
BOOK REVIEW

Mark Sandle, *Communism (Short Histories of Big Ideas Series)*.
Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2006, 224 pp., \$20.95 paper.

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The *Short Histories of Big Ideas* series attempts to provide readers with “clear, concise, and readable explanations of those ideas that were instrumental in shaping the twentieth century and continue to shape—and reshape—the present” (viii). With that in mind, one of the strongest features of *Communism* is the style in which it is written. Sandle demonstrates an ability to convey his expertise in a non-intimidating manner, making this text easy to read and understand. Time is taken to demonstrate how strains of communist thought have existed for centuries, and by drawing from examples in classical texts and records of collectivist action in mass uprisings across time, he crafts a powerful counterargument to those analyzing the evolution of human societies from a more individualistic perspective.

In addition, as a Soviet Historian, Sandle makes it clear that he views the Soviet Union as the pinnacle of twentieth-century communism and over half the book is used to discuss Soviet politics from the early 1900s until the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Curiously though, while he is successful in illustrating the ruthless authoritarianism of the Communist Party in the USSR, Sandle does not discuss the more positive results of Soviet policies (including socialized health care and education, guaranteed housing and employment, etc.) in any great detail, which may leave astute readers feeling as though at times *Communism* is more a Western-produced obituary for a Cold War adversary than a detailed account of a dominant twentieth-century political ideology.

As well, a glaring weakness in *Communism* is that it fails to address the ethnocentrism permeating Sandle's analysis. Although he introduces communism as it was practiced in parts of Asia (most notably in China, Vietnam, and Cambodia), mentions the success of the Cuban revolution (although Che Guevara is not mentioned) and acknowledges the establishment of communist governments in a number of African states, scant attention is paid to them. As well, the influence of communism in the Middle East (where communist parties allied with Leninism played a significant role in the politics of Syria and Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s) is completely ignored, and as such, Sandle's discussion of global communism remains fairly underdeveloped.

This oversight is more egregious in light of his detailed discussion of communism in the First World. While this may be attributed to the fact that most readers of *Communism* will be from Western nations, the ten pages reserved for this portion of Sandle's discussion stand in stark contrast to the mere eighteen dedicated to exploring communism in the rest of the world. When coupled with his belief that the Soviet model represents the zenith of communist practice, it becomes apparent that Sandle's approach might be better described as an analysis of Western Marxism than of communism *per se*.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that academics can speak of the influence of modern radicalism without mentioning the role of anarchists. While Sandle is hardly alone in overlooking anarchism's importance to the development of communism, he does his part to make sure it remains buried. At no point is there any mention of the Spanish Civil War, the split at the First International between the Marxists and Bakuninist anarchists, or even of anarchism in Russia (particularly of Pyotr Kropotkin, who developed "anarchist communism", or the Ukrainian Makhnovists who refused to align with Lenin during the Russian Civil War). Again, while it is unfair to exclusively blame Sandle for these lapses, it is reasonable to criticize experts on global communism for their failure to make readers aware of anarchism and its influence on revolutionary theory and politics.

Despite these weaknesses, *Communism* is worth reading. Sandle does well to demonstrate how communistic thoughts can be traced far back into human history, articulates the main theoretical concepts within Marxism succinctly, and clearly illustrates the inner workings of the Soviet Empire. However, the book's target audience is a Western readership, leading him to sacrifice an analysis of non-Western socialisms in favour of one more exclusively focussed on European communism. In addition, the exclusion of anarchism and of any detailed discussion pertaining to the material benefits received by the masses in the USSR can lead to the conclusion that *Communism* was written more to hold the interest of its Western audience than to analyze how dynamic and revolutionary its subject matter really is.