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## BOOK REVIEWS

### AMERICA SINCE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

*THE FAT YEARS AND THE LEAN*,  
by Bruce Minton and John Stuart.  
International Publishers, New  
York, 454 pages, \$2.50.

**T**HE difficulty of bringing dialectics to bear upon current events in mass understanding is the too frequent lack of memory's relation of present with past events. Therefore the value in obtaining, within the covers of one book, a Marxist history of the United States from World War years down to date.

No one person can recall all the multitude of things which, taken together, as they are presented in *The Fat Years and the Lean* by Bruce Minton and John Stuart, bring out as on a movie screen the rounded perspective of the crowded years in such manner as depict the "whence and whither" of American capitalism in this year of 1940.

Perhaps it were better to give the authors' own statement of what their book is, before delving deeper into its details. Their foreword says, in part:

"The attempt in this book has been to gauge the predominant economic and political trends in the United States since the end of the first World War. We make no claim

of recording the inexhaustible body of evidence which in our estimation proves that capitalism, as it emerged after 1919, was moribund. The political patterns of this declining economic system in turn influenced the course of American economic life. And it is with the broadest strokes that we have pictured the people's struggles against monopoly and hunger, and for a freer and more abundant life—of the conscious and unconscious drive toward socialism."

Although the authors disclaim the giving of detail, this reviewer must testify that in the 429 pages of the text, which is exclusive of complete index and exhaustive bibliography, he has found such an astounding mass of detail, yet so condensed and inter-related by illuminative interpretation as to earn acclaim as to clarity and comprehensiveness combined.

Here are traced and correctly correlated the major and even many minor economic and political developments of over twenty years of recent United States history. Yet these are set against a background, continuously followed throughout, of the changing international situation.

Here are the actions of contending classes, taking place on the industrial and parliamentary fields; of the political parties in and out of

office, including the parties of the working class and the embryonic development of the farmer-labor movement. Here the seemingly lagging but historically swift development of the trade union movement from one officially swathed and bound by class collaboration to the determined class action of the C.I.O.

Here emerges the relation which militant organized labor, and the Communist Party, freed from the hobbles of opportunist leadership in 1929, bears to the growing attraction of the small farmers, petty bourgeoisie and intellectuals for unity with the working class against monopoly capitalism.

Here, in short, is the rich, overwhelming proof in the history of the past two decades that the present policy of the Communist Party of the United States is the correct weapon for the American working class in the struggle against imperialism, hunger and war in this year of 1940.

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One might stop with that. But it would not do justice to a book whose value goes beyond mere mention. Take, for instance, the closing chapter, "In the Shadow of War," wherein are followed the vacillations during and since 1936 of—

". . . the friendly squire from the Hudson Valley [who] had certain leanings toward the democratic way, toward preserving capitalism without resorting to the last desperate weapon of fascist dictatorship."

Why did Roosevelt, the "middle-of-the-road" reformer, become al-

most militant in his attacks on the "economic royalists" in the 1936 election campaign? What were the reasons that, after swinging now right, now left, he—and his "New Deal"—"took a road analogous to that traveled twenty years before by the 'New Freedom,' the progressive movement sponsored by President Roosevelt's political mentor, Woodrow Wilson"?

To those who, remembering the Roosevelt that supported the Wagner Act (but failing to remember that the Wagner Act originated with union labor rather than with Roosevelt), "cannot see" him as at present an enemy of organized labor, the last chapter of this book is required reading. The whole story is there.

"The President could make good his fine words only by leaning heavily on the popular support he could rally among workers, farmers and the middle classes, once he began to turn his promises into reality. . . . Too obviously capitalism was not functioning 'normally'; it demanded ever more frequent shots in the arm just to keep going. . . . The monopolists expressed impatience. So did the people. . . . Wall Street's enmity to the New Deal grew more shrill, more virulent. . . .

"Considering the lamentations against it, the Administration program appeared remarkably restrained. The farmers had been granted no greater benefits than those contained in the first A.A.A. and formerly approved by monopoly. Labor had received only what it had been strong enough to win.

