ON THE LATEST MARX REVIVAL: REPUBLICANISM, MATERIALISM, SOCIOLOGY

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

Thomas Nail, *Matter and Motion: A Brief History of Kinetic Materialism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024

Thomas Kemple, *Marx's Wager: Das Kapital and Classical Sociology*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

Abstract. This paper addresses the ongoing explosion of new research on the life and career of Karl Marx. Twentieth Century interpretations of Marx were decisively shaped by the way his editors and literary executors presented his literary remains for various reading publics. They also discussed his ideas in fairly abstract terms, with little reference to the contexts in which they took shape. More recent scholars have sought to rectify this approach through close examination of the original documents and the specific struggles and debates into which Marx was attempting to intervene. This article engages with three crucial examples of this new scholarship: those of Bruno Leipold, Thomas Nail, and Thomas Kemple respectively. It focuses particularly on new understandings of Marx's relationship with politics and political institutions – an aspect of Marx's project that was once thought to be underdeveloped, but that we can now recognise as sophisticated and robust. It shows how Marx's body of work is sturdy enough to carry the weight of an astonishingly wide array of different approaches. It concludes with some comments on the radical, revolutionary nature of Marx's understanding of republicanism.

Keywords: Karl Marx, republicanism, materialism, sociology, politics

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Marx Studies Today

The past decade has witnessed the publication of a growing mountain of new books on the life and career of Karl Marx. And while not all of them have been entirely laudatory, it would be hard to deny that something like a revival is underway. The bicentenary of Marx's birth in 2018 was accompanied by a spate of original Marx biographies (Jonathon Sperber's *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*, Gareth Stedman Jones's *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, Sven-Eric Leidman's *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx*, and Michael Heinrich's *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society*) all of which proposed to bypass twentieth century Marxist interpretations and contextualise Marx's writings amid the struggles and debates of his own time.[1]

Around the same time, William Clare Roberts completed his pathbreaking *Marx's Inferno*, which adopted a Cambridge School historical methodology to reread *Capital* as a work of political rather than economic theory, and to locate Marx within a neo-Roman republican tradition that emphasised, not so much social equality, but freedom as non-domination, or freedom from the 'impersonal domination' of the market.[2] Terrell Carver took a similarly historical approach in his *Marx*, where he attempted to take the emphasis off the editorially reconstructed manuscripts and notebooks that make up so much of what we take to be Marx's body of work and attend instead to the extraordinarily wide array of journalism he published in his lifetime – the idea being that Marx's writings should be characterised, not as a general theory of society, but as a series of discrete interventions and politically oriented engagements.[3]

More recent examples of new Marx scholarship would include Thomas Nail's *Marx in Motion* (which focuses intensely on Marx's doctoral dissertation on ancient atomism in order to interpret it as a contribution to a supressed ontological tradition that Nail calls 'kinetic materialism'), Vanessa Christina Wills's *Marx's Ethical Vision* (which revitalises the long discredited humanist interpretation of Marx as a powerful normative thinker interested in human nature and human flourishing), and Michael Lazarus's *Absolute Ethical Life* (which performs a similar task by proposing that Marx's mature theory of value and the 'value form' is not strictly economic or descriptive, but an effort to both understand and point beyond the distinctively capitalist 'form of life').[4]

The books under review in this essay all contribute to this larger and ongoing return to Marx.[5] But they have been chosen specifically for their differences, in order to reveal the incredible range of work being done in the field. Bruno Leipold's *Citizen Marx* is undoubtedly the most sophisticated application of the Cambridge School methodology to Marx's work to date (and that is saying something, given the already elevated level of sophistication found in commentators like Stedman Jones and Roberts). It shows how, throughout his career, Marx developed his various positions by simultaneously adopting and repudiating republican arguments. As a result, Leipold maintains, Marx had a much more

complicated relationship with politics in general, and political institutions in particular, than either his friends or his enemies have ever fully acknowledged.

Thomas Nail's *Matter and Motion: A Brief History of Kinetic Materialism*, while not exclusively about Marx, nevertheless continues and expands on the claims set out in *Marx in Motion* by locating them within a larger historical trajectory, or the kinetic materialist tradition mentioned above. Here, however, the concern is less with getting Marx contextually right, as it were, or working out what Marx was attempting to do with his words in his own time, than it is with developing a highly speculative and decidedly contemporary philosophical argument about the nature of reality as such.

