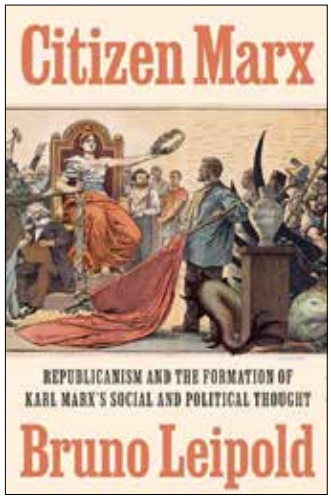
Politics and Property: The Birth of Marxian Socialism



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

BY ANDREJ MARKOVČIČ

Bruno Leipold's *Citizen Marx* is an excellent and long-overdue book tracing the influence of 19th-century republican political thought on Karl Marx and his interpretation of socialism. While Marx is considered synonymous with socialism and communism, the writer and revolutionary did not invent either tradition out of whole cloth. Fusing the antagonistic ideologies of communism—Marx used the term "communism" interchangeably with "socialism"—and republicanism, Marx developed his own "republican communism."

This meant defending participation in politics, something most communists saw as useless, while also recognizing that the economic efficiency of the new factory system meant the old artisans, the cornerstone of the republican political movement, were a dying class in society. This combination set Marx at odds with both camps for much of his life. By recovering this largely lost tradition of radical republican thought, which pioneered demands for expanded political rights, the end of monarchy, and freedom from arbitrary power and punishment, Leipold gives us greater insight into exactly what Marx was synthesizing and what his innovations were in the crowded 19th-century field of revolutionary thinkers.

One of the great achievements of the book is to reintroduce many forgotten radical republicans who shaped the thinking, both as friends and opponents, of Marx and his lifelong collaborator Friedrich Engels. In doing so, it patches a hole in the intellectual map of the era. But republicanism cannot and should not be reduced to a proto- or quasi-socialism.

Citizen Marx recovers the debates between—as well as among—republicans, liberals, and communists. By understanding the struggle for ideological primacy between republicans and communists—rooted in their respective constituencies, propertied artisans and propertyless proletarians—we better appreciate Marx as a living, breathing intellectual searching for answers.

Republican Freedom

Leipold begins by setting out the political terrain in the decades preceding the 1848 revolutions that sprang up across much of Europe. Early-19th-century Europe saw liberals and republicans allied against conservative monarchists in the struggle for political reform. Both wanted to end the arbitrary power of monarchs through the introduction of the rule of law, but they disagreed on who should have a say in that law.

For liberals, it was enough for a society to be based on the rule of law and the protection of individual rights, with less concern for how those laws were formulated. Republicans, also known as radicals, believed that laws alone were not enough. These laws, while important, had to be the product of the people themselves, not some elite group of ministers or even a politically and socially insulated parliament. If the people did not have a say in the creation of these laws, they would still be dominated by those who did, no matter how enlightened the lawmakers might be. This commitment led the camps to disagree on the important question of property requirements for voting, with liberals in favor and republicans demanding universal male suffrage.

Alongside the liberals and republicans were the early socialist movements, though they took a largely anti-political stance. Focused on the question of how society, rather than politics, should be organized, they dismissed political struggles as window dressing. This stance manifested itself in two main currents. One was the small-scale communal experiments like those of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. These sought to bring their vision of communal society into existence, believing that these appealing examples would be emulated. Some of these groups had cooperative democratic practices within the commune, others expected bosses to realize benevolent management was simply more effective. Neither had much interest in the debates over political democracy in broader society. The other current was the technocratic utopian (and deeply elitist and undemocratic) socialism of Henri de Saint-Simon, who believed that in a correctly administered society, all decisions would be made by experts.

Thus, while many socialists had egalitarian values, republicans were the only consistent defenders of democracy. Early socialists and conservatives, with both more and less radical social programs, tended to emphasize the importance of benevolent masters. Republicans rejected this paradigm and held firm to the belief that even latent power over another person constituted a lack of freedom.

It was typical for republicans of the period to critique Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel—the famous German political philosopher who lived at the turn of the 19th century—for his defense of constitutional monarchy. Leipold points out that in Marx's own critique of Hegel, he goes one step further to critique the limitations of traditional republicanism. Most republicans thought that universal male suffrage would be sufficient for a system to be free of domination. Marx suggests that there is a political form beyond a republic, which he labels "democracy." His argument is that even in a republic, most people will only engage periodically and the lack of constraints on representatives means they will form a distinct caste in society over and above the rest of the population.

To combat this flaw in republicanism, Marx suggests the need for reforms like "imperative mandates," meaning representatives have strict orders on how to cast their votes. Failure to follow their mandate could result in recall. While Marx supported regular–even frequent–elections, he did not support direct democracy; he found it implausible given the scale of modern society. Nonetheless, he wanted reforms that would bring the average citizen as close as possible to the act of governing for the common good.

Republican Communism

At the time of his move to Paris in 1843, Marx was still a committed republican and critical of communists and socialists. Like many since, he disliked their fixation on abolishing private property. Writing for a republican journal, he levied a critique that he would never abandon: that socialists were all too often utopian system-builders who had little concern for immediate challenges. Most importantly for Leipold's story, Marx also disliked the typical socialist avoidance of politics.

Republicans, like socialists, saw that propertyless workers were subject to domination and exploitation by capitalists. But rather than abolishing private property, they aimed to universalize private property. If workers were subject to the arbitrary power of capital, the answer would be to ensure that every worker had their own property, by which they meant their own means of production. In the words of William James Linton, an artisan and prominent republican intellectual, "our complaint is not that there is too much individual property, but that there is too little; not that the few have, but that many have not."

