REVIEW

Marx's republics

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

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of academic works offering fresh interpretations of Karl Marx's life and ideas. These have largely adopted one of two approaches: the first, primarily represented by the work of intellectual historians like Gareth Stedman Jones and Jonathan Sperber, has situated Marx's thought within the immediate historical context of European radical politics in the two decades on either side of the 1848 revolutions; the second, as exemplified by political theorists like William Clare Roberts, has sought to demonstrate a connection between Marx's ideas and a long-standing 'republican' tradition of political ideas, centred on civic virtue and a fundamental hostility to arbitrary power.[1] Bruno Leipold's remarkable new study – *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought*[2] – successfully synthesises these two approaches by offering an intensely-detailed contextualist analysis of Marx's extended engagement with republican concepts as they manifested themselves politically in the nineteenth century.

Drawing on his writings from across thirty years of his political life, Leipold contends that Marx, contrary to popular (and academic) belief, 'did not… dismiss the republic as an unworthy political goal' (p11) after his adoption of communism. As his book demonstrates, Marx was grappling with – and indeed fundamentally influenced by – key themes of contemporary republican thought throughout his life. A 'republican moral and political vocabulary of freedom, servitude, dependence, and domination … suffuses all of Marx's critique of political economy', *Citizen Marx* maintains (p176). What may at first seem an overly radical claim is prudently qualified: the impact of republicanism upon Marx's ideas, Leipold notes, 'resists easy reduction to wholesale adoption or rejection' (p8). The central thrust of *Citizen Marx* is that an assessment of this relationship requires a comparative and nuanced excavation of European republicanism *as it really existed* in Marx's lifetime. In doing so, it refutes the once

commonplace assumption that Marx's worldview gave 'insufficient weight and independent space to politics' (p264).

Citizen Marx divides its protagonist's interactions with republicanism and its adherents into three distinct periods, relating respectively to the 'democratic republic', the 'bourgeois republic', and the 'socialist republic'. The first, covering the young Marx in the early 1840s, outlines his conceptualisation of a republic shaped by democratic participation. Marx has often been viewed as essentially liberal in this period given his support for the legislative role of parliamentary assemblies and general insistence on individual rights. According to Leipold's contextualist reading, however, Marx was in fact, by 1842, a 'convinced republican' given his underlying (if fragmentary) insistence on popular democratic participation and commitment to a republican understanding of freedom not only as the absence of arbitrary rule but as emerging from this participation itself (p54).

Leipold also reads Marx's shift to communism against the backdrop of these democratic republican ideas, claiming that Marx's reflections on the distinction between political emancipation and a fuller 'human' emancipation within civil society jump-started his intellectual trajectory towards communism (pp130-131). Nowhere is this clearer than in Marx's writings from this period, where he 'identified the proletariat as the agent of revolution' (p135) and developed a theory of 'alienated labour' that drew heavily on classical republicanism (p175). Later, Leipold devotes an entire chapter to defending his reading of *Das Kapital Volume 1* (1867) as a work deeply indebted to 'republican ideas of dependency, servitude, and unfreedom', showing how Marx extended the tradition's political concern with arbitrary power over individuals to the impact of broader social and economic structures, particularly property ownership and market forces (p303).

The second phase in the development of Marx's republican thought, Leipold claims, was marked by his acceptance of the *bourgeois* republic as a necessary stage in the historical progression towards socialism. Through careful analysis of his writings between 1845 and 1867, *Citizen Marx* suggests that the 'bourgeois' democratic institutions ushered in – if fleetingly – by the 1848 revolutions possessed a certain utility for Marx, because they provided a political framework within which proletarian consciousness could be awakened, and the social preconditions for revolution developed. Throughout this period, Leipold argues, Marx 'combined the socialist critique of capitalism with the republican insistence on politics', most notably in the *Communist Manifesto* (pp215-216). Indeed, Leipold even suggests that Marx was at times *overconfident* about the possibilities of effecting democratic change through bourgeois republican institutions.

However, *Citizen Marx*'s contention is that events in Paris in the spring of 1871 were the catalyst for Marx's shift to a third republican mode, the *socialist* repub-

lic. The Paris Commune's directly elected, revocable Council represented, for Marx, a workable model of democratic delegacy which ensured a dual political and civic (or social) emancipation. As a result, he abandoned his earlier faith in the role of bourgeois parliamentary institutions and focused instead on the need for popular control of state administration; Leipold convincingly extricates this concept from its association with the hackneyed – and largely absent – idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' in Marx's writings on the Commune.

