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**Winter, Richard. *Power, Freedom, Compassion: Transformations for a Better World*. Cambridge, UK: Willow Tree Press, 2011. 195 pp £10 (paperback)**

I have often thought that while Marxism is a wonderful tool for analysing society and its various processes, in its emphasis on classes it largely ignores the question of individual morality and ethical behaviour. This 'missing link' in Marxism may partially explain why the communist project went badly wrong.

Professor Richard Winter admits at the outset that his suggestion of connecting Marxism and Buddhism could appear "surprising or even downright bizarre" to many. When I realised that he was suggesting this as a way of countering the denigration of our humanity under capitalism, I too thought he must be a little "off-beam". However, his lucidly and concisely argued case completely disabused me. Far from being an "odd ball," he is a man with a deep comprehension of the ills of our present system and he has a thorough understanding and appreciation of the value of Marxism as an analytical tool. He has his feet firmly on the ground, based on his wide experience working in our educational system, and sees education as a potential tool for change. His desire for radical change, together with his strong sense of compassion and justice led him to examine Buddhism as a means of individual self-enlightenment, and as an additional means of bringing about social change: first by changing ourselves.

I am very sceptical of those who suggest answers to our pressing problems can be found in "exotic" cultures, whether Indian Hinduism, North American indigenous traditions or Chinese Confucianism, even if they can offer us new and valuable insights. But Winter is not suggesting this. He is attempting to address Marxism's underplaying of the role of the individual by suggesting a combination of Marxist theory with a meditational approach derived from Buddhism.

However, while I can go a long way with him and even accept that aspects of Buddhist teachings have much to offer us in the West; I doubt such ideas could be easily adopted. Yes, it might be a good idea, but is it feasible or even imaginable that one could persuade a sizable proportion of Britons, never mind others, to adopt such a Buddhist approach to their lives? That is always the dilemma for those who want to change society without being able to obtain a majority electoral mandate: where can you effectively start?

Winter argues that one of the keys lies in education. "Without changes in our individual awareness and behaviour our attempts to make our institutions more just and more compassionate are doomed in the long run," he says.

His advocating meditation is basically suggesting a series of straightforward actions that anyone can engage in. Meditation is a method of personal change, he says, and demonstrates how it can refine our personal and ethical responses to practical situations and how it could support the effectiveness of our attempts to change political and economic structures.

"Meditation as pure awareness can have merely the general and familiar meaning of sustained purposeful thought," he says. It involves a heightened state of concentration, derived from being a wholly absorbed awareness of the present. "This methodology," he argues, "helps us resist our spontaneous ego-orientation and thus our assimilation into the stress-filled responses of our exploitive culture, whose ramifications penetrate so deeply into our lives." Meditation practice is inseparable from ethical awareness.

As I understand it, Winter is not suggesting that we adopt Buddhism as the new religion or see it as a magic solution. But using Buddhist ideas, particularly that of 'meditation' could help us understand ourselves and helps us better comprehend and deal with our society in terms of its pressures, stresses and consumer demands. Buddhism places an emphasis on the present and on those things in life that are vital to a meaningful and happy existence, that represent enduring reality. In other words, all the ephemeral trappings of wealth and fame, of vanity and worries about the future or preoccupation with the past, only distract us from the real question of the here and now, and dissipate our creative energies. "For Buddhism in its origins and most of its contemporary versions meditation is the primary practice; its teachings are, above all, a rationale for the validity and power of meditation as an individual path of self-transformation," he writes. It also helps overcome self-doubt and encourages our creativity.

What is certainly true, and something few would deny, is that if we wish to change the world we have first to change ourselves; and in our own behaviour we have to encapsulate the type of society we aim to create.

Both Marxist and Buddhist perspectives also emphasise that "our spontaneous experiences are frequently based on misperceptions of reality; what Marx called "false consciousness". That is why, Winter argues, that any education curriculum needs to go beyond simply involving students' personal experience in the learning process: a "curriculum for transformation" is needed to help students engage in a radical critique of their experience.

He notes perceptively that the behaviour, which constitute part of the "ethics" of capitalism, is not really endorsed by the general population: it is seen rather as a regrettable compromise.

He realises, he says, that putting forward yet another "vacuous plea" for a "change of culture" is pointless. He knows that such pleas avoid the crunch question: through what agency could such change as we desire be brought about? That's why he argues forcibly that we are all potentially "agents for change".

You might not agree with much of what Winter argues in this book, but his ideas are certainly thought provoking and deserving of close attention. He writes lucidly and persuasively.

## **John Green**

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