Ozimandias — Review: Against His-story! Against Leviathan! by Fredy Perlman

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Contents

Review: *Against His-story! Against Leviathan!* by Fredy Perlman, Black & Red, Detroit 1983.

Against His-story! is an attempt to take opposition to Progress to its logical conclusion. So is this belated review.

Perlman summarises the whole history of Civilisation from the viewpoint of its victims: we, the "zeks", free people who were enslaved then taught to identify with the enslaving monster: Leviathan.

Rock of Stages

Civilisation, the antithesis of community, is only 5,000 years old. Communities existed in the New World for thousands of years without either "giving rise to" or becoming part of, the Civilisations of the Aztecs and Incas, which shrank. Civilisations did not arise inevitably because of the development of the productive forces. People have always tried to fight Civilization. So why did it arise, how did it spread and dominate the world, and why didn't communities stop it?

The minority which created Civilisation did so initially, not in a place where the productive forces were rich, but where they were poor, and where Nature was harsh: Mesopotamia. The Sumerians had to build waterworks, so expertise and eventually kings developed. When the waterworks of Lagash overflowed into those of Ur, the king of Ur, or Lugal, persuaded his people to attack Lagash, and basically ended up enslaving its inhabitants and forcing them to rebuild both sets of waterworks, by now a full-time activity.

Communities try to resist Civilisation in various ways. But to form permanent military alliances, which is what is needed to seriously threaten the monster, is to turn these communities into a new Civilisation. Walled cities need a permanent wall-building proletariat. What was a free activity becomes compulsory. What Civilisation touches turns to stone. People internalise compulsion. They become "armored", to use Perlman's term, creating morality and guilt.

Other communities ran away. The modern Leviathan is just now wiping out the very last of them in New Guinea and the Amazon. People have always tried to escape. Leviathans perpetually decompose. Hence the ruins in deserts and jungles. One of the most spectacular examples of decomposition Perlman describes is the decay of French colonialism, stretched out across the fur trails of North America, losing hunters and traders to the existing communities, until the British wiped them out. The first proletarian uprising in American history was the one led by Francisco Roldan against Columbus in 1498. Roldan and a mob of ex-convicts from Spain overthrew the government in Santo Domingo, and ran off into the hills to join the natives, fighting against Civilisation, which they knew from personal experience was far worse than the alternative. There were also tendencies toward primitive communism among English Americans: hence the New England witch trials.

Perlman's critique of religion is more penetrating than Marx's. Moses' God was simply Leviathan made abstract. His program was a "declaration of war against all Life": "Replenish the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth".

There were numerous genuine primitivist crisis cults in the decomposing Roman Leviathan. Christianity was Civilisation's way of recuperating and suppressing them. Christianity is not, as Marxists have argued, the essential capitalist religion. Perlman explains how Islam was the midwife of mercantile capitalism. Arab merchants taught Europeans commerce, maths, etc., and

they have never been given credit for this. Capitalism grew, not out of the burghs of mediaeval Europe but out of the trading networks imported by Islam's imitators. There is no God but Value, and Mohammed is his Profit.

The antithesis of Civilisation, communism, has always been possible. There is a constant tendency toward communist revolution: 4th century Persia, 16th century Germany. The aim of the revolution is to destroy the productive forces, not to develop them. Decadence is not a stage in the development of Civilisation, but a permanent tendency to decompose, the result of the invariant struggle of slaves against private property and the state. Progress is the result of a disruption of cyclical time. Our struggle reasserts invariant, cyclical time against progressive, linear time. Civilisation is not inevitable, but it is a permanent danger, and primitive communities' myths warn them against it.

Myths such as Dream Time, Eden and the Golden Age when "They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods" (Hesiod) are humanity's memories of pre-Civilisation. Leviathan's myths are lies. Here is an example:

"Changes in the economy freed part of the population from the need to engage in subsistence farming, more men now became available to pursue other tasks (i.e. crafts, defence, religious life, administration and technology)" (*Penguin Atlas of World History*, Vol. 1).

Became available to whom? *The Penguin Atlas* continues:

"The centralisation of the state and the hierarchical ordering of society into sharply differentiated classes (rulers, priests, warriors, officials, craftsmen, traders, peasants, slaves) enabled the Egyptians to solve the problems which confronted every riverine civilisation".

