Anarchist Studies 29.2 © 2021 ISSN 2633 8270
www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/anarchiststudies/

# REVIEWS

## David M. Struthers, *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019; 290pp; ISBN9780252042478

Excavating the future of Los Angeles in 1992, urban theorist and historian Mike Davis observed how the city's ruthless corporate planners had successfully armoured the city against the poor. In *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles,* David M. Struthers counterposes this popular image of the 'fortress city' by retreading the steps of its early twentieth-century labour organisers. During this period, coalitions of migrant workers in Los Angeles were woven together by a broad 'culture of affinity' (p15), a left landscape which included the exiled junta of the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The city also attracted revolutionaries of global status, including Sun Yat-Sen, Emma Goldman and Rudolf Rocker. But the migrant residents of LA 'drew from two primary strands of radical thought: the syndicalism of the IWW and the array of strategies found in anarchism' (p41).

The fluidity of migrant work life demanded a more flexible strategy than the myopic 'craft' union structure of the American Federation of Labour (AFL). The AFL offered protection for the 'skilled' white worker by maintaining boundaries between trades and racist divisions among the working class. But at a time when American monopoly capitalism was ripping up the old industries, the AFL's 'protectionist' policy was self-sabotaging and failed to curb the technological tide which crested in the 'deskilling' of craft tradesmen. Indeed, Struthers' makes it clear that the 'skilled'/ 'unskilled' divide was always 'slippery' (p126) and underscored a significant weakness of the American labour movement during the early twentieth century. Even where migrant workers did successfully challenge the racism of the AFL (especially its Sinophobia), 'mobility met the limits of bureaucratic organizing and the flexibility required by workers in the transnational [US] West' (p126). Whilst the point is somewhat under theorised by the author, *A World in a City* shows us that

DOI:10.3898/AS.29.2.REV.01

'skilled' and 'unskilled' labour, two apparently distinct sides of experience in the workers' movement, increasingly overlapped.

Mexican workers, who largely fell into the 'unskilled' category, were predominant in the region's agricultural economy and the expansion of its railroad network. Alienated by the officialdom of the AFL, Struthers' attributes the success of the IWW to its willingness to engage with migrant workers beyond movement-controlled spaces. Whilst the union hall, publishing houses and anarchist libraries were vital arenas for coalition building, Struthers directs our attention to 'street corners', 'freight trains' (p47) and even the sleeping quarters on rural job sites.

One of Struthers' central claims is that there was a direct overlap between the IWW's practice of 'travelling organizing' (p110) and the well-known border revolts against the US-backed dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico. In January 1911, IWW anarchists and members of the PLM poured out of the factories and fields in the US West and crossed the border to take up arms in support of the Magonista rebellion in Baja California. For historians working within the confines of national historiographies, the revolutionary incursion against Díaz has been considered as a linear 'precursor' (p156) to the Mexican Revolution. The focus of *The World in a City* is not on assessing the military success or failure of the rebellion, nor whether it constituted the 'antechamber' of the revolution, but rather the role the PLM and the IWW played in raising a 'cosmopolitan army' (p156) of African Americans, Native Americans, European immigrants and Anglo IWW anarchists from the United States and abroad.

The defeat of the Magonista rebellion was met in Los Angeles with brutal recriminations from the US state. But as with other revolutionary defeats, the transnational anarchist movement proved quite capable of forging its own fissures. Struthers' later chapters focus on the limits of anarchist internationalism: first after the defeat in Mexico, then with the First World War, and finally with the rise of the Communist Party. *A World in a City* reveals that the Baja Raids caused significant rifts within global anarchism: many European anarchists had constructed a vision of revolution tied to urban barricades and thus failed to grasp the potential of a rural and guerrilla-led uprising. Indeed, this is an important book for those interested in the perennial question of how revolutionaries balance local knowledge with internationalist ideals. *A World in A City* shows that this is rarely a smooth, syncretic process.

*Jessica Thorne, Royal Holloway, University of London*

## Benjamin Franks, Nathan Jun, and Leonard Williams (eds.), *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*

London: Routledge, 2018; 254pp; ISBN 9781138925656

The editors of this volume have collected a variety of concise and insightful essays by a diverse range of authors. These essays demonstrate deep knowledge of anarchist thought. Every essay contains extensive quotes and discussions of anarchists old and new. After completing this volume, a reader will be thoroughly acquainted with the main ideas, key authors, and emerging issues in the anarchist canon. However, this also means that the volume will primarily be of interest to those who are already well versed in anarchist scholarship and in the history of philosophy and political theory. This is not a book for beginners. But it does include a broad set of references, which experts will find edifying.

Again, this is not a book for beginners. Indeed, the volume begins with a dense essay that may be off-putting for those who want to get to the meat of the discussion of anarchism. The introductory essay by the editors explains the structure of the volume, which is derived from Michael Freeden's structural or 'morphological' analysis of ideologies. This analytical framework may be of interest to political philosophers who are concerned with the problem of defining a concept such as anarchism. But it will likely not be of interest to those whose interests are less philosophical and more interested in what anarchists say about specific issues and topics.

The preliminary discussion of Michael Freeden's work is, nonetheless, important for understanding the structure of the book. Freeden outlines the morphology of and structural relations in political ideologies by distinguishing between core concepts, adjacent concepts, and peripheral concepts. The book thus has three sections, reflecting these three conceptual categories. The opening chapter also offers a structural analysis of Freeden's account of two modes of 'decontestation' (i.e., ways that an ideology settles on shared concepts). These modes are micro- and macro-decontestations. This account helps explain how the ideology of anarchism developed and cohered (and how any other political ideology is articulated and defended). But the jargon and methodology taken from Freeden's work will likely be of little interest to the average reader who is primarily interested in learning more about anarchism.

Nonetheless, the structural outline of the book makes sense. The point

behind the appeal to Freeden's structural/morphological analysis seems to be to remind the reader that anarchism is a complex and internally diverse ideology, which has defined itself in different ways in different contexts. Anarchists argue among themselves and against their non-anarchist critics. Anarchist ideas also develop within concrete contexts and historical situations.

This basic insight about the complexity and diversity of anarchist ideas is reflected in each of the substantive essays. Indeed, there are diverse methodological approaches and competing ideas found in these chapters. The result of reading the essays collected here is a new appreciation of the complexity of anarchism and the diversity of issues that are important to the broad range of authors and activists identified as anarchist. In nearly every essay, so-called 'classical' anarchists (Stirner, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, and the like) are discussed, often in relation to newer, more contemporary, or 'post-anarchist' authors. The result is a broad and inclusive overview of anarchist thought – old and new.

