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Roland Boer, *In the Vale of Tears. On Marxism and Theology V. Historical Materialism Book Series 52*, Leiden: Boston, Brill 2014, 167.00\$/ 129.00€, hbk, ISBN 978-90-04-25232-5, 337 pp.

Reviewed by Carsten Pallesen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

In the Vale of Tears is the fifth and concluding volume of the project *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth: On Marxism and Theology*. The first volume appeared in 2007. The author Roland Boer is professor of literature at Renmin (People's) University of China, Beijing, and research professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia. The series on Marxism and theology undertakes a reading of Marxist philosophers from the perspective of their critical or affirmative engagement with biblical and theological traditions. Roland Boer reads and comments on an immense amount of material in the archives of Marxist thinkers and relates his findings to contemporary theological debates over politics and religion. The first three books cover twenty-four Marxist theorists from Rosa Luxemburg to Antonio Negri while the fourth volume is engaged with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Roland Boer's primary field of academic expertise is biblical studies and theology and he aligns his project with nineteenth century German biblical criticism. The title of the book refers to Marx's statement: "The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo* the criticism of the vale of tears, the *halo* of which is religion" (154–155). Boer's ambition is to raise the level of today's political and theological debate to a dialectical standard similar to that which Marx found in contemporary German biblical criticism.

In the Vale of Tears is structured around a number of core topics: atheism, myth, history, *Kairos*, ethics, idols, secularism, transcendence, and death. The first part, "Atheism," addresses the debate over the academic status of theology versus religious studies. Theology and Marxism are often viewed as normative and ideologically biased disciplines that should be relegated from the public sphere of academic sciences. Proponents of "new atheism" like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who emerged around 2005, perceive religion as a primary source of evil and distortion and a sign of mental degeneration. The target of this critique is forms of theism that are just as undialectical as the naturalistic evolutionary criteria that the new atheism adopts. According to Boer, this debate fails to live up to the critical potential of theology as well as to Christian atheism in the Marxist perspective (35). New atheism and the scientific criteria of religious studies lack the tools to distinguish between *protest* atheism and an atheism "of the status quo," between religious protest and religion of ideological submission to the given (63–67). In *The Holy Family* (1845), Marx dismisses Bruno Bauer's atheistic program as the last stage of *theism*, "the *negative* recognition of God" (50). Boer advocates a "materializing theology" instead of the ahistorical naturalism embraced by the proponents of "new atheism" but also as an alternative to postmodern "atheology" (38). A primary inspiration of Boer's Christian

communism, Ernst Bloch, phrased the chiasm “only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist” (49). Boer’s uncovering of theological roots of the Marxist Left moves from Marx to G.W.F. Hegel and to the Reformers where he sides with Jean Calvin and Thomas Müntzer, while he is more reluctant with Martin Luther. In recent works such as Jean-Luc Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity (2008: 143) and Giorgio Agamben’s (2005: 99–103) Hegelian reading of St Paul, the relation between Luther, Hegel, and Marx has become increasingly clear as a significant transformation of biblical faith and Christian atheism. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion*, Christian atheism is the “organ point,” the speculative Good Friday, where the representation of agony is read as the agony of representation in the interpretation of the Passion of Christ. Boer’s project participates in this “theological reversal” as an independent voice and offers valuable historical and systematic background for contemporary theological and Marxist thinking.

In three subsequent chapters on Myth, Ambivalence, and History, *In the Vale of Tears* engages in a discussion of utopia, between myth and history in Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch, and reflects iconoclastic approaches in Th. W. Adorno and Roland Barthes. Myth is a deeply ambivalent category suspected to be a repressive inscription of anthropology in an eternal cosmic order. However, inspired by Bloch, Boer sketches a reading of the Torah, the books from Genesis to Joshua, as a *poli-gonic* counter myth, i.e. a narrative of the emergence of political order in a community of liberated slaves (71–75). Boer addresses the relevance of the second commandment (You should not make any graven image of God) in the political iconoclasm of Adorno who is one of the weightiest impulses in the whole project (86–89). Against an undialectical political iconoclasm, Boer rehabilitates Bloch, Adorno, and other Marxist utopians who resume the mythical religious discourse to encourage revolutionary action. Myth, hence, revolts against weak logos and rehabilitates the event and the eschatological narrative of the moment, the *kairos* or rather *a-kairos* when the kingdom of God breaks into this world and makes everything new (233). This section recalls the topic of eschatology and grace in a critical examination of Walter Benjamin and Agamben and discusses the status of the event in Antony Negri, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou as a secularized political counter of the Pauline notion of grace.

