

## Book Review

Diogenes  
 2017, Vol. 61(3–4) 167–171  
 Copyright © ICPHS 2016  
 Reprints and permissions:  
[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)  
 DOI: 10.1177/0392192116666471  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/dio](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/dio)  


W. John Morgan and Alexandre Guilherme (2014) *Buber and Education: Dialogue as Conflict Resolution*. New York: Routledge, 178 pages.

Martin Buber (1878–1965) is one of those rare giants of the spirit, a polymath whose thought defies simplistic categorization. Was Buber first and foremost a philosopher and is to be remembered for I and Thou and his philosophy of dialogue? Was he primarily a theologian and biblical scholar who also translated with Franz Rosenzweig the Hebrew Bible into German? Maybe he is a social and political theorist and more emphasis should be given to works such as *Paths in Utopia*? And of course there are also Martin Buber the Zionist activist and thinker, Buber the scholar and reviver of interest in Hasidim, and Buber the novelist and poet.

It is to the merit of Morgan and Guilherme's *Buber and Education* that it shows the centrality of Buber the educator. Morgan and Guilherme's work is also to be commended for connecting Buber's philosophy of education with other aspects of his thought such as social theory, Zionism, and work toward peaceful existence in the Middle East. In fact, the project undertaken is more ambitious than a mere analysis of Buber's educational thought; the authors want to show the relevance of his philosophy for conflict resolution in the present. With these goals in mind, *Buber and Education* is comprised of nine chapters that can be roughly divided into three sections. The first is "Buber in dialogue." The authors reflect on some of the major influences on Buber and what they call his dialogue with his time (ch. 1). This is followed by a juxtaposition of Buber's thought with that of Bertrand Russell and Georg Lukács (ch. 2), Mohandas Gandhi (ch. 3), and Franz Fanon (ch. 4). These chapters are followed by a second section that is dedicated to a discussion of Buber's theory and practice of education, including analysis of Buber's educational work during the Holocaust (ch. 5) and his contributions to moral and adult education (chs 6–7). The final two chapters are case studies – the conflict in the Middle East on the one hand (ch. 8) and Brazil as a successful dialogical model on the other (ch. 9) – examined through the lens of Buber's educational and political philosophy as developed in the previous chapters.

The comparison between Buber's thought and other prominent thinkers follows the premise that it is best to understand a dialogical thinker in terms of dialogue. Although this approach is useful in highlighting some aspects of his thought, it raises the need for a justification of the comparison and runs the risk of glossing over other important parallels or differences between the thinkers in question. These challenges are evident in the chapter about Buber, Russell, and Lukács. The comparison is novel and the authors do well to ground it, e.g. by stressing Lukács' interest in mysticism (29). Yet the choice of texts for comparison exposes its limits: can we compare Russell's *Roads to Freedom* and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, two texts written in the aftermath of WWI, to Buber's *Paths in Utopia*, published after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust? On the one hand, the authors note that all three texts were written after a great crisis and present utopian alternatives (35); on the other hand, since Buber lived and was prolific also in the

aftermath of WWI, it would be historically more accurate to compare a different set of texts.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach is also more productive in identifying nuances in Buber's thought. The period following WWI is widely recognized in scholarship as an important time of transformation in Buber's thought from the mystical phase to the dialogical (Mendes-Flohr, 1978; Horwitz, 1978). Is there a change in Buber's utopian thinking between the mystical phase, the dialogical phase, and his latter writings in the aftermath of the Shoa? How does such a possible change influence the relevance of Buber's thought for today? The comparison with Russell and Lukács does not tell us that.

