Marxism in the academic's imagination

Two new books on Marx and Marxism

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Hartman, Andrew. *Karl Marx in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025. ISBN: 9780226537481.

Leipold, Bruno. *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780691205236

Bruno Leipold's *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought* makes the case that Karl Marx's work should be interpreted through the tradition of republicanism, particularly that ideology's great Enlightenment inheritance: its abhorrence of "arbitrary power" or domination.

The book traces what Leipold sees as an evolving relationship between Marx and republicanism: an early phase in which Marx was influenced by republican ideas, a transitional period as Marx adopted communism and critiqued the limitations of republicanism, and a later synthesis, when, in Leipold's view, Marx espoused a fusion of socialism and republican concepts, especially in the context of the Paris Commune.

Leipold asserts that Marx's "principal political value was freedom rather than, say, equality." (19) Yet the two concepts were not antipodes to Marx: true freedom could not be realized without social equality. Instead, when Leipold writes of freedom, it seems he has in mind the *appearance* of certain *democratic forms* rather than the *class content* of a given society at a given time: Not which class controls the means of production, but whether or not one can speak of participatory democracy in constitution-making and governing bodies. These latter should be part of "the arsenal of socialist constitutionalism," Leipold concludes. (407)

Leipold considers several of Marx's writings. A quick discussion of *Capital* in his sixth chapter makes valuable points about Marx's comparison to earlier forms of labor exploitation, such as slavery and corvée, to wage labor. More consideration is given to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843) and Marx's much later writings on the Paris Commune. For the latter, Leipold downplays, though he does not deny, Marx's central conclusion drawn from that first attempt at a workers' government: The working class cannot simply inherit the existing state apparatus, but must smash it and create a new form of state—governed by and for workers—which Marx and Engels came to describe as the dictatorship of the proletariat. This development of Marxism provided the theoretical basis for Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written in 1917.

One senses that Leipold, who teaches political science at the London School of Economics, differs with Lenin on this and other matters. For example, he calls "memorable, but problematic" Lenin's identification, in *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, of British political economy, French utopian socialism and German Hegelian philosophy as having provided the bases of Marxism, arguing that Lenin overlooks "the formative role played by European republicanism" in Marx's intellectual development.

But Leipold has set up a straw man. Lenin would not have denied that Marx emerged out of the left, democratic republican tradition. All contemporary European radicals operated in or around this milieu—at least, that is, before the defeated revolutions of 1848 and Marx and Engels' publication of *The Communist Manifesto* that same year. But the task is not to explain what made the young Marx and Engels the same as the others, but rather what made them different—to find the theoretical grounding that ultimately put them in irreconcilable opposition to all other political tendencies. This Lenin's deservedly famous essay accomplishes. Leipold's book does not.

Some of the more interesting of Leipold's insights tend to undermine his own portrayal of an essentially republican Marx. For example, in summing up the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Leipold perceptively writes that in that unpublished book:

> Marx for the first time identified the proletariat as the agent of revolution. Marx argued that successful revolutions bring together a theory or philosophy with a class of people that has an interest in its realization. In the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie managed to present its particular class interest as the general interest of society, when in fact it had only emancipated those who "possess money and education." The impending German revolution, which Marx maintained cannot be a "partial, solely political" revolution but must be a "radical revolution," requires a class that would truly carry out a "universal, human emancipation." That class, Marx declared, was the proletariat. He claimed that the proletariat's special position as a propertyless class in a society based on private property gives it a unique role in the overthrow of society and the emancipation of all from private property. The abolition of private property is thus the universalization of the proletariat's own class position.

Yet Leipold recedes before the implication of this passage: That Marx's discovery of the subject (the working class) and the object (universal equality) of revolution stood not as a direct extension of republicanism, but in dialectical opposition to it, just as the emergent proletariat stood in dialectical opposition to the bourgeoisie. It detracts nothing from the great republican revolutions of the late 18th century—the American and French—to point out that they could only raise up the idea of equality. The bourgeois democratic revolution could, so to speak, only pose the problem of equality in its struggle against aristocracy. In practice, it imposed new forms of domination for old.

In this most fundamental sense, Marx signaled a break from all previous political systems, authoring an audacious new world of thought and action: Marxism as a theory of history; a science of society that exposes the inner workings of capitalist economics; and, above all else, a program of revolutionary strategy and action.

Given his subject, it is odd that Leipold gives so little consideration to

Marx's deep engagement with the world's largest republic, the young American experiment across the Atlantic. There is no discussion of the decade Marx spent as *The New York Tribune*'s European correspondent, starting in 1853, or the years during the Civil War when he wrote on American events for *Die Presse*, or the two letters he wrote to the Lincoln administration on behalf of the First International.

The title of Andrew Hartman's *Karl Marx in America* suggests it will fill that gap. But the name is misleading—Marx never visited America, of course. Rather, the book sets about to trace the reception, adaptation, and contestation of Marx and Marxism in the United States from the Civil War era to the present, moving chronologically, with only the first chapter addressing Marx's rendezvous with America during his own lifetime. From there, Hartman examines themes including Marx's influence among followers and epigones; the waves of both enthusiasm and hostile rejection that marked Marx's reputation during moments like the Great Depression, the Red Scares, the 1960s New Left and the resurgence of interest in Marxism in the period following the 2008 financial crisis.

