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Review

What's Right?

By Eric Aarons

Rosenberg Publishing, ISBN: 1877058106

Paperback, 224 pages

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August 13, 2003—'What's Right?' is a bold new book by sculptor and lifelong progressive activist Eric Aarons that is nothing short of vast in its scope; the product of an entire lifetime of dedication and critical thought.

Following his 1991 autobiography, 'What's Left?', a text which explored the history of Australian Communism, including its final decline, the author's latest work, looks to the future. Recognising at once the mutual extremes of communist collectivism and neoliberal individualism, Aarons ponders the possibilities of 'waging a defensive struggle' against the present dominance of neoliberal ideas, thus setting the foundation for a possible "counter-offensive." This book will surprise readers with its nuanced insights, ranging in scope from the history of ethical philosophy, worldwide environmental crisis, globalization, and the extremes of Left and Right thinking, to current debates on US unilateralism, the United Nations and the "immoral" and "anti-human" terrorist threat. Indeed, the book even goes so far as to consider in depth topics barely considered by other progressive authors: the possible emotional and biological foundation to ethics, the mapping of the human genome and the consequences of the privatisation and possible abuse of this research.

Tracing the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, the prominent Austrian neoliberal economist and ideologue, and of the 'father of Communism,' Karl Marx, Aarons subjects each to penetrating criticism. Recognising the errors of the Communist movement he once championed, Eric emphasizes the importance of individual enterprise, enhancing initiative and innovation to the betterment of society as a whole. Traditional Marxist accounts of 'historical inevitability' and 'the withering away of the state' are, in turn, criticized unsparingly in the light of contemporary developments, and the historical failures of Communism. The orthodox Marxist delusion that markets could be abolished, to the betterment of society, is demolished—the author duly recognizing their essential role in providing "price signals" and "consumer input." Nevertheless, while Aarons makes apparent his 'loss of faith' in Marxism as a comprehensive and holistic doctrine, he nevertheless insists he has retained the "moral principles" which animated him throughout an entire lifetime of progressive activism. It is on this basis, then, that he criticizes neoliberalism: the present, dominant ideology of rampant individualism characterized in George Soros's words by "market fundamentalism and geopolitical realism."

Aarons's critique of neoliberalism is as penetrating as it is withering, questioning the shibboleth that distribution arising from markets is essentially just, because stemming from 'voluntary,' 'bilateral' relations. As Aarons insists, such an ideology 'masks' "great differences in power." Most damningly of all, the author condemns the hostility of this extreme individualist ideology to "human solidarity," "empathy" and "altruism." In this sense Aarons perceives a potential tension between traditional or 'classic' liberalism, which retained a sense of the 'public good,' and its 'neoliberal cousin.' The alternative posed by Aarons appears, effectively, to be a reinvigoration and renewal of that social-democratic tradition which has historically 'staked out' a position somewhere between communist collectivism and liberal individualism.

Such an approach, by Aarons's account, recognizes the 'dual nature' of human beings: at once co-operative and competitive. Sustainable development, progressive taxation reform, economic democracy, strategic social ownership, the reinvigoration of social expenditure and 'social power' are amongst the prescriptions offered by Aarons in response to the neoliberal hegemony.

Aarons's survey of the post September 11 international landscape is equally fruitful. Despite the real horror of terrorism, Aarons perceives the need of United States neoconservatives in a post-Soviet world order for a new 'external enemy' as "primarily a device for unifying a Western civilisation" divided within and facing "social fragmentation" as a consequence of neoliberal policies. In light of the meteoric rise of the Chinese economy, Aarons prophetically predicts that the current era of US economic and military dominance "cannot last forever."

The author's suggestion of a foundational system of ethics, grounded largely upon human emotion is bold and refreshing, going well against the grain of postmodern dogmas of absolute moral relativism. His analysis of the human genome project is genuinely enlightening, as his fears for its abuse are disturbing. Some radicals, however, may be disappointed by his apparent conflation of 'socialism' with the historical experience of Chinese and Soviet Communism. Aarons's apparent concession that the horrors of Maoism and Stalinism have 'invalidated' socialism, ignores the true diversity and breadth of socialist movements—often resolute in their opposition to totalitarianism—while ignoring the ensuing consequences, say, of Pinochet for the 'legitimacy' of capitalism. In truth, 'capitalism' and 'socialism' are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and are ultimately whatever we make of them.

Aarons had long ago made clear his break with Stalinist orthodoxy, courageously opposing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and leading the Communist Party of Australia down the road of an essentially liberal 'Eurocommunism.' This truly significant new work continues the necessary task of wedding liberal and socialist/social-democratic principles. The author proposes heartfelt ethical foundations for a Left too long ensnared by illusions of 'historical inevitability,' illusions which, in Aarons's words, "stilled consciences" providing a rationale for acquiescence in the face of Stalinist crimes. Although the author does not explicitly come to this conclusion, surely the alternative to such determinism can only be a new voluntarism. Perhaps herein lies the only hope for a Left fighting *against*, rather than with the tide of 'History.'

Regardless of readers' personal political perspectives, this book will prove to be refreshing, challenging and engaging.

Review originally published in The Canberra Times and [Shout! Monthly](#).

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