It was the question of private property, and the role of the growing propertyless proletariat, that led Marx to change his mind. In Paris, Marx had much greater exposure to the new working class forming under capitalism. He and Engels realized that, given the significant cost advantage of factory production, it would be impossible to preserve, much less expand, the old artisan working class.

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Thus, universalization was no longer a viable option, but the abolition of private property still needed refinement. Marx and Engels pointed out that what socialists were demanding wasn't the abolition of all private property, but the abolition of capitalist private property. When the republicans opposed this demand, they were standing in defense of an entirely different form of property: petty-bourgeois property. This was the small-scale means of production owned by the artisans and peasants, not factories owned by capitalists. Marx and Engels had no interest in abolishing petty-bourgeois property; they assumed it was destined to disappear anyway. The proletarian worker was going to be the agent of future revolutionary change. Despite their numbers, artisans were increasingly a relic of the past.

Like many converts, Marx and Engels embraced their new beliefs overeagerly, almost dropping the question of politics as they emphasized the despotism of employers in the workplace and their new materialist theory of historical change. Former allies in the republican camp accused them of base materialism that ignored the role of politics in shaping history. But relatively quickly, Marx and Engels corrected course and set about advocating for a new kind of socialism, one that advocated change through the ballot.

Leipold notes that while Marx brought his old republican political ideas to his new materialist vision of history, his new communist radicalism displaced his older republican radicalism. After his conversion, he more or less abandoned his writing about radical democratic constitutional forms. His new communist republicanism settled for seizing the bourgeois state as it exists, retreating from his earlier ideas about a democratic state. He would return to these ideas after the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871.

Capitalist Domination

For roughly the next two decades following his conversion to communism, Marx researched, drafted, and redrafted what would eventually become the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. Essential to his argument was not just the domination of the employee by the employer at work, but the domination of them both by the capitalist system as a whole.

Echoing republican theories of domination in politics, Marx showed how in the economic sphere, it did not matter whether the master was good or evil. The fact that they had power, even unexercised, over others meant they dominated them. Furthermore, the competitive nature of capitalism meant that capitalists would be themselves punished for not taking advantage of their power to dominate, given the likelihood that they would be replaced by another capitalist who would not flinch.

Though there were certainly masters more vile than others, the real master was the capitalist system, the impersonal market. In Leipold's words:

> It was for this reason that Marx thought it in general a mistake in political economy to focus too much "on the mere will of the capitalist." While he thought it was normally the case that the "will of the capitalist is certainly to take as much as possible," what was required was "not [to] talk about his will, but to inquire into his power, the limits of that power, and the character of those limits."

Drawing on political theorist William Clare Roberts' book *Marx's Inferno*, Leipold suggests that at least part of what convinced Marx to finally get *Capital* out the door is the founding of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in 1864.

The IWMA held all flavors of socialists, communists, anarchists, and republicans. Leipold argues that *Capital*:

> was an intervention into this crowded ideological field with the aim of winning over the IWMA and the broader working-class movement to [Marx's] ideas. That included ... an attempt to wean workers from the still popular republican idea that the domination of capitalism could be overcome by individual property ownership.

Marx's time working with artisans in the IWMA had softened his approach to the artisans. Unlike the former serf, for whom proletarianization was an advancement, for the old urban artisans it was a demotion. Despite the appeal of the traditional artisan independence, he argued that there was no way back. Not even co-ops would be immune from the pressures of the market they had to operate in.

The Value of Marx's Republicanism Today

Marx attempted to take what was best from both the socialist and republican traditions to form a new political program. From socialism, he took the recognition that as production became increasingly socialized, ownership of the means of production must also be socialized. From republicanism, he took the conviction a freedom from domination and the need for a political system where all could participate in the "general matters" of society.

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Twentieth-century Marxism was dominated by the needs of the developing world and its struggle for political and economic sovereignty. This brought to the fore the technocratic socialist roots in Marx's analysis, where collective needs were prioritized over the individual. The New Left recovered Marx's humanistic philosophy in the 1960s, emphasizing the importance of the individual's experience within society. By restoring Marx's republican lineage, Leipold shows us the Marx that wrestled with how to use politics to balance the individual and the collective.

Leipold concludes the arc of Marx's republican thought with the establishment of the Paris Commune in 1871. Among other innovations, the *communards* revived the older republican commitment to imperative mandates, long out of fashion, binding representatives to vote in a certain way. Marx also supported the replacement of elite bureaucrats with administration by the people. The radical experiment in government by the people reawakened in Marx the possibility of "democracy without professionals."

Leipold notes, but doesn't pursue, the obvious question of whether we really can run modern society without professionals, specialists, and various kinds of career administrators. Marx sought to wean radical republicans away from the hope that domination by capital could be achieved through a society of independent producers. He saw it as a dream made impossible by the development of modern industry. Has the development of modern society made the dream of the *communards* similarly obsolete?

Leipold is to be commended for recovering in such detail the questions that Marx grappled with throughout his life. At a moment of confusion and retreat on the left, we do not necessarily need to repeat the same answers, but we must be asking many of the same questions. What kind of social, economic, and political organization best restrains arbitrary power? What gives all people the greatest meaningful input on the decisions that matter in their lives? Marx did not find all the answers in a single school of thought but synthesized from what was at hand. We would do well to follow his lead. D&S

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