Thomas Kemple's *Marx's Wager: Das Kapital and Classical Sociology* could be said to sit somewhere in between the historical-contextual and the philosophical-speculative approaches developed by Leipold and Nail respectively. For it effectively combines detailed reconstructions of both Marx's writings and how they were taken up by subsequent social theorists (notably Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel) with wonderfully imaginative and freely associative flights of interpretation intended to show how every reading, no matter how precise, is also and necessarily creative, or an act of invention.

My aim here is less to evaluate the relative merits of these three approaches to Marx's work than it is to explore their distinct purposes. The question, in other words, is less how true they are to their object of investigation, or that colossal collection of publications, documents, and literary remains that we refer to as 'Marx', then it is what each author is attempting to do with those documents and remains, and how effectively they accomplish those tasks. For, as I have argued elsewhere, in a manner that is almost unique in our intellectual tradition, Marx is probably best understood, not as a historical individual with a coherent and unified intention that contemporary readers must endeavour to reconstruct, but as a mechanical assemblage of texts that can be taken apart and put back together in any number of configurations for any number of purposes.[6]

What we find here, then, is not three competing interpretations of a singular and authentic Marx, but three possible Marx-machines, or three ways of arranging Marx in the present. This does not mean that we cannot judge their strengths and weaknesses, or that any interpretation is somehow equal to all others. It means instead that no judgement is entirely subtractive or restrictive, that the act of judging necessarily adds to and expands upon the works being judged, and thus that every judgment contributes another component to the machine or constitutes a machine of its own.

Citizen Marx

During the twentieth century, in the thick of the Cold War, a fairly standard republican attack on Marx and Marxism took shape – a position perhaps best represented by Hannah Arendt.[7] Freedom, the argument went, is essentially public

in nature. It involves the right to stand up in front of one's peers and speak great words or perform great deeds. It thus requires the construction and the protection of what Arendt called a 'space of appearances', or a specifically political realm. On this account, Marx made the error of treating politics in reductive terms as a mere instrument or epiphenomena of deeper, material and economic forces. Not surprisingly, then, once in power, his followers foreclosed the space of appearances, thereby suffocating freedom as such. The republican project in the twentieth century thus involved restoring the dignity of politics and the public realm against the antipolitical tendencies of what was called totalitarianism.

For many, this argument seemed watertight, and even those who wanted to claim some aspect of the Marxist legacy found it necessary to adopt elements of it (Claude Lefort, for example, or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, or Miguel Abensour)[8]. But, for all their sophistication, Marx's twentieth century republican critics never seemed to notice that these same kinds of arguments against socialism were already circulating in Marx's lifetime, that before becoming a socialist, Marx initially identified with them, and that he forged his own unique approach to socialism directly in response to them. The central purpose of Leipold's *Citizen Marx* is to reconstruct this influence of republicanism on Marx's work, and to present that as a response to his most notorious critics. But, as Leipold notes early on in his book, influence here is a complex concept. As Leipold puts it, it 'should be understood as not only the causal tracing of an affinity, when Marx's ideas can be shown to have been inherited from republicanism'. For it also entails 'negative influence, when Marx formed his ideas in opposition to republicanism' (8). In other words:

> Marx both incorporated republican commitments into his communism to critique antipolitical socialisms and positioned this republican communism to supplant anticommunist republicanism. Republicanism thus formed a body of ideas and political movement out of which and against which Marx shaped and defined his own communism. (8)

For Leipold, two of the most important examples of this phenomena were Marx's frequent broadsides against the antipolitical socialisms of the early part of the nineteenth century (the British Owenites, for example, and the French Saint-Simonians, whose abstract technocratic models for an ideal society Marx found entirely implausible) and his lifelong 'commitment' to what Leipold calls 'a republican concept of freedom' or freedom 'as the absence of arbitrary power' and something 'secured by laws made collectively by the citizenry' (9). As Leipold sees it, Marx never repudiated this republican conception of freedom but sought to square it with the struggle against modern capitalism.