The volume does remain Eurocentric in its primary focus on post-Enlightenment European and American authors – both in the 'classical' anarchist tradition and in the work of more contemporary anarchist authors. One criticism that might be offered in terms of the collection of authors and the texts they discuss is about the lack of non-European thinkers and issues. There is, to be fair, some mention of South America. There is also an explicit recognition in a number of the essays in this volume of the need for decolonisation and the need for a critique of Eurocentrism. But while the authors articulate the need for decolonisation in anarchist thought, this volume continues to lean heavily on the European classical anarchist tradition. One wonders what anarchism would look like in Asia or Africa. Despite this, the coverage of topics is broad and inclusive – as can be seen from a glance at the index. No single volume can cover all possible topics. Some topics that receive only minor coverage include: religion, nonviolence, militarism, epistemology, and ethics.

Leaving aside these minor criticisms, what emerges is a broad and complex discussion of anarchist authors, themes, concepts, and movements. Among the most interesting chapters, to my mind – as a political philosopher – were the chapters on prefiguration (Franks), freedom (Jun), revolution (Gordon), intersectionality (Lazar), and ecology (Parson). These chapters (and the others as well) remind us that anarchism generates complex methodological and substantive questions. The issue of prefiguration leads us to wonder whether anarchism has a substantive goal or telos, a question that Franks leaves open. In Jun's chapter on freedom, we wonder whether anarchism is merely a negative critique of oppres-

sion or whether there is a positive vision of freedom guiding anarchist thought. With regard to revolution, Gordon asks us to consider the difference between indefinite liberationist struggle and a more substantial vision of final revolution. Lazar's account of intersectionality connects anarchism with themes in feminism, multiculturalism, and post-structuralism. And Parson's chapter asks us to consider how deep the anarchist critique goes – contrasting primitivist, anti-civilisational green anarchism with other versions of anarchist ecology. The other chapters are no less interesting, even though we cannot discuss the details here.

In general, the authors do a good job of including both theoretical issues and practical/historical examples. Each chapter is well organised. They are short, clearly written, and to the point. Several of the chapters attempt to explain how they are situated in the structure provided under Freeden's morphological framework. But this is less interesting than the erudition exhibited by each author. Each chapter includes an extensive list of references. The list of references found in these chapters can provide an important guide for further study.

*Andrew Fiala, Fresno State University*

---

## Mitchell Abidor (ed. and trans.), *Down with the Law: Anarchist Individualist Writings from Early Twentieth-Century France*

Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019, 203pp; ISBN 9781849353441

Despite the growth of attention anarchism has received in the last two decades, individualist anarchism, perhaps, remains the most understudied tendency in anarchist studies. It is a diverse and vibrant school of anarchism that differs considerably across time and space, yet it remains largely ignored. Therefore, Mitchell Abidor's new book, *Down with the Law*, is a much welcomed contribution.

In this volume, Abidor provides numerous translations from, and short biographies of, key figures from French individualist anarchism. It begins with five short articles by Albert Libertad, all of which were originally published in the influential journal he co-founded, *l'anarchie*. The opening chapter, 'The Carrion Cult' is one of the standout pieces in the book. Jeffersonian in spirit, the article critiques society's celebration of the dead and the moral authority their ideals and traditions hold on the living. As Libertad writes, 'The dead lead us, the dead command us, the dead take the place of the living' (p13). The article demands

a celebration of the living, and for individuals to unbind themselves from the actions and histories of their ancestors. The article exemplifies individualist anarchism at its most fearless, empowering and unapologetic. This is followed by five entries from perhaps the most well-known French individualist anarchist, Émile Armand. Armand's articles cover his thoughts on the viability of anarchism, the constitution of an anarchist, whether the illegalist is a comrade, and a glimpse into his anomalous views on sex and sexuality. There is a single article by the anarchist bandit, Marius Jacob, 'Why I Stole', a justification for individualist appropriation. Then we are treated to two articles by André Lorulot. 'Who Are We? What Do We Want?' outlines Lorulot's individualism, and how individuality is key for happiness. In contrast, 'Men Disgust Me' decries the tyrant, demagogue and the false idol for misleading the masses and suppressing individuality, whilst simultaneously condemning voluntary servitude. There are two selections from the pacifist Han Ryner, 'antipatriotism' a short anti-war article and then a fresh translation of his 'Mini-Manual of Individualism'. Following are three pithy articles by the pessimist Georges Palante, two of which explore the relationship between pessimism and individualism – admirers of Laurence Labadie might find interest here. Next are two entries from Victor Serge written during his anarchist-individualist phase. The first, 'The Communards', questions the possibility of sustainable radical social change through revolution, while 'A Head Will Fall' questions the morality of the French criminal justice system through the trials and tribulations of Jean-Jacques Liabeuf. The book fittingly closes with Rirette Maîtrejean's 'Memories of Anarchy', her reflections from her time in the French individualist anarchist milieu. Maîtrejean beautifully illustrates the everyday struggle of the participants, their constant scheming to stay afloat and the contradictions that arise when trying to live according to anarchist principles in a capitalist society.

Abidor provides a brief introduction but it is, unfortunately, the weakest component of the book. His attempt to introduce the reader to the thought and activities of the French individualist anarchists leaves much to be desired. More alarmingly, articles Abidor translated for the book contradict some of his claims about Individualists. For example, he alleges the individualists believe 'a strict biologically determinism', and that 'only one's biological predisposition', prevents an individual from achieving their potential (pp3-4), but this is contradicted by Lorulot's 'Who Are We? What Do We Want?' Another example is his use of Lorulot's 'Men Disgust Me' to demonstrate the 'elitism' of the French individualist anarchists and their 'barely disguised contempt for the masses' who they

consider 'cowards and spineless' (p5). Abidor fails to mention that Lorulot wrote this article in despair on the eve of the outbreak of World War Two. These two examples highlight the major problem with the introduction: it lacks significant context. Abidor neglects to explain how the failure of the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War informed their thinking on revolution and the class struggle. Likewise, there is no mention how the response of the French public to the lois scélérates, the Dreyfus Affair and the First World War informed their opinion of the masses. Instead the reader is left thinking that French individualist anarchists were a bunch of elitist bandits that read too much Nietzsche and Stirner.

*Down with the Law*, brings some interesting French individualist anarchist articles into English. However, it highlights the need for further historical work on individualist anarchism, and those interested in a more thorough overview of the French individualist anarchist tradition are advised to consult *Disruptive Elements* by Ardent Press.

*Shane Little, Loughborough University*

## Federico Ferretti, *Anarchy and Geography: Reclus and Kropotkin in the UK*

London and New York: Routledge, 2019; 248pp; ISBN 9781138488120

Federico Ferretti has built a prolific career uncovering the networks of scholarly and political sociability surrounding Élisée Reclus. Like his larger-than-life protagonist, Ferretti is a geographer turned social theorist and historian; he is one of the few people who can be trusted to have read the entirety of Reclus's 18000-page *Nouvellle Géographie Universelle* (1876-1894). As if trailing his own move from France via Switzerland and South America to Ireland, in his most recent book, Ferretti follows Reclus to the British Isles and asks how their people and places inspired Reclus and how he, in turn, left his mark. The British focus means that another anarchist and geographer enters the picture on an equal footing: Pëtr Kropotkin, who spent far more time in the UK than Reclus and, as Ferretti shows, often helped to connect him to British interlocutors.

