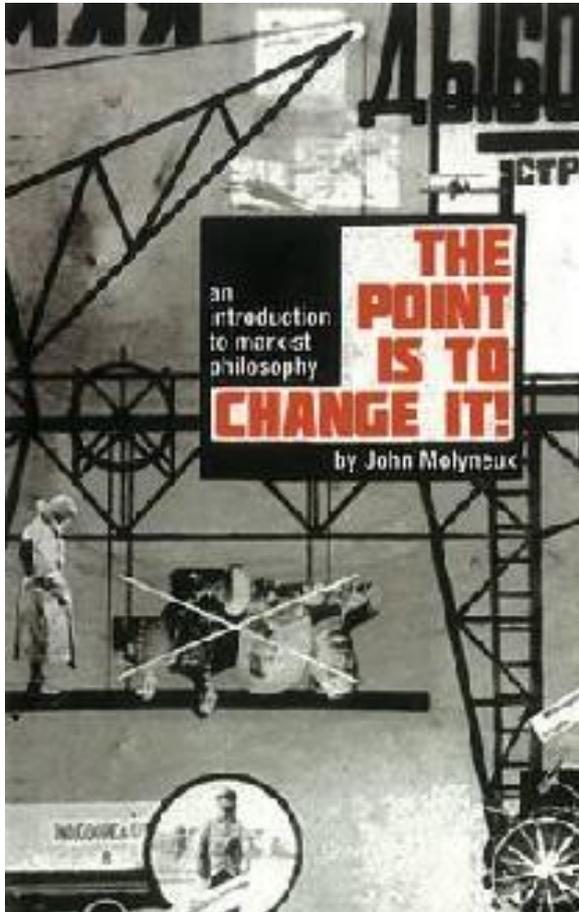


Review: John Molyneux, *The Point is to Change It! An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, Bookmarks, 2012.

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John Molyneux's *The Point is to Change It! An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*. Bookmarks, 2012. £7 paperback

Karl Marx is back, and the reasons behind the growing revival of interest in his ideas are no mystery. A charmed circle of mainstream journalists, university-based economists and think-tank wonderboys who made easy reputations during the boom years have been completely unable to explain-let alone plot a way out of-the most devastating economic crisis in living memory. Night after endless night, as

pundits on RTE talkshow panels or BBC *Newsnight* or in the pages of the bourgeois press, a stable of establishment-vetted 'experts' are paid to reaffirm their cluelessness, urging the rest of us to hang in there and admonishing those hardest hit by global recession to leave it to the politicians.

Over the past two years, however, a very different response to the crisis has begun to take shape, with powerful, revolutionary challenges to the existing order engulfing much of the Arab world, mounting resistance to capitalist austerity in Greece and Spain and across much of Europe, increasing workers' militancy in China, and the rise of the Occupy movement, which has managed to force social inequality back on the agenda even in the United States, where corporate capital's stranglehold over the two-party system has allowed the 1 percent to have its way for so very long.

It is the combination of these two developments-a deep crisis of confidence (and ideas) at the top and the gathering challenge from below-that has created an opening for renewed interest in the Marxist critique of capitalism. For activists coming into the new global resistance seeking a set of ideas that can explain the world we live in, and for many others who consider themselves part of the Left but who have never managed to undertake a systematic study of Marx and Engels's outlook, developing a familiarity with the broad foundations of the Marxist tradition can be difficult-not because the basic ideas at the heart of revolutionary socialism are especially difficult, but mainly because the

mass parties that once made these ideas accessible to large numbers of ordinary people no longer exist.

Beyond the crude caricatures offered by defenders of the existing order and the obscene identification of Marxism with the repressive, unequal societies of the former 'communist' states by some on the Left, there is in the theory and practice of Marx and Engels an extraordinarily rich and coherent philosophical tradition based on the project of working-class self-emancipation. But individuals trying to make themselves familiar with the totality of this worldview can get waylaid in the process.

A large body of ostensibly Marxist writing has grown up in academic circles over the past generation, but much of it is dull and impenetrable, completely disconnected from the real-world struggles that brought analytic power and relevance to the most compelling work in the Marxist tradition. Engaging, brilliant studies of certain aspects of Marxist theory are available, and useful resources are becoming increasingly available on the web-David Harvey's 'open course' on *Reading Marx's Capital* is a good example-but without the time to read through a large body of original writings, there are few places activists can find an introduction to the Marxist worldview that is at the same time both accessible and comprehensive.

