

Book Review:

Carlos Ramírez-Arenas
Syracuse University

Chakrabarti, Anjan, Anup Dhar, and Serap A. Kayatekin.
***Marx, Marxism and the Spiritual.* Routledge: London. £ 96,**
pp.400.

The edited volume *Marx, Marxism and the Spiritual* gathers a group of texts and interviews that ask about how notions and experiences of “the spiritual” appear in the works of Karl Marx and other Marxist authors, as well as in Marxist-inspired political and religious movements. Some of the contributors to this volume revisit Marx’s famous critique of religion as the “opium of the people,” and reinterpret it to claim that this critique does not necessarily discard spirituality from anti-capitalist praxes. In consequence, most of these authors distinguish between “religion” and “spirituality” in the Marxist tradition and understand “spirituality” as a broader phenomenon than “religion.” Contrary to custom, they do not reduce spirituality to an individual experience. The “Marxist mode of the spiritual,” (15) as Kevin M. Brien calls it, does not affirm an isolated form of existence but, on the contrary, highlights and transforms the “interconnectedness of all species and beings” (2). This volume, thus, offers a variety of ways in which Marxism might be reformulated through a consideration of the spiritual and, at the same time, invites us to understand differently spirituality through a Marxist lens.

Some of the contributors to the volume unearth a “secret spirituality” (2) in Marx through a careful exegesis of his work. This task, for Brien, has the aim “to suffuse a revolutionary praxis with a this-worldly mode of the spiritual” (27). For Timofeeva it is possible to find in Marx a form of spirituality in a non-essentialized conception of the soul that conceives it as labor and as the mediator for the realization of human freedom. Other authors interpret the works of Marxist and Marx-influenced intellectuals, such as Foucault, Bloch,

Derrida, and Levinas, to show how their interpretations and appropriations of Marx accentuate in his legacy a spiritual dimension that would make revolutionary praxis less dogmatic, more embracive of difference, and more conscious of its contingency and situatedness. Dhareshwar revisits Marx's claim that the true Christian state is the secular state and leans on Foucault's work to interpret it. Rehmann critiques the confusion some authors, like Gilles Deleuze, make between Nietzsche and Spinoza and suggests that a clarification of the latter's notion of "potential" could allow a different approach to spirituality in Marxism. Kosnoski combines Bloch's notion of utopia and Derrida's conception of mourning to formulate the concept of the "work of utopia" as a form of Marxist praxis that would be in a "constant alternation between the positive experimentation and negative criticism" (96). Thompson also interprets the spiritual dimensions of Bloch's notion of utopia as a type of hope that does not negate the past and the present, but that recognizes its own contingency. Kayatekin and Amariglio read Levinas and Marx together and claim that Levinas' post-ontological ethics "confers a deeper spirituality to Marx's vision," which would make a "communist sociality" "more desirable and more resonant" (136).

Another group of texts address the question about spirituality in Marxism from a more practical and historically located point of view. Dussel gives a historical overview of how Marxism was adopted by Latin American liberation theology as a method to understand poverty and organize religiously and politically against its causes. Healy explores the connections and parallels between Christian monasticism and post-capitalist economic practices to "*practice* a different mode of humanity" (177) more aware of the global environmental catastrophe we are currently experiencing. Tuğal reevaluates the Marxist critiques of charity and discusses religious and spiritual forms of charity that "could undermine capitalism" (198). Green interprets the role that religion plays for Gramsci in the formation of "common sense" and proposes a "renewed common sense" that is halfway between an overdetermined life of the masses and philosophy. Frosini also states that despite's Gramsci's critique of religion, he recognizes and highlights a "mythical" element that is crucial in all forms of subaltern organization. Dhar and Chakrabarti summarize this group of contributions by stating that to "truly live up to what Marxism says and to what it seeks, as well as what it ought to practice (in which it has failed time and again), the phronesis of social revolution needs to be singed in askesis—that is, in the unending spiritual stream of self-transformation" (257).

On a more historical note, Wolfe shows that even in one of the most atheist forms of Marxism, in communist Russia, religion was still considered by some factions as an aspect of human life that should not have been so rapidly dismissed. West argues that in South Africa, Marxism allowed a critical reading of the Bible that supported the struggles of the poor and the oppressed. Zene, on his part, uses Gramsci and Ambedkar to "provide further evidence of a particular kind of spirituality of the subaltern" (321), particularly in relation to

the case of the Dalits of Southern Asia. The volume ends with three interviews with Giorgio Agamben, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and Antonio Negri. In the interviews with the two philosophers, they both speak about why and how their work uses religious topics and concepts to articulate new ways of understanding political subjectivity. The Dalai Lama, on his part, defends a notion of “secular spirituality” that preserves the “moral principles” of Marxism and complements them with a quotidian and practical spirituality that recognizes a sense of “humanness” that has been often forgotten by Marxist movements.

An unexpected argument in most of these texts is that the question about spirituality in Marx and Marxism entails a critique and re-conceptualization of what we understand by “the human,” “human essence,” or “humanism.” Thus, a thread that traverses this volume is that recovering and highlighting the “secret spirituality” in Marxism requires a more “humane” and self-transformative revolutionary praxis. Further, one of the assumptions of the editors is that without spirituality, Marxism is set to repeat the lack of self-criticism of past Marxist movements. Thus, *Marx, Marxism and the Spiritual* recognizes that political praxes based in Marxism have historically led to forms of violence and dogmatism and its hypothesis is that “spirituality” might be the antidote for such mistakes. Although some of the contributors pertinently argue that whatever this humanism might be, it cannot be one that revalidates bourgeois individualism, the volume is rather ambiguous in what is being understood by “humanity” or “being human.” The book, then, is quite useful for those of us who believe that Marxism is not necessarily opposed to religion or spiritual practices, and that it is possible and necessary to find overlaps and connections between them. However, the volume does leave us at the edge of another monumental question: How can Marxism help us redefine what we understand by “humanity”? From one angle, this might be seen as a fault of the book. But from another perspective, the inevitability of this problem shows how relevant Marxism still is for theoretical and practical considerations that seek to connect revolutionary praxis, religion, spirituality, and contemporary work in the humanities; especially in disciplines and social movements that critique hegemonic notions of “the human” and that claim that race, sexuality, gender, and the environment, to name a few, are aspects of “being human” whose denial or overshadowing throughout history has contributed to all sorts of injustices and oppressions.

About the Author:

Carlos Ramírez-Arenas is a doctoral student at Syracuse University (Religion Department). His research focuses on the relations between religious and modern notions and experiences of time. More specifically, he studies the Christian genealogies and undertones of capitalist temporalities, and how certain discourses and practices operate in/on time, thus interacting with, reinforcing, or interrupting the capitalist timescape.