

Book Review: Karl Marx in His Times

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***Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work, Volume I: 1818-1841.* By Michael Heinrich. Translated by Alexander Locascio. Monthly Review Press, 2019, 390 pages, \$34 cloth.**

THE FIRST VOLUME of Michael Heinrich's biography of Karl Marx, if any indication of the two volumes yet to come, signals a genuine event in the understanding of Marx and his work. With it, the terrain for understanding all aspects of Marx's life has likely changed fundamentally.

Heinrich, author of *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (also translated into English by Alexander Locascio), is comfortable viewing history, including Marx's own, through a Marxist lens. In his introduction to the present volume, he makes his commitments clear, arguing for the contemporary relevance of Marx, stating that the "basic structures of capitalism, which Marx analyzed more comprehensively than anyone else, are of fundamental importance to most societies today."

Heinrich tells us that theories of society "are driven by the question of what human emancipation means, and in what sense we can speak of freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice, and under what social relations they are even possible." On one side stands the bourgeoisie celebrating free markets and free elections, "last demonstrated in the 1980s and 1990s with the triumphal march of neoliberalism." (20) On the other side stand Marx and the Marxist tradition.

With regard to Marx's writings, Heinrich correctly rejects distinguishing between an early and late Marx, along with the corresponding arguments regarding where this line should be drawn. Like most writers, Marx is best seen as exhibiting continuity and discontinuity every time pen is put to paper. This is the Marx we meet in Heinrich's biography.

Heinrich offers three justifications for a new biography of Marx. First, too many biographies are guilty of what he calls "biographical overestimation," explicitly or implicitly claiming to reveal the entire essence of the person, depicting their deepest thoughts and feelings. Judging such a project impossible, Heinrich, in contrast, carefully refuses to play the role of omniscient narrator, regularly identifying what is known, what is probable, and what is possible.

Second, very few biographies engage in a serious way with the relation between life and work. Exceptions cited by Heinrich include works by David McLellan — the biography regularly recommended by this reviewer — and Auguste Carnu (covering Marx's life only up to 1846 and unavailable in English).

These attempts are limited, according to Heinrich, in that they were written prior to the (second) Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), the largest collection of the works of Marx and Engels. Heinrich by contrast has clearly spent extensive time with some of Marx's most obscure and previously unpublished texts.

Third, Heinrich engages with historical context in a novel way, devoting unprecedented attention to

the history and geography of place and on the backgrounds of figures around Marx.

Rich Environment

The attention to setting generates a narrative where, instead of seeing the world primarily through the eyes of Marx, we are offered a rich and textured environment within which we can imagine Marx moving. As a consequence, we don't encounter a Marx intended, or particularly well developed, as a literary character. Written not as a novelistic page turner, Heinrich's text avoids the literary embellishments that he willingly calls out in other biographers.

However, Heinrich still lets his own voice emerge. One noteworthy occasion comes when, describing Marx's academic program at the University of Bonn, he sarcastically remarks, "Back then, attending a university still had something to do with education. The usual practice today in Germany of testing the results of one's learning with exams in which knowledge learned by rote is interrogated would have probably been rejected as absurd." (127)

The time from Marx's birth to the writing of his doctoral dissertation has rarely attracted the attention given it here. In their biographies, both David McLellan and Sven-Eric Liedman each devote approximately 40 pages to this period. Consequently, this is not a text for those who want to know just a bit about Marx's life. However, for those who think they know quite a lot already, it is exciting, perhaps even a bit titillating in the way it challenges often repeated anecdotes from Marx's youth.

One might characterize this as, in part, a meta-biography. That is, Heinrich substantially engages with and offers commentary on existing biographies. In fact, the book will be of particular interest to those who have read other accounts of Marx's life.

Of recent biographies, Heinrich is probably most critical of Francis Wheen's *Karl Marx: A Life*. Apparently, Wheen makes a lot of stuff up. Examples include Wheen's unsupported story that Jenny von Westphalen at five years old "first saw her later husband when he was an infant during a visit by her father to the Marx household." (84) Heinrich considers this unlikely given the lack of evidence of any relationship between Ludwig von Westphalen and Marx's father at this early date.

Even more fantastic is what appears to be Wheen's wholly fabricated account of Marx's supposed duel while a student at the University of Bonn. This is an incident reported by virtually all biographers and one of the many popular nuggets from Marx's early life carefully unpacked by Heinrich.