John Molyneux's aim in publishing *The Point is to Change It!* was to offer newly radicalized activists a wide-ranging and sophisticated introduction to a body of ideas whose main purpose has always been to serve as a guide to action. "Marxist philosophy matters," he writes, "because it has an essential role to play in the struggle to change the world." Anyone familiar with Molyneux's writing on Marxism and religion, on changing conceptions of the relationship between workers and the revolutionary party, or on art and revolution will

know that he brings to his work a rare ability to render complex ideas in clear and accessible form. This small book showcases that quality throughout, covering an incredible range of philosophical ground without a trace of jargon, his arguments continually illustrated with examples from the wave of struggles that have emerged in recent years, and which will be familiar to readers.

After a brief exploration of the sources of Marx's philosophy, and of their transformation in the new outlook that he and Engels would pioneer, the book opens with a focus on alienation, exploitation and class struggle. The centrality of labour to human experience means that "the alienation of labour" that accompanied the rise of class society "distorts *the totality of social relations.*" Humanity is not only alienated through private control over the production of the means of everyday life; Marx argued that the whole system rested on exploitation. While under slavery and other precapitalist forms this exploitation was unconcealed, capitalism operates under the pretense of a 'free' agreement between workers and employers.

But plain theft lay at the heart of the new system, Marx insisted: Capital pays labour for a portion of what it produces, but appropriates for itself 'surplus value,' the difference between what workers are paid and the full value of what they produce. Thus "at the heart of capitalist society" lies a "direct and irreconcilable antagonism," an intrinsic conflict between labour and capital-class struggle-that cannot be reformed away or permanently suppressed. On top of this, the system is prone to crisis, as the forces of production (the productive capacity of the system) periodically come up against the straitjacket of relations of production (the ways in which production is organized).

Their starting point in the relation-

ship between exploiting classes and the exploited reflected a materialist understanding of human development. Here Marx and Engels both borrowed from and transformed the insights of earlier materialist philosophers. Being determines consciousness, they insisted: in general human thought at any juncture reflects the material parameters of the society from which it emerges. But humans are themselves part of the material world, and human action rebounds back upon and reshapes the material world. To the mostly static model of society embraced by earlier materialists, Marx and Engels brought a dialectical approach, with an emphasis on a world marked by constant change and the playing out of internal contradictions. Molyneux's treatment manages both to demonstrate the philosophical advance that materialist dialectics marked over formal logic and their importance to revolutionary practice.

In our time, the clearest example of the contradiction between the productive and potentially liberatory capacity developed under capitalism and its species-threatening priorities are starkly evident in the system's inability to respond to the threat posed by industrially-driven climate change. In a forceful presentation of the stakes involved, Molyneux refutes the notion that Marx and Engels were star-struck advocates of capitalist industrialization, reasserting their remarkably prescient understanding of the relationship between alienated humanity and the degradation of the natural world, of which we are part.

Similarly, in a methodical and nuanced reassertion of the Marxist approach to religion, Molyneux distinguishes between the 'muscular atheism' of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (who, he writes, "have not advanced beyond 18th century materialism") and the profound critique offered by Marx, who located the persistence of religious belief in alienation, describing it as an "expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering." The "abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people," Marx insisted, "is the demand for their real happiness." The implications of such an analysis for the world we live in now, a world in which rampant Islamophobia circulates in the mainstream, are obvious, and prove the continuing power and relevance of the Marxist tradition.

Fittingly, in a volume aimed at engaging activists, Molyneux offers concise and pointed assessments of a number of well-known thinkers influenced to varying degrees by Marxism, and whose writings have resonated in academic circles during the long retreat from 1968-Lukács, Althusser, and more favorably, Gramsci-and of others who have exerted a more recent influence on the emerging global resistance-Negri and Hardt, Guy Standing and Slavoj Žižek. Above all, he reasserts the enduring relevance of a theoretical framework based on the theory and practice of working-class self-emancipation, offering a wide-ranging, readable and compelling overview of Marxism and its continuing relevance in the first global crisis of the twenty-first century.