In Chapter Six, “Ethics as Immorality,” Boer addresses the postmodern turn to ethics and alterity in Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, and Michel Foucault in a critical examination inspired by Badiou’s critique of Lévinasian ethics of alterity. Boer perceives ethical subjectivity and alterity as regressions to the most bourgeois form of self-repression. The ethical category of other and otherness is ironized in an eloquent page (260). A similar but less polemical critique is targeted against any theology (or politics) of love like in Marx’ Christian predecessor, Wilhelm Weitling (138) and against the invocation of love of neighbor in Eagleton’s combination of Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and theology (261).

In Chapter Seven, “Idols, Marx on Fetishism,” Boer calls for a fresh reading of the Marxian dialectics between idol and fetishism. This section is where the dialectical tension of Boer’s project is most profound and fertile for contemporary debate. While the critique of idols and idolatry is an approach adopted by many figures from the prophet Isaiah to Marx and Latin American Liberation theologians, the shift from idol to fetish is Marx’ decisive breakthrough in the criticism of capitalism (313). In this move, Boer perceives a political and theological potential (289) that has been lost in the Marxism of Latin American Liberation theology from the seventies (310–313). In Adorno’s utopian iconoclasm and Boer’s own Calvinist stance, the Marxian analyses are taken further (309; 314–320).

Theology is suspended in the gap between myth and history. The dialectical questioning goes in both directions, when it questions the blind spots of both Marxism and theology. Materializing theology is the name chosen for a dialectical understanding of theism/atheism (48–49). Despite all his sympathies, Boer de-materializes Friedrich Engel's (and by implication Thomas Müntzer's) crass undialectical materialism stating that religion is nothing but an ideological overcoat (169).

Boer's sensitivity for marginalized utopian or Christian communist positions such as the Protestant socialist Diggers and Levellers in 17th century England, Thomas Müntzer and the revolt of the German peasants in 1525, and modern Marxist Liberation Theology in Latin America makes his analysis persuasive and provoking. On Boer's reading, the Marxist perspective of the global capitalist world is foreshadowed in the early Christian community depicted in The Acts of the Apostles as a relinquishing of private property and redistribution of all goods (Acts 2: 44–45) (112). These references are inspired by thinkers such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Th.W. Adorno and a host of other less well-known writers that are given a voice in Boer's project. He presents not only their radical ideas but also inspiring biographical fragments of some of these figures. The book gives a wide range of historical accounts of the relation of political power, economics, and religious responses in the theological tradition from the earliest biblical times to the history of the church as well as the heretics. The Chapter on History (171–206) offers a historical materialist argument for the thesis that early Christianity should first of all be understood as a political movement and explains why it produces a myth of Christian communism (171).

In Marx, Lenin, and Engels, however, the biblical and religious aspirations are more problematic as sources of revolutionary action. Marx and Engels reject such religious utopianism as bourgeois ideology in the French movement of Christian Communism inspired by Saint-Simon. In the section, "Old Timber and Lovers," Boer depicts his method of writing and thinking with heterogeneous material as an art of combining and constructing bookshelves, furniture, and useful products from discarded items and found objects (2–5). From the prophet Isaiah chapter 44, Boer quotes the passages where the prophet scorns the blacksmith and the carpenter who use their craft to make images and sculptures of God (290). Isaiah, like Marx, distinguishes between unalienated work and its products and the alienation of this work when the carpenter makes an idol and worships the work of his hands. This points to a Puritan motive in Boer's analyses that is reminiscent of literary heroes of liberalism (and even of the Tea Party movement) – figures such as Henry David Thoreau or Robinson Crusoe. Marx would probably have dismissed this motive as nostalgia for simple living. According to Marx, the religious socialist stance nourishes a regressive longing for a primordial lost communism of consumption that will never reach a modern developed state of a "communism of production" at which mature Marxist theory aims. On Marx' account, capitalism and its technological achievements are indispensable preconditions for the communist end. Yet, according to Boer, Marxist critical theory seems to live from a disowned religious and humanistic conviction that motivates revolutionary engagement. Boer lingers between this religious mythical impulse and the genuinely scientific claims of Marx' economic theory. The role of state bureaucracy and state power is downplayed in Boer's Marxist focus on economics on the one hand and utopian anticipation on the other. Marx seems to imply that the question of political power and the state in his predecessors Hegel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Thomas Hobbes, will be surmounted as soon as economic alienation and fetishism of commodities are overcome.

