

Fantastic Materialism

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Andy Merrifield. *Magical Marxism: Subversive Politics and the Imagination*. London: Pluto, 2011. 220 pp.

Andy Merrifield's *Magical Marxism* arises from what he describes as "a double dissatisfaction": an obvious dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary society and a more delicate frustration with the revolutionary potential of actually existing Marxism (xii). Discontent with the resolute negativity of traditional Marxism, *Magical Marxism* instead proposes an alternate vision that leaves behind some of Marxism's most well-worn notions in favor of an affirmative utopianism that uses the imagination as the foundation from which to begin the act of living "post-capitalistically" (73). As such, the book is in conversation with other recent attempts to reinvigorate Marxism, most of which have been published as part of Verso's Communist Hypothesis series. Merrifield's contribution to these debates centers on the affirmative politics of living differently. Thus, alongside its critique of traditional Marxism and its theorization of a new international – one inspired by magic and surrealism and which sees Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Guy Debord as its guiding thinkers – *Magical Marxism* surveys existent models of alternate living that challenge both capitalist hegemony and certain tenants of traditional Marxist thought.

At the core of the book is Merrifield's attempt to reconnect critique and praxis, a link that has been lost as Marxism becomes an increasingly and exclusively negative practice. For Merrifield, this emphasis on negativity is, in part, the legacy of Marxism's adherence to dialectical thought, where the positive can only ever be "an outcome, not a starting point" (111). Moreover, it is reinforced through basic Marxist concepts – the idea that the proletariat is the class proper to revolution, the theory of fetishism, and the tension between appearance and essence – all of which stem from the belief that there is a truth of material conditions that only (scientific) Marxist analysis can uncover through political critique. As a result, Merrifield maintains, Marxism has become obsessed with capitalism's contradictions and crises, with its "darker, negative side" (112) and its mission has become simply to "monitor a failing global system, to soberly and coolly analyze capitalist machinations, to revel in clinical critical negativity (146). "Historically," Merrifield argues, "negative thinking has been a collective prison-house and individual straightjacket" (110) that has resulted in a "gutless and worthless" Marxism, one "without a future, without hope, without hope of inspiring hope, without any discernible characteristics to pass on to anyone" (146).

Turning away from the canon of traditional Marxist concepts and the stultified negative Marxism inspired by them, Merrifield posits instead an “*ontology of action*,” a positive subversion that affirms utopian desire and attempts to bring it into being through the act of living differently (119). The source for this desire is the poetic imagination, which enables us to imagine radically new worlds and non-traditional ways of being that can then materialize. “Never, perhaps, have we lived in such *un-poetic times*” (162), laments Merrifield, and it is essential that we reconnect with our creative, utopian spirit if we are to transform the world. For Magical Marxists, poetry “becomes something ontological [...], a state of Being- and Becoming-in-the-world, the invention of life and the shrugging off of tyrannical forces that are wielded over that life. Poetic lives destabilize accepted notions of order and respectability, of cool rationality and restraint” (11-12). Channeling André Breton and the surrealists of the early twentieth century, Merrifield champions their poetic power of “absolute nonconformity and marvelous unreality” as the source of new ways of being (12). Tracing this thinking back to the *Grundrisse*, Merrifield maintains that this magical imagination is “something more than idealism, something more than simple wishful thinking and naïve optimism” (143). Rather, it is a powerful material force where “‘real materialism’ is conditioned by ‘the will (and hope) of ‘fictitious’ idealism’” (16), it “drag[s] present reality along with it, [...] leaping across the ontological gap between the here and the there, between the now and the time to come” to actively create the future (12). Thus the Magical Marxist project is, in the Blochian sense, conditioned by invention rather than discovery; it is a large-scale *détournement* of reality where “the source of creation is always reality, always somehow embedded in reality, yet a reality in which imagination is an instrument in its production and recreation” (29).

This poetic transformation of reality breaks with the traditional Marxist model of the seizure of power since “society isn’t so much overthrown as reinvented” (12). Rather than focusing on the negation of capitalism, Magical Marxism proposes affirmative invention through spontaneous subversion, or what John Holloway elsewhere calls “an anti-politics of event rather than a politics of organization” (Holloway 214). The influence of anarchism and the self-determined politics of 1968 loom large in this emphasis on anti-power. Indeed, Merrifield’s Marxism is founded on the desire for autonomy, for Lefebvre’s notion of the *autogestion* of life; that is, “a spontaneous *subjectivation* from the standpoint of social reproduction ... [where] people construct their own objective structures to life,” and where “their agency and even their wishful thinking drive them forward, compel them to act, have them strive for collective autonomy” (101). The result is a movement characterized by a revolutionary energy that “resonates” affectively and non-teleologically (74), that is adaptable, non-dog-

matic, fully self-determined, “unperfect”¹ and spontaneous. Significantly, this does not mean that it is unorganized; somewhat akin to Lefebvre’s idea of “cultivated spontaneity,” Magical Marxism rejects both the rigidity and authority of a formalized system and the ineffectuality of “localism, of symbolism, of ‘partial practice,’ of an impulsive nihilism” (87). Rather, Magical Marxism mixes “painstaking planning with spontaneous militancy, clearheaded analysis with touchy-feely utopianism” (90).