Furthermore, the decision to focus on *Paths in Utopia* somewhat overlooks the religious dimension of Buber's thought, which is an integral part of his answer to the political. Morgan and Guilherme's choice of texts throughout *Buber and Education* raises an interesting hermeneutical question: how does one read Martin Buber? As implied above, there are many ways to do so. I suggest here that in order to understand the utopia and the political in Buber's thought, his more theological works and his biblical scholarship should also be taken into consideration. Morgan and Guilherme's briefly, mostly following Ephraim Fischhoff (35) and Dan Avnon (50), mention the religious element in Buber's thought but they do so only in order to stress some existential dimension of it (15). Yet there are many ways in which Buber's political thought is expressed in his biblical scholarship and possibly shaped by it. As scholars have noted (Avnon, 1998; Zank, 2006; Lebovic, 2008; Feller, 2013; Brody, 2015), Buber's biblical scholarship, under the guise of philology and exegesis, often contains Buber's political philosophy. An example of this is Buber's opposition to Carl Schmitt, the "crown jurist" of Nazi Germany. Morgan and Guilherme rightly note Buber's objection to Schmitt's identification of the political with the friend-foe distinction (19). Yet there is much more to it: in works such as *Kingship of God*, *The Prophetic Faith*, and *Two Types of Faith* Buber weaves into the biblical analysis further critique of Schmitt. Buber's biblical scholarship thus adds an important dimension to the understanding of his political thought, e.g. by showing how Buber critiques not only the friend-foe distinction but also the state of exception. Paying attention to Buber's biblical scholarship also helps explain why his messianic politics should not be seen as revolutionary (Mendes-Flohr, 2008).

The ways to realize utopia and the limits of utopian action in the world can be seen in the chapter "Buber and pacifism." Claiming that Buber "is often referred to in both the academic and general literature as an advocate of pacifism," Morgan and Guilherme go on to ask: "But is this the case? If so, what sort of pacifism was Buber defending?" (40). These are excellent questions that deserve careful consideration because they influence how the authors understand the comparison between Buber and Fanon or Buber's work toward coexistence. The question concerning Buber's relation to pacifism is in this sense central to the broader argument of *Buber and Education*. Morgan and Guilherme attempt to answer this question by conceptually differentiating between "stronger pacifism," which is a "doctrine rejecting and ruling out war and every form of violent action as means of solving disputes" and "weaker pacifism" that is "a belief in peaceful methods as feasible and desirable alternatives to war" (40–41). Based on these definitions they reiterate the question about Buber's pacifism, this time on their own terms: "What sort of pacifism was Buber defending? Was it a weaker or a stronger pacifism?" (41). The careful reader will note that Morgan and Guilherme's definitions blurred the question of whether Buber was a pacifist. Now this is already assumed and the only question remaining is what kind of pacifist he was. Based on their typology, the authors conclude that while it is possible to read "stronger pacifism" from Buber's work, in extreme cases such as Nazi Germany or other genocides, one should at most strive toward "weaker pacifism" because the enemy has become "so far removed from humanity" that a dialogue is no longer possible (49, 53). The problem with the category of "weaker pacifism" is not only that it is conceptually too broad; it also obscures the relation between pacifism and Buber's view on the Jewish settlement in Palestine.

Morgan and Guilherme's discussion of Buber's answer to Gandhi illuminates an important tendency in Buber's thought. In 1938, Gandhi wrote a public letter about the situation of the Jews in Nazi Germany in which he called them to adopt non-violent resistance even in the face of massacre. In a passionate response letter, written shortly after Buber left Nazi Germany, Buber rejects Gandhi's comparison of the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany to colonized India. The willing suffering of German Jews, asserts Buber, will be a mistake (Buber, 1983: 115), it will be martyrdom in vain. In the same letter, Buber also answers Gandhi's concerns about the Jewish settlement and makes it clear in unequivocal terms that while he fully recognizes the right of the Arabs living in the land and strives toward coexistence and cooperation with them, he also believes that Jews have a right to the land: "We cannot renounce the Jewish claim; something even higher than the life of our people is bound up with the Land, namely the work which is our divine mission" (Buber, 1983: 120). This right is not connected with the use of force and violence but with what he saw as the Jewish task: the realization of a just society that can serve as an inspiration for the entire world. The people of Israel are to behave in an ethical manner, hence his insistence on cooperation, dialogue, and a bi-national state. At the same time, Buber firmly believes that the light to the nations shall come forth from Zion (Is. 2:3), i.e. the return of the Jewish people to what they believe to be the Promised Land.