The United Kingdom may not seem like a hotbed of radicalism, and Kropotkin himself described its political scene as a 'grave' with 'no atmosphere to breathe in'. The most important contribution of this detail-packed book is that it

points to the many more subtle workings of anarchist politics and to the complex engagement of anarchists with different sectors of intellectual life: chapters of the book cover the Reclus brothers' encounter with British science, Kropotkin's substantial publishing networks, and the anarchists' efforts to introduce an international audience to the social and economic issues that they discovered in Britain. The two final and more extensive chapters discuss the circle around Kropotkin's journal *Freedom* as well as the anarchists' involvement with a diverse group of social reformers that Ferretti characterises as adhering to a broadly configured ethical humanism. Through such connections, we can appreciate how Reclus and Kropotkin took a stance on issues that are not strictly speaking at the centre of their own writings; Ferretti singles out examples like women's liberation, anti-colonialism, and gay rights. Taken together, this perspective allows Ferretti to convincingly argue that anarchist geographers pursued a multi-perspective and, in modern terms, 'intersectional' approach – in stark contrast to the economic determinism of their Marxist opponents, who are tellingly absent from their networks.

The trade-off for the proximity to the historical debates, networks, and sources is that Ferretti spends less time situating his work within existing analytical frames. His scholarship operates from a logic of accumulation rather than synthesis. Haia Sphayer-Makov's work, which could have shed more light on Kropotkin's carefully curated 'British' persona, is a surprising absence; the earlier English-language standard biographies of Reclus and Kropotkin are hardly discussed (Cahm's and Miller's studies have relied on those very Moscow sources that Ferretti treats as a major innovation); the sparse references to Matthew Adams's book leave open the extent to which Ferretti agrees with its reading of Kropotkin as a Victorian scientific rationalist (he does not seem to).

It is also not entirely clear how Ferretti's biographical network approach relates to another methodological commitment set out in the introduction: declaring what he calls his 'positionality' as 'an admirer of the early anarchist geographers' (p7) Ferretti presents the anarchists as standing unequivocally on the 'admirable' side of the history of a discipline whose tainted past has recently been scrutinised. Ferretti's sincere enthusiasm and profound sympathy for his subjects make for a reading that is both engaged and engaging – and in this sense very true to Reclus and Kropotkin. But in the eyes of this reviewer, some more uncomfortable questions are thereby sidelined rather than illuminated: Is the claim that Kropotkin was 'totally opposed' (p45) to the dynamiters of the *fin de siècle* a fair reflection of his broader grappling with issues of revolutionary

violence and individual agency? If Ferretti's digging in editorial correspondence has revealed the role of material considerations in all such business, can this factor really suffice to explain the unlikely collaboration between the anarchists and Halford Mackinder, the leading proponent of chauvinistic British imperial geopolitics? Would a more thorough engagement with the scholars who have taken a more critical view of the anarchists not in many cases have strengthened Ferretti's interpretations? Ferretti certainly has all the deep and detailed knowledge to answer such questions. This study for one aptly connects the different concerns of anarchy and geography through the focus on the British Isles. It gives a sense of why it was in Ireland where for Reclus – as he wrote in *La Terre* (1868) – 'the idea of telling the phenomena of the earth was born'.

*Pascale Siegrist, Princeton University*

## Ra Page (ed.), *Resist: Stories of Uprising*

Manchester: Comma Press, 2019; 446pp; ISBN 9781912697076

The previous volume in Comma Press's 'History-into-Fiction' series, *Protest: Stories of Resistance*, covered an impressive history of British public protests. The latest volume expands on this theme whilst also exploring more direct forms of action. *Resist: Stories of Uprising* is an illuminating anthology of short stories and accompanying critical reflections concerning some of Britain's most significant moments of political struggle. At a time when political protest groups (Extinction Rebellion, CAAT, Greenpeace) are being included in UK counter-terror documents (as revealed by the *Guardian*, January 2020), this volume should be of outstanding interest to the politically conscious. And to the outside, non-politicised reader, the anthology does an admirable job of rendering protestors more relatable than typical media narratives do.

Across twenty chapters, historically-informed accounts of political uprisings are followed by critical, reflective afterwords from leading historians, sociologists and campaigners from the frontlines. These critical voices often provide compelling rejections of stereotypes. For instance, Richard Hingley's essay on Boudica's Rising rejects the idea that Boudica was oppressed, relatively powerless, and resistant to Rome. She was 'the wife of a king friendly to the Romans', and there is much 'evidence for Boudica's membership of the aristocracy'; she could likely 'read and write in Latin' and 'lived in some luxury prior to the events of AD 60'

(pp29-33). It was most likely the way the Romans treated her family and people that encouraged her to revolt.

From Boudica's Rising through to Peterloo, the authors examine a range of repressive state tactics: domestic espionage, entrapment, torture, mass shootings, 'kettling', and improvised weaponry. Many of the volume's accounts touch on rearguard actions intended to retard regressive state policies; for instance, Kamila Shamsie's story 'Savage' (with an afterword from Malcolm Chase) covers the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, which was a response to the post-Peterloo Six Acts, while the 'Little Bird' story by Steve Chambers (afterword: David Rosenberg) covers the Battle of Cable Street (1936), a response by trade unionists, communists and the Jewish community to the rise of Mosley's blackshirts in East London. Other stories cover Blair Peach (1979) (wherein police officers brand their own unofficial weaponry to clamp down on anti-fascist protestors), the Seeds of Hope anti-arms trade action (1996), the Newbury bypass protests (1996), the Tottenham riots (2011), and Grenfell Tower (2017).

Vivid and often moving accounts are provided of individual struggle and companionship. S.J. Bradley's story 'Black Showers' explores the Oxfordshire Rising of 1596, exploring a failed rebellion against land privatisation during times of severe economic strife intensified by an increasing population and rising inflation and land-poverty. John Walter's afterword observes that the lack of effective bureaucracy and hard economic data in the late sixteenth century encouraged the government to create what we would now term conservative explanations for inflation and landlessness: poverty was seen to be a direct consequence of individual moral failure, and not of land-grabbing and enclosure policies. As Walter reports, many at the time of the Oxfordshire Rising reportedly often said in rebuttal: 'Corn would not be better Cheap until some of the hedges were thrown down' (p49).

Martin Edwards's story 'The Cap of Liberty', concerning the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 – four years after the Battle of Waterloo – reminds the reader that the state's true enemies are not foreign Napoleonic hordes, but its own people, who must remain passive and subservient. The story 'Before Dawn' by Anna Lewis covers the 1831 Merthyr Rising with considerable empathy for social and religious mores. The story 'To Plot, Plan, Redress' by Eley Williams looks at the Rebecca riots of 1839 and 1842-4, an excellent example of 'successful direct action by ordinary people', as Rhian E. Jones puts it in her afterword (p151). These Welsh riots (which soon turned into a more organised popular movement, targeting land enclosures and the New Poor Law) were a response to the impo-

sition of toll-charges on privatised roads, whereby rioters dressed in a range of costumes (males wearing bonnets and petticoats) and damaged tollgates under cover of darkness. 'Rebecca' was not a real person but a fictional symbol used by the rioters for the purposes of unification and to generate a symbolic figurehead, akin to General Ludd of the Luddites. 'Rebbecaism', though not as well known as Chartism, became a leaderless, popular and autonomous form of protest targeting wealth inequality.

