

Book Reviews

Red Decade, by Eugene Lyons, 423 pp, paperback, \$35.95, ISBN-13: 9781931541077, Safety Harbor, Fla., Simon Publications, 1970.

This book, originally published in 1947, may be the best book that will ever be written about today's progressive mind-set. As Lyons describes the communist-dominated American Left of the Depression-wracked 1930s and 1940s, it is sobering to be confronted with how little has been learned from hard experience.

Lyons, a journalist who was, early on, a socialist, was assigned by United Press International to cover Russia in the early 1930s. His book, *Assignment in Utopia* (1937, still available), described the horrors and pogroms/purges/assassinations/famines, and systematic killing of Stalin's regime.

Upon his return to the U.S., Lyons turned his eye to the domestic communist political project, which was directed by Moscow. His investigations and analysis resulted in *Red Decade*. The book details Stalinist control of communist infiltration in the U.S., including creation of front organizations, infiltration of unions, influence in media and academia, and political and social takeovers. The magnitude of what Lyons documented is stunning.

Lyons also describes the complex international communist strategic projects that were surprisingly successful, partially due to American docility and social/political naïveté. The story is frightening, but more importantly, informative about these longstanding communist strategies.

Read it and weep for our nation. Ponder the nature of the enemy afoot here now, in the form of aggressive socialist political action. It is sobering to see a 50-year-old communist strategy of vilification of political enemies being perpetrated effectively with the complicity of modern media.

We must confront what today's leftists are pushing, compared with what

they pushed in the past. For example, emphasis on feelings over reason; decay of morality; antagonism toward traditions; revision of history; ideological totalitarianism; and dominance of politically correct thought, with control of words and thoughts themselves. Lyons shows that these are not new, and that they remain standard communist operating procedure.

Lyons is a superlative writer and a gifted reporter, courageous and determined. His story of the spell cast by Stalinist-tinged social justice activism over that day's purported best and brightest—literary titans, Hollywood celebrities, leading academics, religious leaders, media heavies, economic and business giants—would be jaw-dropping if it weren't so eerily familiar in the current environment.

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Socialism: The Failed Idea That Never Dies, by Kristian Niemietz, 172 pp, soft-cover, \$6.50, ISBN-13:978-0-255-36770-7, London, England, Institute of Economic Affairs, 2019.

Economist Kristian Niemietz summarizes the recurring pattern of proponents' accounts of socialist regimes over more than 100 years. At first, there is a honeymoon period. Then, when the regime fails to bring about the promised paradise, the excuse is always the same: this wasn't really socialism.

The frontispiece contains quotations from an early novel about the implementation of socialism from a classic liberal perspective, which assumes that the abuse of power is not an issue, but that socialist politicians are genuine idealists. Eugen Richter writes in chapter 1 of the 1893 book *Pictures of the Socialist Future*: "The red flag of international Socialism waved from the palace and from all the public buildings of Berlin.... Our long years of toil and battling for the righteous cause of the people are

now crowned with success.... And for the benefit of my children, and children's children, I intend to set down, in a humble way, some little account of the beginning of this new reign of brotherhood and universal philanthropy."

Then, in chapter 32, Richter writes: "An order has just been issued to reduce the bread rations of the entire population by one half and do away with the meat rations altogether.... I find I shall henceforth be no longer able to give the same full account of events as they happen. The twelve hours day comes into force tomorrow.... I notice that I am regarded with such increasing suspicion that a search might be made, and my papers confiscated at any moment."

Niemietz recounts in some detail the history of socialism in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, North Korea, Cambodia, Albania, East Germany, and Venezuela. He explains why the restriction of emigration as with the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain are not the betrayal of socialism, but its consistent application, and why socialism has always led and must always lead to an extreme concentration of power.

Admirers of socialism pay little attention to the atrocities committed under their favorite regimes, or ignore them completely, and criticize those who condemn Stalinism because they do not at the same time explicitly condemn Nazism, colonialism, the slave trade, the Vietnam War, etc. As Niemietz notes, these are not fashionable causes today, and there is no political force of any relevance that wants to resurrect any of them. Furthermore, nobody argues that Nazism or slavery were noble causes that had just been badly implemented. No one suggests that Hitler's version of Nazism was not real Nazism, or that the slavery in the American South was not real slavery.

If an economic model fails three or four times, the claim that it was a good idea in principle that was just badly implemented is not necessarily

implausible. If it fails 10 times, without a single positive counterexample, the claim begins to lose its credibility. One way of decreasing the number of failures is to lump all the socialist experiments in different members of the Warsaw Pact as one model. Niemietz shows that all the Warsaw Pact countries had their own homegrown Marxist traditions.

