

BOOK NOTES / RÉFÉRENCES BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES

Chris Brazier, *The No-Nonsense Guide to World History* (Toronto: New Internationalist Publications and Between the Lines, 2001)

WILLIAM BEINART writes in the introduction to this book: “On no account should we be protected from brave generalisers who seek to make sense of the whole, when so many professionals cultivate close vision.” (6) Brave or not, Brazier is an unapologetic generalizer, with an engaging manner as he conveys a sense of the forces that have shaped human history over 40,000 years. “In the beginning there was slime,” he writes (10), and he is at pains throughout to debunk popular mythologies about various eras. Though the book is quite short (143 pages), it attempts to provide relatively balanced coverage of various regions of the world, without privileging “Western civilization.” Brazier’s political perspective is progressive, and for each era, he focuses on the distribution of wealth among classes and regions, and the relative power of men and women.

This book is one of several in a New Internationalist series of short-course “No-Nonsense Guides,” that, in 2001, included guides to globalization, fair trade, climate change, international migration, and sexual diversity.

David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega, and Gabrielle Watson, *Advocacy for Social Justice: A Global Action and Reflection Guide* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2001)

THIS BOOK might be called “The No-Nonsense Guide to Organizing,” if that was not someone else’s series! It’s a well-written book of sensible advice about how to build and maintain organizations for “people-centered advocacy.” The advice is shaped by the experiences of a variety of successful organizations on all continents, from the South African Women’s Budget Initiative to the campaign against Texas Oil in Ecuador and the struggle to revise the land law in Cambodia to favour poor and landless farmers. There are interesting parallels between the latter and the discussion of Black farmers’ struggles in the US to keep their land in the face of institutionalized discrimination that 1960s civil rights legislation only managed to chip away a tiny bit. The organizational issues dealt with include everything from identifying allies to tailoring messages for particular audiences and to keeping an organization alive when its cause hits snags. This book should be in every organizer’s library.

Istvan Meszaros, *Socialism or Barbarism: From the "American Century" to the Crossroads* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001)

FOR OVER 40 YEARS, Istvan Meszaros has been an important voice for a Marxism that is at once humanist and revolutionary. In this book, Meszaros applies his philosophical rigour and catholic knowledge to the issue of whether socialist revolution is possible in the 21st century and what it might look like. His thoroughgoing critique of contemporary capitalist social relations takes aim not only at the so-called economic globalizers and the destruction that they have wrought, but also at the proponents of the nebulous "third way" advocated by Tony Blair and other reformist politicians.

"Socialism or barbarism," of course, is a phrase that Rosa Luxembourge used a century ago to describe the stark choice facing humanity. Meszaros gives it a 21st century qualification, "barbarism if we are lucky," noting that extermination of humanity is the "ultimate concomitant of capital's destructive course of development." (80) Unlike some of Meszaros's earlier works, that are a heavy slog because of his concern to draw out the importance of often-misunderstood concepts in Marx's corpus, *Socialism or Barbarism* has a popular tone, and is appropriate reading for undergraduates.

Debra E. Bernhardt and Rachel Bernstein, *Ordinary People Extraordinary Lives: A Pictorial History of Working People in New York City* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000)

THIS POPULAR HISTORY of New York workers and their unions uses pictures from the 19th and 20th centuries to weave together its various narratives, biographical sketches, and first-person accounts. While the print is large and the words are minimal, the book tries to cover the im-

portant events of the city's labour history, such as the shirtwaist makers' strike of 1909, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, the waterfront strikes of the 1930s, and wildcat strikes of public workers in the late 1960s.

The first-person accounts are very good, and the brief biographies of everyone from Samuel Gompers and David Dubinsky to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and A. Philip Randolph are useful introductions for those unfamiliar with American labour history. Little wonder that the back cover can feature accolades from the likes of Studs Terkel, Susan Sarandon, and David Dinkins. But Dinkins' praise for the book as "a gorgeous mosaic of a book" also speaks to its major shortcoming. This book simply avoids the issues of conflicts within the labour movement and among working people over time. It is triumphal history meant to inspire workers in the present by refusing to let them in on the issues of skill hierarchies, ideology, gender, colour, and ethnicity, among others, that both shaped labour identities and restricted the development of a broad consciousness among workers of being members of a social class that was repressed by the capitalist class.

But the pictures are very nice!

Richard Kazis and Marc S. Miller, eds., *Low-Wage Workers in the New Economy* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2001)

THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT literature on the poor and the working poor that has been produced by the left, and is assiduously ignored by policy-makers who are mostly interested in catering to the needs of the rich. This collection of essays, by contrast, is the product of the research of a variety of dyed-in-the-wool liberals. Like the right and unlike the left, they find the sources of poverty in the structural characteristics of the poor as opposed to the structural characteristics of capitalism. But, unlike the right, they believe that a

variety of state initiatives could help the poor to change their structural faults. The causes they support, such as more money for educational programs for the poor, and more help for families with daycare, are worthwhile enough. But there is an air of unreality about the whole enterprise, and not surprisingly, not an ounce of historical analysis as to how so much poverty and unemployment has managed to persist to the present when supposedly there have now been several generations of prosperity.

Stephen Collis, *Mine* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001)

THIS ONE'S HARD to review. The cover indicates: "In this book-length poem, Stephen Collis plunges back in time to reconstruct the history of coal on the [Vancouver] Island." And indeed, as the cover promises, Collis, an English professor at Simon Fraser University with coal-mining forebears, does deal with the miners' struggles, and with the ecological harm wrought by mining. Some of the poems (it is a series of poems, despite the suggestion on the cover, that it is one poem) are quite moving. But, on the whole, this is not likely to be accessible to coal miners, workers generally, or even undergraduates. This reviewer, despite an undergraduate degree in English literature, and a working knowledge of four languages, could not figure out the meaning of such poem titles as "Of the Poem's Chiaroscuro." I got no meaning at all out of some of the poems whose titles were easily understandable. Again, going to the cover: "Echoes of Plutarch, Leonardo da Vinci, Melville and John Ruskin hover among invocations of Robert Dunsmuir, John Muir and Ginger Goodwin." A heady brew and a worthwhile read presumably for those who are fairly familiar with both sets of gentlemen.

Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2001)

THIS IS A BALANCED but progressive overview of the French Revolution that includes both narrative and a large set of documents within 200 pages. As one would expect of a book that is largely a documentary collection, it is more a compendium of recent scholarly conclusions about the revolution than an effort to introduce new materials and a new synthesis. Both undergraduates and general readers would get a good sense from this book of why the popular forces in the rebellion were crushed, the role of women in the revolutionary drama, debates on slavery in the colonies, and why Napoleon was able to carry out a counter-revolution within the revolution. A cd-rom that features primary documents, hundreds of images, and maps and songs is an added bonus.

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