Buber's response to Gandhi is consistent with his understanding – already evident in Buber's early addresses on Judaism (Buber, 1963) – of the relation between Jews, the land, and God. In Buber's view, there is an inherent connection between the founding of an organic and authentic Jewish community and a Jewish return to their origin, i.e. to the Hebrew Bible and physically to Zion. In this perception of the organic community Buber was probably influenced from neo-Romantic movements of his time (Oliveira, 1996). Although Morgan and Guilherme rely on the idea of organic and authentic community (19, 37) and also note that Buber is "committed to the physical return of the Jewish people to the Land" (52), they do not pay sufficient attention to the tension between the two, i.e. the development of an organic community is predicated according to Buber upon a return to the land.

The tension between pacifism, Zionism and connection to the land is evident in the life and work of Hans Kohn (1891–1971), a thinker who has won increasing attention in recent years (Pianko, 2010; Gordon, 2014). Kohn was one of Buber's early disciples and an author of an important biography of Buber. An avowed Zionist who worked at Keren Hayesod (The Palestine Foundation Fund) and settled in Palestine in 1925, Kohn resolved in 1929, following the riots of that year and the armed Jewish response to the Arab violence, that his commitment to pacifism does not allow him to remain a Zionist. In a letter to Berthold Feiwel – a copy of which he sent to Buber who at the time was still in Germany – Kohn explains his decision:

We pretend to be innocent victims. Of course the Arabs attacked us in August ... They perpetrated all the barbaric acts that are characteristic of a colonial revolt. But we are obliged to look into the deeper cause of this revolt ... We have been relying exclusively upon Great Britain's military might ... Having come to this country [as immigrants], we were duty bound to come up with constitutional proposals which, without doing serious harm to Arab rights and liberty, would have also allowed for our free cultural and social development. But for twelve years we pretended that Arabs did not exist and we were glad when we were not reminded of their existence (quoted in Buber, 1983: 99).

Kohn claims that the Jewish work and settlement in Palestine are made possible only under the British umbrella and are therefore part of a colonialist project. In 1929 there were already Zionists who considered themselves followers of Buber and reasoned that "stronger pacifism" is incompatible with the Jewish policy in Palestine. Unfortunately, Kohn's position as an alternative to Buber's, despite its importance for a discussion of the latter's alleged pacifism, is completely absent from *Buber and Education*.

Paul Mendes-Flohr notes (Buber, 1983: 101) that Buber's address "And If Not Now, When?" (1932) can be seen as a response to Kohn. Buber asserts that the intellectual should not be above politics, but rather engage in it even at the risk of failure. If read as a response to Kohn, it appears that Buber sees in Kohn's "strong pacifism" a detachment from politics and a turning away from the specific, mundane problems in favor of a dogmatic adherence to an abstract principle. This is apparent also in other writings by Buber that show that although he strove toward peaceful existence, he was hardly dogmatic in his pacifism. In fact, at times he claims that there is necessary injustice in politics. Such a case, thought Buber, is the settlement of the Jews in Palestine (1992: 261). While it indeed causes injustice, one's task is to minimize it, to cause no more harm than is required for one's existence.

Buber's thought oscillates between pacifism and non-pacifism (Schwarzschild, 1986: 367) and this tension is inherent to his political philosophy. The comparison between Kohn and Buber shows that the way Morgan and Guilherme understand Buber's views on pacifism is problematic. Buber's position about the conflict in the Middle East is quite different than Kohn's "stronger pacifism" and his understanding of the Jewish settling in Palestine as a colonialist enterprise.<sup>2</sup> The above analysis is not meant, however, to undermine the importance of Buber's vision as an alternative to nationalistic politics and the use of violence. His position was that Jews could properly seek peace only if they realize themselves by returning to the Promised Land and working there toward perfecting society in a way that includes both Jews and Arabs. For Buber, ethics and Jewish national particularity do not contradict but complement each other. He strove for peace and his political position constantly reminds one of the verse "stray away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:15). This is an admirable position, especially taken in its historical context and in comparison with other varieties of Zionism.