The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911 is also covered, a moment which exhibited previously unheard-of levels of solidarity between 'ship workers from above and below decks' (as Mark O'Brien puts it in his afterword to Jude Brown's fictional account) along with dock labourers and other transport workers. The striking workers from major unions experienced things that are today unheard of, as O'Brien recounts, including police-led 'military occupation', a 'battlefield' of indiscriminate baton attacks, and 'a hot Liverpool sun' (pp212-8). Another story covers the Liverpool Dockers' Dispute of 1995-98.

The anthology also allows its editor, Ra Page, to effectively respond to Paul Simon's rather uncomradely 2017 review in the *Morning Star* of the previous volume (*Protest: Stories of Resistance*) by including a wealth of previously 'omitted' (due to space restrictions and author interests/competence) episodes. Of particular note is Jonathan Moss's afterword to Luan Goldie's story on the Ford Dagenham Women's Strike (1968), which provides a highly insightful corrective to celebratory feel-good nostalgia by exploring the opinions of the actual strikers, not the view of the media and Hollywood, with the strikers viewing Ford's meagre pay rise for female workers (and not company-wide gender-equal pay) as a failure for them but a PR win for Ford.

*Resist: Stories of Uprising* attributes to fiction a clear sense of radicalism, assuming that the reader's narrative imagination can inform and, potentially, inspire transformative ideological shifts away from passive spectatorship and towards direct political engagement. Where the historian will often omit the emotive nature of rebellions, the storyteller reminds us of the deeply psychological component behind every political uprising throughout British history. If Ra Page is able to compile a third list of stories and commentaries, perhaps covering some Enlightenment-era events, another great modern trilogy could be within reach.

*Elliot Murphy, University of Texas Health Science Center*

## Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*

Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018; 330pp; ISBN 9781478002017

This is an edited volume, with contributions by a number of scholars working mainly in the social sciences. While its overarching theme is the decolonisation of knowledge, this subject is addressed from a variety of perspectives and with a changing focus on different parts of the global South. The tone is set by the foreword, written by Walter Mignolo, who refers to the 'decolonial political vision' of the Zapatistas, in which 'many worlds would co-exist'(pix), thus announcing the 'pluriverse' and challenging the hegemony of Western / Northern universalism. The case has been well put by previous generations of anti-imperialist thinkers, including Edward Said and Samir Amin, that the predations of colonising powers extended not just to political conquest and economic exploitation, but also to the belief systems, social values and traditions, languages and cultures of the colonised. It is widely accepted that this perceived monopoly of knowledge has persisted into the postcolonial age and that it has influenced at a deep level the would-be progressive, modernising agenda of development that the former colonies have attempted to pursue. For many of the contributors, modernity is seen as the Trojan horse for the pretensions of Western universality. 'Western' science itself is thus seen as part of the problem and the reason for failed development initiatives, where solutions imposed from outside have not included local knowledge and practice in their design and gone against traditional worldviews. As the editor, Bernd Reiter, sees it, 'the common thread that brings all the contributions assembled here together is the effort to move beyond one-dimensional solutions to diverse problems and the imposition of universalist claims about the very nature of the humanity towards the construction of the pluriverse' (p1). This entails not just appropriately adapted practical solutions to local problems, but also 'counterhegemonic analytical frameworks', non-Western ways of thinking about the world, mosaic rather than monolithic epistemologies.

This raises serious issues, concerning possible distinctions between the diversity of ideas, beliefs of a political, economic, philosophical or religious nature, cultural assumptions and viewpoints, cultural and ethical value systems, on the one hand, and the theories and practices of the physical and natural sciences, on the other, which are often assumed to be universal. This is a view which is

challenged here, as by Sandra Harding who emphasises the importance of the scientist's standpoint in gender terms, as well as those from the non-Western world. It also raises questions about the unity of the human race, the existence of a universal or near universal global capitalist system, the problems affecting the planet as a whole and the need for joint collective action to overcome them.

This volume is at its most interesting when it discusses particular movements which have taken a different tack, looking to local, traditional practices of thinking and viewing the world, as a guide to developing societies in ways that do not fit the dominant model proposed by global capitalism, that do not accept destructive economic growth and industrialisation as the only route to development, that look to ways to live in harmony with the natural world and achieve ecological balance. To mention just a few of these, Raewyn Connell stresses the diversity of women's experiences across the postcolonial world and the debates about gender relations that have taken place in the 'South', outside of Western feminist models. There are sections on ideas and debates in some Latin American countries, especially Ecuador and Bolivia, whose constitutions have been changed to incorporate notions of development based on indigenous organisation and struggle, such as *Buen Vivir*, *Sumak Kawsay*, which recognise the rights of nature or *Pachamama* and promote alternatives to extractive and industrial development as ways for people to improve their lives, along with communal and collective forms of social organisation, in line with native American tradition. There is a chapter on North American First Nation communities and another on the water-based communities of Columbia's Pacific Coast. The role of the *griots* of West Africa in maintaining tradition, cultural identity and socialisation is discussed. In the context of India, Manu Samnotra discusses Gandhi's political epistemology and rejection not just of nationalism and revolutionary violence but also modern, Western industrialisation and Venu Mehta analyses the epistemology of Jainism. There is also an interesting discussion by Manuela Boatcă of the anomalous status of Europe as a continent, with particular regard to Caribbean Europe. The Arab world is represented by a chapter on Ibn Khaldun's 'indigenous epistemology' and Ehsan Kashfi throws light on attempts by reformist religious intellectuals in Iran to develop new thinking in a non-Western context.

In short, there is a vast diversity of analysis and proposals for alternatives within the present global context. No doubt some will argue that the volume, as a whole, downplays the role that global capitalism exerts on the planet as a whole and the difficulties this presents for localised, autonomous change to take place. Some will also argue that the 'West' is not actually the monolith that is presented

here and regret that there was little discussion of the diversity, the dissidence and the hybridity within Western societies. This is surely going to be an ongoing debate.

*Margaret A. Majumdar, University of Portsmouth*

## Mitchell Abidor (ed.), *May Made Me: An Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France*

London: Pluto Press, 2018; 272pp; ISBN 9780745336947

*May Made Me*, joining a large collection of publications celebrating the fifty-year anniversary of the events of May 1968 in France, is a wonderful collection of interviews with participants in the uprisings. It is not an introduction to the subject, but rather aimed at enriching the field by presenting an oral history of its participants through their own eyes. Despite this, readers who are unfamiliar with the details might still be able to pick up the general gist and find the May '68 revolutionary spirit contagious.

