

Book Review

MAGICAL MARXISM: SUBVERSIVE POLITICS AND THE IMAGINATION. By Andy Merrifield. London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011. 189 pp.

For the majority of the world's population, working life is dead life. Alienated from both time and labour, individuals exist in a zombie-like state, often experiencing an insomnia plague that allows people to accept a repressive situation as natural reality. Andy Merrifield suggests however, that there are individuals that form "pockets of resistance," engaging in fair trade and food sovereignty issues, global landless struggles, or even free software movements (xvi). Such actions form an underground that Merrifield attempts to explore throughout *Magical Marxism* in a new (read: less systemic and scientific) Marxist style.

In *Magical Marxism*, Merrifield calls for a denial of the real world. A more 'magical' Marxism is about "invention not discovery, about irrationality, not rationality. There's no fetishism anymore, no absolute truth hidden behind innumerable fictions and false images of the world... its [Magical Marxisms] critical power doesn't come from criticism but from an ability to disrupt and reinvent, to create desire and inspire hope" (18). Merrifield presents his argument for a Marxism that pivots on possibility rather than critique through six independent chapters, all which attempt to inspire the reader to believe in the existence of alternatives to capitalism and then to see them in the landscape.

Throughout this work, readers are exposed to numerous forms of direct-action anarchism which Merrifield suggests is necessary to reinvigorate classical Marxism. Merrifield's discussions of the communal publication of subversive books and the appropriation of spaces such as building rooftops, improvised street markets, and second hand bookstores for alternative, radical uses are meant to make believers out of skeptics. Such examples illustrate the ways in which individuals are engaging in subversive acts and living differently, often choosing to create "post-capitalist communes of like-minded adventurers, people who work together, practically, energetically, while expanding their individual selves" (73).

Although such attempts to live differently have led to a rebirth of the phenomenon of violence, acts of resistance must not become limited to violence or succumb to realist actuality. Rather, forms of resistance must inspire hope. Building upon Marx's parable regarding spiders, bees, and architects, Merrifield suggests that we find solace in our ability to first imagine and then to change physical and mental forms as these abilities distinguish the worst of architects from the best of bees. We as humans can invent future scenarios, engage in formulating abstractions, all of which are magical acts. Those of

us on the left must begin to imagine another destiny, becoming the architects of a new society.

In the last section of the book, “Soft Dreamers, Intellectual Anarchists,” Merrifield reflects upon one of the most powerful and subversive sensibilities in society – the poetic sensibility. In Merrifield’s words, “Power fears poetry... Poetry resides somewhere else, somewhere inaccessible to power; it evokes sentiments, touches being, and speaks in a strange tongue” (163). I need only to reflect upon my own experience of crying quiet tears while listening to labour songs being performed at the 2011 Mountain Justice camp (a direct-action training camp held in the Appalachian region), to understand how subversive poetic sensibilities can be. Perhaps such artistic forms are far more effective in creating social change than any academic text... Individuals like those engaged in the direct-action group, Mountain Justice, build solidarity that moves far beyond the narrow confines of a unified working class, forming a strong political force through a common desire to oppose environmental degradation. Merrifield’s work then provides a critical lens through which to better appreciate and understand such activist groups within the context of Appalachia and beyond.

Although Merrifield seeks to present and better understand alternative practices, it is curious that the author makes no references to literatures pertaining to alternative economic and political spaces or even diverse economies. Researchers in these fields have worked diligently to both document and advocate for alternative practices. In addition, when Merrifield attempts to address questions of the role of the state, he tends to write the state off without fully exploring the threat of state co-option. In the end, Merrifield is ultimately unable to answer the lingering question of whether or not some so-called alternative practices are simply forms of neo-liberal social enterprises that address the failures of capitalism without actually doing anything about it.

With that said however, *Magical Marxism* provides a foundational text for believers and skeptics alike, and for all those who hope and dream of something beyond capitalism. The book could easily be assigned for a graduate level course (along with other works that have been published as part

of the Marxism and Culture series), and perhaps an upper-level undergraduate course (although Merrifield draws heavily from numerous theorists such as Derrida, Lefebvre, Marx, Debord, as well as others, and some familiarity with these theorists is crucial for understanding the text).

Overall, *Magical Marxism* is a delightful, hopeful text that challenges previous theoretical conceptions and understandings of Marxism as well as the academy. One is left wondering after reading this text if action is far more useful than abstract thinking. Merrifield offers the following note on the importance of action. “Action brings us to life, gives meaning to our lives, and helps us become subjects in the creation of this life, masters of our own activity and body” (42). Perhaps as academics we might give more meaning to our scholarly lives by engaging willingly in action-oriented research – certainly an important issues for all academics to consider.

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