Leipold's overarching argument is that throughout his career Marx remained committed to the existence of some form of democratic political life, both before and after the revolution. The final section of the book therefore turns its attention to the apparent 'myth' that Marx's communism envisioned the 'withering away' of state administration, and 'an end to politics' more generally (p385). In the post-Commune period, we are told, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Marx did not propose the abolition of all deliberative institutions following the revolutionary destruction of the modern political state. There is, however, some room for doubt here, given Leipold admits that his interpretation is largely based upon 'a few cryptic remarks from [Marx's] (unpublished) notes' on the subject (p399).

There is much to be admired in *Citizen Marx*, and Leipold is right to present the findings of his research as a corrective to 'some of the tired antidemocratic stereotypes of Marx's thought' that continue to plague the literature (p248). Perhaps the book's greatest strength is the care with which Leipold reconstructs the (often-contradictory) details of Marx's republican-inspired thought and the ways in which it evolved over time. Particularly original is his situation of Marx within the nineteenth-century republican space, which features welcome vignettes of eminent nineteenth-century republicans: alongside canonical figures like Giuseppe Mazzini, Leipold introduces an array of obscure yet historically significant individuals such as the militant German journalist Karl Heinzen, the London-born engraver and political activist William James Linton, and the oft-maligned French revolutionary Félix Pyat.

Despite the overall strength of its arguments, there are instances in which *Citizen Marx* over-extends itself in pursuit of its assertions. Occasionally, intellectual links appear too tenuous for the argumentative weight they are granted, as when Marx's vision of politics in the social republic is said to be based upon a 'suggestive rather than comprehensive' text (p361), or when highlighting the importance of an early 'fragmentary… republican vision' (p102). Elsewhere, though he cautions against reading Engels as a proxy for Marx's thought, Leipold does just that in several cases (though admittedly with explicit qualification) (pp170-171).

Most importantly, though Leipold's positioning of Marx within the nineteenth-century republican milieu is comprehensive, there are several areas in

which he fails to fully appreciate the nuances of the revolutionary republican ideologies from which Marx apparently sought to differentiate himself. For example, whilst he accurately demonstrates that the social programmes of some radical republicans held much in common with Marx's own thought (aside from the central issue of property) he somewhat erroneously generalises the latter as offering 'an anti-capitalist but nonsocialist alternative to capitalism' (p252). Not all radical republicans were opposed to capitalism, particularly in the French tradition, and many, like Pyat, incorporated an explicitly capitalist approach into their socialist-adjacent political ideas.

Finally, though he carefully incorporates some references to critical events which shaped Marx's writings after 1848 – such as the foundation of the International Working Men's Association in London in 1864 – Leipold leaves little room for consideration of the many politically active republican exiles there, with whom Marx certainly interacted.[3] Indeed, Leipold certainly does not tell the full story of Marx's interactions with many of the relevant tenets of republicanism's uniquely French iterations. This is particularly true with regards to the perpetuation of Jacobinism, a critical theme to which *Citizen Marx* dedicates insufficient attention.[4] Applied as a pejorative to radicals of all stripes throughout the nineteenth century, this label referred to the 'Jacobin club' of republicans during the First French Republic and the associated and bloody Reign of Terror (1793-1794). Yet the term was also adopted by many republicans in Marx's era, and its complex legacy is an important component of current scholarly debate amongst historians of republicanism.

Nonetheless, *Citizen Marx* is a welcome and certainly thought-provoking addition to the ever-growing academic literature on both Marx and nineteenth-century republicanism. Crucially, in contrast to so much of the existing scholarship, Leipold achieves the rare feat of both situating Marx firmly in his historical context and demonstrating his continued relevance to contemporary political debates – most notably over the role of democracy, elections, and political institutions in socialist and Marxist politics. *Citizen Marx*'s originality is such that Leipold's contextualisation of Marx's intellectual relationship with republicanism not only brings Marx's own ideas into sharper focus but also opens up a window into the often-overlooked worlds of pre-Marxist political radicalism.

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Notes

1. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*, W. W. Norton & Co, 2013; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, Allen Lane, 2016, William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, Princeton University Press, 2017, pp246-249.
2. Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2024.
3. Thomas C. Jones and Robert Tombs, 'The French Left in Exile: *Quarante-huitards* and Communards in London, 1848-1880', in Martyn Cornick and Debra Kelly (eds.), *A History of the French in London: Liberty, Equality, Opportunity*, University of London Press, 2013, pp165-191; Thomas C. Jones, 'French Republicanism after 1848' in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp70-93.
4. James Ingram, 'Jacobinism', *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* Vol 38 No 2, 2018, pp88-91.