

Review of Richard Greeman's *Beware of Vegetarian Sharks*

Eli Messinger
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Beware of Vegetarian Sharks, Radical Rants and Internationalist Essays, Richard Greeman, 2008. Published by Praxis Research and Education Center (Moscow) www.praxiscenter.ru. Buy \$19.97 from <http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/beware-of-vegetarian-sharks/15468160> or download free from <http://www.lulu.com/product/file-download/beware-of-vegetarian-sharks/15468161>.

Richard Greeman has given us a spirited and frank account of his life in the U.S. radical-revolutionary Left from about the time of the occupation of Columbia University in the late 1960s. As a French-speaker who lived for years in France, Greeman is also at home in discussing European politics.

Greeman's account of his political life carries the reader along on a fast-paced and eventful journey. He has been fully engaged in political causes but is not self-righteous in recounting them. He makes no scholarly pretense of political neutrality nor does he provide alternative views on controversial issues. Nevertheless he is not narrow-minded or mean-spirited toward other viewpoints. He is simply not bashful about giving his own opinions. Throughout, Greeman serves as the focal point of the narrative except when he writes about Victor Serge.

Why am I comfortable taking events from Greeman's vantage point? First, although he obviously enjoys advancing his own views, he does not have an inflated sense of his own importance or correctness. Second, I agree with most of his views. Third, while he has strong views, he is not tendentious.

Greeman gives an all-too-brief account of his relationship to Raya Dunayevskaya and News and Letters. He read her *Marxism and Freedom* in 1960 and calls it "a seminal work establishing the underlying humanism of Marx's philosophy as the antithesis of Stalinist Communism."

Greeman describes his book--I believe correctly-- as a "compilation of essays." He always provides the date the essay was written, but unfortunately he does not always tell us the circumstances of its composition. While there definitely are recurring themes, the book does not have a unified, central theme. This perhaps reflects the heterogeneity of Greeman's interests or perhaps the several loci of his life including the U.S., France and Russia.

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It is rare that the author of a political tract provides biographical information that helps us understand his outlook. But Greeman does so. His family is loaded with iconoclasts and leftists. His upbringing proved especially interesting to me because of similarities to my own. Both his father and mine were left-wing public-school teachers who were supporters of Henry Wallace's ill-fated presidential bid in 1948. Both families had to keep a low profile during the McCarthy Era when leftwing public school teachers were extremely vulnerable.

I especially enjoyed Greeman's account of his deft handling of the redbaiting he encountered in the 6th grade: "I was labeled a 'Communist' during Social Studies class... I had zero idea of what a 'Communist' was back then (we were 'pwogressives' at home, but I knew the label could get me in trouble). Never at a loss for words, I instantly retorted that I was not a 'Communist' but a 'commonist' because I was 'for the common man.' This inspiration shut the pint-sized red-baiter's nasty little trap, won the approval of my 11-year-old classmates, and has defined my political outlook ever since." (p. 17)

Of particular interest to readers of this periodical, Greeman relates that he "encountered" Raya Dunayevskaya in 1960 and promptly joined her group of workers and intellectuals. He read her *Marxism and Freedom* and "the next day I hitch-hiked to meet her. Her Detroit-based organization was nearly unique in combining Blacks and Whites, workers and intellectuals, women and men on an equal footing." (p. 33) Although Greeman later went his own way, some of this influence continues to this day. For example, I know that he arranged for translations of Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* into both Russian and Arabic. He considers this "still the best introduction to Marxist Humanism." (p. 34)

Greeman's fluency in French adds a valuable dimension to his political outlook. Many of the essays in his book are translated from newspaper articles he composed while living in France. He named his newspaper column "The World Is My Country," the motto of the radical pamphleteer of the U.S. Revolution, Tom Paine, Greeman's hero.

Greeman's political education came largely from interactions with Left figures from the recent past. He writes: "They incarnated its ethos, breathed its energy, spoke of people like Trotsky and Emma Goldman as if they had just left the room. I had the impression, in our conversations, of being initiated into an oral tradition which paralleled and completed the reading of history and the 'sacred texts.'" (p. 35) I feel Greeman was very fortunate in having these conversations.

Greeman borrowed the title of his book from Bertolt Brecht who likened our world to one that sharks build for little fish. These holding pens represent a kinder, gentler capitalism that would make "all kinds of sanitary arrangements. If, for example, a little fish were to injure a fin, it would immediately be bandaged, so that it would not die and be lost to the sharks before its time. So that the little fish would not become melancholy, there would be big water festivals from time to time; because cheerful fish taste better than melancholy ones." (p. 41)

In the lead essay, "Dangerous Shortcuts and Vegetarian Sharks," he also provides a readable yet sound introduction to basic terms such as "the capitalist system"; distinguishes between theories of the origin of capitalist wealth and various socio-economic policies conducive to its growth such as mercantilism, free trade, state

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capitalism, welfare capitalism; and provides a brief but basic characterization of capitalism as “the self-expansion of capital through the exploitation of nature and the extraction of unpaid labor-time from workers.” (p. 41)

He cautions against a narrow focus on recent manifestations of capitalism such as neo-liberalism with its free-trade policies and integrated global systems, “As if we could somehow turn back to a ‘kinder, gentler capitalism.’” (p. 41)

The book’s special value, in my estimation, is Greeman’s extensive presentation of the life and work of Victor Serge. In Greeman’s hands, Serge comes across as a heroic but ultimately tragic figure. Serge was close to the heart of the Bolshevik movement in Russia at the time of the 1917 Revolution. He was a fierce critic of its authoritarian, Stalinist turn, and for this independence he paid a heavy price--imprisonment, exile, social ostracism, and attacks on his reputation. Serge’s life story is the stuff of high drama, and Greeman obviously relishes telling it. Serge emerges as a larger-than-life character who remained loyal to the high principles of the Bolshevik Revolution; he was deeply involved in its later phases; and he was a compelling writer of both fiction and non-fiction.

Greeman is not shy about telling us his opinions. I found his candor refreshing. Greeman’s is not a heavily footnoted, scholarly treatise. His lively style is likely to make this book particularly attractive to younger readers as will the high drama of Victor Serge’s life story. But it is by no means a work for juveniles.

In a chapter entitled “Where are the Riots of Yesteryear?” Greeman looks nostalgically at the turbulent, politically promising events of the 1960s. In a 1969 piece, he contended, I’m afraid over-optimistically, that “From Paris to Prague: the Spirit of ‘68 Lives!”

Greeman’s account of the 1968 Columbia University “riots” is particularly dramatic and detailed because he was in the thick of the battle. It is a heady mix of political resistance and humorous sidelights.

In conclusion, Greeman’s *Beware of Vegetarian Sharks* is a lively and engaging, largely personal account of his political experiences and thinking. While the bulk of them, like his time with Dunayevskaya’s News and Letters group, were as part of the anti-Stalinist Left, he did not hesitate to go beyond that sphere of politics. He has long been in search for democratic, revolutionary currents in which to participate. His knowledge of the heroic but now largely forgotten Bolshevik revolutionary Victor Serge is enormous and deserves to be known by many more of us. This is but one example, albeit a major example, of how Greeman’s work brings to light people and events in our recent past which deserve to be known by those struggling today.