

that Bethune drew from it. Archives likely hold some Bethune's notes on Marxist ideas, but *Phoenix* portrays little more than his "man of destiny" approach to Communism. If that is all there was, it has some important implications for the Communist Party of Canada and how they accepted him, employed his skills and personality and folded him into the party apparatus in much more flexible ways than the usual party stereotype.

There is some unfortunate messiness in the book. A map listed on the wrong page in the table of contents has no legend, so you only discover that a certain kind of line is a railroad from either close reading of the text or reference to another map more than 100 pages earlier. Another map is missing towns named in the adjacent text, making it hard to follow the route and the chronology of Bethune's war marches. Wonderful pages of photographs appear, unannounced in the table of contents. The name of the woman Bethune married twice is misspelled twice. It may be understandable that Chinese place names have different English spellings, but they sometimes occur on the same page. Some people and topics appear in the index, others do not.

On the other side of these minor complaints, reading the admirable endnotes independent of the text conveys a story in itself. Detailed and pointed, they tell of important events and trends in the Communist Parties (of Canada, of China and of the USA), in government and in the political culture of the times.

Part of the fitting conclusion sums up a sparkling personage: "Bethune's life exhibits recurrent cycles of achievement and self-destruction – the pattern of the phoenix. He was a born crusader, and the evangelistic spirit created by his Christian upbringing later informed his developing social consciousness and his ultimate faith in communism" (375).

Lilley, Sasha. 2011. *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*. Oakland: PM Press. ISBN: 978-1-60486-334-5. Paperback: 21.95 CAD. Pages: 279.

Reviewed by Thom Workman
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Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult is well worth the read, but is likely to be much more alluring to initiated readers. In this new book, journalist Sasha Lilley interviews many of the luminaries on the left today including Noam Chomsky, Ellen Meiksins Wood, David Harvey, Mike Davis and Leo Panitch. Seventeen different writers are interviewed in all. The range of themes

surveyed include the crisis of global capitalism, the rise of neoliberalism, militarism and imperialism, the looming ecological catastrophe, and the acute failure of capitalist development across the majority world.

Lilley's interviews show that she is in complete command of the main ideas and contributions of each writer. The interviewees are invited to reflect and expand on their ideas familiar to many of us on the left. The semi-formal nature of the interviews gives these expansions a fresh feel, and it is compelling to get a sense of the suppositions impelling certain notions and claims. Lilley's questions are posed with an impressive clarity yet she avoids too much "voice-leading." The pace and tone of the interviews are relaxed despite the fact that they never lose their theoretical coherence. The interviews are as solid as this format can get. Anyone who has had a brush with a typical journalist will quickly reflect on the pleasure it would be if all interviews were conducted by such theoretically informed, perspicacious interviewers.

Capital and Its Discontents coheres around the notion that capitalism's tendency towards immanent crises has created an incompatible cultural disjunction and an odd sort of political paralysis. The Freudian notion—implied by the title—of a basic tension between the instincts on the one side and repressive Western culture on the other endures in the notion of a contradiction between neoliberalism with its grievous social injuries and the incapacity of the cultural and political world to respond effectively. Something must give and will give. Neoliberal society is one where a latent anger with the prevailing capitalist order of things manifests itself at numerous turns, yet fails to coalesce into a sufficiently formed political movement capable of challenging the course of things. *Capital and Its Discontents* brings this tension to the surface in a theoretically and empirically sustained manner.

The book opens with a review of the basic features of neoliberalism. Lilley's introductory essay demonstrates that she has a firm grasp of the basic trajectory of neoliberalism, and she spins the story with uncommon clarity and pith. Indeed, so impressive is her brief review that I now plan to assign it to students to help introduce them to the basic features of neoliberalism.

