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Eric Aarons. *What's Left? Memoirs of an Australian Communist.* Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1993. xi + 260 pp. A$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-14-015704-8.

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Is a book on Australian Communism still of interest? In fact it is a timely reminder that the ideas of economic rationalism were once hotly contested. Eric Aarons (born in 1919), a scientist, sculptor, and part-time poet, devoted most of his life to working full-time for the Communist Party of Australia. His brother Laurie was a general secretary of the party. Inspired by the Communist views of his grandmother and other members of the family, Eric Aarons started in 1934 as a member of the Young Communist League and finally saw out, without undue emotion, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1991.

Aarons was a loyal, if somewhat sceptical, member of the party. As secretary of the Sydney University branch, he was influenced by the arch-heretic Trotsky. During World War II Aarons used his scientific training for munitions work. After the war he was swept up in the Communist push for union control and worked for a time as a Communist organiser on the South Coast of New South Wales. From 1951 to 1954 he received training in the local variant of Marxism as leader of an Australian Communist delegation to China.

Leaving Australia when the referendum on the banning of Communism was in full swing, Aarons was part of a potential leadership in exile. The failure of the referendum rendered such leadership unnecessary. Returning from China in the wake of the Petrov affair, Aarons was involved, first in party educational work, and then as an organiser in Newcastle, before becoming in 1963 secretary to the party's secretariat. In 1970 he gave up full-time party work, taught in a school, turned to sculpture, and wrote a book on Communist theory.

In 1974 Aarons became editor of the *Communist Tribune*. From 1976 to 1982 Aarons was one of three national secretaries of the party. His position gave him considerable opportunities for travel abroad to Russia, other parts of Eastern Europe, Cuba, and Chile, as well as to China. Aarons was thus strategically placed to observe and participate in all the conflicts and splits of the party before its dissolution in 1991. Aarons remained with the party despite Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the invasion of Hungary in 1956. Nor was he tempted to follow the dogmatic Ted Hill in setting up the minority pro-Beijing CPA (Marxist-Leninist) in 1961.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 proved more traumatic. Aarons sees the "Prague Spring" as the precursor of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The CPA became openly critical, despite the ingrained pro-Soviet attitudes of many members, of Russian intervention. The pro-Soviet Socialist Party of Australia (SPA) split off in 1970. The CPA was now aligned with neither Moscow nor Beijing, but still generally hostile to the ALP. Support dwindled, especially as economic rationalism advanced internationally in the 1980s. The complete collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe after 1989 left the CPA little option but to dissolve and attempt to cooperate with other radicals in a New Left Party.

Where did Aarons himself stand? His book is divided between personal biography, an account of his role in the CPA, and Marxist analysis. He gives the impression that he was always something of a loner, dissatisfied with the Party line. Aarons concluded that Marx's belief in the inevitable immiseration and revolutionary organisation of the working classes was unsound. Instead he developed an idea of socialism based on values rather than economic analysis. Conservationism, ignored by Marx, women's advancement, Aboriginal rights, and similar single issues could, Aarons believes, be more profitably sought than a single social and economic revolution.

Angered by the exposure of the corruption and crass inefficiency of the fallen Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, Aarons now advocates a limited market economy. Some supervision, he believes, is necessary, but in general Aarons has broken with his earlier ideology.

Aarons helps to demonstrate why so many disintegrating Communist regimes attempted to move directly to extreme capitalist market economics without any effort to implement a democratic socialist alternative.

Aarons is virtually silent on the weaknesses of market ideology, exposed by many non-socialist investigators. If, as he himself maintains, Communism was a religion, its rejection is likely to result in adherence to antithetical beliefs, rather than to a reformed version of itself. Ironically, Santamaria and the Groupers, whom Aarons mentions as the sworn enemies of the CPA in the unions, have emerged as stronger critics of economic rationalism than many of their bitter Marxist opponents, now left floundering in the wake of recent events. Aarons's socialist analysis is too heavy for the general reader, while somewhat superficial for the close investigator.

Revealing about his private life, the book leaves a number of tantalising gaps in the narrative of his career. Some of the issues he raises cry out for further development, such as the conflict with the Groupers in the 1950s and the comparative policies of prominent radical leaders, then and later. Nevertheless, this book is well worth reading for the light it throws on the current ideological revolution.

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