This is literally nonsense. The division into classes makes the phrase "the Egyptians" meaningless. "The Egyptians" did not differentiate themselves into slaves and torturers in order to solve their common problems. The slaves were enslaved. From this point on, to talk of humanity solving its problems, is to peddle the discourse of the State.

Stage Fright

The evidence discovered since Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) derived from the racist anthropologist Morgan, shows that primitive peoples did not generally live in scarcity, nor were they cannibals. It was not the increase in the wealth of society which allowed Civilisation to emerge. It emerged in an area of scarcity, whereas Native Americans often lived in abundance, and, according to Perlman, consciously rejected the Civilisations on offer. This is hardly surprising. Civilisation has made more and more people more and more miserable for five thousand years.

Perlman's uncritical description of Native American communities should not be swallowed whole. According to one of his main inspirations, F.W. Turner, scarcity, competition, warfare, intolerance and torture did exist among pre-Columbian Indians (see *The Portable North American Indian Reader*). Perlman manages to paint a glaringly black-and-white picture of community and Civilisation. European Civilisation introduced the horse into Native America. On the other hand, it exterminated the beneficiaries of this development. Some white supremacists used Morgan's stages theory as an excuse. Nathan Meeker founded a cooperative concentration camp for the Ute Indians in Colorado, which he believed would raise them from savagery through the pastoral stage to barbarism, then to "the enlightened, scientific, and religious stage" (*Bury My Heart at*

Wounded Knee, p372). Sounds familiar? The ideologists of the frontier didn't need historical materialism. Christianity served their genocidal purposes adequately. The ignorant savages, unwilling to be elevated into barbarians, killed Meeker in 1879.

Fredy vs. Fred

Perlman dismisses the progressist ideas of Marx's *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* as "moronic". Capitalism doesn't "develop the productive forces", it creates capitalist "productive forces" and "relations of production". "The so-called material conditions are Leviathan's garments, not the ground it stands on." Perlman is right to point out that the productive forces do not exist apart from their social form, and that the latter give rise to the former, not vice-versa. But his dismissal of Marx is a trifle brusque. He makes no attempt to give a balanced assessment of Marx and Engels' contribution.

Engels' position was ambiguous. Although he saw the state as a weapon of one class against another, he also believed it "arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check". The concept of the "needs of society" implies some neutral force apart from the two antagonistic classes:

"At a certain stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the split of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this split. We are now rapidly reaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes has not only ceased to be a necessity but becomes a positive hindrance to production. They will fall just as inevitably as they arose at an earlier stage."

Perlman confidently invites his readers to reexamine the theory of stages to see whether he has caricatured it. He hasn't. The argument that Civilization is an inevitable stage in the development of the productive forces is just as dangerous as the old chestnut about it being "human nature". To deny alternatives to Civilization's program of war against nature and peoples is to be an accomplice to their physical destruction. To those who say Marx developed a less progressist position (for example Teodor Shanin in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*), I would reply that it's a shame he didn't do it earlier. Nevertheless, it is simplistic to identify the whole of Marx's work with some of his, and especially Engels', mistakes. Perlman gives the impression that nothing good has happened since the state first arose in Sumer, and that non-civilised people were just as Hesiod described them. If the only alternative to life under Civilization is the "Stone Age", a life of hunting, screwing, being at one with Nature, etc., there is no question which is preferable.

Women in particular were better off before Civilisation, which has systematically stripped them of the power they used to have. But some technologies which have been developed during the last 5,000 years could be inherited by communism. No doubt the idea of a centralised world administration will be rejected. There will be a large degree of self-sufficiency. Without the waste of capitalism, the world could easily support its current population. The Stone Age couldn't. The population figure will depend entirely on how many children women choose to have and how much effort people are prepared to put into raising them (see *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* by George Bradford).

Perlman's arrogance is infectious. He dispatches Marxism in a couple of pages, the concept of "bourgeois revolutions" in one sentence. His method of dealing with anyone he doesn't like involves its own totalitarian circular logic. His critics are dismissed as "armored". People who want some positive evidence before accepting his conclusions are guard dogs of the Leviathanic

order. Perlman's anti-history is so all-explanatory, covering the whole of history in 300 pages, there must be a danger of *Against His-story!* eventually becoming a new bible for a political dogma, the fate which befell Situationist theory.

An eclectic approach is needed to avoid this dead end. In learning from the culture of primitive peoples, we are not obliged to abandon everything which has been developed since the waterworks of Mesopotamia.

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