
BOOK REVIEWS

READING FOR LOCKED-DOWN AND SOCIALLY-DISTANCED DAYS

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Each issue of *JAPE* normally concludes with reviews and notes on recent books in political economy. During these unusual times, here's something different – suggestions for suitable reading during the current crisis period. These are a personal selection of books - old and new, fiction and non-fiction, big and small – which may strike a chord...

The Plague by Albert Camus is the obvious starter. A classic work of fiction from the 1940s, it has been hailed during successive decades for its fine writing, its humanity, and its contribution to existential thought, giving deep insights into the human condition, life and death. It describes a town in Algeria (then still a French colony) where dead rats start to appear in stairways and on the streets, leading to the onset of a terrible plague that causes widespread death among the local citizens. The whole town has to be locked-down until, eventually, the crisis passes and it can be re-opened for people to enter and leave. Through the eyes of the central character, Dr Rieux, we meet other inhabitants exhibiting diverse forms of human response, ranging from passive defeatism to deeply-felt empathy and social support. The book is also renowned because of its allegorical character, having been written by Camus implicitly as a denunciation of the influence of fascism and of the Vichy regime's collaboration with the Nazis during their occupation of France in the second world war.

By the time *The Plague* was first published, in 1947, people who had actively participated in the French Resistance during the war had already

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begun meeting as the French Committee for European Federation, developing a declaration and movement for a post-war united Europe¹ in which such barbarity and carnage could never occur again. It would be stretching a overly long bow to claim that initiative as the embryo of the European Union. The capitalist economic interests that pushed to establish the European Coal and Steel Community – subsequently developing into the Common Market and then the EEC – were the more direct driver. However, it is a pertinent reminder of an underlying concern in Europe to develop institutions that would prevent recurrence of fascism and war. It is in this context that Britain’s decision to leave the EU may be seen as a reactionary nationalist rejection of that ideal.

That’s the segue into my second book suggestion: *The Cockroach* by Ian McEwan (Jonathan Cape, 2019). This engaging little book is a parody of the Brexit process under the leadership of Boris Johnson. Yes, Boris (name changed to Jim Sams) is really a cockroach, heading a Cabinet comprised almost wholly of other cockroaches, wreaking mayhem on the country they govern. Yet, these cockroaches appear as normal humans when it suits them so to do, and most of the people cannot see the true nature of their political leaders. Increasingly bizarre policies emanate from the government, particularly the economic policy called ‘reversalism’. This is a policy to reverse the circular flow of income, so that people pay to work and get paid for buying goods and services (yes, you read that right). Keynesians may shudder, but that’s the point – to shake up the orthodoxy (just as, in the real world, the economics of Brexit runs counter to the mainstream economists’ cherished theories of ‘comparative advantage’ and ‘gains from trade’). Fed up with conventional economic prescriptions and willing to take a chance on this alternative, the people vote in a referendum to adopt ‘reversalism’. How crazy can you get? Sure, there are flaws in the concept and its construction of the book, but it is only 100 pages and can be comfortably – and chucklingly – read in about four hours. Speaking of big insects and small books, my next recommendation is Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, first published in German in 1917 (available free online at www.feedbooks.com). Indeed, the opening lines of McEwan’s *Cockroach* are a direct nod to Kafka’s famous story of the young man who wakes up one day as a giant insect, somewhat like a

¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/lets-remember-the-popular-front-of-1936/>.

cockroach. Kafka is renowned as authoring intriguingly gloomy books like *The Trial* and *The Castle*, in which seemingly arbitrarily selected victims have their lives destroyed by unfathomably complex bureaucratic or authoritarian regimes. In *Metamorphosis*, it is more as if ‘nature strikes back’ – but why pick on the hapless young Grigor Samsa (note the name similarity to McEwan’s cockroach PM) who has committed no crime, rather dutifully struggling to provide for his family. Central to the story are the family members’ responses to Grigor’s plight. His father is aggressive to his now-loathsome insect son, his mother is helpless, while his sister undergoes her own metamorphosis – from sympathising and caring for Grigor to showing distain and disgust. This is a profoundly pessimistic story but, as a tale of deep alienation and the sometimes unknown forces that transform our lives, it resonates in the current context.