Following a synoptic introduction, *Citizen Marx* is broken down into three parts, each of which corresponds roughly with a period in Marx's career during which Leipold proposes that his engagements with republicanism became most

pronounced: Marx's early left Hegelian journalism and philosophical speculations of 1842 and 1843; his protracted studies of political economy following the revolutions of 1848; and his enthusiastic defence of and requiem for the Paris Commune of 1871. Of the first period, Leipold shows that the 'left Hegelians shared the wider republican movement's political commitment to popular sovereignty and a republic' but that 'their republicanism was also marked by an ethical ideal of citizens acting for the common good and realizing their universal nature over particular private concerns' (48). Aside from the more familiar names (Bruno Bauer, Edgar Bauer, Arnold Ruge, Eduard Gans, and so forth), Leipold makes a number of especially insightful observations about the political theorist Johann Georg Wirth, who set out the basic parameters of what republicanism meant to German radicals during the *Vormärz*, or the years leading up to the revolutions of 1848. He also brilliantly mines Marx's extensive notebooks and manuscripts from the period to show how, from very early on, Marx had developed a rich theory of democratic institutions, or what Marx called 'true democracy', especially the crucial concept of the '*mandat impératif*' (101), which would ensure that elected officials were permanently subject to recall and thus directly responsive to the demands of their constituents. Not incidentally, this institutional principle, and the general theory of democracy that supported it, would return quite forcibly in Marx's responses to the Paris Commune of 1871, suggesting that they were never superseded in his thinking by an economic reductivism, but always flourished just beneath the surface.

In terms of the kinds of contextual or archival material that Leipold is able to turn up, the second part of *Citizen Marx* is undoubtedly the most original. While far more is at stake than I can address in this brief review, among the more intriguing figures Leipold discusses is Marx's longtime republican sparring partner Karl Heinzen. As a writer, one of Marx's greatest abilities was also one of his nastiest: the ability to dispatch with his enemies in a couple of vicious phrases. More than one thinker who was famous in their own time has been lost to history as a result of Marx attacking them, and more than one is only remembered today *because* Marx did so. But, as Leipold tells the story, Heinzen is intriguing because he was able to go toe-to-toe with the master polemicist, and match Marx's cruel wit with his own. Moreover, Leipold also shows how, behind the insults and personal animus, Heinzen's and Marx's various exchanges represent an important confrontation between republicanism and socialism in the nineteenth century – one that should continue to inform any discussion of the two today. The basic question concerned individual property rights. Both Heinzen and Marx believed in the abolition of inheritance, a widespread and deeply radical demand that was designed to destroy all aristocratic privilege. But while Heinzen developed a moral argument in favour of universalising property, Marx kind of hid behind the ostensibly scientific claim that economic and historical forces would inevitably lead to its demise. Or, as Leipold puts it, here referring to some of the arguments developed in volume one of *Capital*: 'While it was not possible to restore the individual

property ownership of the independent artisan and the peasant, the dependency of capitalism could and would be overcome by socialized production in which everyone owned the means of production together' (324).

A frequently repeated criticism of Marx, one closely related to the republican criticisms mentioned above, is that he developed no consistent concept of state, which he treated as little more than a weapon in the hands of power. The third part of Leipold's book shows definitively that this is not true, and that Marx's responses to the Paris Commune of 1871 in his pamphlet on *The Civil War in France* should in fact be read as a robust contribution to modern constitutional theory. As Leipold points out, far from proposing that the state can or should be eliminated, Marx was 'electrified' by the 'political institutions of the Commune' (346), which he saw as '"the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour"' (346). He therefore argued that '"freedom consists in transforming the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it"' (392).[9] As Marx saw it, Leipold continues, 'the realization of (political) freedom is thus … about establishing the right kind of control over the state (or the polity that replaces it)'. Here freedom 'amounts not necessarily to the absence of coercive interference, but potentially (without stretching Marx's remarks too far) to the absence of interference uncontrolled by the people' (392).

Implicitly responding to what we might call the fetishism of the political that is so common among academics today (often if not always inspired by Arendt), Leipold concludes: 'We do not need to return to a full-blown Aristotelian view about the centrality of politics to the good life to think that democratic institutions are more than "mere concomitants" of economic emancipation'. For Marx's 'commitment to political democracy springs from the same source as the commitment to economic democracy: that people should have control over the structures and forces that shape their lives' (401). And Marx's concern was never to wonder whether humans should be free in this sense (from the time of his earliest writings to that of his latest, he believed almost axiomatically that they should) but to explore what conditions would make this kind of freedom possible in the modern world.

