

MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS: an overview

by Michael D. Yates

(Editor's note: When *Progressive Librarian* was approached by *Monthly Review Press* with a request to accept MRP books for review, we reluctantly had to decline the offer due to our policy of reviewing books directly related to the field of librarianship. We do, however, want readers of *Progressive Librarian* to know about *Monthly Review Press* and so are publishing here a description of this venerable, leftist publishing house.)

Monthly Review Press (or MR Press as it is commonly known) is one of the world's premier publishers of radical nonfiction. An offshoot of *Monthly Review* magazine, it was founded in 1952 with the publication of distinguished journalist I.F. Stone's *The Hidden History of the Korean War*. The decision to start a press at the height of the Cold War and with a book that sharply challenged the U.S. government's rationale for sending troops to Korea was a courageous act. The magazine's editors, Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, knew the risks but concluded that such a venture was not only necessary but could succeed in keeping radical ideas alive and introducing them to new generations of readers. They were right. The Press has been in continuous operation for fifty-eight years, a remarkable achievement in a nation as antagonistic to left-wing ideas as is the United States.

Stone could not get his book published, but Sweezy and Huberman were convinced that his history was correct and of great importance for the public to understand. As with so many MR Press books, Stone's analysis was vindicated by later scholars, most notably Bruce Cumings, while his contemporaries either ignored or condemned it. Another case in point is the arguments put forward by Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran in their seminal book *Monopoly Capital*, by Sweezy and Harry Magdoff in several later MR Press books, and most recently by Fred Magdoff and current *Monthly Review* editor John Bellamy Foster in their book, *The Great Financial Crisis*. They argue that advanced capitalist economies are prone to slow growth or stagnation (and accompanying labor market problems) and that the explosion of the financial sector has served in large part as a compensation mechanism helping to stave off this problem. Not only did they show that a crisis-free capitalism is a contradiction in terms, but they presciently predicted the current financial debacle and accompanying "Great Recession."

The revolutionary ferment of the 1960s and 1970s spurred great interest in *Monthly Review Press* books. I remember how I would look forward to each new catalogue, always finding exciting titles to order in preparation for teaching my college classes. Terrific books like William Hinton's China classic *Fanshen*; Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* (the book Hugo Chávez gave to President Obama, boosting our sales considerably); what I consider the best book ever written about work,

Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*; and John Bellamy Foster's brilliant introduction to our environmental catastrophe in the making, *The Vulnerable Planet*. What makes MR Press books so valuable is that they combine depth, clarity, and accessibility. After I read Hans Koning's exposé of the brutality of Christopher Columbus, *Columbus: His Enterprise*, I gave it to my mother and grandmother. They said they'd never celebrate Columbus Day again. And they were Italian-Americans!

Monthly Review Press publishes books that critically educate people, whether they be teachers, organizers, or ordinary working men and women. What is more, this critical education is aimed not just at those who live in the United States but rather at the world community. MR Press books have been translated into languages as far apart as Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Our friends in India publish MR books in inexpensive additions so that those who are poor can read them too. MR Press authors live in every inhabited continent; they and our readers comprise a far-flung radical family.

If Monthly Review Press books are, in the deepest sense, educational, they also seek to change the world and most of its component parts. For example, MR Press books have sought to put modern education under the microscope, pointing out the many ways in which it serves to reinforce the power of the property-owning elite and effectively habituates working people to their own exploitation, as well as how education might be made to serve more progressive and humane ends. David Noble's *Digital Diploma Mills*, Joe Berry's *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*, Murray Levin's *Teach Me*, and John Marsh's *Class Dismissed* (forthcoming) are each models of what a good radical book should be. At the level of society as a whole, Monthly Review Press is known for publishing books that critique capitalism itself and point the way forward to the building of a society that aims to allow each human being to develop fully his and her capacities. The list of books here is a long one. Recent titles include Michael Lebowitz's provocative *The Socialist Alternative*, István Mészáros's *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, and Samir Amin's *The World We Wish to See*.

Finally, Monthly Review Press publishes books that you simply won't find anywhere else. Al Sandine's remarkable *The Taming of the American Crowd*, Steve Early's labor insider critique *Embedded With Organized Labor*, Michael Yates's quirky travelogue *Cheap Motels and a Hotplate*, and John Tully's magisterial history of the rubber industry, *The Devil's Milk* demonstrate that Monthly Review Press is not only alive and well but still doing the job its founders envisioned when they published I.F. Stone's muckraking masterpiece so many years ago.