Among the social-psychological effects of the COVID-19 crisis now being widely discussed is the increased consciousness of mortality. Of course, everyone knows the adage that the only certainties in life are death (and taxes). Indeed, knowing that a death-sentence might now lurk in every unwisely close social interaction tends to make us more aware of our mortality. This is a context in which a book called *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* (Profile Books, 2019) has obvious relevance. Its author is Martin Hägglund, a Swedish philosopher teaching in the US at Yale, who presents a strong case for our mortality being central to our freedom. He links consciousness of mortality with living a life to the full and, in effect, creating the best of all possible worlds. Although written prior to the pandemic, this is a marvellously prescient book, just right for fostering thoughtful reflections about our current lives and times. Hägglund turns his philosophical skills to showing the importance of mortality to our wellbeing as individuals and society, requiring rejection of all religious beliefs about ‘eternal life’ and ‘heaven and hell’ so that we can focus freely and purposefully on living a good life in the here and now. This is not merely a case for freedom of individual will, but also for progressive politics with democratic socialism as the goal. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this book is a sophisticated philosophical case for ‘godless communism’ (a phrase best pronounced in a sneering, accusatory tone, redolent of the Macarthyite ‘red-baiting in the USA during the 1950s). Indeed, Hägglund’s book is a wonderfully engaging intellectual journey with profound implications for living purposefully and politically.

Hans Baer’s *Democratic Eco-Socialism as a Real Utopia* (Berghann, 2018) shares a similar political inclination but is more concerned with

political strategy for attaining systemic change. It develops a strong case for democratic eco-socialism by showing the deep contradictions of the capitalist system and distinguishing it from other currents of socialist thought and political practices that have been undemocratic or/and insensitive to the requirements for ecological sustainability. How to get from here to there is the conundrum, of course. Baer puts weight on what he calls 'anti-systemic movements' organised around 'labour, ethnic and indigenous rights, women's, anti-corporate globalisation, peace and environmental and climate movements'. The problem that he clearly recognises is that an alternative world system is so elusive that, practically, striving for 'system challenging reforms' has to be the more modest focus. A 13-point list is presented, ranging from the formation of new left parties, to emissions taxes, workers' democracy, 'resisting the culture of consumerism', and much else besides. Readers of *JAPE* will probably find much to agree with here, although may still end up wondering how this could actually get us all the way from the unacceptable and unsustainable present to the 'real utopian vision' to which the author aspires - or is it the quest and the journey that matters even if the eventual goal is not attained?

Naomi Klein's latest book *On Fire: the Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (Allen Lane, 2019) takes a different tack in that it leaves the reader with little doubt about the goal that *must* be attained. Narrowing the focus to the climate change problem results in a more politically-targeted strategy, although ultimately no less anti-capitalist. The book comprises the written versions of 18 of Klein's rousing speeches, each dealing with different aspects of the challenge of preventing disastrous climate change. Some chapter titles signal how the challenge is framed - 'Hot Take on a Hot Planet'; 'Capitalism Versus the Climate'; 'When Science Says that Political Revolution is our only Hope'. Others signal the way forward - 'The Art of the Green New Deal'; and 'Movements will Make, or Break, the Green New Deal'. The book's epilogue, titled 'the Capsule Case for the Green New Deal', presents a clear summary of her arguments for a way forward - it would be worth getting the book for this alone. Of course, the 'so near but yet so far' failure this year of Bernie Sanders' campaign to become the Democratic Party's Presidential candidate - a campaign that Klein strongly supported - was a significant set-back for Green New Deal proponents. But not terminal: around the world the campaign strengthens as the problems intensify. Klein makes a powerful case for action to prevent an ecological disaster that would, in effect, make the current CoVID-19 crisis look like a vicarage tea-party in comparison.