Mitchell Abidor starts the book with a somewhat defeatist introduction. Without pointing fingers, he frames '68 as a failure of the Left to achieve social change, both on the side of the PCF and the student movement. Even the positive effects he briefly mentions are overshadowed by his conclusion that at the end, May '68 was a victory for capitalism. This context sits almost in opposition to the actual interviews, where optimism and the spirit of joyful resistance flow out despite admittances to stalling. The twenty interviews Abidor presents vary in their opinions and political affiliations. The interviews open with a few well-known names, including Jean-Jacques Lebel and Alain Krivine, but continue with an astonishing scope and breadth. Abidor talks to students, workers, farmers, neighbourhood committee organisers, militant anarchists, artists, people in the centre of Paris and people in other cities and towns in France. Some of these people remained politically active, others didn't, and not all of them think that May '68 was life-changing. Through this balanced account of various points of view, the reader gets a feeling of the general perception in society before and after the events, but also an idea of what might have triggered the events in the first place. In addition, readers interested in contemporary French philosophy might be fascinated to discover more about the influence of May '68 on French intellectuals.

The central question of the book, and one that pops up in each interview, is whether May '68 was a revolutionary moment, stifled by the PCF and the unions, or, on the other hand, a (more or less) successful attempt at reforming working conditions. The answers, just like the background of the participants, are varied. Krivine and the Communist party members Texier, Vauselle and Barbe all seem to rely on a Marxist working class framework for their analysis, which results in lack of excitement and appreciation of the radical potential of the events. For them, it seems, May was about the bread-and-butter demands of the workers and the outcome of the strikes was satisfactory. Others are more optimistic in their perception of the events, talking about the long-lasting connections and friendships they made, such as Suzanne Borde, who, for instance, readily admitted that the 'blah-blah-blah political element of May '68' (p152) wasn't for her. She didn't feel connected to the PCF or even her radical peers with whom she was studying, but found her place in Comités d'Action in the neighbourhoods. The CA, however, had such a profound effect on her life that she ended up starting a commune and bringing up children together with other members of the CA.

Adding to the positive sides of May '68 are the examples of complete change in French society during and after the events, such as the joyful help and solidarity between people. Almost every interviewee mentions the unexpected alliances between protesters and other people in the streets of Paris. A fascinating example is the interview with Joseph Potiron, a farmer in Brittany, who organised the distribution of food during the workers' strikes in the region. His robust political analysis is still filled with energy and hope for the future. Similar feelings resonate in other interviews. May '68 changed people's perception of their own role, as individuals, in politics, but also their capacity as a collective. Regardless of whether May '68 had the potential to overthrow the government, most of the interviewees agree that it caused a social revolution in French society. Feminism, LGBTQ rights and challenging rigid conservatism are often listed among the consequences of the uprisings, along with the radical political consciousness that defined this generation.

An easy and entertaining read, *May Made Me* is a vivid account of one of the biggest strikes in modern day Western Europe and has a lot to offer for both strategic and tactical organising. More than just a historical description, it gives its participants the scope to reflect on their successes and failures, which are often valuable lessons for anarchists.

*Elizabeth Vasileva*

## Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*

Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018; 384pp, ISBN 9781629634476

*Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* is likely already known to most of the readers of this journal. For many years after its publication in English by Freedom Press in 1975, it was one of only a handful of easily accessible and affordable books in that language which provided an account and demonstration of the extraordinary achievements of the Spanish anarchist movement during the civil war (1936-1939).

Undoubtedly indispensable to scholars and assured of classic status to anyone who values anarchist history, as an introductory text it has advantages and drawbacks. A partisan account based on the author's extensive fact-finding mission in the period under study, the book provides moving testimony to the 'modest and unknown heroes' (p49) who transformed Republican Spain from the ground up, and in its extensive detail builds a formidable case for taking the Spanish revolution seriously that even its detractors would struggle to counter. It is also, as Pedro García-Guirao points out in his introduction, remarkably fair-minded, concerned to point out deficiencies in the new social arrangements and to highlight both internal and external obstacles to the realisation of the anarchist ideal. Furthermore, the analysis provided in Part Five, 'Parties and Government', is highly informative and clear-sighted, bringing out the importance of often overlooked phenomena. This is particularly true of the all too brief chapter on the complex relationship between libertarians and republicans.

Its drawbacks reside in its density and frequent digressions. García-Guirao notes that Leval was not a 'systematic thinker' (pxii). Certainly he would have benefited from a good editor. One finds important contextual points common to the experience of a great number of towns and villages tucked away in asides which might easily be missed, particularly since the casual reader is unlikely to plough through the details of every town included in his account. The addition of an index to PM's re-edition is therefore enormously helpful. Still, given the availability of José Peirats' lengthy but logically-constructed *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, which has the added advantage of Chris Ealham's scholarly and up-to-date introductions and footnotes, the necessary – even urgent – role that Leval's contribution once played in propagating the achievements of Spain's revolution has been superseded.

In his preface to the present edition, the late Stuart Christie made the curious comment that Leval and his English-language translator and publisher, Vernon Richards, should, in 1975, have included further texts in the book that were written by Leval and contained in Sam Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-1939*. Curious because one would have thought that the book's re-edition would have presented the opportunity to rectify these omissions. As both the Dolgoff collection and *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* are freely available online, the point is probably moot. By contrast, an affordable version of Graham Kelsey's indispensable *Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State: The CNT in Zaragoza and Aragon, 1930-1937* and English translations of studies on the revolutionary transformation in Spain by the likes of Alejandro Díez Torre, Antoni Castells Duran and Anna Monjo and Carmen Vega remain pending.

*Danny Evans, Liverpool Hope University*

---

## Justin Akers Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio: Magonistas, Socialists, Wobblies, and Communists in the Mexican American Working Class*

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018; 719pp; ISB 9781608467754

Justin Akers Chacon's *Radicals in the Barrio* is a vital and, I am saddened to note, very timely book. The book is exceptionally rich in detail, well sourced in English and Spanish, and covers an astonishingly long period of history of both the Estados Unidos Mexicanos and the United States of America. It could have been three separate consecutive books, but a significant power of this book is that it is one comprehensive and inclusive narrative. Increasingly, as historians in Canada and the USA have come to recognise, a history of either that does not include First Nations/Native Americans, is woefully incomplete (and readers should be aware that there are numerous Native American peoples the unity of whose lands are violated by borders such as those claimed by the USA). Not only does Akers Chacon include indigenous and Native Americans, he does not allow the artificiality of a border to exclude the history of the working classes in Mexico from those in the land that lies to its north.

