

Citation style

Morgan, Kevin: review of: Silvio Pons / Robert Service (eds.), A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, 2013, 02, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189727288, downloaded from recensio.net

First published: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/81428.pdf>



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Silvio Pons/Robert Service (Hrsg.), A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism, Princeton University Press, Princeton/Oxford 2010, XXXVI + 921 S., geb., 45,00 £.

It is not the easiest thing to review an encyclopaedia or dictionary of this type. On the one hand there are the individual entries: in the present case, over 400 of them contributed by some 160 different authors. On the other hand, there is the overall framework within which the entries are presented, and its effectiveness in providing a comprehensive source of reference and illumination. In theory a collection maintaining the highest standards in respect of individual entries may nevertheless fail to assemble them according to any clearly stated or easily comprehensible editorial criteria. This in fact is the case with the work under review. Though a collaborative project of impressive scope, the whole is not in this case more than the sums of its parts; indeed, it is decidedly less.

For those familiar with the literature on twentieth-century communism, the list of contributors alone is a recommendation. It is invidious to single out particular entries for discussion. Nevertheless, if illustratively one mentions Richard Stites (on festivals or utopia), Robert William Davies (on the command economy), Igal Halfin (on communist autobiography), Brigitte Studer (on the new man) or Kevin McDermott (on the Comintern), one sees at a glance that the editors have been able to call on recognised international authorities whose credentials need no urging here. For the 40 or so entries on individual communist parties or groups of communist parties, the contributors are in many cases authors of standard works on the party in question. In cases where their writings are not generally accessible in English, for example José Gotovitch on Belgium or Antonio Elorza on Spain, the value of the work for the anglophone reader is further enhanced. In certain cases, authorship of key texts might be taken by some readers as a recommendation; this, for example, was my own reaction to Paul Hollander's entry on political pilgrims, which in its distilled form is even more problematic than his book on the subject. Even so, this is consistent with the editors' commitment to a 'plurality of approaches' irreducible to any single perspective or line of interpretation. If a historian like Ellen Schrecker would doubtless demur at John Earl Haynes's entry on spies (apparently only Soviet spies; communists themselves were never spied on) Haynes would react in much the same way to Schrecker on McCarthyism. Twentieth-century communism is a contested field and this is fairly represented by the range of contributors.

Where the dictionary falls short is in the coherence and transparency of its coverage. Just now there is a vogue for coffee-table books advising 1.001 things to read, or listen to, or watch before you die. Individual contributors pick their favourites, their choices are inherently arbitrary and disputable, and this indeed is one of these books' selling points (what, no "Great Dictator" but "The Incredible Shrinking Man"?). It is difficult to see that Robert Service and Silvio Pons have attained even this degree of clarity. The entries, they say, include "figures, historical events, organisations, institutions, societies, and numerous keywords". Given that the categories are conceptually distinct if not actually incongruous, there needs to be a clear explanation of how they interconnect with one another. One might, for example, imagine an entry on Dimitri Shostakovich but not on music. Or one might imagine an entry on architecture but not on Oscar Niemeyer. This dictionary, confusingly, has both. Not only does it combine these alternative approaches, but it is unclear how far individual contributors have been advised of how their entries fit into the overall coverage provided. For example, one might conceivably justify the exclusion of a Niemeyer on grounds of space, were it not that the entry on architecture and urban planning deals unhurriedly with the such robustly non-communist tangents as the English garden-city movement, Red Vienna and the French and Dutch Situationist International.

Contributors can only write to the brief they are given, and one suspects that the editors may have over-reacted against the communist obsession with centralised co-ordination. Who better than Nicole Racine, for example, to contribute on French intellectuals? In doing so in the form of biographical pro-

files, however, one wonders what criteria Louis Aragon, André Malraux and even Jean-Paul Sartre met that Henri Barbusse failed to. If Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein are rightly in here, what has happened to Pablo Picasso? From a British perspective, one wonders whether the same criteria might not have justified the inclusion of John Desmond Bernal (who, like Lysenkoism and Joliot-Curie, slips into "science") or Bernard Shaw. But at the same time, if there are to be entries instead on George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, what has Raymond Aron done not to make the shortlist? Do Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini really require individual entries? If so, why not Francisco Franco or Augusto Pinochet? And why is there an illuminating essay on fascism in Italy, but no corresponding feature on National Socialism? What, no "Great Dictator"?

No project of this type can entirely avoid this problem. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that the principles both of inclusion and categorisation be articulated in some clearer fashion. It does not help that the index itself is not comprehensive, so that Bernal (for example) does not even appear there, while the indexer has simply baulked at Hollander's long lists of political 'pilgrims', whose indiscriminate pointlessness (Robert Redford, Emma Goldman, Noam Chomsky) is thereby underlined. There is also a more basic issue. The editors in their introduction describe communism as a "fundamentally homogeneous phenomenon", implicitly contesting the perspective of works like "Le siècle des communismes". Can this affirmation of homogeneity be sustained across the dictionary's individual entries? Or is there also a fundamental tension between the systems of state oppression and the movements of popular politics which are both encompassed within the phenomenon of twentieth-century communism?

In practice, though clearly not by intention, the assertion of homogeneity is not maintained. Entries on a host of issues, from cultural and demographic policies to markets and anti-Semitism, are essentially concerned with the Soviet Union and sometimes its satellites. Donald Filtzer and Lynne Viola deal authoritatively with workers and peasants in a Soviet and (in Filtzer's case) Chinese context; but there is no wider discussion of these crucial elements in the communist world-view, or indeed of other key social categories like the petty bourgeoisie – though Juliane Fuerst shows what might be attempted in her entry on youth. Trade unions again are considered in a Soviet context, and there are no separate entries on the Profintern or its leader Solomon Lozovsky. The same is true of keywords. Is despotism really such a key concept demanding an entry here? From contributors of this calibre, one might instead have looked forward to a discussion of the communist conception of democracy, which figured so prominently and with such tragic ambivalence in communist discourse.

The editors observe that the time has come for an assessment of twentieth-century communism. The dictionary they have compiled provides entries mostly of impressive quality. The bibliographic references are helpful and the dictionary itself introduces readers to many of the leading authorities on the subject. At the level of the individual entry, the volume can therefore be strongly recommended. However, there is no new attempt at a synthesis here, either in the perfunctory introduction or, as far as one can make it out, in the editorial rationale. The editors also note the recent appearance of excellent general histories of communism by Archie Brown and David Priestland. It is to these that one might turn first to get one's bearings.

Kevin Morgan, Manchester

Zitierempfehlung:

Kevin Morgan: Rezension von: Silvio Pons/Robert Service (eds.), A Dictionary of 20th-Century Communism, Princeton University Press, Princeton/Oxford 2010, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte (online) 53, 2013, URL: <<http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81428>> [18.2.2013].