The early chapters on Marx's indirect and direct influence on US politics through his journalism and his influence on the enormous German immigrant population are valuable. To cite one example, Charles Dana visited Cologne to recruit Marx to Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* several years after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. The *Tribune* was then by far the most-read newspaper in the world, with a circulation of 200,000. It became the standard, moreover, of the Republican Party. "Abraham Lincoln," Hartman writes, "was familiar with Marx's journalism, if not his name." (33)

Hartman, who works in the field of intellectual history at Illinois State University, is at his best when describing Marxism's impact, for better or for worse, on a wide array of thinkers. In the 1930s, as he shows, Marxism exercised an immense influence on intellectuals. But a stark shift took place in 1939 after the Hitler-Stalin pact. This emerged first within the Trotskyist movement, when in 1940 James Burnham broke with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). By 1941, Burnham had written his *The Managerial Revolution*, which claimed the means of production were not controlled by social classes, but by a technocratic elite—what he called "bureaucratic collectivism." Burnham's rightward trajectory never ended. He died an icon of the American right wing.

Burnham's collapse may be the most spectacular, but Hartman's work suggests his positions, developed first in a philosophical fight over dialectical materialism waged against Leon Trotsky, predicted the rightward, anti-Marxist movement of much of an intelligentsia that earlier, during the Great Depression, had been pulled to the left.

In this vein, Hartman discusses Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1940), which put forward the idea that the dialectic was the spawn of an earlier form of German mysticism that also produced Hitler; Max Eastman's *Marxism: Is it Science?* (1941), which similarly claimed that the dialectic was an unfortunate inheritance from Germany and better thought of "as a theology"; Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), which attacked Marx's notion of the perfectibility of man; and Dwight MacDonald's *The Root is Man* (1946), a text that condemned Marxism's theory of human progress and in turn influenced David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956).

Reading Hartman's presentation of their thought is to be reminded of how shortsighted these intellectuals were—their writings today are of purely historic interest. How dated, for example, is Arthur Schlesinger's smug contention in *The Vital Center* (1956) that the American example of "wealth and freedom for the ordinary worker" disproved Marx's "prediction of increasing proletarian misery." And how risible is Sidney Hook's declaration in his *Marx and the Marxists* (1955) that "Marx vastly underestimated the regenerative power of capitalism to overcome its own periodic crises."(!) In hindsight, American liberalism was then already intellectually bankrupt, a poverty of thought perhaps best crystallized by its standard-bearer, Louis Hartz, in his 1955 *The Liberal Tradition in America*, which held that the laws of history had never applied to America and never would.

Hartman tacks back and forth in his book between those who attacked Marxism and those who appeared to be more friendly to it. But this latter category includes all sorts of "adapters" of Marx to supposedly unique American conditions—or even those who never claimed much proximity to Marxism at all, but who were thought by their opponents to be Marxists. In this expansive group are figures ranging from the economist Paul Sweezy, to the "critical theorists" of the Frankfurt School, to the sociologist C. Wright Mills and many more.

This coverage of intellectual trends makes Hartman's book valuable as a reference. But as a history—that is, a study that makes a coherent argument about the past—*Karl Marx in America* is fatally undermined by Hartman's indifference to what Marxism *is*. In his hands, Marxism is an abstractly presented series of ideas, subject to fierce debate among intellectuals, that flit in and out of the historian's focus without explanation.

This weakness becomes clearer as the book makes its way through the latter half of the 20th century toward the present. After 500 pages of text, in which Hartman considers literally scores of intellectual and political figures that can be in one way or another connected to Marx—often at considerable acrobatic risk on the part of the author—he finally gets to what he thinks the right "Marxism" is. The book concludes with uncritical praise for *Jacobin* (a "maximally accessible" publication building "socialist political power"), its editor Bhaskar Sunkara (who "promotes working-class empowerment"), the Democratic Socialists of America ("a vehicle for millennial socialism"), and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders ("a class warrior").

Hartman praises *Jacobin* for "seeking to avoid left-wing sectarianism" (484), a coded epithet in the DSA milieu directed against those who insist on the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party—in other words, those who fight for Marxism! This is as close as Hartman can bring himself to mentioning the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Hartman is well aware of the WSWS. The omission speaks less of ignorance than of avoidance. To pass over it in silence is itself a kind of acknowledgment: Trotskyism endures, impossible to wish away and harder still to refute. Last year, another DSA-linked historian, Aidan Beatty, approached this problem by publishing a book filled cover-to-cover with slander, an effort that only wound up discrediting the author. Hartman, who is not a liar like Beatty, attempted to resolve the problem by burying his head in the sand. Unfortunately for the author, it is an omission that makes his book dated upon publication.

To be sure, Leipold's *Citizen Marx* and Hartman's *Karl Marx in America* reflect genuine sympathy for Marx and his critique of capitalism. Yet in seeking to render his ideas congenial to present academic and petty-bourgeois political sensibilities—Leipold more the first and Hartman more the second— both books underscore how contemporary scholarship has distorted rather than grasped Marx's ideas. Leipold reinterprets Marx through the narrow lens of republicanism, draining his revolutionary theory of its class content, while Hartman reduces Marxism to a shifting current of American intellectual moods culminating in the pseudo-left reformism of *Jacobin* and the DSA.

What both books avoid is precisely what Marx insisted upon: that the liberation of humanity requires the political independence of the working class and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. That omission marks the enduring gulf between these academic treatments and Marx's own project.

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