

Insgesamt kann man den Band als globale Einführung in die Geschichte des modernen Nationalismus durchaus empfehlen, auch wenn sicher viele Leser nicht mit allen Einschätzungen des Autors d'accord sein werden. Dazu ist eben die Geschichte des Nationalismus bis heute viel zu kontrovers und spannungsreich diskutiert worden, was aber nach wie vor den Reiz dieses Forschungsfeldes ausmacht.

Fabian Scheidler: *The End of the Megamachine: A Brief History of a Failing Civilization*, Winchester/Washington: Zero Books, 2020, 427 pp.

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Maybe Karl Marx was right, after all. Defects as a prophet undermined confidence in his critique of capitalism. When the revolutions he predicted failed to occur in highly industrialized economies, it looked for a while as if capitalism's capacity for self-correction was as great as its apologists claimed. Bosses heeded dangers, restrained exploitation, and boosted wages to increase their own markets. After the first decade or so of the twentieth century, living standards began to converge. Embourgeoisement of proletarians and proletarianization of bourgeois eased class conflict. Social democratic modifications of capital-

ism made the system easier to live with. Revolution receded because, as William Cobbett said, you cannot "agitate a fellow with a full stomach".[1]

In the last 40 years or so, however, expectations of indefinite social peace have weakened. Wealth gaps have widened to levels unexperienced since before the First World War. Greed has become "good". As Thomas Piketty shows, the decades of convergence in the twentieth century were the result not of the benevolence of the master class but of war, driving up wages and increasing regulation.[2] Meanwhile, economic growth, which provides the modern equivalent of bread and circuses, has come to look unsustainable, as madcap consumption threatens resources, pollutes the planet, and aggravates climate change. Problems of controlling climate and disease seem to demand more regulation of what Étienne Girard calls "spiralling desire".[3]

Fabian Scheidler is among writers who have described this new crisis of capitalism with minatory glee. Part of his object is to denounce a "system" he deems "crazy" and "sick" (p. 3); a further part, less consistently foregrounded, is to hear "voices drowned by the megaphone of power" (p. 4). He warns that current practices condemn the world to conflict and ecological disaster (p. 6). So far, so familiar.

Less convincing are his attempts to place current problems in a millennia-long context and, more particularly, to blame European expansion for current woes. Empire bashing is a popular sport but, like others (say bear baiting or cock fighting), lacks both subtlety and moral authority. Empires, Scheidler avers, have been "associated with expulsion, impoverishment,

destruction of environments and massive violence” (p. 5) – which is true of all methods of political organization and, in any case, does not necessarily mean that the evils of capitalism are attributable to or congruent with European outreach.

It is not clear why Scheidler starts his narrative of decline with the Bronze Age. His ignorance of the period subverts readers’ confidence: “hierarchy” did not “begin” (p. 14) then, nor were earlier configurations “far more democratic” than anything since (p. 208). Scheidler’s characterization is based on “structural violence” under “dominating gods”, facilitated by a supposed popular submissiveness (pp. 17–31). Even if this caricature were valid, it would make nonsense of the logic of Scheidler’s claims that “the modern world-system” (p. 85) is responsible for the ills of the world.

Professional historians are unlikely to accept responsibility for “a reconstruction from the perspective of growth”, from which Scheidler regards Howard Zinn as the only exception honourable enough to mention (p. 59). Such a rebuke seems impertinent from a writer apparently unconcerned with getting his facts right. He is cavalier about subjects he dislikes, including Judaism and Christianity. Daniel was not “thrown into a fiery pit”, nor is the book attributed to him intelligible as “an attempt to compensate for powerlessness and humiliation” (p. 66). Scheidler’s assertion that the Apocalypse “contradicts the main goals of the Jesus movement” is typically insensitive (p. 71). It is untrue that “none of the authors of the gospels” – which are composite works incorporating traditions of long standing when the current state of the texts was defined – “ever met” Christ (p. 71). Jesus, we hear,

was “possibly illiterate” (p. 71): anything is possible, but the evidence suggests the opposite. Paul was indeed an innovator but did not turn “almost everything the Jesus movement stood for on its head” (p. 77). Rather, Paul was a faithful formulator of Christ’s doctrine of grace. St Boniface’s mission was not “to the peoples of Central Europe”, nor did he “send in troops” (p. 79). Sepúlveda was not “a theologian” and did not “justify genocide” (p. 79). Bacon’s and Campanella’s were by no means “visions of total despair” (pp. 63–65). The persecution of witches did not “follow up on the Inquisition” (p. 119).