Kinetic Materialism

One standard challenge to the Cambridge School methodology is that it has no obvious contemporary relevance – that it gets pathologically fixated on the past and fails effectively to address the present. But scholarship, I would suggest, always entails a moment of madness. One must obsess over minute details that no one else has ever considered before. One must believe it is possible to discern the intentions of long dead individuals by deciphering an organised distribution of black characters across a white surface. One must inhabit a world of ghosts and mysteries, spectres and delusions. And while the scholar's delusions are not everything, to relinquish them entirely would be to relinquish the profession as such. It is thus

with great respect and admiration that I call Thomas Nail's *Marx in Motion* both incredibly scholarly and incredibly mad.

The basic proposition of the book is that, in his doctoral dissertation on the ancient atomists, the twenty-one year old Marx somehow discovered an ontology that would not only silently inform the rest of his career (including his mature studies of political economy) but also magically predict some of the most advanced theoretical physics and academic trends of our own time (including both quantum physics and the so-called 'new materialism').

That argument might not seem entirely bizarre, and we might allow it some space to bear itself out, were it not for the fact that Nail begins with the blanket assertion that, at the time he was working on his dissertation, Marx had not yet read Hegel. 'Long before Marx had ever read Hegel', Nail claims, 'his first and original philosophical engagement was with Epicurus. Before there was the Hegelian Marx, there was the Epicurean Marx'.[10] Unfortunately, this is a demonstrably false claim that also conveniently forecloses the most obvious interpretation of the dissertation, not as a prophetic ontology, but as a somewhat idiosyncratic but discernibly Hegelian study of 'the difference between Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature' (as Marx helpfully indicates in his title).[11] That said, I want to emphasise that, from my perspective, none of this is decisively damaging. Because, and as I noted above, the issue here is less whether Nail gets Marx right than it is what he wants *to do* with Marx – what Marx-machine he wants to build. Or, to paraphrase something someone said somewhere else, in this instance, the point is not to interpret Marx; the point is to change him.

At the same time, we might wonder, if Nail's objective is less to explain what Marx wanted to say in the past and more to develop an ontology capable of meeting the demands of the present, why involve Marx at all? Why not just state the argument without any reference to Marx whatsoever? An unsympathetic response would be that this is an unjustified appeal to authority – that Marx's name occupies a uniquely powerful place in our collective political imaginary and that using it gives force to one's words they would not otherwise have. A more generous, and in this case I think more accurate, approach would be to point out (in concert, it is worth noting, with ancient atomists like Epicurus) that nothing comes from nothing, that there is no creation *ex nihilo*, that all thought must begin with some raw material, as it were, and that, in the case of Nail's thought, Marx's dissertation represents a fruitful point of departure.

While *Marx in Motion* provides a much more elaborate interpretation of Marx, the specific reasons why Nail turned to Marx to develop his kinetic materialism are explained more directly in *Matter and Motion*. The basic question animating that book is why what Nail refers to as 'Western' thought consistently privileges 'form and stasis' over 'matter and motion', and why it almost always seeks to explain 'the movement of matter by something static' (1). More accurately, Nail sets out to trace an alternative, subterranean tradition that avoids this rule. And he proposes that we can discern this tradition, or what he calls 'the untold history of a relatively

rare but philosophically important line of thought' (3), across the axis of three figures: Lucretius, Marx, and Viginia Woolf. For Nail, Lucretius set out the parameters of a heterodox ontology organised around his infamous theory of the 'swerve', or the sudden declination of the atom, and five closely connected concepts: 'matter, motion, indeterminacy, relationality and process' (4). And Marx and Woolf were the two readers of Lucretius (and maybe the only two) who recognised this gesture.

