

Review of Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: Marxism and Theology*. Historical Materialism Book Series, 18. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007; *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology*, II. Historical Materialism Book Series, 22. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009; *Criticism of Theology: On Marxism and Theology* III. Historical Materialism Book Series, 27. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.

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In the first three volumes of his five-volume series, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, Roland Boer examines the influence of the Bible and theology on twenty-four key Marxist thinkers. Such an influence will undoubtedly surprise some readers, given the widespread perception—not wholly undeserved—of historical materialism as a discourse which is fundamentally antithetical to religion. Accordingly, an overriding goal of Boer's series is to counter such a prejudice, to demonstrate that the Bible and theology have an "indispensable" or "crucial" role in the development of seminal Marxist works (2007, pp. xi–xii); that the impact of the Bible and theology is not only evident in the recent fetishization of Paul within certain fashionable coterie of European Marxian philosophy, but is manifest throughout twentieth-century Marxism, and even, as volume four seeks to show, in the voluminous works of Marx and Engels.

It is certainly a bold claim. Yet it is broadly consistent with, and contributes to, the growing critical consensus that the "secularisation thesis" has blinded scholars—in particular historians, sociologists, literary critics, and philosophers—to the precise role of religion in modernity. In this regard, Boer's series provides a welcome corrective to those earlier studies of Marxist thinkers which have overlooked or downplayed biblical and theological dimensions in their work. And thus the series has the most to offer as a contribution to Marxist criticism. The method by which Boer seeks to demonstrate the influential role of the Bible and theology is "close reading", which ultimately derives from the traditional techniques of biblical commentary. In so doing, he pays careful attention to the particular ways in which the Bible and theology have been generative of Marxist thought. The three volumes are properly viewed, therefore, as detailed exercises in *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*—and, in his wider writings, Boer may rightly be regarded as the most prolific contemporary practitioner of biblical reception history. Without detracting from the value of the studies in *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, I am not persuaded that Boer has shown that the role of the Bible and theology should be categorized as "indispensable" or "crucial" for Marxist thought; usually the Bible and theology appear much less influential than this, if not peripheral. Yet the series as a whole successfully and exhaustively demonstrates a role for religion in the development of Marxist criticism which has been consistently underemphasized if not neglected in previous scholarship.

Given Boer's criterion that his selection of Marxist thinkers be important for "contemporary political, cultural and philosophical debates" (2007, p. xv), his selection is largely judicious; most would be readily recognisable from your typical Critical Theory or Cultural Studies syllabus: Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (treated together), Terry Eagleton, Max Horkheimer, Fredric Jameson, Lucien Goldmann, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Kautsky, Julia Kristeva, Henri Lefebvre, Michael Löwy, Georg Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Negri, E.P. Thompson, Raymond

Williams, and Slavoj Žižek. The omission of the post-Marxists is deliberate, yet, while it may be justifiable due to Marx's peripheral status in Jacques Derrida's imposing oeuvre, it is less justifiable for those post-Marxists who have directly and prominently addressed both Marxism and Bible/theology (eg Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard). I would have also liked to have seen more writers critical of authoritarian statism and Stalinism (eg Herbert Marcuse, Leszek Kołakowski). More concerning is the omission of any Marxist thinkers from outside Europe and North America, even those who have offered influential discussions of the Bible and theology (eg Chen Duxiu, Omafume Friday Onoge).

Each chapter is based on a thorough reading of the primary works of each Marxist thinker, with minimal discussion of secondary literature, generously infused by Boer's incisive and often entertaining opinions. A central theme for the whole series comes in the very first study, in Ernst Bloch's dialectical evaluation of the Bible. For Bloch, the Bible serves *both* as an instrument of domination or oppression *and* as the Church's "bad conscience"; it is *both* an instrument of conservative, reactionary regimes *and* a tool for revolution or subversion. The chapter is very stimulating and enjoyable, and some of the other highlights for me included Boer's discussion of Adorno, including his *Jargon of Authenticity*, with its trenchant criticisms of existentialism and of attempts to secularise the Bible and theology; his thorough review and generally favourable estimation of Horkheimer's often undervalued works, including the latter's "observations concerning opposition and accommodation, resistance and compromise within religion" (2011, p. 12); his summary and analysis of Ste. Croix's economic analysis of the classical world; and his detailed metacommentary of Antonio Negri's *The Labor of Job*.

