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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Beyond Post-Socialism: Dialogues with the Far-Left

Chamsy el-Ojeili, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Reviewed by Colin Cremin

JUST AS SOCIALISM is pronounced dead, it uncannily comes back to life. Nowhere is this revival more surprising than in Britain where against the odds the long-time member of the left-wing Campaign group of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, was elected leader. His victory, in the same year that Syriza came to power in Greece, appears evidence that, pumped with populism, the socialist heart can recover its beat in the very institution from which it has for many years been absent. Much of the academic left, particularly in the social sciences where the likes of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens held court, had pronounced the end of class; according to Beck, class being an outmoded concept to which those nostalgic for the past have clung. Ironically, it was the bourgeoisie that maintained the faith. Neoliberalism, after all, is the art of total warfare, an unrelenting attack on the working class, first by crushing trade unions, today through increasingly militarised

policing and hi-tech surveillance. They know we pose a threat; the problem until recently at least is that we didn't. Chamsy el-Ojeili's book comes at an interesting historical juncture, then, when the metanarratives of postmodernism, post-class, post-whatever have themselves become outmoded. Perhaps this is why el-Ojeili calls his book 'beyond' post-socialism. It suggests, in a Hegelian negation of the negation, that if 'post' is invalidated by the turn of events, it is not socialism as such that returns but something new his book attempts to grasp. He does this by salvaging from a diverse range of left thinkers and activists ideas and strategies of continuing relevance. El-Ojeili identifies, under the umbrella label of left-communism, four central themes that connect them.

The first is on party and organisation debates, at one end of the spectrum vanguardism and at the other working class self-organisation. The second is on socialist consciousness, whether it can be realised through education and so forth or arises from material circumstances, such as a contingent political event that puts class divisions in sharp focus. The third examines issues around knowledge, power and communism, with the fourth, state, democracy and conceptions of how society will be organised after capitalism. El-Ojeili has sharp words to say about all those he includes into this task, and so the question that lingers throughout is whether there's much to salvage at all, that perhaps another selection of thinkers would've been more useful. El-Ojeili says no, his concluding remarks worth quoting as they summarise his position while also hinting at the book's limitations.

To my mind, the thinkers, ideas, currents treated here mark out a crucial orientating constellation deserving of attention from all those on the Left at present. They raise profound questions about values and institutions, in both a critical-explanatory and utopian sense – forcing us to think democracy beyond liberal democracy, to join positive and negative freedoms, as well as freedom and equality, to imagine a revaluing of our notions of the economy, work, value and worth. They pull us this way and that, providing dynamic, unstable materials, but in colliding with and rubbing up against them, we are surely going to be better for the immense tasks at hand.¹

1 Chamsy el-Ojeili, *Beyond Post-Socialism*, Basingstoke 2015, p. 178,

In terms of detail, description, evaluation and critique, every chapter is superb and remarkably polished. It's a fantastic resource that one almost feels like a thief reading, given how generous the author has been in providing this shortcut. If this were judged simply as a collection of disconnected essays, there'd be very little to fault. It's when considered as a book of interconnected themes where the issues lie. It's not the place here to summarise each chapter, suffice to say that you won't find a better summary of the ideas and the struggles each alights on: Laclau and Mouffe; Hardt and Negri and the workerist tradition; Debord; Castoriadis, Lefort and 'psychoanalytic Leninism'; Camatte; the world system's theorist Immanuel Wallerstein; and finally, 'four voices', Badiou, Magri, Therborn and the Australian social theorist Peter Beilharz. El-Ojeili is no puppet. He serves no master. It's something of a disappointment then, and a missed opportunity in my view, that the conclusion is so vague. As suggested, el-Ojeili gives all his interlocutors a bloody nose, the self-indulgent and bitter Guy Debord faring the worst. He questions the premises on which Empire is based, offers counter narratives through the likes of Wallerstein, and exposes the flaws of the anarchist tradition. His arguments are persuasive and so against this his concluding comments by contrast appear weak. They are weak because elsewhere the book is so strong.

Two chapters are missing: three if I'm to be greedy – a chapter on utopia perhaps? One would develop a more elaborate synthesis of the theories he explores. The absence of this may have something to do with the other chapter the book would benefit from, on political economy. Should the labour theory of value, the cornerstone of Marx's thinking on capitalist circulation and expansion, be abandoned or qualified? Why? How? How important are nation states in the current context? To what extent can the history of class struggles in one country – Italy the main focus here – and the lessons drawn from them be abstracted to other contexts and histories? What if anything can be gleaned in respect to the book themes by following the trajectories of capitalism's internal contradictions? Questions such as these do factor into el-Ojeili's analysis such as when interrogating Negri or praising Wallerstein, but would benefit from being made more explicit. It's not enough simply to call for an holistic approach when the problems of how different writers theorise political economy, class composition,

labour power and so forth are exposed. For all the work that has been done, the punch line is left for the reader to come up with. This is not in itself a fault with the book. It is more that it would be a stronger one had el-Ojeili taken a more emphatic standpoint at the end of it.

Each chapter of the book draws on a wealth of critical sources, skilfully organised and enumerated making it highly accessible and engaging. I learned a lot from this book and will no doubt be using it as a resource in the future. My critique is between magnificent lines. That the book leaves one begging for more is testament to its quality and one, given what it does achieve, that makes it deserving of a wide audience. For these reasons, *Beyond Post-Socialism* is highly recommended.

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