Given my limited expertise, I am not going to try to evaluate the accuracy of Nail's reading of Lucretius or Woolf. Nor am I going to address his proposal that Lucretius established an approach to materialism that predicts the 'quantum mechanics' of 'contemporary physicists' like 'Carlo Rovelli and Karan Barad' (3). I will focus instead on his discussions of Marx. The good news is that, between *Marx in Motion* (which was published in 2020) and *Matter and Motion* (which appeared in 2024), Nail seems to have realised that Marx began composing his dissertation 'after reading Hegel'. However, for some reason, he doubles down on the idea that, 'long before Marx read any of the great German philosopher Friedrich Hegel's writing, he was a … close reader of Lucretius' (51), an assertion for which he provides no evidence, and for which, to the best of my knowledge, there is no evidence to be found. Regardless, Nail's central argument is that, in his dissertation, Marx discovered materialism, and especially the notion that 'if matter is "the cause of everything, [then matter is] without cause itself"' and must therefore be 'immanently self-caused' (51).[12] Nail's selective citation of Marx and use of square brackets to add words should not go unnoticed, as here Nail is inserting a reflection on the concept of matter into Marx's writing in a place where, if we look up the reference, we can see Marx is not really discussing materialism, at least not in the sense that Nail implies.

Setting that point aside for the moment, Nail proposes that, following Lucretius's theory of the swerve, Marx came to understand matter, not as a collection of static and identifiable things, but as a mobile and indeterminate process, or relations that generate their relata. Or, as Nail puts it, 'for Marx, matter and motion is not a change in an underlying substance, but *the change of change* itself: absolute indeterminate movement'. Here there are 'no fixed physical entities, no fixed value, and no fixed relations between physical entities and units of value' (53). And this set of conceptual manoeuvres provides Nail with what he takes to be a direct link between Marx's early study of ancient atomism and both his later conversion to communism (which Nail characterizes as a social arrangement in which there are no fixed hierarchies or values) and his critique of capitalism and the commodity form (which Nail thinks Marx challenged for attempting to break the world down into fixed entities with fixed values).

Thus, and as Nail puts it a little later in his book, 'Marx took Lucretius's idea of relational knowledge and emphasised its political power to transform human society' (91) – an idea that Nail believes is especially well expressed in Marx's use of the term 'metabolism'. And, finally, this line of thought allows Nail to accomplish

one of the central aspirations of his project, namely, to link Marx's work to a modern ecological politics:

> Ontological and ecological relationality was at the heart of Marx's philosophical and political project. Metabolism was not discrete relations between discrete relata. It was the 'hanging-together' of nature as an open and simultaneously changing process. For Marx, metabolism and communism are the natural, human and social balance of the global relationality that capitalism continually ignores and disrupts using hierarchy and the value-form. (92)

Nail is therefore able to conclude that 'Marx's fundamental methodological orientation to modern society was process-oriented'. For Marx, society 'was nothing other than matter in motion'. And 'social motions are neither predetermined substances nor random events but emergent and dialectical patterns' or 'patterns of movement' that 'emerge, persist, dissipate and re-emerge historically' (135).

For those interested in fashionable social and political theory, and especially recent efforts among theorists to escape the 'prison house of language' and respond effectively to ongoing discoveries in the physical sciences, Nail's work will undoubtedly appear exciting and inspiring. And if anyone finds this interpretation of Marx helpful – if it allows anyone to think through an impasse or design new lines of research into previously impenetrable fields – I would not want to take any wind out of their sails. But the small problem is that Marx's dissertation is not really about materialism. Indeed, Marx does not use the word 'materialism' once, and on the few occasions where he discusses 'matter' it is not to build a unique materialist ontology, but with reference to the classical metaphysical opposition between matter and form, which he learns largely from Hegel. And the reason why Marx does not discuss materialism in his dissertation is that, at the time he was writing, the ancient atomists were not considered materialists. The notion that they were materialists in the contemporary sense is very much an invention of the late nineteenth century, and particularly the great German classicist Eduard Zeller, who wrote it into his influential history of ancient philosophy, and who, in doing so, set off a whole series of efforts to conflate the two.[13] In fact, Hegel himself explicitly denied that the ancient atomists were materialists in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* – a work that, despite what Nail insists, Marx undoubtedly knew intimately when he was writing his dissertation, and to which he undoubtedly understood himself to be responding.[14]

To use the initial error of assuming Marx's dissertation provides an original materialist ontology as a lens through which to approach the rest of his entire career is not completely unjustified, so long as we begin with the methodological principle that we are not attempting to represent the historical Marx accurately but use his literary remains to build a Marx-machine. But Nail never suggests that that is his purpose. As a result, he leaves his project open to the kind of

challenge I have gestured towards here. And I suspect that, for many readers, that is going to be enough to stop them from trying to figure out what he wants to say about quantum physics, new materialism, and how such things might inform politics today.