Ultimately, then, Merrifield’s is a Marxism of affirmation and of action as the “only viable alternative[s] to the bankruptcy of representative democracy, the paralysis of contemplation, to the alienation of the spectator” (42). Importantly, *Magical Marxism*’s emphasis on action does not entail a rejection of traditional Marxism’s critical negativity. Indeed, Merrifield maintains that negation remains as a foundational principle of resistance. However, rather than the negative clearing the ground for the positive as traditional dialectic thought would have it would have it, the positive simultaneously performs the negation as it struggles against something to affirm something else. Ultimately, then, *Magical Marxism* is a “dialogue between Marxism as realism and Marxism as romantic dreaming” (xviii).

Merrifield discusses a diverse range of situations where these politics have manifested in the act of living differently: the Zapatistas, the Invisible Committee and the Tarnac Nine, the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, the San Francisco-based human rights organization Global Exchange, the Direct Action Network and the Institute for Applied Autonomy, Local Exchange Trading systems, and the Free Software movement and its fight for A General Public License society, even the downshifters and voluntary *déclassé*. For Merrifield, it does not matter whether these groups are working class, whether they identify as Marxist, or even whether their modes of action are compatible or ideologically coherent. What matters is that they are all finding ways to at once actively resist capitalism and affirm alternative modes of being. As such, they are members of a “non-aligned neo-proletariat” (94), of an Imaginary Party, bought together only by some “inessential commonality” in the Agambenian sense. These “pockets of resistance” (language Merrifield borrows from Subcomandante Marcos) are part of a larger network of “collective micro-movements against the totalitarian mega-machine” (xvi).

For Merrifield, the benefits of moving beyond the idea of the working class as the only group proper to revolution are clear: “The notion of a ‘non-class’ opens up the political terrain, makes it both potentially more fruitful and decidedly more in-

¹ This term is borrowed from the Yugoslav radical Milovan Djilas, whose book, *The Unperfect Society: Beyond the New Class*, similarly articulates the never-ending nature of revolutionary action.

clusive, yet clearly more uncertain, too, because nothing can be taken for granted, because it precludes Messianic dogmatism, militates against ‘bearers’ of history in our midst. Instead, it implies a challenge, and begets a possibility” (63). Moreover, the idea of a “non-class” suggests that revolution is no longer an external, abstract force imposed on the masses. Rather, it springs from shared desires: “it’s the realm of affect that binds [...] that serves as a mobilizing force” (64, 76). As a result, “Marxism is treated as offering a utopian vision, an expectant counter-emotion of how people might live *post-capitalistically*” (72-73) and by opening itself up to these movements and their affirmative praxes, Marxism becomes “broader,” “more versatile,” “more supple,” (xii) and ultimately, “*unbreakable* because there will never be anything set in stone or cast in concrete, no giant monuments or ego edifices, nothing that towers above people” (189).

In using figures like Debord and Lefebvre as his touchstones, Merrifield aligns himself with the theory of social alienation. As the logic of capitalism invades our free time, Merrifield argues, the boundaries between the political, the economic and the social begin to disintegrate until “all consumable time and space are raw materials for new products” (22). As such, the Marxist struggle has become “a question of reclaiming the totality of everyday life – of work life and daily life” (23). And it is precisely this idea of an increasingly pervasive capitalism that enables Merrifield to open up the idea of struggle to everyone who feels marginalized by capitalism. More significantly, this emphasis on the social means that the dynamics of culture become the motor of revolutionary change and the basis for a new political imaginary. For Merrifield, as for Lefebvre, the everyday is “the primal arena for meaningful social change – the only arena” (19) and that time-honored goal of Marxism – “the extinction of political economy” – is no longer confined to the workplace.