On secular topics, Scheidler is hardly more reliable. He knows little of the early modern world, where his analysis of the origins of “an economy that aims for capital, competing states with centralized armies, and an ideology touting expansion” (p. 85) is focused. Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, for instance, did not “block the Asian trade routes” (p. 112). Hobbes said the exact opposite of what Scheidler claims (p. 149): the sovereign was the beneficiary of, but not party to, the contract the philosopher postulated. The suspension of Zheng He’s voyages did not “signal the end of Chinese expansion” (p. 151). Christopher Columbus, on whom Scheidler seems to share Zinn’s delusions, was not a “pirate”, nor did he think “he had reached India by 12th October, 1492”, nor did he kidnap “500 men” on his first voyage, nor did he chop off the hands of his victims, nor did he say most of the things Scheidler attributes to him (p. 113). Our author exercises no critical judgement or restraint in caricaturing the Reconquista (which was a slow and fitful business with Muslims and Christians normally in alliance) or the

Spanish monarchy in the Americas (which was a native and Spanish condominium with constructive as well as destructive features) (pp. 113–116, 193).

The litany of errors continues in Scheidler's account of more recent times. What credence can one attach to a writer who thinks that Glasgow "became rich" through slaves (p. 168)? Or that nationalism was a consequence of industrialization (p. 184)? Or that "the birth of fascism" occurred after the First World War? Or that the atom bomb was "the fulfilment of Francis Bacon's vision" (p. 239)? Or that the movie *Jaws* "fulfilled an important ideological function by preparing [...] for a world of total competition" (p. 268)? Or that pandemics are "a consequence of the colonial domination project" (p. 319)? Who can take seriously Scheidler's admiration for "the world revolution of 1968" (p. 255) or his denunciation of Mickey Mouse and Aunt Jemima as agents of capitalist propaganda (p. 244) or his praise of the Gaia Hypothesis as "scientific" (p. 261)?

What of his proposed solutions? At times he puts his faith in "resistance" (p. 288), at others in delightfully old-fashioned anarchism: communal "self organisation" by citizens who must "take matters into their own hands" (pp. 288, 296). He has a touching affection for democracy, apparently unaware of the invincible popularity of the unsustainable growth and consumption rates he condemns. In the end, he reverts to the same paradox that bedevilled Marx: the state Scheidler detests is uniquely empowered to do his bidding, expropriating the rich (p. 298) and becoming – we are not told how – "an institution obligated to serve the common good". It is a pity that the author's errors and rhetoric

occlude his case: for Marx was, perhaps, right, or at least less wrong than his detractors have supposed. He deserves a better advocate.

Notes

- 1 A. Briggs, The Background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in Three English Cities (1830–2), in: *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 10 (1952), pp. 293–317, at 317.
- 2 T. Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge, MA 2014.
- 3 É. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore, MD 1977.

Maria Todorova: The Lost World of Socialists at Europe's Margins: Imagining Utopia, 1870s–1920s, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 363 pp.

Reviewed by
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The rehabilitation of utopia in the age of the end of ideology is the main objective of Maria Todorova's most recent book on the history of Bulgarian socialism. Covering chronologically approximately the period of the Second International (1870s–1920s), Todorova sets out to answer an ostensibly simple question: What drove young Bulgarian men and women to socialism in the late nineteenth century? In more detail, what did they dream, feel, think, and fight for? And most significantly, how did they form their socialist world view and convictions in a distant corner of Europe, and admittedly not exactly the epicentre of capitalistic development, such as Bulgaria?