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Review of "Common Preservation"

Tom Wetzel

11 January 2024

This book is where Jeremy Brecher gives his theory or set of "tools" for explaining social movements. Jeremy is a significant influence at Labor Network for Sustainability and his "Green New Deal from Below" is an approach that is having some influence. So I wanted to understand his viewpoint.

The book's title comes from Gerard Winstanley of the "True Levellers" — sort of the radical wing of activists in the English revolution of the 1640s. Altho Jeremy doesn't talk about origins of the True Levellers, they were part of the plebeian movement from below that arose in reaction to the vicious direction of the English ruling class in that era. This was the period when agrarian capitalism was created in England through a very vicious process. Large masses of rural people who had lived through subsistence agriculture, growing their own food, were kicked off the land by the barons. These "enclosures" were then ratified by the parliament.

Thousands were tramping the roads. By the mid 1600s there were 600,000 propertyless wage-workers in England whereas this class had not existed a century earlier. The viciousness is

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indicated by the Vagrancy Act of 1597. This allowed the authorities to round up anyone who was unemployed and put them in a forced labor regime, often run by some baron. This is the origin of the slave system in the US south because sons of the English land owning class set up the Virginia colony by picking young lower class people in London who had been arrested under the Vagrancy Act, and they were shipped to Virginia where the new planter class bought them on the dock.

The True Levellers revolted by seizing lands which were then held in common, so people could share the land to raise food. Thus the land provided a basis for their “common preservation” of their lives.

Jeremy uses the term “a common preservation” to refer to the shared goals of any social movement. This term works for the climate movement and for the True Levellers, but I don’t think it works in general. For example when workers form unions their aim may be not to “preserve” something but to get rid of aspects of the employer’s work regime. Of course in a trivial sense they are acting to “preserve” their own lives, as they are trying to enhance their own situation.

I’ll give Jeremy credit for his humility. He doesn’t claim his theory is “the” correct explanation of the origin of social movements and invites others to try their hand at coming up with a theory.

But I don’t find his theory at all plausible. At the outset Jeremy rejects a structuralist theory of social struggle and social movements, such as Marx’s “modes of production” framework, with the class structure playing a key role as the fault line along which so much resistance to the system develops. He says he rejects Marxist structuralism because it is “inevitableist” and became the basis of tyrannical regimes.

This argument can be refuted straightaway. First, libertarian socialists may have been influenced by Marx but are not Marxists and yet also operate with a structural understanding of oppression and exploitation, looking to institutions like cap-

ital's ownership of the economy and the power of the state as two aspects that create fault lines which generate common struggle by those subject to the arbitrary power. And libertarian socialists — and many democratic Marxists — reject the one-party dictatorship model of “Marxism-Leninism”.

Marx's “modes of production” theory does not have to be interpreted as deterministic or “Inevitableist”. Marxists in late 1800s and early 1900s sometimes talked that way, as it was part of the Victorian mentality of “inevitable progress.”

Without a theory of social structure Jeremy has to resort to a purely psychological theory of social movements, drawn from Piaget's theory of child development. So this means he adds all kinds of neologisms like equilibration and others. And then he piles these terms on top of each other in the same sentence — which makes the reading very tedious, because these terms have a vague definition. This type of approach is called “methodological individualism.”

You can't plausibly account for development of organization and shared goals on that basis. Why would that happen? You need to have the common enemy, the class enemy, the state and corporate managerial powers. For example men and women, black and white workers, LGBT people in a particular may not share the same “identity” or background or circumstances but they all are subject to arbitrary management power, and can come together for that reason. I've been in situations where a struggle developed around protection of gay workers and we were able to get others to go to bat for them for the reason I just mentioned — common subordination to arbitrary authority.

I derive from the blue collar working class and throughout my life class analysis has made a lot of sense in providing an understanding of what I see going on around me in society.

I think Jeremy's methodological individualism also explains why his climate solution seems so implausible to me. He envisions a widespread and growing climate movement civil dis-

obedience pressuring local and other governments and corporations to make the changes needed to prevent catastrophic global heating. Thus he thinks that the solution could be found without a necessity of any basic change in the social structure or mode of production — leaving corporate capitalism and the present states intact. I think that is very implausible.

I think he does not give adequate consideration to how the basic structural dynamics of capitalism are inherently ecocidal. The only change he thinks is necessary is to abandon neo-liberalism. But the forces heating the planet were already very much at work during the hayday of Keynesianism and the “New Deal consensus” after World War 2.

So the politics of the book are a kind of grassroots oriented social democracy or progressivism. The lack of a proposal for revolutionary or basic structural change seems to fall out of his unwillingness to take on capitalism as such.