz’ book and a framework for forms of solidarity and social unity that are visibly lacking and vitally necessary to the workers’ movement. Like many of the greatest social movements in American history, Occupy has arisen from Marxian origins of class dispute. The lasting success of Occupy is also the most important in relation to the labour movement: its political subversiveness. By refusing to participate in the establishment politics of American representative democracy, Occupy directly addressed the worst symptoms of neo-liberal hegemony – disaffection and alienation.

More than any other advanced capitalist country, the steep decline that has taken place in the

American manufacturing sector has resulted in the complete transformation of the economy – of those practices people engage in to produce and reproduce their lives. As a result of economic determinism and neo-liberal thought, the struggles which have manifested as a result of free trade agreements and technological fixes are met simply with the goal of new “jobs”. Now, three in four Americans work in the service sector, many of them part-time, and a great many of them are not represented by traditional union apparatuses. The losses have therefore been extraordinary, as policy makers (particularly in the South) provide incentives to draw in employers, including the promise of non-unionised labour. Labour now takes place in a vacuum of dissent, and labour–capital relations have been skewed vastly in capital’s favour. While the author cites a great many failures of American labour today, including its failure to represent the new middle class, none of them strike truer than his remarks regarding the AFL-CIO’s obedient deference to codified institutionalised processes that do not favour the working class.

Having situated the current state of labour in the United States via an historical analysis, and having arrived at the major failures of labour today – the rise of alienated work, lack of inclusiveness, characterised by concessions, deference to establishment politics – the author seizes on the need for social movements which harness the spirit of the 1930s and 1960s. The labour movement does not just take place at the base, but also in the superstructure of American life. He sees the future of labour as the future of the American citizen, and therefore poses the many economic, social and political problems plaguing America as problems which can be met by labour unions. The proposals of Aronowitz’ book grow from Marxist principles, strongly rebuking the American distrust and antipathy towards communism. A radical communistic reimagining is exactly what is needed, not least for the AFL-CIO which has become stuck in capital’s traps.

If Aronowitz’ book seems more of a political piece than an explanation of labour, than it is due to the author’s strategic definition of the economy as just one piece of “a social totality that consists of economic, political, sociocultural, and ideological relationships that are closely interconnected” (p. 44). The author’s greatest strength is his ability to connect labour’s problems to the problems of American society at large, to the problems of working-class citizens. This is not to say that the piece has no shortcomings, particularly when the author tasks himself with placing blame. While there is no lack of ire and contempt for contemporary labour organisers, it seems that the author is most upset with the political left and particularly the Democratic Party. The author’s reticence to embrace or endorse socialist politicians who champion the working class as a path towards improved economic policies stems from his total disillusionment with the mainstream political system. Given his fixation on Occupy and the message of the 99 per cent, it is surprising that the author fails to comment on the prospect of a grassroots political movement and how labour could and should support such a movement. Coming back to Marx, it is also folly to pronounce the victory of capital over labour, as the grievances caused by neo-liberalism stir equally grievous reactions, and the dissent into a radical application of liberalist principles must result in the countervailing radicalisation of the American working class.

REFERENCE

Polanyi, K. (2001). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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