

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Andrew Jackson, *The Fire and the Ashes: Rekindling Democratic Socialism* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021)

FOR MORE THAN a decade, at least since the 2008 global economic crash and the emergence of the Occupy Movement in 2011, there has been renewed interest in alternatives to the capitalist system. In particular, for those born after the end of the Cold War, coming of age amidst many overlapping crises, including structural racism, extreme wealth inequality, a climate catastrophe, and the COVID-19 pandemic, socialism has become an attractive proposition; it offers hope that, despite the claims of those in power, a better world is, in fact, possible. As such, the publication of *The Fire and the Ashes* by Canadian economist Andrew Jackson comes at an opportune moment. Although lacking some necessary background and critique, the monograph makes a significant contribution to the shifting political discourse in Canada and the literature of the left.

“[P]art personal memoir, part historical analysis, part political manifesto” (1), the short monograph offers unique insights into the past fifty years of Canadian history, especially the practically ineffective resistance from the left to the increasing dominance of neoliberalism. Jackson recounts his experiences as a researcher for the New Democratic Party (NDP), as chief economist for the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), and as a contributor to left-wing think tanks – specifically the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

(CCPA) and the Broadbent Institute – revealing tensions within the labour movement and in its relationships with the electoral system and demonstrating the exclusion of workers from the decision-making processes at all levels of society. Significantly, he provides compelling arguments regarding the relevance of democratic socialism to the 21st century and sets out a clear vision of a more just and equitable world that might be achievable.

The Fire and the Ashes is particularly valuable for its analysis of the labour movement during the era that saw the final destruction of the Keynesian welfare state. Jackson demonstrates the constant efforts by left-wing economists and union leaders to counter the persistent attacks waged against the system, especially during and after the free trade debates of the mid to late 1980s, but he argues that the inability to build real solidarity on the left contributed to the ascendancy of the right. The labour movement, he shows, was divided over internal structures and leadership, raiding, and political campaigns and remained disconnected from the NDP, which, over the years, adopted a more modern and moderate approach and became increasingly indistinguishable from the Liberals. Opposition to neoliberalism then existed, but it was marginalized, isolated, and ultimately ineffective against a powerful elite seeking individual wealth at the expense of social justice and equality.

The 147-page book is, however, too short, with brief chapters that would benefit from additional context and analysis.

Table of Contents for Reviews, p. 5.

For example, Chapter 6, “The Great Free Trade Debate,” runs only four pages despite its significance, Jackson claims, to democratic socialists in Canada and the rise of the neoliberal order around the world. Regardless of the potential audience – committed lefties, young activists, scholars, and students, or the general public – many will not know or understand the varying perspectives presented or how the political dynamics evolved throughout the period; Jackson has access to information and perceptions that are unavailable in the mainstream literature and could add nuance to understandings of these events. In addition, Chapter 10, “Workers Teaching Workers,” argues political education is essential to labour unions but, in less than three pages, does not engage with the literature, practice, and purpose of such programs. This is not an academic book, nor should it be held to those standards, but more detail and background would help substantiate the central arguments.

In addition, Jackson misses an obvious opportunity to engage with gender inequality in the labour movement and left politics over the past half-century. Despite chronicling decades of work in male-dominated unions – and criticizing Shirley Carr, the first woman to lead the CLC, fairly harshly – his discussion of structural inequality is one sentence: “it is still the case that women rarely make it to the very top ranks of unions, even though some 60 per cent of union members are now women.” (66) There is no consideration of why this might be the case or how a lack of representation might affect the movement – or, as importantly, his perspectives. Not only is the reader robbed of particular contributions to important conversations and critiques, but the oversight appears particularly glaring in a work published in 2021 (and dedicated to Jackson’s three daughters).

The monograph nevertheless concludes with helpful insights into the role democratic socialism might play moving forward. In Chapter 15, “Recipe for a Renewed Economy,” Jackson offers specific ideas, including a larger role for governments in the formation of industrial and trade policies, declining reliance on extractive enterprises, and a transition from fossil fuels to a green and sustainable economy. “We lack,” he argues in the concluding chapter, “a vision of socialism as a viable utopia” (139), but the only alternative is some form of dystopia. He warns strongly against embracing “discredited liberal centrist politics” (139) and insists that “[a] left political agenda should advance radical but feasible demands, attached to a vision of transformation. These demands should be advanced by a democratic socialist party or parties through the liberal democratic process ... and a mixed-market economy, albeit with a much higher level of public and social ownership of capital.” (140) Some may disagree with the particular approach, but the vision is clear and compelling and provides a basis for further discourse across the political spectrum.

On balance, *The Fire and the Ashes* is an excellent memoir and political manifesto from a deservedly well-respected Canadian socialist economist. It is essential reading for those exploring the individuals and the movements that resisted neoliberal capitalism and for those attempting to achieve a more just and equitable society in the future. It would benefit from the inclusion of a more thorough historical analysis and the exploration of gender in a male-dominated world, but, as Meatloaf famously sang, “two out of three ain’t bad.”

ROBERTA LEXIER
Mount Royal University