Waging Sociology

It seems possible, then, that Nail has picked out a number of generative fragments from Marx's body of work, largely stripped them from their original contexts, and used them to weave an elaborate and abstract ontology ostensibly capable of explaining social, political, economic, and even natural relations in the widest possible sense. And while it is hard to imagine anything further from Marx's own procedure, or the fastidious precision and attention to detail with which he conducted his research, here Nail is not exactly in bad company. For it could be argued that the first person to take this approach to Marx was none other than Friedrich Engels, who spent much of his later career carefully curating Marx's legacy (notably in this instance the work of his youth) for a late nineteenth century reading public. The key text in this regard is Engels's 1888 pamphlet *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* – the work that first introduced the notion that, as a young man, Marx broke with the 'idealism' of his Hegelian contemporaries in order to develop what Engels dubbed 'the materialist concept of history', and that, more importantly, first published a slightly edited version of Marx's famous 'Theses on Feuerbach', a collection of random scribbles that Engels had found buried among Marx's literary remains amid the manuscripts now known as *The German Ideology*.

This is not the place to attempt to recount the extremely complicated story of how Engels and a host of other editors and literary executors shaped the way Marx would be read and interpreted throughout the twentieth century, other than to say that, even today, much if not most of what gets characterised as 'Marxism' would probably be better referred to as 'Engelsism', especially with respect of Marx's supposed philosophical commitment to 'materialism'.[15] Instead, I want to use these comments as an opportunity to turn my attention to Kemple's *Marx's Wager*. For there, among many other things, Kemple emphasises and explores the misreadings of Marx that circulated among the great classical sociologists of the early twentieth century, and argues that, for better *and* for worse, those misreadings played a crucial role in formulating the discipline of sociology.

The essential conceit of *Marx's Wager* is that, under the direct and identifiable influence of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's masterpiece *Faust*, Marx made a kind of Faustian bargain with bourgeois political economy or wagered that an intensive study of those who defended the horrors of modern capitalism would ultimately provide the tools for destroying it. Or, as Kemple puts it, Marx 'tends to treat the bourgeois economists as Faust did Mephistopheles … as a guide to the earthly experiences and infernal worlds of capitalist society'. Then, in a parallel (or perhaps

inverted) fashion, early social theorists like Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel made a similar wager with Marx, or with the truncated version of his body of work to which they had access at the time. Thus, 'Marx himself plays the role of Mephistopheles for the next generation of Faustian sociologists', all of whom were as critical of socialism as Marx was of capitalism (xi). Finally, and as Kemple himself wagers, his own study of Marx and the classical social theorists will provide him with a coherent and effective way of using the tools of sociology to intervene into the contemporary world, or assess and, in whatever small manner, work to change the countless social, economic, political, and environmental crises we collectively face today. Or, in slightly less expansive terms, Kemple wagers 'that *Faust* is one of the best guides to *Capital*, and that *Capital* is among the best guides to classical sociology and contemporary critical theory' (xiii). As we discover throughout *Marx's Wager*, Kemple means this in both precise and fanciful ways. Thus, he shows that the canon of classical sociology is replete with specific references to *Faust*, and that, along with a panoply of other literary references, *Faust* is integral to the sociological imagination. But he is also able to creatively use *Faust* as a kind of prism through which to refract and reassemble the history of sociological theories and practices, or use that history to cast new light, or a new pattern of shadow and light, across the present.