*Radicals in the Barrio* is 598 pages of narrative and an impressive 104 pages of endnotes. I would entreat readers to not skip past the notes because they are themselves rich in detail, with substantive information (sadly, the book does

lack a bibliography but the references in the notes are generally complete for each chapter). Tracing the history of workers across the frontier, Akers Chacon provides an informative history of his topic covering the trajectory of workers from late nineteenth century through to the mid-1950s Cold War in the USA. He begins with economic conditions in Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century, the causes of the Mexican Revolution, and the trans-border activism of organisations such as the Partido Liberal Mexicano, Socialist Party of America, the Communist Party of the United States of America, as well as the role of various labour organisations in both countries. The influence of anarchism, communism, socialism, and syndicalism are all thoroughly covered. Akers Chacon makes some key points about 1954, the date with which he ends. The year 1954 saw substantive changes in the trajectory of this history: '[a]fter 1954, the federal government made permanent the apparatus of immigration "enforcement" by doubling the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] budget ... and steadily increasing funding and the number of enforcement agents each year thereafter' (p597), and, in his concluding sentence, '[t]he year 1954 also witnessed the beginning of the next phase of the civil rights movement, in which struggle moved away from the point of production with Communists no longer the driving force' (p698).

One of the difficulties in writing a review of this book is how much it does cover. Rather than take the standard academic tack of focusing on a narrow and tightly defined aspect of the topic, it covers so many people, organisations and topics. Racism, immigration, economics, politics – my list here is necessarily incomplete. Akers Chacon has taken a number of focused studies and generated substantive history of the Chicano working class in the USA, even while stopping in 1954, and given a richness of detail and information that few synthesized studies achieve. But reading it does raise this question: exactly whom do borders serve?

It was a difficult book to read and review as it is relevant to a raw and immediate present politics. The behaviour of the Trump administration was especially abhorrent, partly because it openly revelled in its racism. But on immigration sadly, slight improvements but fundamentally *plus ça change, c'est la même chose*. Immigrants are human beings, and though governments seek to demonize them, the people coming share many characteristics with my ancestors from Scotland and with the people described in Akers Chacon's tremendous book. We are all living in a colonial settler state. Read Akers Chacon and learn this history, keep it alive for the right reasons.

*Andrew H. Lee, New York University*

## Matt Meyer and Sonia Sanchez, *White Lives Matter Most: And Other 'Little' White Lies*

Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019; 108pp; ISBN 9781629635408

*White Lives Matter Most* is not a title I can display while reading on the train. This book gets a plain brown wrapper, same as the books I read whose covers feature a swastika or a cross-burning. Because you have to look past your first impression, to the much smaller subtitle, to see that lead author Matt Meyer is denouncing his own title statement as a lie.

I had to look past my first impression in another way, too. A lot of *White Lives Matter Most* reads like a set of speeches: short essays on big topics that inspire or challenge but don't offer a lot of depth or complexity. What redeems the book for me is its insistence that revolutionary work requires a multiplicity of approaches, and there is no 'one correct way to build for radical change' (p9).

Helping us build for radical change is this book's purpose, and its essays centre on a few key themes: combating white supremacy must be central, organising is crucial, and – most distinctively – advocates of revolutionary violence and nonviolence can and must work together. Matt Meyer (a long-time friend and comrade) has been addressing all of these issues for decades as a teacher, activist, and writer, and he is joined on several essays by co-authors Fred Ho, Natalie Jeffers, Ana López, or David Ragland. It's unfortunate that none of these four is listed on the cover or title page, although foreword author Sonia Sanchez is listed.

Matt and his co-authors call out white supremacy both at the systemic level ('Since America's founding, whites have used widespread violence against Blacks, Indigenous populations, and women to gain free labor and land' [p14]) and within progressive movements ('We [whites] must get comfortable with the discomfort of not being at the center or the head of all things' [p12]). These points are important but not particularly new, and *White Lives Matter Most* invokes them without providing much detail or new insights.

By contrast, the book's discussion of organising centres on a specific campaign: the historic, successful movement to free Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar López Rivera. Matt and co-author Ana López highlight lessons ranging from the need for 'simple and patient ... person-to-person contact' tailored to people's preferred forms of communication (p58) to the complexi-

ties of working with elected officials without allowing them to take over the campaign. Yet here too, more detail would have been helpful. We learn that international activists 'took leadership' from the Puerto Rican movement, and that this 'did not mean some kind of blind obedience to one Puerto Rican organization or another; it meant a creative engagement regarding how the work could be most effectively built in a wide variety of cultures, languages, and environments' (p64). That sounds good, but what does it mean in practice?

Most compelling is the book's third major theme, that radical movements must draw on multiple strategies – specifically both nonviolent activism and armed struggle. Matt Meyer is not the first leftist to argue we must 'refuse to choose between the legacy of Martin or of Malcolm' (p8), but he brings a distinctively powerful body of experience to the discussion, as a leader in the War Resisters League and Fellowship of Reconciliation who has also long worked closely with proponents and practitioners of armed revolution.

Matt points out that terms commonly associated with nonviolence – passivity, absolutism, and non-confrontation – go against what major nonviolence leaders such as Gandhi and King actually believed in. He cites feminist and nonviolence activist Barbara Deming, who engaged sympathetically with Frantz Fanon's advocacy of revolutionary violence and declared that acting against oppression was more important than purity.

Writing with Ragland and Jeffers, Matt advocates 'a multiplicity of intersectional strategies that expand what we consider as nonviolence'. These co-authors warn against glorifying violence but point out that 'casualties and bloodshed occur in all revolutions' (p24). They cite the Black Lives Matter movement as a rare political initiative that has fostered 'a revolutionary and militant nonviolence mindset and discipline' (p21).

This discussion is still general, but more than the book's other themes I believe it challenges many likely readers – both proponents and critics of nonviolent action – in potentially fruitful ways. It also resonates with recent antifascist calls for a 'diversity of tactics' that embraces militant and non-militant activism as complementary parts of a larger struggle. In a context where political openness and radical commitment are often treated as mutually exclusive, *White Lives Matters Most* offers a welcome corrective.

*Matthew N. Lyons*

## Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*

New York: Verso, 2019; 156pp; ISBN9781788735018.

Jodi Dean's *Comrade* came to me when I felt distanced from political engagement and activism. These days I have felt less and less like a Comrade. I often feel – as in my engagement with my labour union – that activism is too bogged down by practicalities and the difficulties that arise from collective bargaining. I feel distanced from the high-theory language and utopianism of academic publications on anarchism and Marxism. Dean's work in *Comrade* is a lovely balm, soothing my political fatigue with a nuanced balance of pragmatism and utopia. In short, it was a joy to read and it came to me at the perfect time.

Dean's careful analysis of the Comrade is useful because she presents the term as a 'generic figure' (p36) that is, at once, a designation of relation – how we are politically connected to and responsible for each other – and a gesture to a utopian ideal. My immediate concern was that proposing the comrade as a generic figure runs the risk of dismissing some of the political issues that arise from comradeship, but Dean is careful to address these concerns. In the second chapter, 'The Generic Comrade', Dean looks to the issues of race and gender that come along with Comrade as a designation; whether we like it or not, 'comrade' connotes masculinity and whiteness. Dean doesn't propose divorcing the term from the white patriarchal ideals it connotes, and suggests instead that conscientious use of Comrade 'doesn't abolish the antagonism' of patriarchal oppression or white supremacy, but instead 'enables another possibility to intrude' (p35). This is a part of what Dean proposes as the 'equalizing promise' (p10) of Comrade.