Like many things, however, the strength of *Capital and Its Discontents* is also the source of its weaker side. Lilley's incisive lines of query and her theoretically informed interrogations means that the interviewees are generally left expanding upon ideas broached in earlier works. The retorts and rejoinders often directly reference familiar theories and categories. "What I was trying to say" or "as I wrote elsewhere" or "one of my earlier arguments" are locutions encountered frequently, and they underscore the fact that spontaneous dilation is under way. But this also means that the interviews by and large add little new to the critical discussions well under way in other theoretical quarters. Lilley's deft touch renders the interviews interesting, but the very format itself undermines the likelihood that initiated scholars attracted to the book will benefit significantly. The "concept" of the book, in other words, is executed as well as it could be,

but the fact remains that those readers inclined to read the book are unlikely to derive much substantive theoretical or empirical edification along the way.

And there is another trade-off bound to accompany a work of this sort. The spontaneous form of the obiter sometimes gives the reflections an “off the cuff” sort of feel. This renders some of the responses a bit difficult to follow, and on a couple of occasions which I need not specify, the lines of discussion are anything but clear. We occasionally realize that nothing can replace carefully composed arguments presented in papers, lectures or books.

In one important respect, however, *Capital and Its Discontents* does make a more original contribution, as doyens ponder the challenges facing the left from their various theoretical positions. We are the better for this. The reflections of David McNally and David Harvey stand out in this respect. Harvey’s prescient reflections seem to anticipate the appearance of such movements as Occupy Wall Street. It is worth quoting him at length:

I don’t think it’s a matter of saying to people, forget your specific struggles and join the universal proletariat in motion; I don’t think that’s what it’s about at all. What we have to do is to find a way of politically uniting those struggles, and that’s why I think something like the concept of neoliberalism and its penchant for accumulation by dispossession provide a kind of vocabulary to start to bring together those struggles around a more general kind of theme. So that an Iowa farmer who’s just lost his farm can understand how a Mexican peasant feels, can understand how the struggles going on in China are parallel, so we start to see a certain unity in all of the struggles, at the same time as we acknowledge their specificity (59).

And in a similar spirit of practicality and concreteness David McNally remarks that in times of crisis,

people start to raise questions they normally wouldn’t raise and even act in ways—like occupying a plant—that they normally wouldn’t. On a larger global scale I think we can see it in a whole wave of development. Think of the riots and general strikes in Greece. Or the government in Iceland that fell after agreeing to an IMF package, and after groups in civil society started to organize every Tuesday night outside the Parliament building. Eventually they started to do it every night. There was fighting with the police, there were demonstrations, and eventually the rightwing government in Iceland had to resign (101-102).

As suggested in the above quotes, *Capital and Its Discontents* embraces a deeper political principle. It shows us that the dialectical deconstruction of capitalism and its crises by intellectuals is an indispensable element of the left, and at the same time the interviews are infused with the democratic notion that the struggle to overcome capitalism must be broadly based and inclusive. With the spirit of Freud lingering in the background, we on the left suspect that the contradictions at the heart of capitalist social formations, those pressures that supply the very content of politics, inexorably create upheavals and sustained social struggles. And we believe that the intellectual form and political shape we lend to those struggles will be historically decisive. Lilley's sweeping interviews affirm this deeper democratic conviction more than anything else.

McNally, David. 2011. *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press. ISBN 978-1-60486-332-1. Paperback: 17.95 CAD. Pages: 230.

Reviewed by Bill Burgess, Kwantlen Polytechnic University

David McNally's prognosis in *Global Slump* seems exactly right:

Rather than describing a single crisis, the term [global slump] is meant to capture a whole period of interconnected crisis – the bursting of the real estate bubble; a wave of bank collapses; a series of sovereign debt crises; relapses into recession – that goes on for years without sustained economic recovery. This, I submit, is what confronts us for many, many years to come (8-9).

My attention was drawn to two points in this book. The first is an important nuance in McNally's discussion of the crisis. The second is his original explanation of the reasons for financialization.

Like most Marxists, McNally roots the current financial crisis in capitalist over-accumulation. The "majority" assumption is that there has been a more or less continuous "bust" in capitalist profits since the 1970s. In contrast, *Global Slump* insists that our understanding of the current crisis must acknowledge that a genuine profit "boom" occurred between 1982 and 2007. McNally labels this period a "neoliberal expansion" (38). This draws attention to historically-specific factors that are often left out of accounts guilty of the complaint that Marxists have correctly predicted ten of the last