



BOOK REVIEWS

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Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Marx's Social and Political Thought* (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 2024), 440pp., £35.00, ISBN 9780691205236.

Bruno Leipold's *Citizen Marx* offers a rich reconstruction of Marx's political development by situating him in the largely forgotten tradition of nineteenth-century radical republicanism. The result is both an illuminating contribution to Marx scholarship and a subtle provocation for contemporary political theory. Marx, Leipold argues, was driven primarily by a concern for *freedom*, understood in a republican sense as freedom from domination, and not merely by egalitarian or communal ideals often attributed to him.

Leipold's distinctive strength lies in the way he weaves together a deep knowledge of historical context with contemporary theoretical concerns. The 'modern revival of republicanism' associated with writers like Pettit and Skinner serves as a conceptual backdrop, but the book's real achievement is its reconstruction of the vibrant nineteenth-century debates about domination, popular sovereignty and civic independence — debates involving figures such as Ruge, Mazzini, Heinzen, Lamennais and Linton. According to Leipold, Marx's political commitments become fully intelligible only when one understands how he both absorbed and transformed these radical republican ideas. What Marx shared with them — although he gave it a distinctly economic inflection — was the conviction that people are unfree when subject to *arbitrary power* they cannot control, and that capitalist society inflicts this condition on the majority.

One of Leipold's contemporary aims is to challenge entrenched portrayals of Marx — especially those hardened during the Cold War — as indifferent to politics, democracy or freedom. By recovering the republican Marx, he shows instead that 'freedom' was Marx's central political value. Equally important is Leipold's argument that socialists and Marxists have too often ceded the language of freedom to their opponents; radical republicanism, he suggests, may offer them a more compelling political vocabulary. At times the book sends mixed signals about how far Leipold wishes to identify Marx with republicanism. He is clearly sympathetic to the radical republican project, yet he remains careful not to retroactively remake Marx into a contemporary Anglo-American neo-republican. He keeps the historical and normative questions largely distinct, though not unrelated.

I

The Democratic Republic

Part I traces Marx's development from 1842 to 1845, arguing that his early political thought aimed at a thoroughly democratic republic.

Chapter 1 recounts Marx's early republican journalism and young Hegelianism (1842–3), criticizing the Prussian monarchy and defending the formation

of a genuine public sphere governed by law rather than arbitrary personal authority. At this stage Marx allied with reform-minded liberals, opposed despotism, and saw his task as articulating a political sphere in which citizens could legislate for themselves.

Chapter 2 examines Marx's republican critique of the various modern, state-forms — absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, and the republic (1843). Here Marx emphasized opposition to arbitrary power, endorsed popular sovereignty, and criticized both liberal constitutionalism and the anti-political tendencies of contemporary communists. Although sympathetic to criticisms of 'egoism' in civil society, he was not yet committed to abolishing private property and instead advocated popular self-administration, imperative mandates for delegates, and the active participation of citizens in public affairs.

Chapter 3 charts Marx's gradual move away from this early republicanism towards a distinct form of communism. The key realization was that political emancipation within a republic could not overcome the deeper social inequalities of capitalist society. Formal political equality masked massive substantive inequalities grounded in property relations. Genuine 'human emancipation' could only come from the political empowerment of the proletariat — now understood as the only class capable of universal emancipation. Marx's focus thus shifted from political reform to political economy, and from the artisan or petit-bourgeois protagonists of republicanism to the industrial working class.

II

The Bourgeois Republic

Part II covers 1845–52, showing how Marx both criticized radical republicanism and integrated many of its insights into his new communist perspective. His mature political economy, especially *Capital* Vol. I, translates republican concerns with arbitrary political domination into the economic sphere: the capitalist, not merely the monarch, exercises arbitrary power.

Chapter 4 presents Marx's view of the bourgeois republic as historically necessary but insufficient for emancipation. He adopted and transformed republican critiques of apolitical socialism, arguing against 'true socialists' who separated political from socio-economic emancipation. The modern republic remained a form of class rule, structured for bourgeois domination. Yet Marx also believed that universal suffrage and political struggle were indispensable tools for the working class — a tension Leipold emphasizes. Marx at times underestimated how deeply the state's administrative apparatus was tied to bourgeois interests, a point Leipold notes with some critical distance.