Although it is clear that Buber sought peace, his philosophy poses a challenge to political practice: how does one know what is "necessary injustice" and what is not? Where is the borderline between the two? How should one act? When should one follow and when should one stop? Buber does not provide easy answers. Morgan and Guilherme claim that I-Thou relation is of an ethical nature, it turns the Other into a person for me (17). This is definitely in line with the great value that Buber put on fostering this relationship. Buber (1970: 80), however, also writes that the I-Thou has no content, it is out of the spheres of time and space. I-Thou, or revelation for that matter, cannot therefore serve as a valid measure for political action. After the Holocaust, Buber (1957: 217) explained that the "demarcation line," the decision on how to act, is never fixed and should be determined by the individual every time a decision is needed, it should be done "not necessarily with fear, but necessarily with that trembling of the soul that precedes every genuine decision." As Steven Schwarzschild (1986), in what remains in my opinion one of the best assessments of Buber's political philosophy, shows, Buber failed every time he attempted a particular intervention in the political sphere because the demarcation line is too subjective and individual to serve as a political platform.

Buber's thought perhaps does not always provide us with specific instructions but it does "point the way," and Morgan and Guilherme follow this path. Herein the true value of *Buber and Education* is to be found, in the important reminder that despite its practical difficulties, dialogical education provides hope. Morgan and Guilherme recognize that the way to reach true peace, which is very different from political ceasefire (40, 132), is through education. With dialogue in education and education to dialogue, it is never too late to learn to say "you" to one's neighbor.

Yaniv Feller  
University of Toronto, Canada

## Acknowledgements

I thank Merom Kalie for many fruitful discussions about Buber's political philosophy.

## Notes

1. This is true even though some of the texts in *Paths in Utopia* are from the Weimar period.
2. Cf. Judith Butler's assessment of Buber's position (2012: 36): "The most consequential blindness in his position, however, was that he could not see the impossibility of trying to cultivate certain ideals of cooperation on conditions established by settler colonialism."

## References

- Anvon D (1998) *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brody SH (2015) Is Theopolitics an Antipolitics? Martin Buber, Anarchism and the Idea of the Political. In: P Mendes-Flohr (ed.) *Dialogue as a Trans-Disciplinary Concept; Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue and its Contemporary Reception*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 61–88.
- Buber M (1957) *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, transl. by Maurice Friedman. New York: Harper.
- Buber M (1963) *Der Jude und sein Judentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Reden*. Köln: Melzer.
- Buber M (1970) *I and Thou*, transl. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Scribner.
- Buber M (1983) *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. by P. Mendes-Flohr. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Buber M (1992) *Hope for This Hour*, ed. by Avraham Shapira. Tel Aviv: Am Oved (in Hebrew).
- Butler J (2012) *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Feller Y (2013) From Aher to Marcion: Martin Buber's understanding of Gnosis, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 20(4): 374–397.
- Gordon A (2014) "Nothing but a disillusioned love"? Hans Kohn's break with the Zionist Movement. In: RI Cohen, S Hoffman and E Mendelsohn (eds) *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 117–142.
- Horwitz R (1978) *Buber's Way to I and Thou: An Historical Analysis and the First Publication of Martin Buber's Lectures Religion als Gegenwart*. Heidelberg: Schneider.
- Lebovic N (2008) The Jerusalem School: The Theopolitical Hour, *New German Critique*, 35(3): 97–120.
- Mendes-Flohr P (1978) *Von der Mystik zum Dialog: Martin Bubers geistige Entwicklung bis hin zu "Ich und Du"*. Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag.
- Mendes-Flohr P (2008) The Kingdom of God: Martin Buber's critique of Messianic politics, *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilization*, 1(2): 26–38.
- Oliveira MD de (1996) Passion for Land and Volk: Martin Buber and Neo-Romanticism, *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 41(1): 239–260.
- Pianko N (2010) *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schwarzschild S (1986) A critique of Martin Buber's political philosophy: An affectionate reappraisal, *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 31(1): 355–388.
- Zank M (2006) Buber and Religionswissenschaft. The case of his studies on Biblical faith. In: M Zank (ed.) *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 61–82.