The most clear-cut case was the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), which refutes the idea that socialism would've turned out differently if it had been introduced into a country with a more advanced economy, a more educated population, and a working class with more experience in democratic self-organization. The East German experiment has a control, a remarkably similar country, West Germany. David Legates previously discussed the comparison in this journal.¹ The book concludes with a set of fictional press releases that might have been written had the election that voted for German reunification gone the other direction.

Niemietz observes that even George Orwell, author of the two most famous critiques of existing socialism, was nonetheless a socialist, and his books were compatible with the view that totalitarian societies represent a failed experiment in which real socialism was not tried. *Animal Farm* might have turned out differently if we could remove the bad pig Napoleon and have the good pig Snowball prevail. "We could imagine the other animals being more vigilant and devising more effective safeguard mechanisms against the pigs' power grab."

In 1984, Orwell does not spell out in detail how the dictatorship originally came about, but Niemietz thinks it is clear that "Ing Soc" was supposed to represent a perverted version of ideal socialism. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with Oceania's economy. The population lived in poverty because of a deliberate policy choice, rather than inadequacy of a planned economy. The party wanted to keep the population docile by ensuring that daily struggles consumed all their energies.

Unfortunately, the book does not consider the universally unsuccessful socialist utopias in America,² which would have added more than 100 to the count of failed experiments.

The book provides an interesting theoretical discussion of the reasons for the attractiveness of the utopia, along

with excellent historical examples. An index would have made it much more useful.

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2. Christman K. Failed utopian communes. Presented at the annual meeting of AAPS. Atlanta, Ga., Oct 1, 2011. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrrlde7i-dQ>. Accessed Apr 19, 2020.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, by Shoshana Zuboff, 704 pp, hardback, \$22.99, ISBN-13: 978-1610395694, PublicAffairs, 2019.

If you want to know what it was like to be a gold prospector during the Gold Rush of 1849, read *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. To find a few nuggets of value, you will have to dig through more than 500 pages of ideological biases, half-baked takes on capitalism, distortions of the writings of such free-market thinkers as Friedrich Hayek, irrelevant and unoriginal asides on the evils of American and European colonialism, and a pretentiousness that brings the author, a Harvard professor, to see herself on an intellectual par with Karl Marx in her theory of a new social and economic order brought about by a revolution in information technology.

A compelling reason to read the book is that it will give you insight into what appeals to the American and British intelligentsia. It received pages of rave reviews from the media establishment, including being praised by *The New York Times* as a "Notable Book of the Year," by the *Financial Times* as the "Best Book of the Year," and by the *Guardian* as one of the "100 Best Books of the 21st Century."

The book's gold nuggets are its findings on the workings, hypocrisies, and dangers of such tech giants as Facebook and Google (a.k.a. Alphabet, Inc.). Not only are the companies and their related gadgets and apps mining users' internet purchases, personal information, and behavior, for sale to advertisers at great profit, but they are predicting and shaping user behavior. Equally disturbing, they have convinced users that such mining and mind control is benign and for their own good.

As the book details, there are apps and gadgets galore with the potential of spying on users, including "smart" thermostats, televisions, vacuum cleaners, mattresses, and digital assistants. There are even plans to extend the idea of smart homes to entire cities.

Unfortunately, such nuggets of keen insight and research are buried beneath tons of worthless and distracting ideological tailings. For example, author Shoshana Zuboff claims that Republicans have enabled the surveillance industry by gutting regulations and making campaign contributions to anti-regulation politicians. This claim flies in the face of the ever-growing regulatory state and the fact that Democrats have been the biggest donors to the tech industry and Wall Street.

The book's biggest tailing, er, failing, is its underlying premise that surveillance companies are the inevitable result of capitalism. In reality, they are nothing more than creepy companies that operate in a capitalistic system but are not intrinsic manifestations of capitalism. They would be creepy under any economic system. More to the point, surveillance is intrinsic to communism and other autocratic economic and political systems. After all, the East German Stasi knew everything about everybody long before the birth of Google and Facebook.

Oh, and let's not forget the surveillance departments at Harvard and other universities that enforce speech codes, monitor violations of campus orthodoxy, and discriminate in admissions against some races and ethnicities in favor of other races and ethnicities.

The book would have been more effective if it had used a simple analogy to describe what is wrong with the surveillance companies, instead of pushing a complex and convoluted new theory of capitalism. What the companies do is analogous to a creep with a notepad and pen following people around in libraries, stores, and homes; looking over their shoulders to learn their interests, secrets, and behaviors; and then selling the private information to other creeps. If that's not cause for an arrest, it should be.

Maybe this analogy is not as valuable as a gold nugget, but at least you did not have to dig through hundreds of pages of irrelevant material to find it.

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