The appeal to religious utopianism underestimates the challenges that modern state bureaucracy and democratic politics should be able to meet in terms of institutional structures and systems of redistribution. Political theology tends to go with either the sublimated Messianism of Walter Benjamin or the authoritarian theology of the state as described by Carl Schmitt. However, in his account of Paul's political theology in the Letter to the Romans, Jacob Taubes strongly states the *absolute necessity* to distinguish between the worldly political and the spiritual and divine which is lacking in Benjamin as well as in Schmitt. "You see now what I want from Schmitt—I want to show him that the separation of powers between worldly and spiritual is *absolutely necessary*" (Taubes, 2004: 103). In a certain respect, Marx sides with Paul and Taubes on the question of religious utopian politics, but Marx dismisses the Pauline recognition of the (Roman) state, the *katechon* (Thessalonians II, Chap. 2, v.6) as an absolutely indispensable deferral of the reign of anarchy and terror. This conclusion is not drawn in Roland Boer's work, but the ambivalence and tensions are worked out. Boer lingers between a utopian Christian communism and Marx' denunciation of the latter to the benefit of rational and scientific economic analyses of the capitalist system and its contradictions. The residual romantic anthropology from Rousseau and Ludwig Feuerbach makes Marx' own appeal to a human rationality vulnerable.

"Ambivalence," the title of the third section, lingers between a strictly historical materialist dialectic of Marx and Engels and a visionary, mythical, literary, and biblical approach to the utopian community. The drama of the project is an internal debate between Christian communism and Christian atheism on the one hand and an atheistic non-Christian "scientific" communism (Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin) on the other. This tension is fleshed out in Marx' relation to his early predecessor, the layman Wilhelm Weitling for whom Boer has a soft spot (135–138). Weitling argued for a violent and direct overthrow of the state and the immediate establishment of communism on the model of the first Christians in the New Testament. In 1846, Marx rejected all that as "sentimental, back-ward looking rubbish" (136). A modern communism would need a full development of capitalism and bourgeois democracy if it were to be solid. The development of these modern structures is an unfinished project. But Boer does not like compromising and every sort of Hegelian mediation is suspected to be social-democratic or worse forms of betrayal. Yet it seems that only some form of a Hegelian analysis of modernity will prevent the Marxist and the Christian communist stance from sliding into sectarian violence. The era of Stalin revealed a specific alienation of power, an inherent ambiguity that pertains to the rationality of the political regardless whether the economic system is capitalist or communist. This point was made by Paul Ricoeur in an article in 1957 that became a linchpin for the debate over politics and *the political* traced by Oliver Marchart (Marchart, 2007; Ricoeur, 2007: 247–270).

The Pauline *kathecon* (Agamben, 2005: 111–112; Taubes, 2004: 103) reminds us of a political realism that the enthusiastic utopian understanding of civil society, market, and religion tend to neglect in a certain liberal tradition that Marx in some respects prolongs. Hegel did not ignore the potential self-destructive powers of the market and of religion, and therefore he tried to give a philosophical, non-theological account of the modern secular state as an independent counter power to the forces of civil society.

Boer has dedicated his exegetical and theological skills to the now completed series of commentaries on Marxism and theology. The genre of commentary on canonical texts is the common way of working consistently with complex linguistic, historical, and systematic questions. *In the Vale of Tears*, Boer sums up some of the findings from the

previous volumes. The final volume, however, is presented as an autonomous piece of work where the author to a larger extent distances himself from the texts and develops his own views and arguments in a thematic approach.

Scripture should be the “bad conscience of the church” as Boer phrases his *protest* Protestantism (82). A similar self-critical relation is a result of Boer’s account of Marxism and its many internal tensions. Marxists and theologians will find something to learn about each other, and readers who do not consider themselves as members of these groups will discover a neglected dimension of modern intellectual and political history, which is more relevant than ever.

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Matt Tomlinson, **Ritual Textuality: Pattern and Motion in Performance**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, (pbk) ISBN: 978-0-19-934114-6, xii + 169pp.

Reviewed by Paul-François Tremlett, *The Open University*

In a previous review of mine about Hilary B. P. Bagshaw’s *Religion in the Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: Reason and Faith* (2013) I argued that Bagshaw had offered a rather one-sided account of Bakhtin’s *oeuvre* and drastically misconstrued the notion of “dialogism” and its value for the study of religions. Serendipitously, the next book in the scattered and rather disorderly pile on my desk is interested, with Bakhtin, in language in motion and performance or, in Bakhtin’s terms, in “dialogue” (3, 8–10, 92–93, 103, 111). More precisely, Matt Tomlinson’s interests are in speech and speech patterns and their capacities for illocutionary and perlocutionary affect. In the preface he states that his main ethnographic research method is “to record and analyse speech” concentrating particularly on “textual patterns” (ix). Elsewhere, he summarizes his approach as one concerned with “understand people’s expectations of ritual effectiveness,” paying close attention “to the distinct patterns people create as they articulate signs and texts in performance” (1). Tomlinson specifies four such