Chapter 5 is arguably the book's core historical chapter, comparing radical republican programmes with Marx and Engels' communist agenda. Both camps sought land reform, nationalization of key resources, public education,

progressive taxation, and the abolition of inherited wealth. But their theoretical foundations diverged sharply. Republicans sought to preserve precapitalist forms of independence rooted in small property ownership and saw proletarianization as an assault on freedom. Their project was a form of majoritarian democracy aimed at universalizing smallholder property. It is curious that 'populism' is never mentioned in this book, because it is the clearest and closest living relative to what Leipold is talking about (cf. the Populist Party's 1892 'Omaha Platform').

Leipold insightfully notes that the debates as they influenced Marx and Engels largely treated 'republican' and 'democrat' as synonyms, took a majoritarian view of democracy (rather than the Madisonian view customary in mainstream discussions today), took Rousseau as their principal reference point, and saw universal manhood suffrage as necessary but insufficient for true emancipation. Republican freedom was understood as self-legislation: domination occurred whenever law or coercive authority was imposed by others. Republicans extended this concern into society at large, arguing that wage-labourers were unfree because their dependence on capitalists resembled servitude.

Communists, by contrast, accepted the irreversible character of capitalist development and the obsolescence of small-scale property. They argued that only by pushing capitalist development further — while ultimately abolishing private ownership of capital — could society overcome exploitation. In Leipold's terms, republicanism offered a moral critique of capitalism, whereas communism combined normative commitments with a theoretical explanation of capitalist dynamics. In this sense the communists could claim to cure the ills of capitalism by transforming its material foundations rather than by attempting to revive a doomed past.

Chapter 6 argues that Marx's 'critique of capitalism', particularly in the 'Working Day' chapter of Volume I of *Capital*, translates the core republican concern into the register of political economy. Marx's analysis of 'necessary' and 'surplus labour' — the source of capitalists' 'surplus value' (profit) — reveals a form of domination structurally embedded in the wage-labour relation: workers are formally free but structurally dependent on capitalist employers (i.e. exploiters) for survival. Domination here is impersonal, mediated by markets, and driven by the competitive imperatives that bind capitalists themselves. Marx thereby extends republican insights about arbitrary power into a general theory of exploitation.

Leipold also emphasizes Marx's interest in worker cooperatives as partial institutional solutions to domination. Yet his analysis pays less attention to the rest of Marx's mature economic writings — especially volumes II and III of *Capital* — where Marx complicates the class structure into workers, capitalists and landlords, and where forms like the joint-stock company already begin to 'abolish' the private ownership of capital and the capitalist mode of

production itself from within. One sometimes senses that Leipold's Marx treats all social dynamics as essentially political, underplaying Marx's mature economic framework for explaining society and politics.

III

The Social Republic

Part III, Chapter 7, culminates in Marx's reflections on the Paris Commune of 1871. In texts like *The Civil War in France*, Marx saw the Commune as an embryonic form of the 'democratic transformation of government and administration' required for communism. The Commune suggested a return — transformed and enriched — to Marx's early republican commitments: popular control over administration, deprofessionalization of bureaucracy, and closely supervised, recallable delegates bound by imperative mandates.

Leipold concludes that, after the bitter disappointments of 1848, Marx came to believe that the bourgeois republic was politically inadequate for the abolition of domination and exploitation, yet that republican institutions would be necessary not only to achieve communism but to sustain it. Here some reservations arise. Marx's later writings on technological development, macroeconomics, and historical transformation (which Leipold discusses less extensively) suggest that the decisive factor in abolishing domination may be the transformation of material production itself. The exploitation of labour which class domination requires in conditions of natural scarcity might become redundant or obsolete and therefore be abolished only if material conditions of post-scarcity are reached through economic and technological development. It is not clear that republican political forms would survive by themselves; they may just be transitional.

Leipold's more modest claim — that meaningful political struggle and democratic institutions would be essential for socialism — is far more plausible. But socialism, communism and the political forms appropriate to each remain distinct questions, and Marx's own position may be more open (or unsettled) than Leipold suggests.

Conclusion

Citizen Marx is an impressive and engaging contribution to the study of Marx's political thought. Its originality lies in reviving an almost forgotten intellectual world and showing how deeply Marx's political development was shaped by engaging with radical republican debates. The cost of this approach is some unevenness: Marx's scientific analysis of capitalism sometimes recedes behind his political interventions. But this is a small price to pay for a fresh perspective that reopens the question of Marx's commitment to freedom and the political vocabulary appropriate for contemporary critiques of

capitalism. It is a valuable and thought-provoking work that will interest scholars of Marx, republicanism and political theory for years to come.

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