In many of the studies, Boer recovers rare and sometimes forgotten Marxist engagements with the Bible and theology. For example, he exegetes two early theological essays from Althusser as well as his Master's thesis on the Fall. Boer also resuscitates Eagleton's early theological writings from the period in which the renowned literary critic was active in the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 1970s and in the circle around the English journal *Slant*. The chapter on Luxemburg focuses on "two neglected works written more than a century ago, "Socialism and the Churches" and 'An Anti-Clerical Policy of Socialism'" (2009, p. xviii). Boer's rehabilitation of neglected works such as these is both valuable and fascinating. Yet given their incidental or peripheral nature, it is difficult to see how they support Boer's overall thesis concerning the "indispensable" nature of biblical and theological myth to these Marxist thinkers.

Boer is aware of the tension, however, and attempts to solve the problem by treating such minor engagements as secret keys to their supposedly important subconscious influence by the Bible and theology. For example, Althusser's early but rejected Catholicism becomes, for Boer, "the absent cause of his philosophy" (2007, p. 108). Boer also spends sixteen pages on a single footnote on Genesis 1–3 which was penned by Althusser (2007, pp. 143–58). Boer interprets Lefebvre's fervent rejection of Catholicism, in "Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside", as the writings of one who "protests too much" and thereby inadvertently demonstrates "the Church's hold on him" (2007, p. 168). He thus prefers to read Lefebvre's work "against itself" so as to allow "the possibility for a more positive role for religion" (2007, p. 214). As Boer acknowledges, he has formed his rather positive evaluation of Gramsci's views on religion from "various snippets and scraps" in the latter's *Prison Notebooks* (2007, p. 218). Yet in so doing, Boer confines Gramsci's negative comments on religion, from five similarly minor snippets, to a single footnote (2007, pp. 216–17). Despite Adorno's explicit suspicion of theology, Boer detects "an ambivalence" in his work which he believes gives theology a more positive role (2007, p.395). Jameson's assumption that religion has been superseded, and his general avoidance of the topic of religion, provoke Boer to recover more positive implications for religion from his writings on utopia (2009, p. 32). Such symptomatic readings are the recurring pattern throughout the series, and I generally found them less than

convincing. A more solid conclusion from the evidence is that the studies evidence greater and lesser levels of theological and biblical influence, but interesting engagements nonetheless.

The doubtful nature of some of Boer's symptomatic interpretations is compounded by his consistent recourse to dialectic to resolve negative and positive attitudes to the Bible and theology. Even if one accepts dialectic's speculative appeal to the unknown and unknowable future, the particular *Aufhebungen* which Boer proposes are not always convincing. One example is his contention that "the less historically reliable... a story is, the more powerful it is as a political myth" (2009, p. 86; cf. 2009, pp. xix, 115–16)—a claim which goes to the core of Boer's project to resuscitate myth, religion, theology, and the Bible for Marxist ends. While such a relation between the reliability and the believability of myth might sometimes be true and thus paradoxical, this formulation is still underpinned by a quite non-dialectical *opposition* of "history" and "myth", one established in terms of history's veracity versus myth's lack of veracity. The true dialectical move, by contrast, would be, first, to observe how history *depends* on the constitution of myth as its other in maintaining its "reliability" or "verisimilitude" and, then, to inquire as to the real grounds for maintaining the "power" of "mythistory". These grounds are less likely to be found in their "reliability"—the claims for which are always already bound up with the power interests that seek to make a distinction between "myth" and "history"—than in the capacity of both historical and mythic narratives to reinforce communal identity and to authorize collective goals.

In his second and third books in the series, Boer introduces a further and very interesting major topic: Marxist historical economic analysis of the backgrounds to earliest Judaism and Christianity. Boer's contention is that the economic tensions uncovered by Marxist criticism provide the grounds for understanding the literary and ideological tensions within the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Boer outlines in some detail what he sees as the economic context for the composition of the Hebrew Bible, which centres on tensions within a single mode of production (which he labels the "sacred economy", a development of the problematic Asiatic mode of production). He also outlines the economic context for the composition of the New Testament; but in this case the central tension is between the residues of the older sacred economy and the then-dominant Greco-Roman slave economy. In so doing, Boer develops analyses and comments on historical economy found, in particular, in Ste. Croix, Goldmann, Luxemburg, Kautsky, and Thompson. While this line of inquiry promises exciting results in the analysis of biblical texts, the proposed models may be questioned on several grounds. If we accept that the slave economy had been introduced by the Greeks—who were influential in Palestine from at least the Persian Period and much more so after the conquests of Alexander—would we not expect that the transition between modes of production was a major issue for the composition of the Hebrew Bible, perhaps even more so than for the composition of the New Testament centuries later? Is it correct to describe the emerging mode of production in Palestine as a slave economy when, despite the ubiquity of slaves, there is a lack of evidence for mass (ie agricultural) slavery? If what is important for the analysis of mode of production is not total production, but production which contributes to the extractable surplus, is it true that (largely subsistence) agriculture is as important as Boer insists (even if carried out by 95% of the population)? Should the analysis take greater account of the ever more extensive and invasive administrative mechanisms established to extract tribute from Palestine, which benefitted local elites and ultimately external imperial rulers? While Boer is well aware of the need to avoid a vulgar homology between the major economic and literary tensions, the former are perhaps more complex than his models allow.