As I noted above, it is this combination of rigorous erudition and playful innovation that most characterises Kemple's book and sets it apart from others in the genre. The argument unfolds in five chapters, each of which addresses a particular moment in the sociological tradition. The first focuses primarily on the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, its original contexts, and its complex reception history. Here Kemple is keen to reveal the dramatic structure of Marx's writing, or the way he stages a series of dramatic scenes, often with explicit or implicit reference to *Faust*, and how those scenes are curiously rehearsed by Marx's early readers and commentators. The second chapter turns our attention towards Durkheim and his attempts to both expand on and challenge Marx's insights by grounding society, not only in economic and material forces, but in morality, sentiment, and the experience of solidarity, as well as that elusive ('sensuously supersensuous' as Marx puts it) category that Durkheim calls the 'social fact'. Kemple's third chapter addresses Weber's 'more sustained' but also 'at times selective, sporadic, and superficial' (55) engagements with Marx, noting how, while Weber agrees with Marx on '*the primacy of action*' (58), he mistakenly believed that Marx somehow neglected 'the subjective motivations that drove the capitalist work ethic in the first place'(60) – an error that Kemple is able to dispel via a virtuoso reading of Chapter 15 of *Capital* on 'Machinery and Large Scale Industry'. In the fourth chapter, Kemple brings Simmel onto the stage, showing how Simmel's theories of modernity, urban life, subjectivity, and especially money, all of which were designed to point beyond Marx's approach, were in many ways predicted and superseded by Marx. 'In contrast to Simmel's concern with the "law of the individual"', Kemple maintains, 'Marx never wavers in his concern to address the

problem of collective agency as the level of social reproduction and historical transformation' (104).

I have not done anything approaching justice to the breadth and sophistication of Kemple's project, much of which takes shape in the rich footnotes that he includes throughout. But for my money, the most absorbing moment in *Marx's Wager* is the last chapter, where Kemple engages with a host of other, more minor but no less compelling classical social theorists, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Thorstein Veblen, and (most surprisingly, perhaps) Sigmund Freud. And I would wager that it is Kemple's discussion of the last of these that provides us with the most penetrating insight into his own methods and agendas, or the way he goes about his scholarly work.

It is well known that Freud employs a wide range of economic metaphors to describe the operation of the mind. But Kemple is the first to notice just how often he characterises the workings of the psychic apparatus like a factory, with various workers playing various roles in the production of mental states. Thus, and as Kemple shows, what gets translated into English as 'cathexis' is the German word *Besetzung*, which can variously mean occupation or theatrical cast. Freud's 'dream work' is *Traumarbeit*, 'condensation' is *Verdichtungsarbeit*, 'displacement' is *Verschiebungsarbeit*, and so forth. 'In an uncanny echo of Marx's topology of economic agencies', Kemple explains,

> Freud describes how these agents of dream-work facilitate the translation of latent contents of dream thoughts (the infrastructure of the dream) into the manifest content (or superstructure) of the visual and verbal dream-text. … It is as if Freud's own language for analysing the domestic economy of the mind (*psychische Haushalt*) provides a kind of translation that accounts for how the categories of capitalism are internalised. (123)

Kemple then uses this cluster of associations to analyse the psychic-social dynamics of colonialism, finance capitalism, and the impending environmental catastrophe, thereby 'helping us to imagine a psychoanalytically informed Marxist sociology' (124) for the future.

On Multiple Marxs

It is a testament, of course, to the fecundity of Marx's legacy, and the diligence of those who have worked to preserve it, that it could inspire three so different responses. Despite what both Marx's critics and many of his followers have often assumed, not only is there no orthodoxy in Marx, but it is almost impossible to generate one out of him, at least not without ignoring exponentially more than one considerations, or simply pretending that most of what he wrote is not important. Anyone who knows anything about Marx's life knows that he was often frustratingly exacting – that he demanded a comprehensiveness and a perfectionism of himself that almost made it impossible for him to complete any

major work, and which frequently left him both physically and emotionally exhausted. But for that very reason, most of what we know about him comes from unfinished manuscripts and incomplete projects.

As a result, there is an invitation at almost every point in his body of work to speculate as to what else it could possibly have become. This is why you can have a neo-Roman republican Marx, a kinetic materialist Marx, a Freudo-sociological Marx, and literally countless others. It also helps explain the perpetual waves of revival that have taken place since his death and since the earliest efforts to make sense of the enormous cache of published texts and literary remains that he left behind. And while all three of these books are excellent in their own ways, there is one thing we know for certain: none of them, and none of the books destined to follow them, will ever have anything like the last word.

