Review - Reading the Postwar Future: Textual Turning Points from 1944

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RICHARD TOYE, APR 22 2020

Reading the Postwar Future: Textual Turning Points from 1944
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The editors of this volume note its origins "as a cross-corridor conversation along the lines of 'Have you ever noticed how many influential books were written in 1944?'" (p.x). This conversation gave rise to a project of intellectual history exploring how key texts from this pivotal year reflected on, and helped shape, a different world order. The twelve chapters are not in fact confined to books; there are treatments, for example, of a Kurosawa film (by Chikako Nagayama), of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (by Suzanne Langlois), of the 1944 Democratic Party programme (by Katherine Rye Jewell), and of a Mao Zedong speech made in tribute to a fallen comrade (by Rebecca E. Karl). The Mao speech became "one of the three 'constantly read articles' of socialist education campaigns" (p.216). As the editors acknowledge, there are several other texts which might have been included, such as Sartre's *Huis Clos*. However, they are to be commended on a judicious selection and on their choice of a novel frame through which to examine a significant historical moment.

F.A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* actually receives two different treatments. Radhika Desai compares it to Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* which, she argues, has been unjustly neglected. In her analysis, Hayek provided a thin, ahistorical account which attributed the interwar movement towards economic planning to the intellectual failures of "socialists" (who in his view could be found in every party). She argues convincingly that Polanyi's book "goes for the jugular of the Austrian/Hayekian argument against planning and otherwise interfering in the allegedly spontaneous or natural market mechanism" (p.34). Polanyi rejected the idea that laissez-faire had emerged naturally and that subsequent legislation that departed from it was the consequence of deliberate action by opponents of the tenets of economic liberalism. In fact, he said, laissez-faire was itself the product of purposeful government action, whereas the subsequent limitations placed upon it arose spontaneously because of the threat that free markets posed to key aspects of society. Polanyi, Desai notes, ended up being marginalised in his career, whereas Hayek took laurels which, as far as she is concerned, were wholly undeserved.

Luke Foster, who offers an intriguing juxtaposition of *The Road to Serfdom* and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, gives a treatment of Hayek that is more sympathetic. Hayek, crucially, denied that he was a Conservative, whereas Eliot distinctly was one. During World War II, Eliot argued that the defence of European civilization against the barbarism of the Soviet and the Nazis required a sense of Christian national identity. As Foster suggests, "Such claims pose challenges for the Hayekian ends-neutrality view of political economy, because Eliot insisted that some aspects of human life were sacred and intrinsically valuable" (p.61). However, he argues, "these two far-sighted intellects" (p.71) in fact arrived at post-war prescriptions for European and international cooperation that were remarkably similar.

Michael D'Arcy's chapter on Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* describes it as of "seismic importance for the development of Western Marxism" (p.43). He suggests that they were willing to turn their critique of Enlightenment on Marxism itself. For them, the phenomenon of antisemitism could not be explained by

purely economic causes. Hence, "The criticism of Marxist theory is muted […] but the implication of the argument is clear: the phenomenon of antisemitism manifests an urge to domination, intrinsic to enlightenment, that political economy cannot explain" (p.47). Marxist analysis itself is therefore implicated in the power dynamics of enlightenment and thus requires a fundamental re-evaluation. If any of this seems at all impenetrable this is in part a reflection of the difficulty of the original text, which D'Arcy does his valiant best to explicate.

There are some valuable chapters on imperial themes. Sarah Frank discusses the Brazzaville conference, which was supposed to mark out a bold course for the reform of the French Empire, but inevitably offered only "repackaged colonialism" (p.92) in which the old inequalities remained in place. Radhika Natarajan discusses the work of Frank Lugard Brayne, a British official in India, who was a self-proclaimed champion of community development. The ideas in his book *Winning the Peace* were also to be found in the pamphlet "Village Life and how to Improve It" which was targeted at African readers. Whereas Brayne "represented himself as a heroic transformer of peasant conditions" (p.103) he was actually highly coercive and left financial disaster in his wake. Ajay Parasram gives a sensitive reading of Eric Williams's seminal *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams, who was to become the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, was a brilliant scholar who suffered from racism when studying at Oxford. His book argued, inter alia, that Britain's abolition of the slave trade was driven primarily by economic factors rather than humanitarianism. Parasram argues that Williams "internalized many colonial assumptions" (p.126) about the practice of history but nevertheless succeeded in mounting a bold challenge to orthodoxy.

Turning to the United States, Chike Jeffers examines a contribution by W.E.B. Du Bois to the collection of essays *What the Negro Wants*, which was edited by the African American historian Rayford W. Logan. The book was commissioned by the director of the University of North Carolina Press, but he didn't like the results, and therefore insisted on writing an introduction that in effect repudiated the entire contents. Du Bois's contribution was entitled "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom", which Jeffers describes as "an intellectual autobiography that ties together the theme of pursuing a personal life plan and the theme of the collective struggle for black freedom" (p. 185). Jeffers notes that Du Bois did not think that it would be easy to overcome American racism and did not anticipate how quickly Jim Crow would collapse; yet even if he was wrong in that particular respect, perhaps we can now see that he was right to expect that prejudice and discrimination would persist for a long time. The end of formal, legally-institutionalised inequality certainly did not put an end to it.

Alan M. Wald's treatment of the Jewish author Howard Fast's *Freedom Road* is equally intriguing. This was his seventh novel, out of sixty-five: "In the genre of radical historical fiction writers, Fast was a superstar" (p.199). Fast had a complicated relationship with the Communist Party, which, in spite of his refusal to name names in front of the House Committee on un-American Activities, he later repudiated. *Freedom Road* told the story of the Reconstruction so as to expose the Southern myth depicted, most famously, in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. But Fast's demand for large-scale socio-economic change to undo racism was at odds with the more cautious party line which urged support for Democratic candidates (many of whom were opposed to civil rights) in the 1944 elections.

Some of the chapters of this book would have benefitted from a deeper investigation of the circumstances of the various texts' production and reception – what, for example, were the commercial pressures that influenced the publication of books and pamphlets? Equally, it is not clear that the volume amounts to much more than the sum of its parts. The authors do not reflect much on what one might call the "1944ness" of the texts they discuss. Whereas, by definition, the Democratic programme had to be published in an election year, *The Road to Serfdom*, for example, was completed in 1943, and found a substantial new audience when republished in abridged form in the *Reader's Digest* in 1945. Because such issues are not considered, an intriguing methodological approach does live up to its full potential. However, there is only so much that could be achieved in the space, and it may be hoped that the book will act as a stimulus to further scholarly explorations of the problems of voice and genre that it so interestingly raises.

About the author:

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