"[But] from the moment monopoly entered into a definite offensive against the New Deal and

against all concessions won through organization and struggle, the class character of the attack became clear, and every battle only brought the issues into more precise focus. President Roosevelt was the leader of the united opposition against 'the economic royalists,' as he called them . . . 'the resolute enemy within our gates ever ready to beat down our words unless in greater courage we will fight for them.'

It is important to understand that, although the masses smelled the smoke of class struggle:

"Neither candidate [Landon or Roosevelt] challenged the profit system. Roosevelt believed in capitalism as strongly as his bitterest critics. The nub of disagreement centered in the question of how to preserve it, whether by forcible dictatorship of monopoly that meant fascism, or by holding on to democratic forms, acknowledging certain abuses and alleviating them. . . . The composition of the two camps nevertheless bespoke the tense character of the conflict."

Those who today see the vital and growing role of Labor's Non-Partisan League must remember its fledgeling days in 1936. Also that "Labor had been pivotal in amassing Roosevelt's votes—the fruits of intensive organization from 1933 onward." But they must also remember that Roosevelt's "ostentatious indifference" to the savagery with which capital fought the advancing C.I.O. was rooted in "an innate distrust of workers" whenever they showed signs of moving toward securing greater influence in the affairs of the nation.

It was this that led him to lend support to the bosses of "Little Steel" when they first locked out the workers and then murderously attacked their picket lines. It was then that the forked tongue of bourgeois reformism uttered the signal of class opposition: "A plague on both your houses." And the President was silent when the capitalists massacred the steel workers of Chicago on Memorial Day in 1937.

It was in this period, also, that the shameless betrayal of democratic Spain was a sharp reminder to any idol-worshippers who forgot that in this historic period any bourgeois leader, whether a "friendly squire from Hudson Valley" or not, who sets out to "preserve capitalism," is sure to have "certain leanings" toward fascism as his basic line, with well-advertised "leanings toward the democratic way" for window dressing.

Indeed, this collaboration with the "appeasers" of fascism continued beyond Spain and did not drop a stitch even when the betrayal of Munich horrified the world. In all essentials, aside from a few empty words, the great "defender of democracy" in the White House supported the Munichmen Chamberlain and Daladier—and for the same reason, a desire to destroy the land of socialism. And with the outbreak of war American imperialism's spokesman became frantic with its central desire to organize the imperialist world against the U.S.S.R. A fact, by the way, that Minton and Stuart have failed to make sufficiently emphatic, in my opinion.

As with union labor and with

Spain's besieged democracy, so also with the unemployed. The Roosevelt who challenged the "economic royalists" in November at Madison Square Garden with "I welcome their hatred . . . we have only just begun to fight," by his second inaugural had presented a budget which encouraged relief cuts—"in violation of the election mandate"—and later went into full retreat before monopoly pressure in 1937, as the authors point out, "By cutting relief, Roosevelt imperiled what recovery there had been since 1934."

In brief, what sent Roosevelt, who set out to preserve capitalism, to the Right, was a long process to which the fear of a revolutionary outcome of the war was only a climax, a process of growing conviction "that resistance to war, to monopoly and its imperialist policies was also a struggle against the profit system." His "national unity" with Wall Street and abandonment of New Deal reforms were but a logical consequence.

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This sketchy and inadequate résumé of the book's last chapter, snatching some of the authors' phrases from that chapter's seventy-two pages, is but a faint illustration of the scope of this book which acquires more than ordinary value during this election year.

Every one of the first five chapters is as necessary as that last one. The first one, "The Armistice Begins," reminds us that, with the end of the first World War and the beginning of the truce, now again broken—

"America had changed. And the prospect of the morrow induced a deep nostalgia, a desire to recapture the past that in the deceptive haze of recollection appeared so alluring. Men felt themselves the victims of a shabby hoax. The struggle to preserve the democracy of the world had brought, not liberty, but the vengeful Treaty of Versailles. President Wilson had crassly violated his oaths of fealty to the people; his assurances of a just peace had proved as illusory as the New Freedom."

