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Book review

Decolonial Communism reviewed

- Reviews section -

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Decolonial Communism, Democracy and the Commons, by Catherine Samary, with contributions from Samuel Farber, Silvia Federici, Franck Gaudichaud, Zagorska Golubovic, Ernest Mandel, Goran Markovic, Svetozar Stojanovic and Raquel Varela. Pub. Resistance Books/IIRE/Merlin Press, 2019.

For much of the recent past the experience of eco-socialists and feminists has necessarily been a defensive one, trying to push back as hard as possible against the attacks mounted by capital, especially in its neo-liberal phase. Movements like Occupy a few years ago, and the Extinction Rebellion protests earlier this year, have briefly opened up broader perspectives and allowed for alternative visions of what a liberated society might look like. But most of the time activists have been trying to maintain what we have in a difficult context rather than discussing what life could be like in a world free from domination.

It is in this context that Catherine Samary's new book is so important and invigorating. The core of the book is an attempt to reclaim a significant moment in the revolutionary tradition, the struggles around self-management in former Yugoslavia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to connect these struggles both with earlier revolutionary movements and with contemporary debates. Samary is particularly well-suited to do this. She has been a leading member of the Fourth International for several decades, working in particular on the economics and politics of Central Europe, and she has been especially involved in supporting radical movements in the Balkans. At the same time she has connected this involvement with a long record of campaigning activity against neo-liberalism, austerity and debt within France.

The book is structured around six articles by Samary; an introduction, a conclusion and four longer pieces (three of which have been published previously) dealing respectively with the evolution of the revolutionary tradition, the experience of Yugoslav self-management, the debates around planning, the market and democracy in Eastern Europe and the USSR and the collapse of the Eastern European regimes after 1989. Interspersed with these articles are a variety of other analyses, including accounts of debates within Yugoslavia (both documents from the 1960s and a more recent overview) and discussions of Cuba, Chile during the Popular Unity period and Portugal following the 1974 revolution. There is also an article from 1963 by Ernest Mandel, which looks at the question of the operation of the law of value in a transitional economy, and the book concludes with two articles on the subject of the 'commons', one by a group of activists from the Balkans and one from the feminist writer Silvia Federici.

The central argument of the book is that the late 1960s in Yugoslavia was a period of unfulfilled revolutionary potential, based on a widespread movement involving workers, students and intellectuals, which attempted to develop the concept of self-management in a way which could have provided the basis for a qualitative leap towards socialist democracy. Sadly, however, this movement failed in its broader aims and became channelled into a narrower and more restrictive framework in which self-management became identified with elements of workers' control over enterprises linked through market relations. Without any effective co-ordination between these enterprises other than that offered by the market, the way was open for managers within the enterprises and bureaucrats within the ruling League of Communists to tame the movement and re-assert control. Samary argues that this in turn led to economic divisions between enterprises and regions which laid the basis for the rise of nationalism and the imposition of austerity which fuelled the break-up of the Yugoslav federation and the wars of the 1990s.

As a result of this setback self-management became identified with market relationships and the more radical concept of a self-managed society co-ordinated through democratic planning became forgotten. While in Samary's view the movements of the 1960s in Yugoslavia both arose out of a genuine revolution, expressed through Tito's

break with Stalin in the late 1940s, and also resulted in real gains for workers through the 1970s, the possibility contained within them for more radical liberation was not realised. However, she argues that the lessons of this period are an important element in the formation of a revolutionary tradition which could lead to such liberation. She names this tradition 'decolonial communism'. This needs to be distinguished from recent debates around 'post-colonialism', which Samary acknowledges but sees as separate from her analysis. For her, decolonial communism is that part of revolutionary thought which is based on seeing individual countries or regions as part of an international capitalist system so that change in one part of that system both depends on and reacts back on change elsewhere. Samary sees elements of this way of thinking in Marx and Engels but argues that decolonial communism became central to revolutionary thinking through the work of Lenin and Trotsky and the heritage of the October Revolution in Russia.

For Samary, though, decolonial communism was not in any sense completed by Lenin and Trotsky; their analyses were crucial but also contained important gaps which needed to be filled through creative revolutionary thinking and action in the years which followed 1917. She highlights the issues of feminism and ecology here but her main discussion centres on the question of socialist democracy and the necessity for such democracy if planning is to succeed. The importance for Samary of the Yugoslav debates around self-management lies chiefly in the contribution which they make in deepening this concept of democracy. It is the issue of democracy which also lies behind Samary's interest in the idea of the 'commons'. For her the concept of common ownership and of the struggle against the 'accumulation through dispossession' highlighted by the Marxist geographer David Harvey provides a possible way of connecting democracy with decolonial communism and reigniting revolutionary activity.

Samary's book is successful in my view in demonstrating the importance of the Yugoslav experiences of the 1960s for revolutionaries and in connecting these with other debates and experiences both preceding and following them. There is a wealth of ideas contained within the book which make it an important resource for anyone interested in considering what an eco-socialist society might actually look like. It can usefully be read together with Darko Suvin's important recent *Splendour, Misery and Possibilities: An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Haymarket Press) and with Samary's review of Suvin's book in *New Left Review* no.114 Nov/Dec 2018. I do have a couple of questions about the book, however; one connected with its scope and range and one connected with its content.

The scope of the book is extremely wide and while this enables the editors and contributors to connect a large number of issues it also means that many of those issues are covered relatively briefly. For example, the discussion of the 1960s in Yugoslavia covers the unrest among students and intellectuals more fully than workers' struggles. The two articles on the commons are suggestive and interesting but rather short, considering the weight placed on this concept in discussions elsewhere. Debates over self-management elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe could perhaps have been looked at in more detail, especially the important developments in Poland during 1980-81. There are some important contributions to discussions about socialist planning which it would have been interesting to include, especially the work of Pat Devine and his collaborators (see his *Democracy and Economic Planning* (Polity Press)).

With regard to the content of the book one area which I think could be discussed further is the relationship between workers' self-management within organisations and community and locality based struggles. Samary is convincing in her argument that market-based co-ordination between enterprises is not the way forward and that in the Yugoslav example a national 'chamber of self-management' or something equivalent would have allowed for a different kind of connection between workplaces. But this still leaves open the question of how such workplaces, however they are co-ordinated, will be linked in an eco-socialist society with the community as a whole. This is especially important when the role of such co-ordination is broadened to involve not just liberation from class exploitation but also a challenge to gender-based oppression and recognition of the demands of ecological sustainability as well.

These criticisms, however, should not be taken as detracting from the significance and interest of the questions which Samary and Leplat have opened up in this book. On the contrary, they indicate the richness of the debates

contained here and the possibility that this book will stimulate many more important debates in the future.

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