At the same time, I would be remiss if I were to conclude this discussion of the positions taken by other Marx scholars without extending myself a little or exposing something of my own convictions to the judgment of my colleagues. Probably the dominant theme of recent Marx scholarship is the one explored most explicitly by Leipold, namely Marx's relationship with politics, and especially the republican tradition. In the background here are at least two things: Isaiah Berlin's well known liberal challenge to what he called 'positive liberty' in favour of its 'negative' variant; and the work of current republican theorists like Philip Pettit, who seeks to develop an alternative version of negative liberty by opposing liberal 'non-interference' to republican 'non-domination'.[16]

But rather than endeavouring to bring Marx into conversation with this contemporary discussion of republican freedom, I would like to suggest we focus on what republicanism meant in Marx's own time, or the multiple meanings that he and those around him would have associated with that term. For, from the perspective of the first half of the nineteenth century, it would have appeared more than a little anodyne and watered down to reduce republicanism to an abstract theory of freedom. On the contrary, and as I have sought to show elsewhere, for both its adherents and its enemies, republicanism signified a militancy and a rigorous commitment to principles – a rejection of particularistic private interests (notably religious and economic interests) in favour of the universal pursuit of the public good, and the direct and ongoing participation of all citizens in all aspects of public life.[17]

This was the political ideal that the radical Hegelians with whom Marx associated as a young man promulgated and sought to advance through intellectual hand-to-hand combat, and the ideal that profoundly frightened both liberals and conservatives around them, who wanted more than anything else to place boundaries on the political passions, lest they resurrect what they took to be the most bloody and chaotic events of the French Revolution. And if, as Leipold suggests, Marx remained attached to some aspect of republicanism throughout his life, it was primarily to this radical, revolutionary model. No doubt the word revolution meant many things in Marx's age, and no doubt it means many

different things today. But it is hard to imagine writing about Marx at any time without at least invoking the concept or trying to work out what it might do in our world.

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Notes

1. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York: Norton, 2015); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Sven-Eric Leidman, *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx* (London: Verso, 2018); Michael Heinrich, *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of his Work, Volume I: 1818–1841*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review, 2019).
2. William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of* Capital (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
3. Terrell Carver, *Marx* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).
4. Thomas Nail, *Marx in Motion: A New Materialist Marxism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Vanessa Christina Wills, *Marx's Ethical Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Michael Lazarus, *Absolute Ethical Life: Aristotle, Hegel and Marx* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025).
5. I will use in-text parenthetical references to page numbers for the three books under review.
6. Charles Barbour, *The Marx Machine: Politics, Polemics, Ideology* (Lanham: Lexington, 2012).
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 79–135; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 255–81; Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–50* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974).
8. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (London: Polity, 1988); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. M. Blechman and M. Breaugh (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
9. The internal quotations are from Marx's *The Civil War in France*.
10. Nail, *Marx in Motion*, 6.
11. On Marx's dissertation and its relationship with Hegel, see: Charles Barbour, 'The Logic Question: Marx, Trendelenburg, and the Critique of Hegel', *Historical Materialism*, 32.3 (2023): 252–81.
12. The internal quotations are from Marx's *On the Difference between Democritean and Epicurean Philosophies of Nature*.
13. Eduard Zeller, *A History of Greek Philosophy from the Earliest Period to the Time of Socrates*, trans. Sarah F. Alleyne (Longmans: Green & Co., 1881), 291–300. Another key moment in the invention of a materialist tradition in the late nineteenth century is Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (Iserlohn: Baedeker, 1866).
14. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E. S. Haldane (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1892), 303–4.
15. The best brief overview of this issue is in: Carver, *Marx*, 171–80.

16. Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72; Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).
17. Charles Barbour, '"The Intelligence of the People": Marx's Early Political Thought and the Young Hegelian Concept of State', *History of European Ideas*, 50.3 (2023): 409–27; Charles Barbour, '"The True Practice is Theory": Edgar Bauer, Republicanism, and the Young Hegelians', *International Critical Thought* 12.4 (2022): 640–60; Charles Barbour, 'Partisan of the Absolute Atate: Arnold Ruge, Liberalism, and the Hallische Jahrbücher', *Central European History*, 57.4 (2024): 457–78.