

## Book Review

Foley, Barbara. *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*. Pluto Press, 2019.

Review by: Ronald Paul

The word *Today* in the title of this book refers to two main things: the state of the world and the role of marxist literary criticism in it. When it comes to the world, Barbara Foley reminds us that capitalism is “no longer as seemingly natural as the air we breathe. It is a socioeconomic system that came into being in history and can therefore go out of being in history, albeit after prolonged and intense struggle” (xiv). She also notes that in the United States, a 2017 poll revealed that as many as 40 per cent of US inhabitants “now prefer socialism to capitalism” (xiv). The prologue to her book was written before the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, which has created the one of the greatest humanitarian crises the world has ever experienced. It is against this background of systemic collapse that Barbara Foley’s new study should be read.

The other meaning of the word *Today* is connected to the contemporary status of marxist literary criticism itself and what it continues to offer students, teachers and readers in terms of a theoretical method of exploring both the politics of literature as well as the literary response to a world that cries out for social, political and economic change. Foley sees her book therefore as a “call to consider the continuing need for a classless future and a reminder of the abiding presentness of the past; we are still very much in the *longue durée* (that is, long-term era) of capitalism” (xiv). The great strength of her new guide is that it not only conveys a profound sense of the relevance of literature in all its forms, but also that marxist criticism remains an essential tool for interpreting both the text and the context in which it is produced. In an interview given in connection with the launching of her book, Foley states two main reasons for writing it. Firstly, because there hasn’t been a new introduction to marxist literary criticism for many years – not since Terry Eagleton’s *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976) and Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Secondly, because there is clearly a revived interest – especially among young people – in marxist ideas and how these pertain not only to culture but also to economics, politics, and history (Interview with Jon Bailes, <https://stateofnatureblog.com>). It must be said however that this long publication gap has in fact been partially bridged by Eagleton himself who wrote two more useful radical introductions – *How to Read a Poem* (2007) and *How to Read Literature* (2013), while Moyra Haslett covers similar ground in her *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories* (2000). At the same time, after reading Foley’s book, it is clear that her own most recent contribution is more theoretically sophisticated, radically instructive and politically compelling than these previous additions to the field.

Foley’s guide is divided into two parts: one on ‘Marxism’, which covers Historical Materialism, Political Economy and Ideology; and another on ‘Literature’, which includes Literature and Literary Criticism, Marxist Literary Criticism and Marxist Pedagogy. Taken as a whole, the book offers much more than just an introduction to marxist literary criticism, as the title suggests. There is a wide-ranging discussion that begins with Marxism as a revolutionary critique

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of modern capitalism. It ends with a series of in-depth case studies of individual works of literature. Thus, we have for example comparisons between texts by Matthew Arnold, Muriel Rukeyser and Xu Lizhi on the theme of social alienation, and by William Butler Yeats and Claude McKay on the question of political rebellion.

Foley has succeeded in writing such an inspirational and authoritative guide, the product of many years of teaching and research, I feel I can offer only one or two short critical reflections. The first section on historical materialism, political economy and ideology is extremely ambitious, covering key concepts such as class, dialectics, base and superstructure, commodity fetishism, surplus value, alienation and capital. Foley makes a heroic effort to explain the basic meaning of these difficult concepts, but the overall impact remains theoretically challenging and constitutes a heavy start to the book, while the link to literary criticism is often tenuous. The inclusion at the end of each section of a shortlist of recommended literary texts that deal with the issue in question also leaves readers very much to their own critical devices. Thus, for example, in the chapter on money:

Money figures centrally in the literary representations of societies where it reigns supreme – from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (2011 [1596-99] to Honoré de Balzac's *Old Goriot* (1835; English translation 1999 [1860], from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (20003 [1854] to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1996 [1949]) (182).

