

Why Marx was Right, by Terry Eagleton. Yale University Press, 2011. 272pp., Pb. \$16.00. ISBN-13: 9780300181531.

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Terry Eagleton has developed a reputation as an engaging philosopher, who encourages us to recover the radicalism of both Christian and Marxist thought. This is a polemical work, intended to draw attention to what Marx himself thought and wrote, reminding us that Marx was not some utopian idealist but an intensely practical man, who sought material solutions to the very real poverty that he saw around him. In this, Eagleton critiques both those on the political right who have ridiculed his ideas (or later Marxist versions of them), and Marxists who have used Marx's ideas to propose or justify agendas that Marx himself would clearly have opposed. In describing this volume as polemical, I draw attention to Eagleton's aim of rediscovering Marx, so as to demonstrate the relevance of his ideas in the early years of the twenty-first century.

The structure of the book is to take ten common criticisms of Marxist thought, using a chapter to examine each of them in turn. Although there is an index, the referencing is sparse. This book is aimed at a general readership, and could readily be approached without any prior knowledge of Marx's work. Further, the focus is very much on Marx's own thought, and does not map the various Marxist political systems that have arisen; for the most part, these are engaged with for the purpose of demonstrating the extent to which they represent a distortion of his thought, or at least a selective use of his ideas to support agendas that are not themselves found in Marx's own thought.

The style of the book is conversational, although for my taste a little rambling in places. The author makes many of his points well, but the volume would have benefited from a slightly firmer editorial hand. What the book does convey extremely well is the intensely material and practical nature of Marx's thought, and the author places his work in historical context very effectively. Many of the concepts employed by Marx were not original to him, including ideas of social class, but Eagleton highlights the particular dynamic of class struggle as central to Marx's contribution to

political thought. Marx himself was well aware that his own freedom to write depended upon the industrial profits made available to him through personal connections, and this made him conscious that material want needs to be addressed in order to enable human flourishing. In this we see parallels to the radicalism of early Christianity, a topic the author has written on elsewhere. The broader question the book perhaps asks is whether we might be better to look for Marxist answers to the world's problems, hinting that western Christian traditions often remain too closely wedded to existing power structures to be effective here. In a strange way, this is a book by a prophet in the Old Testament tradition.

One difficulty for Marxist scholars has been the extent to which the predictive power of Marxist models was brought into question as the twentieth century unfolded. Yet many of Marx's particular criticisms are not only relevant to the western society of his day but continue to be relevant, because of their ability to highlight the extent to which particular classes are still able to maintain powerful social positions. The problems and characteristics of western society that were highlighted by Marxist approaches are still with us; if the predictive power of Marxist approaches has seemed problematic, this may simply be an indication that our understanding of the mechanisms involved has been partial. Marx himself was vague as to what a Marxist future might actually look like in practice. Eagleton is keen to remind us that prophets are not fortune-tellers; instead they critique the present so as to alert us to where we might be headed if we carry on as we are.

A classical Marxist suggestion is that greater material wellbeing should lead to less religion, based upon the perception that if people's material needs are met in this world, they become less interested in the next one. In this, Marx may have missed the transformative role religion can play in people's lives, because his concern was to highlight the extent to which religion as a coping mechanism can derive from the use of religion as a controlling mechanism. Although Marxist approaches may not have offered an adequate explanation, many of the issues Marx himself was concerned with remain, challenging us to explore.

Eagleton makes the point that Marx's concept of alienation was closely allied to his perception of capitalist systems of production (like their feudal predecessors), as decreasing the available social space for individual self-expression. Marx was a writer, an artist, who appreciated social variety as crucial to individual flowering and who opposed social forces that might hinder it, including (if not especially) the deliberate exercise of power so as

to require conformity. An interesting point that occurs from reading this book is that if the material want of the “have-nots” is addressed, the way is open for religion to cease being a controlling or coping mechanism, and to become a truly transformative one.