

Cox, Lawrence and Alf Gunvald Nilsen. 2014. *We make our own history*. London: Pluto Press. ISBN 978 0 7453 8481 3. Paperback: 36.95 CAD. Pages: 254.

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In this engaging and accessible text, Lawrence Cox and Alf Nilsen pursue one key idea: social movements—current and past—make up the fabric of capitalist modernity. This thesis is firmly rooted in the soil of classical historical materialism. The authors thus distinguish movements “from above” and “from below,” which develop in a dialectical relation. Through this lens, they view social movements as integral to how we make our own history. The authors have produced an excellent though inevitably selective synthesis of social science in the historical materialist tradition. They do this by standing on the shoulders of quite a few giants.

The book is deeply structured around Marx and Engels’s contributions to social ontology (human needs, capacities and praxis, structure and agency), to the analysis of capitalist development worldwide, and to normative thinking through the imperative of Marx’s Thesis 11—with the early chapters laying out the ontology and the later ones drawing on the theory of capitalist development. Antonio Gramsci figures quite significantly throughout: the analysis is framed around a problematic of hegemony and counter-hegemony and it takes up key Gramscian questions around the transformation of common sense into good sense, the need for subaltern groups to move beyond immediate interests, the need to construct an alternative political project around a system of alliances, and the radical contingency of organic crises. Gramscian cultural scholars Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall provide insights on such issues as militant particularism, the emergent character of culture, and the contingent relationship between encoding and decoding within ideological practice. Soviet linguist Valentin Volosinov’s dialectical theorization of language (which in my view remains far more incisive than a heap of poststructuralism) is tapped for insights on consciousness and ideology. British social historians, especially EP Thompson, fill out the analysis of agency, history, and the making of classes. Contemporary political economists David Harvey, Bob Jessop and David McNally supply the structural framework for an analysis of movements from above and below in the current era. Michael Lebowitz’s *Beyond Capital*, an exploration of the political economy of labour and its implications for a Marxist reading of social movements, is acknowledged as a significant precursor text. *We make our own history* is not so much an original contribution as it is a synthesis of these perspectives. And it is not a “social movements” text in any conventional sense. Rather, it disturbs the boundaries that constitute this genre, insisting that movements (including the institutionalized residues of past movements) should not be consigned to a subfield of

sociology, but recognized as a central aspect of modernity. That said, this book will be valuable to movement activists and in university courses that take up social movements, political sociology, and critical political science.

Cox and Nilsen develop their synthesis through critique of extant formulations, including mainstream social movement theory (which they dismiss in a summary manner) as well as academic Marxisms of two sorts: the overly structural (most political economy) and the overly voluntarist (autonomist celebration of movement agency without “real discussion of how the movements they work with could go *beyond* their current mode of existence”) (16). Instead of these “contemplative” approaches, the book offers a praxis-oriented take, emphasizing the connection between theory and “the struggle to change the game” (23). However, it suffers from two blind spots. On the one hand, Cox and Nilsen are too dismissive of conventional sociology. In my view, historical materialism needs to engage with conventional social science, and to learn from that engagement. Formulations such as new social movement theory, resource mobilization theory, and the extensive literature on the discursive framing of collective action contain insights which could have enriched Cox and Nilsen’s analysis. On the other hand, the book ignores most of its precursors on the critical side of social science—including key books by Larry Ray (*Rethinking critical theory: emancipation in the age of global social movements*, 1993) and Steven Buechler (*Social movements in advanced capitalism*, 1999)—as well as my own *Organizing dissent* (1992, 1997) and related articles, which presented a Gramscian analysis that resonates well with Cox and Nilsen’s. The authors also assume the from above/from below motif can be generalized from their class-centred narrative to various categories of subalternity, such as gender and race/ethnicity, and they invite others to pursue such work. Yet it is not clear how one might transplant that motif into, for example, the politics of disability (structured around centrality, marginality and normalization) without losing a sense of the specific dynamics of power in contexts less immediately shaped by the dialectic of class. A final weakness in my view is the cursory treatment this book gives to the global ecological crisis. Apart from occasional references to ecological struggles, the analysis is bereft of political ecology, a crucial field for contemporary Marxism.

The arc of the book reaches from initial thoughts on social ontology, through presentation of “a Marxist theory of social movements”, to a detailed account of the development of capitalism in a dialectic of movements from above and from below. The final chapter focuses on the movement-of-movements against neoliberalism and arrives at a diagnosis of our times, including some useful ideas on transnational transformative politics, and how movements from below might break the current stalemate that comprises a global organic crisis. But as an indicator of how fast events move, the final chapter, written late in 2013, asserts that the planned “long war on terror” is “basically over” (160). This glitch recalls the well-known misdiagnosis of the 2008 financial crisis—

that neoliberalism had met its demise. In a similar spirit, we may ask if what these authors call neoliberalism's "twilight" is the best terminology, given its many lives. This question returns us to this important book's core message. If we make our own history, then the future—including neoliberalism's—is radically open, and the onus is on us not only to understand but to change the world.

Not Enough Fight: a Review of *Fight for Your Long Day* and an Argument about the Sessional Situation

Kudera, Alex. 2010. *Fight for your long day*. Madison, NJ: Atticus Books. ISBN 978-0-9845105-0-4. Paperback: 18.99 CAD. Pages: 265.

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This is in some respects an excellent book. It won the 2011 Independent Publisher (IPPY) Book Award - Gold for Best Regional Fiction (Mid-Atlantic), it has been favorably reviewed in numerous journals including the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and it already has a certain cult status among contract academic faculty (adjuncts as they are called in the US). The numbers of people who identify with the book's main character—Cyrus Duffleman—are growing rapidly. This is easily understandable, as ever increasing numbers of people share Duffleman's working conditions and resentments, as casual labourers in the neoliberal, ever more factory-like institutions of higher education.

Duffleman needs to work four lecturer/tutor jobs, plus an additional one as a university security guard, to keep himself financially afloat. Among a long list of his worries, the lack of any health care benefits in his short term contractual employment particularly worries him. Canadian contract academic faculty also lack much in the way of a benefits package, but at least our country has a decent national health insurance plan. One can well imagine Duffleman being something of an enthusiastic and grateful proponent of Obamacare, but Obama is not the president of his fictional US; rather it is President Fern/Bush. This is a satirical novel, but satire generally involves humor, albeit sometimes a rather bitter laugh. But this book is much more sad than funny.

The four educational institutions spread around Philadelphia that Duffleman works at are very different in terms of their wealth and their class—yes, class—of student intake. The novel thus gives something of a cross section of "allegedly higher" education in America. For all those who have ever taught in higher education, Kudera's portrayals of classroom discussion—going brilliantly, limping along, out of control—will very much ring true. So too will the various cost management strategies employed by the