

SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS – Spring 2019, Issue Two

DIVISION CHAIR: William Cabin, CHAIR: (2017-2019), Assistant Professor,
Social Work, College of Public Health, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

Email: tuf34901@temple.edu AND wcabin@umich.edu

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NOTE FROM THE CHAIR:

Hi. I hope you all are well. The Annual meeting in NYC is fast-approaching. Hope to see you all there. Ethan Evans will take over as chair. Ethan is full of energy and wants to enhance the Division. I hope you all will join him. LOOKING AHEAD TO 2020. Check the program theme and email new chair Ethan Evans of sessions you'd like our Division to sponsor. It's never too early.

STUDENT PAPER COMPETITION WINNER

Zita Dixon was the winner in a very close contest. Zita is a doctoral candidate at Brandeis University. Please check out this award on the SSSP site and think of people to encourage to submit for 2020.

Book Review Participation:

If you want to do a book review for this newsletter, please contact our book review editor: Ethan Evans at ethan.evans@csus.edu

BOOK REVIEW

The New Communism: The science, the strategy, the leadership for an actual revolution, and a radically new society on the road to real emancipation

Bob Avakian. 2016. Insight Press.

Book review team:

Ethan J. Evans, PhD, MSW, is assistant professor, Division of Social Work, California State University, Sacramento. e-mail: ethan.evans@csus.edu.

Michael O. Johnston, PhD, is assistant professor, Sociology, William Penn University. e-mail: johnstonmo@wmpenn.edu.

Overview

In the words of Bob Avakian, this book “covers a lot of ground, speaking to fundamentals of the communist revolution, and what should guide us to bring about an actual revolution” (p.7). Its chapters outline: a method and approach with Communism as a science, a description of emancipation, a strategic approach to an actual revolution, and a treatise on the importance of leadership. The text is extracted from a presentation given by Avakian at a conference in the

summer of 2015. The reader is transposed to audience, all the while encouraged to take up intellectual struggle with classic Marxian concepts, such as dialectical materialism, and alienation, and to engage with their practical implications.

Contribution

The author argues for a retaking of communism from an intellectual and popular drift that has “taken the heart out of” and “reduced” it into “a feeble approach to tinkering around the edges of things...even in the name of communism, keeping things within the confines of the capitalist system, its relations, its ways of thinking” (p.79). The new synthesis offered by Avakian, is a double-down on two things: 1) a scientific approach—a Marxist materialism, or in other words an assessment of the world as it is, not as one would like it to be, and 2) a dialectic orientation—an evidence-based assessment of the contradictions of productive and thus social relations. Avakian asserts, that the fact that there can be an entirely and radically different world, a communist world without exploitation and oppression, is a fact that is scientifically determined by examining the actual dynamics of human society throughout history [what Avakian calls in other passages “defining contradictions” (p. 92) or the “5-stops” (p. 248-251)]. He describes the new synthesis as a “rejecting, casting off or recasting in a more correct light some of the things from earlier times in the development of communism [since Marx up through Mao] that were not thoroughly scientific. The synthesis seems summarized in these two precepts:

- 1) Humanity, the masses of oppressed humanity, and ultimately humanity as a whole, really does need revolution and communism, and that
- 2) the new synthesis of communism, in terms of method and approach to understanding and transforming human society, and the application of this method and approach to crucial contradictions and problems of revolution, represents a decisive qualitative leap in the development of the science of communism (pgs. 89-90).

Together they frame Avakian's call to attention that "the basis for revolution resides in the defining contradictions of this system, which cannot be resolved under this system" (p. 92).

Strengths

This work actively grapples with the Marxist critique of capitalism at a time when great sums of capital have been amassed among very few people, at a time when social and political institutions are strained, and at a time when competing calls for reform, perhaps fundamental reform are gaining popular attention. Avakian offers a large body of work seeking to advance both the intellectual and practical cause of communist theory and revolution. This book takes seriously the long history and depth of analysis that has come before it to address questions concerning materialism and idealism, epistemology and morality, and revolution and reform.

Weaknesses

Given that the piece was adapted from a spoken presentation and the overt advocacy agenda of its author, little coverage is given to other materials in the field. The work is largely self-referential, and readers are often admonished to consult other books, pamphlets or speeches by the author. This approach obscures details and clarity. In many passages, the reader finds referential statements where the referent is absent. For instance, the new synthesis of communism is said to build on "essential parts" (p. 82) and then described on page 83 as being developed in "many key areas." It is quite challenging to identify the specifics to which these and many other such general statements refer.

Summary

As Avakian, himself acknowledges, "we don't or shouldn't proceed from 'the way the world is,' in a static sense." We are living in tumultuous times and Avakian offers a perspective as to what is happening now, how society got here, and what is necessary to make fundamental change. The book offers a presentation of critical theory and polemic in political economy and praxis, that

could easily be required reading for master-level students in social theory, political economy, and social welfare courses. Additional works by Avakian, mostly available on the website www.revcom.us could be used as introductory material for the bachelor-level.

New Division Chair:

Congrats to Dr. Ethan Evans. He'll take office at the 2019 Annual Meeting. Please communicate with him at ethan.evans@csus.edu

Newsletter Contributions Invited

We encourage members to submit news such as publications, new appointments, and other professional accomplishments for inclusion in a future newsletter.

Suggestions and inquiries about less conventional content are also welcome—consider editorials, book reviews, teaching notes, department/program profiles, calls for contributions to journals and edited books, obituaries...

Please direct such inquiries to the current Division Chair, Bill Cabin at:

wcabin@umich.edu or to incoming chair Ethan Evans at ethan.evans@csus.edu