American imperialism did not feel cheated; for it had changed from a debtor to a creditor nation, and began its long course of reliance upon the weapon of capital and rationalized productive capacity for the conquest of "backward" and poorer nations. It boasted sanctimoniously that this was a bloodless way to build an empire, and even congealed this pretended distaste of "the use of force" in the Kellogg Pact which it thrust under the noses of its less "moral" rivals in a way both to gain for itself the approbation of the world and put the League of Nations, the private property of Anglo-French imperialism, on the spot.

That was okay for the American imperialism of the first post-war decade. For it yet held the appearance, compared to its rivals, of health and growth. For American monopoly capitalism, the 'twenties were a giddy whirl of "prosperity." The Social-Democrats of the whole world, especially those of Europe who had betrayed the discontented and aroused masses in the post-War

revolutionary upheaval and tricked them back into submission to capitalism, clamorously acclaimed America and "organized capitalism" as the true path to a better life, in scornful rebuke of those who urged the Lenin road to socialism. In 1929 Bukharin still saw American imperialism as "young and red-cheeked," and Lovestone invented a whole theory of "American exceptionalism" and exemption from world imperialist decline and decadence.

Yet, as *The Fat Years and the Lean* shows, the general crisis of capitalism was gnawing at American imperialism's vitals already in 1920. Visibly, that is, in the agrarian crisis, which throughout the book is dealt with in generous detail and correctly related to the general crisis.

In one minor respect, the general excellence with which the farm question is handled, this reviewer feels, is marred, and an erroneous impression is left, by the inference of a dominant and permanent trend of dispersion of the agricultural population from the land to the city as a settled result of the agrarian crisis. This is an overestimation, yet the trend is important, as is also the tracing of its cause.

The fact, as given on pages 146-47, of the growth of large area and mechanized farms, does not precisely justify saying: "As a result, the agricultural population dispersed from land to city. . . . Sharecroppers were crowded off their holdings, tenants were displaced," etc. While proper as a generalization, this should be modified.

For it was rather the relative "prosperity" of city industry as compared to farm poverty of the early twenties that attracted farm population cityward, than the propulsion of mechanization. When the crisis struck industry also, we saw a growth in the number of farms from 6,288,648 in 1930 to 6,812,350 in 1935. Yet mechanization of farming undoubtedly grew, too. As also the area in large-scale farms, if not their absolute number. What the authors correctly note (page 64)—that "to spread mechanization was impractical on the basis of small individual holdings," should be added to the fact of an absolute increase in the number of farms, to extract the final conclusion of the *impoverishment* of the farm population rather than its dispersion to cities. This fact is of high political importance.

But, in a brief review of such a monumental work as the authors of *The Fat Years and the Lean* may take pride in, this reviewer does not wish to overemphasize such relatively minor flaws. The problem is to do it justice, and to illustrate its value as a history of the past two decades to those making the history of the next two decades. And there is no space for doing that adequately.

Above all we recommend the tracing through the last years of Wilson and the administrations of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover; the irrepressible strivings of the toiling masses for independent political organization and action, and how this trend is now maturing.

There are invaluable lessons to

be learned from the obstacles it has met and the petty-bourgeois mistreatment it has suffered, from the Conference for Progressive Political Action in 1920, and the LaFollette movement in 1924, to the more encouraging emergence of its outline today, when militant union labor is assuming its proper role as leader. LaFollette refused to crystallize a party, yet he got 5,000,000 votes.

Of that, Minton and Stuart say:

“If LaFollette had accepted the nomination from an independent political party, as the Workers (Communist) Party had suggested, if he had built an organization and had called for the unity of the working class instead of red-baiting, his vote might well have been more impressive and it would have formed the basis of a full-fledged political party in future elections.”

In a period when both the Republican and Democratic Parties

are again indistinguishable as parties of capitalism, reaction, hunger and war, this lesson of what even such a caricature of independent political action as LaFollette represented could do in attracting the masses is a cheering one for those working with better material and in more favorable general circumstances. As the authors conclude their history of post-war America:

“The history of the years to come would inevitably be marked by a growing realization that the final test of those who desired progress rested in the ability of the majority to win full economic, cultural and political freedom. The aspiration for a better life, for liberty and security was the true expression of the American Dream that capitalism had perverted and debased.”

Minton and Stuart have given us a book that aids that realization and inspires that aspiration.

HARRISON GEORGE

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