Moreover, the drive towards self-autonomy and the politics of anti-power preclude the possibility of party-led transformation or the reformation of the state. For Merrifield, the state is a bankrupt concept that will only ever hamper our efforts towards *autogestion*. As such, he ultimately comes down against any state-sponsored actions, including more radical projects like Social Income, arguing that, “There’s little to expect from the state other than repression or pacification, or both; there’s little to expect other than baton blows or bribes, suppression or seduction – or various permutations of each” (122). For Merrifield, the fact that the state, at least since Thatcher and Reagan, has “withered away from the social needs of people, re-channeling its ‘post-Fordist’ paternalism unashamedly in the direction of capital” (102), needs to be seen as an opportunity to finally break from its structures of dependency, as a “potential cue to exploring new activities more self-organized, more autonomous; to self divest from work without falling into the right’s ideological trap of personal responsibility and possessive individualism” (102). As such, “becoming autonomous,

asserting Magical Marxism, thus means that any new experiments in living, any new collective affinities and fidelities, any new forms of solidarity and citizenry, will have to come without subsidies and will need to be impenetrable to state interference, to state intervention” (173). While there is always an imminent danger, Merrifield concedes, that the autonomous impulse of *autogestion* will be reappropriated by capitalism as the neo-liberal logic of self-responsibility, we can no longer direct our energies towards the transformation of the state: “we already knew the revolution was not going to be televised but we must accept that neither will it be funded” (174).

This emphasis on the social makes it easier to imagine a stateless existence since it foregrounds individual experience and folds the political and economic realms into the social so that the more universal problems that they pose appear diminished. But they do remain. So, while it is relatively easy to imagine our particular lives organized outside the strictures of the state, more universal concerns, especially those concerning equitable distribution, become much harder to deal with. The commutopian sentiment of Merrifield’s book, the desire to “go back to the future” (136) and create smaller, and in some ways more simple modes of existence, seems to come unstuck in the face of access to certain fundamentals – clean water and air, healthcare, modes of mass transit, housing. Without some kind of larger state structure, it is hard to imagine how we can ensure access on a global scale. Surely the state must remain, even if only as the “minimal abstract structure” and “instrument of distribution” that Spivak defends (Spivak and Butler 98).

But this is perhaps precisely Merrifield’s point: Marxism spends so much time debating these questions, critiquing systems and theorizing alternatives that it becomes trapped in its own criticality. Magical Marxism simply asks us to begin somewhere: “*Autogestion* cannot be all or nothing from the outset; it doesn’t have to be global or everywhere before it can be anywhere. *Autogestion* has to germinate somewhere, somehow” (102). This is not to turn towards a politics of reform – Merrifield is clear that the larger goal of Magical Marxism is total and perpetual revolutionary transformation – but to argue for the centrality and vital importance of action as a starting point from which such revolutionary momentum blooms. Merrifield’s Marxism is one of action, of permanent revolution; it is an unperfectable system of subversion that combines critique with action, negativity with affirmation. So, rather than waiting for the conditions or the theorization of the perfect solution, Magical Marxism implies that we should just get on with the act of living differently and tackle these problems as we go. To do so, to imagine something different and act in order to realize it, is the only revolutionary path.

Magical Marxism isn’t for all Marxists, a fact which Merrifield acknowledges wholeheartedly. It seems as though Merrifield imagines this rejection will come at the hands

of classical Marxists who remain faithful to the ideas of stagist, class-based revolution. But one has to wonder to what extent this old guard still persists; while certain elements of traditional Marxism have perhaps endured, the doctrine of scientific Marxism has long been eclipsed. Moreover, while Merrifield's primary contention is with Marxism's serial negativity, surely it is the case that the critique of political economy persists precisely because of capitalism's radical transformations, because its machinations are anything but "obvious" (112). Given such paradigm shifts as post-1956 Communism, the failures of 1968, postcolonialism, and the advent of truly global, stateless capitalism, the critical work of these negative Marxists remains vital as it refines our understanding of structural changes in capitalism. Thus, just as Merrifield attempts to sharpen the active side of Marxism, these scholars diagnose the changing conditions of capitalism and the failures of older socialist programs and their models of futurity; that is, they deepen our knowledge of the system through critique so that action can ultimately become more powerful. To be sure, however, to reaffirm the importance of critique is not to undermine Merrifield's argument and his insistence on the persistence of negation perhaps allows for this. For *Magical Marxism* is not a call to abandon the critique of political economy altogether, but to develop a concomitant affirmative politics that opens up the possibility of the future. And for those of us similarly dissatisfied with the programs of the official left, the frustrated "mischief-makers who want to *do* something radical" (xiii, my emphasis), his contribution to the shape of contemporary Marxism is timely and invigorating. Above all, then, what *Magical Marxism* asks us to do, in the spirit of Bloch's utopia, is to begin²: to begin exploiting the cracks of the capitalist system in order to liberate time and space from work and private property, to abolish wage labor and imagine systems of work and exchange free of capitalist logic and which enable autonomous self-development, and to reclaim the commons and the right to space. *Magical Marxism* asks us to begin "living the revolution *now*" (148).

Works Cited

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² The opening lines to Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* read: "I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin" (1).

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