One point that strikes me, in reading the first three books in this series, is the gulf that has opened up between the Marxist thinkers treated in the book—most of whom grew up familiar with, if not immersed in, Christian or Jewish thought, practices, and institutions—and the target contemporary Marxist readership—for whom such concepts might at best appear strange if not irrelevant. And this only goes to support the view that, while the secularization thesis was too

idealistic when it predicted the eradication of religion, the Christian (and occasionally Jewish) paradigm familiar to earlier Marxists has indeed been significantly eroded. Boer might therefore have paid more attention to defining or explaining biblical and theological concepts before eagerly hastening towards his commentary and critique, a problem which is especially apparent in the first volume. For example, in discussing Bloch's tendency to treat biblical books as historically true, Boer provides a much too brief summary of historical criticism, citing only one work by Philip Davies (2007, p. 18), and incorrectly noting the emergence of "Israel" under "the Maccabees in the third century BCE [sic; should be 'second century BCE']" (2007, p. 41). The second and third volumes are much better in this regard, providing useful backgrounds to issues within biblical studies and theology when required, for example, on the myth of early Christian Communism (2009, p. 80); on biblical scholarship on Paul (2009, pp. 137–40).

I would expect that these volumes would typically be consulted by those who are interested in individual Marxist thinkers, rather than be read through in a consecutive fashion. But there are some problems in utilizing the volumes in this manner. Boer's chapters are sometimes very loosely structured, making it difficult to locate his treatment of a particular passage, comments in respect of which are too often strewn throughout a chapter. Some of this lack of structure is probably as a result of the evolution of the series—originating as it did in individual articles which were later rewritten as *Criticism of Heaven*, which only later was conceived as the first volume of a five-book series—while some of the disorder is due more to the author's idiosyncratic style. Often his writing lacks discipline; he makes a point in one place, only to repeat it, in much the same wording, in another; or he takes a page to get to a point that could have been made far more succinctly. His prose is too frequently overrun by lengthy and idiosyncratic circumlocutions, overly florid expressions, and distracting and unwieldy extended metaphors. There is also a preponderance of first-person summaries of what he has earlier demonstrated, is currently demonstrating, and will soon be demonstrating, which almost invariably made me wish he would simply get on and do so. Yet while these features detract somewhat from the potential usefulness of the series, they are compensated by Boer's (distinctively Protestant) concern for an *ad fontes* examination of his Marxist subjects, his resultantly thorough reading of their compendious writings, combined with his own unrelentingly critical and regularly insightful commentary.

Boer's deepest wish, which guides his interpretations of these Marxist thinkers, is not for the supersession of theology but for its sublation; for a dialectical theology of the future, one that will move through its Marxist historicization and materialization into some, currently unimaginable, form. In the short period since the publication of these books, Boer's tenacious insistence on an ongoing role for theology seems to have been more enthusiastically received by theologians than by his targeted Marxist readership—for whom supersession might typically be the more attractive option. From a more orthodox Marxist perspective, it is difficult to see how Boer can advocate for the position he does without advocating for an idealist component to the materialist dialectic. Yet there is certainly a legitimate role within Marxism for the analysis of idealism within past and present social formations, based on the relative autonomy of the superstructure from the economic base and the so-called reciprocal action of the superstructure on that base. There is value in this series, therefore, even for the recalcitrant Marxist who harbours a deep and ingrained suspicion of "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties". For Boer's *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth* is now the foremost resource for understanding the role of the Bible and theology within the writings of a wide range of key historical and contemporary Marxist thinkers.



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