The latter part of this section also takes up the question of 'Proletarian Literature and Alternative Hegemony'. Foley admits to being unsure however of the most suitable way of characterizing this particular genre, despite the fact that it represents a significant literary challenge to bourgeois ideology and is therefore of fundamental interest to marxists:

The currently available terms for describing different variants within this oppositional literary tradition are many: literature of social protest; resistance literature; leftist literature; radical literature; partisan literature; literature of commitment; revolutionary literature; literature of alternative hegemony; proletarian literature. (151)

Although Foley seems to prefer the term 'proletarian literature', she tends instead to use the more abstract one: 'literature of alternative hegemony'. This may be because it does not carry the same political baggage of 'proletarian literature', a genre that first emerged in the early years of the Soviet workers' state. Today the kind of writing associated with this label is often considered psychologically simplistic and politically propagandistic. It is also surprising to note that the other closely related term of 'socialist realism' is missing from Foley's list, presumably because it is too tainted by the vulgar marxist aesthetics that dominated in the Soviet Union from the 1930s onwards. I myself would prefer the phrase 'working-class literature', which links the social background of the author, the subject matter of the text as well as its ideological point of view. This discussion of 'proletarian literature' is nevertheless extremely important since it is the only space devoted in Foley's book to a radically alternative literary tradition that is in contrast to the other works she mentions. I would therefore have liked to see a closer examination of the genre and the political issues it raises, not only in terms of giving ordinary people a literary voice, but also its utopian potential in showing both how we live and how we might live. Since her book is

about today, it would also have been useful to include more modern examples of radical literature. Robert Tressell's pioneering novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), is mentioned several times, but what about more novels, stories and poems from the 21<sup>st</sup> century and from around the world?

In the section on 'Literature and Literary Criticism', Foley very much bases herself on the work of Fredric Jameson, not least in terms of the bold claims she reasserts for marxist literary criticism. Thus, marxism is viewed not just as one literary approach among others, it seeks instead to reveal the essential ideological relationship between literature and society, revealing elements of the political unconscious that lie embedded within literary texts. In this respect, marxist criticism remains indispensable, Foley maintains: "Marxism draws upon and completes the insights made available through other lenses; but it proposes itself as a 'meta'-theory, that is, one possessing overarching explanatory power" (88). In order to support this claim, Foley covers many of the classic debates within marxist literary theory and criticism – about realism, modernism, ideology, hegemony, commitment, politics and aesthetics, form and content – documenting a long tradition of intellectual deliberation, theoretical rigour and cultural polemic. However, it would have been helpful to also acknowledge some of important contributions made by other radical theorists that have addressed critical blindspots within marxism. It seems unfortunate for instance that Foley rejects those who in recent years have promoted a broader, 'intersectional' approach to literature and society (something which she herself dismisses as both inadequate and undialectical). Intersectionality has nevertheless enabled a more fruitful discussion of race, gender and class, not least within academia. Since her book is meant to provide the starting point for a contemporary and accessible marxist pedagogics, there are clearly areas where more open engagement is needed with non-marxist concepts that cover the complex interplay of social and economic forces within modern capitalism. The *Black Lives Matter* movement for example has succeeded in creating an international solidarity campaign of common struggle against structures of oppression that clearly overlap: racism, sexism and class exploitation.

Despite her political disavowals, Foley does herself show how illuminating a more radically eclectic approach can be when it comes to a discussion for example of 'Gender and sexuality'. Here she engages with issues of class, capital, sexuality and power in a comparative analysis of very disparate texts: E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Ann Petry's 'Like a Winding Sheet', and Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*. This is also where the effort demanded of the reader in coming to grips with the theoretical sections of the book really pays off. Foley's marxist pedagogics section is, I suspect, one to which students and teachers will most often return since it is here that her skills as a consummate marxist interpreter of literature are most fully revealed. It is for example not every day one comes across a radical critic who is unafraid of dealing with such elusive aspects of literature as beauty, greatness, empathy, density, depth and mortality. Everything falls into place at this point under Foley's expert guidance and we see the application of marxism to literary studies as not only offering a unique way of understanding our cultural past and present, but also of envisaging a more humane, equitable and sustainable society of the future.



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