Two recent Australian books make for engaging reading too. One, also expressing strong ecological concerns is by Samuel Alexander and Brendan Gleeson, called *Degrowth in the Suburbs: a Radical Urban Imaginary* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) The authors look at what could be done to re-shape our cities to become more sustainable, equitable and liveable. Their book is deeply critical of the ‘blind-fold of technological optimism’ and the prevailing ideologies that have shaped economic policy and conventional urban design. They argue that much can be done in Australian suburbia, localising and downscaling resource use, pointing to some of the things that ecologically conscious people in the suburbs are already doing to pave the way to more sustainable living. They make the case for a policy goal of ‘energy descent’ and for seeking progress through a ‘post-capitalist politics from below’, positing the culture of sufficiency as an alternative to growthmania. As they say (on p.181): ‘We see [...] the dialectical relationship between culture and political economy: culture must radicalise in order to create the social conditions for political and macroeconomic change beyond growth’. Their final chapter presents a list of the policies that could help produce better outcomes at grass roots level. For readers – especially those currently ‘languishing’ in the suburbs – who want to engage with the local applicability of ‘degrowth’ arguments, this should have considerable appeal.

Other readers might be interested in knowing more about where political economic power resides in Australia. It is not only blinkered thinking, inertia and ineffective government policies that impede progressive political economic change. Massive vested interests are involved too – the power of the corporate elite, most obviously. *How* it exercises its power is the main concern of Lindy Edwards’ new book, *Corporate Power in Australia: Do the 1% Rule?* (Monash University Publishing 2020). She takes six case studies: the big mining companies’ opposition to the proposed mining tax during the Rudd/Gillard years; Coles’ and Woolies’ power over farmers providing the produce; NewsCorp’s undermining of media reform; the bad behaviour of banks and their financial advice services; the Telstra/NBN debacle; and ‘unfair contract’ laws. In each case, she narrates the story, shows the evidence and tries to unpick exactly how power was exercised. While most of us would be aware of some of the fragments, this development of a more integrated analysis makes for a very engaging read, bridging from political science into political economy. Now, what about some short books? If it is true, as has been reported, that one of the effects of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis is to reduce

people's attention span, then short books could be just the ticket. Polity Press is evidently pitching strongly in this area. Having had success with a series of mid-sized books on 'Key Contemporary Thinkers', including political economists Hyman Minsky and J.M. Keynes, the same publisher is now making a big thing of brevity (can one really say that?) with two new series of short books. One is on 'The Future of Capitalism', starting a couple of years ago with Steve Keen's *Can We Avoid Another Financial Crisis?* This argued that the mountain of debt has become so large that, no, we cannot be sure that the GFC won't recur. While a post-Coronavirus update couldn't exactly say 'well, I told you so', the debt mountain that Steve emphasises sure ain't helping - and it is surely growing even faster now. Polity's other new small book series is called 'The Case For...'. It allows authors space to say what political economic strategies they think would help deal with problems of this ilk. Some of those published so far are clearly relevant to the current economic crisis. One, by Louise Haagh, makes the case for *Universal Basic Income*; another, by Frances Coppola (not the film director of the same name) for *People's Quantitative Easing*; and a third, by Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill, for *Community Wealth Building*. All are clear and thought-provoking contributions, showing that the ideas presented in short books are probably more likely to stick.

Finally, working on entirely the opposite principle, there is Thomas Piketty's new book *Capital and Ideology* (Harvard University Press 2020). The *JAPE* editors aim to feature a review of it in this journal in due course, so I won't attempt a summary here. Suffice to say that Piketty has become more deeply immersed in history and with how ideology shapes 'inequality regimes'. He is also more explicit about his own 'socialist' perspective, while pointing to the failure of nation-based social democratic parties to reverse the trend towards greater concentration of wealth. Piketty's 2013 bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, was enormously influential and widely cited - some would say *the* political economy book of the decade - so this new one has been awaited with keen anticipation. At 1,093 pages, it is even more massive than his previous *magnum opus* which was a mere 685 pages! But, if you're feeling strong enough to take it on, it should keep you going at least until the next issue of *JAPE* - a special issue on '*Democracy on the Edge? Revisiting Neoliberalism and Democracy in Contemporary Capitalism*' to be published in December 2020. There'll be plenty more good reading for political economists therein.

That's all for now: keep reading, keep active, keep well...