

***Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974.* Eds. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006. lxiv + 425 pages and index. \$28.00 paper.**

When this 425-page book arrived in the mail, my trepidations about committing to read a collection of MacIntyre's old writings on Marxism increased. Luckily, I read the book anyway, gaining an appreciation for MacIntyre's one-time commitment to and rejection of Marxism, insights into the development of his theoretical approach to modernity and capitalism, as well as truths about human life and society. What promised to be a book of interest only to a select group of scholars interested in Alasdair MacIntyre or Marxism in the twentieth century turned out to be a book relevant to scholars in many fields concerned with the modern world. It is particularly appropriate for Catholic social scientists both because MacIntyre is considered by many to be the leading Catholic social theorist of the contemporary age and because of what he has to say about doing social science and doing social theory.

The collection includes some significant pieces by MacIntyre including "Notes from the Moral Wilderness," and "Breaking the Chains of Reason." Placing these oft-read essays in the context of MacIntyre's Marxist years opens up new insights into both these articles and the other articles in the collection. "Notes," for instance, combines a critique of Stalin's Marxism with a critique of liberal individualism. They both share a reliance on ahistorical theory that tends to separate off theory and praxis. MacIntyre contends that human action must be central to meaningful political theory because "we need a morality which orders our desires yet expresses them" (59). Neither Soviet-Marxism nor liberal individualism can help us to order our desires, partly because they are ahistorical.

The notion of history proves doubly relevant here. First, Blackledge and Davidson provide a great service by putting together this historically-themed collection, because, from MacIntyre's Marxist point of view, we can only understand theory in its historical development. Second, throughout the collection, MacIntyre attacks theories and theorists who try to divorce theory from its practical context. This is as true of his article on Sartre as it is of his more political essays on British labour.

Nicely, then, Blackledge and Davidson sandwich the articles between the opening chapters of MacIntyre's first book, *Marxism*, and his postscript to a reprint of that book titled *Marxism and Christianity*. In the first selection, MacIntyre holds that capitalism fails because the

kind of society it creates “can never fully employ the skills of hand and brain and eye, the exercise of which is part of man’s true being” (6). This thesis foretells an essential part of his concept of practice developed twelve years after these essays, in *After Virtue*. Thus, that MacIntyre does not abandon this commitment when he abandons Marxism comes as no surprise. The epilogue of *Marxism and Christianity* gives an overview of MacIntyre’s relationship to Marxism at three different periods: 1953, 1968, and 1995. He reflects that he was inspired by the attempt to be genuinely and systematically Christian and genuinely and systematically Marxist, something he later came to regard as impossible (416). Further, he realized that Marxism shared with liberalism an assumption he had to abandon: that social justice must come about by changing social institutions. In 1995, however, he is more aware of what his commitments are and can articulate more carefully what he stands for, especially local communities of practice.

Other essays stand out in the collection besides these that have been noted by MacIntyre scholars. My personal interests in Herbert Marcuse, for instance, made the essays on Marcuse in this volume an invaluable corrective to MacIntyre’s *Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic*. MacIntyre shows an appreciation for Marcuse’s work in both “Marcuse, Marxism, and Monolith” and “Herbert Marcuse.” First, MacIntyre notes that Marcuse points out some responses to Soviet Marxism under Stalin; yet, Marcuse does not follow up on these responses because he is too enamored by the bureaucrats of the Soviet Union. In the second essay, MacIntyre praises Marcuse’s ability to understand Hegel and his commitment to Marxism. Yet, these commitments force Marcuse to desire a social theory that explains empirical facts while it remains unsupported by such facts. This theoretical foundation leads Marcuse to an unnecessary pessimism when he cannot find empirical possibilities for resisting the system. This point provides yet another key for understanding MacIntyre’s critique of Marxists of the British left in the 1950s and 1960s while pointing forward to his mature theory, namely, that human beings have the power to change society and that every society suffers breaks in its overall ideology that open up room for resistance and revolution.

Many of the essays in the volume include reactions and responses to politics in Britain, especially within the Labour party—so essays on Gaitskell and Wilson or reviews of works by, about, or on Marxism and Marxists, including discussions of Trotsky, Guevara, and Lukács. All of these prove valuable, not only because of the insight into British politics and international socialism, but also because of the philosophical gems found along the way. For example, in an essay on Dr.

Zhivago, MacIntyre writes that “the essence of the tragic is that it provides a measure of what man is and can hope for” (73). Later, he notes that “the essence of capitalism ... makes the worker, and what happens to the worker as a result of the system, occur as a result of large-scale forces, large-scale working of the system, which immediate action in the immediate environment cannot touch” (235). Insights like these should give social theorists and social scientists pause. To what extent does our own research support capitalism’s ideological workings and to what extent can we use social science to expose the ways in which everyday human beings can escape from or subvert the “system”? Perhaps more than anything else, this question motivates all of MacIntyre’s work from his early engagement with Marxism, through his rejection of Marxism and Christianity in the late 1960s and 1970s, to his development of a Revolutionary Aristotelianism that he continues to defend into his eighties.

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