Dean's work here is thorough, well-researched, and careful, and the book is clear, straightforward, and accessible. The work it proposes is challenging, but the writing itself is pragmatic and thoughtful, written with the goal of shared understanding. This is perhaps best demonstrated by Dean's third chapter, 'Four Theses on the Comrade,' which breaks down her argument into four clear and intertwined theses. First, that Comrade names a relation that is based on sameness, solidarity (despite some ideological differences that may arise), and the promise of equality (p62). Second, that while anyone can be a Comrade, not everyone can because comradeship is based on shared work against oppression and fascism (p67). Third, that the Comrade is a collective designation that opposes politics based primarily on identity and the Individual (p77). And

finally, that the relationship between Comrades is mediated by fidelity to, and the work of building, truth (p80). These theses are clearly written, carefully extrapolated, and supported with passion. Dean's work here is encouraging, and for this reviewer, have invigorated a long-waning political engagement and a solidarity.

For me, the most exciting and engaging part of *Comrade* is that Dean critiques the now-popular political designation of the 'ally' as an isolating, limiting position that requires a clear drawing of the Individual as closed, as educating their self and reading the required texts, often at the expense of solidarity, work, and collective engagement (p20). In some ways, Dean's work here suggests, the 'ally' designation 'keeps attention away from the fearsome challenge of choosing a side, from accepting the discipline that comes from collective work, and from organizing for the abolition of racial patriarchal capitalism and the state designed to secure it' (p21). 'Ally', Dean makes quite clear, is not a collective designation, it's a self-identification, and 'political change is always and only political' (p22). This section on allyship is careful in its invitation to engage, rather than a simple rejection of the term 'ally' as vapid or empty. In these moments, I have found Dean's work most challenging to my own politics, and it has motivated and mobilised my activism in ways I hadn't expected.

Finally, I want to add that, even more than most Verso books, *Comrade* is beautifully designed. The book's cover is an eye-catching red and it boasts the text's clarity, its dedication to a single goal, and its accessibility. I read much of it while invigilating an exam for a postcolonial literature course, and many students asked about the book as they handed in their work. I had no hesitation then to recommend it, and I still don't. *Comrade* is inspiring and inspired, and comes at a time when I – when *we* – need it most.

*Dani Spinosa, York University*

## Anonymous, *Total Liberation*

London: Signal Fire, 2019; 120pp; ISBN 9781909798687

*Total Liberation* is an anonymous work that sets out to justify and articulate an intersectional revolutionary manifesto along anarchist lines. The book's purposes include: critiquing the reliance on class war rhetoric in anarchist theory; emphasising the significance of social ecology within an intersectional approach to

revolutionary ideas; and proposing how best to exploit future crises for revolutionary ends against a backdrop of climate change.

The successes of the book are primarily in its critical aspects. The author argues that there is an over-reliance on the language of class conflict and syndicalism, and, at least when it comes to the current shape of labour in Western Europe and North America, there are some valid criticisms here. The author contends that many forms of labour are irrelevant, dehumanising, and temporary, like call centre and shop floor work, and that no one anticipates collectively running such workplaces after a revolution. The book claims that anarcho-syndicalist approaches have become less relevant due to the casualisation of labour and the disintegration of skilled labour, which has destroyed the community and pride of belonging to a workplace. The author maintains that the language of class is still relevant, but locates it in an intersectional approach to opposing power, modelled on Bookchin's critique of social hierarchy. Another point well-made is how to balance insurrection with the need to build the skillsets required for alternative communities to flourish in power-vacuums left behind when the state crumbles. The book reflects on how to learn from the mistakes of past revolutions, and argues that the anarchist ideal must move away from its place within 'inaccessible sub-cultures' (p46) into a more approachable, workable reality. The book's most important take-away is its assessment of anarchism and ecology in relation to coming climate crises. It predicts that a century shaped by global temperature increase will exacerbate social tensions and likely lead to more fascistic state practices. It proposes that anarchists be ready to exploit such crises and start laying the foundations of self-organisation and community in anticipation of a law and order break down.

The books shortcomings are in its scope and the consistency of its philosophy. It is unclear how applicable its criticisms of anarcho-syndicalism are beyond the book's aimed audience in the economically-wealthy global north. The author notes that one of the reasons that labour in Western Europe and North America has been located in the service sector is because factory and agricultural labour has been outsourced elsewhere, especially to the global south. There is no attempt, however, to discuss the relevance of the anarcho-syndicalist approach for these relocated factories. This is a problem, given that an anarchist appreciation of labour and its inequities should be international. Furthermore, the book leans heavily into biocentrism and deep ecology – affirming that animals have just as much right to existence as humans, leading the author on more than one occasion to express the fight for animal welfare in unfortunate parallels to Black

slavery. The book also fails to point out the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the necessity of the rest of nature for humanity's continued existence. The book is lacking in philosophical grounds to make its case that all non-human life is intrinsically good, meaning this section of the work is unlikely to win over those that don't already agree with the author's biocentrism. Given that a key purpose of the work is to solidify the case for social ecology within the idea of 'total liberation', it is odd to find no discussion either of the shared struggle of, or the clash of priorities that can arise between, human and non-human interests. These are precisely concerns one would expect to be paramount if one seriously wishes to encourage anarchists to place social ecology on a par with (other) human injustices. Furthermore, the book is silent on a realistic, workable alternative to cities. It borders on the anarcho-primitivist in places, with an emphasis purely on agricultural communes and a surprisingly fierce rejection of technology (without discussion of its utility for medical purposes or to the disabled).

Overall, this book is a welcome addition to accessible anarchist theory. Its main strength is its consideration of how to organise in the face of unprecedented global crises. It is unlikely to win over those who do not already agree with its central premise and its philosophy is suspect in places, but it nevertheless provides some important suggestions and warnings for how to think and organise in the face of coming climate disaster. It remains to be seen if the book will remain relevant after the COVID-19 pandemic and the global protests in response to the murder of George Floyd. It is likely that revolutionary thought will need significant updating to reflect the impact of the events of 2020 and 2021.

*E. Brown Dewhurst, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München*

## adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*

Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019; 441pp; ISBN139781849353267

Michel Foucault, in conversation with Gilles Deleuze, said he could not bear the word desire because for him it equalled lack and repression (and why, he asked, do we recognise ourselves as subjects of desire and not as agents of pleasure?). Deleuze, in response, says he cannot tolerate the word pleasure (and anyway, for him desire neither comprises lack nor repression). Instead, desire is viewed as a productive life force which may, at times, give way to pleasure. Moreover, desire is merely an element among many in an assemblage, implying that it is

never 'neutral' because it may be partially captured by apparatuses of power, for example the state.

In a similar vein, Audrey Lorde articulates something about the revolutionary potential of *desire* (rather than pleasure as used here) in 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' (1978). In this essay, Lorde argues that the erotic is a resource which has, over the course of history, been maligned and disabused of its power by, on the one hand, being associated with the inferior place assigned to women and, on the other hand, being used to justify male contempt for women who do not shy away from the amatory. In locating the erotic as a power, Lorde recognises the creative force of desire.

Using Lorde's essay as one of the foundational texts for her own book – alongside the work of Toni Cade Bambara, Octavia Butler and others – adrienne maree brown argues in *Pleasure Activism* for practices of love and care as core to political resistance and the cultivation of resilience (p60). Her questions include who gets access to pleasure, how harmful desires are created and perpetuated (especially in capitalist societies), and how and when we unlearn pleasure. The aim of the book, then, is to provide readers with the means to become 'pleasure activists' which, for brown, is the reclamation of 'our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy' (p13).

The book consists of brown's own writings, as well as some from activists, artists and writers like Joan Morgan, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Cara Page. Morgan, like brown, contends that pleasure is not 'frivolous, irrelevant, or "unfeminist"' (p87), but a resistance strategy to the overdetermined categories in which especially women of colour are placed, and which then define them negatively according to more dominant narratives of womanhood, race, beauty and sexuality. Piepzna-Samarasinha intersects this further with disability when she writes: 'There can be nothing more badass than a bunch of crips loving and caring for each other' (p315). In these instances, *Pleasure Activism* responds to historical and economic slavery and its attendant cruelties and traumas, be they visible or invisible – and this is really the most powerful aspect of the book.

*Pleasure Activism* is also an invocation to live life as an artist would: making revolution a *way of life* by continually eliciting encounters that shatter received ideas, including ideas around sex work, drug use and so on, although these are minor inclusions as the book relies quite heavily on sexual experience as the practicing of pleasure. In a sense, then, the book is closer to Foucault's use of pleasure than Deleuze and Guattari's – and in fact Lorde's – use of desire. This is not a

critique per se, because sexual health and pleasure should certainly form part of revolutionary practices, but I must confess that it left me wanting, despite having enjoyed the read.

Let me clarify: my concerns are about the more pernicious forms of pleasure in contemporary societies, such as the dopamine hits provided by social media and the many ways in which these are corroding societal and intergenerational memory (as the late philosopher Bernard Stiegler also argues in his 2019 book, *The Age of Disruption*). In turn, this is changing the underlying desire of people. The lack of engagement with this 'other side' of pleasure is really the greatest detractor from the book because, if we are to 'center pleasure as an organizing principle' (p432) as brown implores us to, do we not need to address this near-ubiquitous aspect of daily experience and the effects it is having on activism? Nevertheless, brown's book *does* bring home an important transformational message: to endure struggle is to embody pleasure for that is where we find 'the power to co-create the world' (p437).

*Chantelle Gray, North-West University (Potchefstroom)*

## Victor Serge, *L'École du cynisme. De la Seconde guerre mondiale et ses raisons*

Paris: Éditions Nada, 2019; 126pp; ISBN 9791092457346

Victor Serge, the pen name of Victor Kibaltchich, was one of the most perceptive critics of the crisis of European culture and politics in the first half of the twentieth century. Originally close to members of the infamous Bonnot gang and to the individualist anarchist group of Albert Libertad, publisher of the weekly *l'anarchie*, Serge later became fascinated with the Russian Revolution, and turned Communist. He worked from 1919 to 1936 for the Comintern in the USSR. Disgusted by the increasingly dictatorial turn of the Bolshevik experiment, he was eventually expelled from the presumed workers' paradise. He found his way back to France and escaped the Nazi invasion by fleeing to Mexico, where he died in 1947.

It is during this later period of his life while in France that Serge – who had become a thorn in the side of the French communists, close as he was to the libertarian milieu as well as to the Trotskyist opposition to Stalin – published in the bourgeois newspaper *L'Intransigeant* a series of 18 articles between October,

1939 and February, 1940, collected in this volume. This is following the signing of the USSR's non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, an event whose repercussions were strongly felt within revolutionary circles in France.

In these articles, on the strength of his first-hand experience with the intricacies and the contradictions of Soviet politics, Serge offers a nuanced, critical point of view on the consequences of the Pact and Russia's plans for Eastern and Northern Europe. These denunciations of Moscow's cynical and unprincipled *realpolitik* profoundly displeased the French left, while diverging from the simplistic interpretations of the Pact favoured by the bourgeois parties, who were content to proclaim an equivalency between Nazism and Communism.

Serge starts by identifying the sources of the Pact in Soviet politics well before its signing. He points out, for example, how the Bolshevik's insistence on destroying social-democracy, supposedly 'in order to fight fascism' (p32), by helping the Nazis fight Otto Braun's Prussian government in 1932, already anticipated what was to be. He highlights the transitioning of support from Communist voters to the Nazis in Germany. And he reveals to a still fairly uninformed public the dire state of the economic situation in the USSR and the effect the purges have had on the efficiency of the Red Army, making a provisional *entente* with yesterday's enemy seem all the more necessary. In between, Serge does not forget to mention long lists of Russian negotiators entrusted by Stalin with the near-impossible task of dealing with the Germans, who disappear one by one into Siberian gulags or end up in front of firing squads, whenever a new sudden turn in the leader's policies transforms them into inconvenient witnesses to his inconsistencies.

Other articles deal with the situation in Poland, with the elimination of the Polish Communist Party by the Soviet secret police as early as 1929, seen by Serge as foreshadowing the eventual dismemberment of the country. The fate of the Baltic countries, where Russia successfully imposed its rule, eliminating a centuries-old German presence, is contrasted with the still volatile situation in the Balkans, the oil fields of the region being of paramount importance to both German and Russian imperialist ambitions. Several articles deal with the Russo-Finnish war, seen as an attempt by Stalin to pre-empt a possible future takeover by Germany, and to guarantee for Russia a strategic advantage that would allow it to defend itself from any eventual push by the Third Reich towards the essential ports of northern Europe. And in discussing all these geopolitical tensions, Serge never fails to bring the situation down to a human level, reminding the reader of the tragic fate of the successive communist

leaders of the countries now being disputed by the two colossi, ruthlessly sacrificed whenever convenient.

The book, with a brief introduction by Charles Jacquier and a bibliography of works of Serge in French, is illustrated by the reproductions of seventeen drawings of his son Vlady, a noted artist. Although they deal with a very specific historical moment made at times to seem almost secondary by the events that followed, these articles shed an interesting light on how the run-up to the war could be perceived in France at the time, and show once again the perceptiveness of Serge's political analysis: always on the margins, never totally committed to any given ideology, and often, as the future would show, quite correct. As such, this book is a notable and worthwhile addition to the published works of one of the twentieth century's most multifaceted revolutionaries.

*Vittorio Frigerio, Dalhousie University*