Essentially, the only real evidence for a duel comes from a letter written by Marx's father in which he appears to scold his son by saying, "And is dueling then so closely interwoven with philosophy?" In addition, on Marx's certificate of release from the University, it is noted that he was accused of "carrying prohibited weapons in Cologne." (134)

These two incidents have led to wild speculation. Heinrich, careful as always, notes that University records actually reveal that Marx was levied a fine for carrying a sword cane which was used by a companion, injuring a bystander, during some sort of street brawl. Heinrich's commentary on Wheen is typical of his no-nonsense approach:

"In the case of Wheen, the duel story is adorned with an entire bouquet of products of the imagination: the Borussions (one of the student corps) had allegedly forced other students to kneel and swear fealty to the Prussian nobility; in order to defend himself, Marx supposedly procured a pistol and ultimately accepted a challenge to a duel. There is not a single piece of evidence for any of this." (135)

The book is filled with instances of this care for evidence and detail. From many biographical accounts, we have been told for instance that Marx's mother Henriette was uneducated and perhaps semi-literate. However, Heinrich shows that most of these claims rest on almost no evidence.

Dutch by birth, Henriette never mastered German, though Heinrich demonstrates that her letters still exhibit wit and intelligence, concluding that "the dominant image in the literature of a vapid and uneducated housewife cannot be correct." (59)

Heinrich explores Marx's years at the Gymnasium [the elite level of German secondary school — ed.] in Trier, examining the background and political views of Marx's teachers, most were liberal, as well as discussing Marx's final Abitur exam essays. While these have received a fair bit of attention with most of it going to "Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession," Heinrich, in an attempt to discern what is original in Marx and what might have come from school lessons, offers up a comparison of Marx's essay with those of his classmates on the same topic.

Marx is, for example, the only student to take an anthropological approach distinguishing between animals which have a fixed sphere of activity and human beings who have a choice amongst different activities. Also, while most students speak of working for one's own perfection and for the good of society as being a tension to be negotiated, Marx is the only one to reject any necessary conflict.

Marx writes, "Man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men. If he works only for himself, he may perhaps become a famous man of learning, a great sage, an excellent poet, but he can never be a perfect, truly great man." (107)

Toward Young Hegelianism

With the transfer of the 18-year-old Marx to the University of Berlin, the philosophical context of Hegel and Young Hegelianism becomes crucial. In Marx's famous 1837 letter to his father, he reports on his tumultuous journey leading from hostility to Hegelian philosophy to its embrace, necessitating his abandonment of poetry.

Heinrich argues that this was a significant personal crisis and that Marx's commitment to, and talent for, poetry was more substantial than is generally recognized, with the surviving poems comprising about 300 pages of the MEGA. Heinrich even suggests that Marx seriously considered attempting a career as a poet.

In contrast to other biographers, Heinrich attempts to identify the causes of Marx's intellectual transition. In his letter, Marx calls his previous work "purely idealistic," the "complete opposition between what is and what ought to be."

Important here is understanding how Marx understood his early aesthetic vision. Some see Marx's poetry as a retreat from his concern for "service to humanity" expressed in the Gymnasium essay. Heinrich, for example, cites McLellan who writes that Marx's poems "reveal a cult of the isolated genius and an introverted concern for the development of his own personality apart from the rest of humanity." (186)

To the contrary, Heinrich sees continuity of concern as more likely, citing examples of Marx's poetry defending Goethe and Schiller against conservative religious attacks, as well as criticizing the passivity of Germans.

What Marx likely rejects is the possibility of improving the world by means of artistic endeavor. Going beyond Heinrich's reading, we might even see this as an early indication of Marx's concern

for identifying the proper agent for historical change. In effect, Marx realizes through his early encounter with Hegel that engaging solely with the realm of ideas is insufficient for bettering the world.

Heinrich shows that there is substantial evidence that Marx engaged with Hegel's critique of Romanticism in this period. Since Marx refers to Hegel's Aesthetics elsewhere in 1837, he presumably encountered passages like this where Hegel describes the artistic ego that "looks down from his high rank on all other men" from "this standpoint of divine genius.... This is the general meaning of the divine irony of genius, as this concentration of the ego into itself, for which all bonds are snapped and which can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment." (191)

The world of Young or Left Hegelianism is explored in detail, with Heinrich investigating the origins of these terms, as well as various versions of who constitutes membership in these groups, with accounts of the positions taken by Strauss, Bauer, and Feuerbach (all students of Hegel) as well as background debates involving Kant, Lessing, Schelling, Schleiermacher and others.

Heinrich frames this through an investigation of Marx's interest in the philosophy of religion. While Marx's relationship with Bruno Bauer is well known, Heinrich lets us see the depth and intimacy of their friendship, arguing that it is likely that it was Marx that turned Bauer to atheism, rather than the other way around as suggested, for example by McLellan. We should look forward to Heinrich's account of the two friends' break in the next volume.

In general, the Young Hegelians became increasingly critical of religion in a context where religion and politics were deeply entangled. Heinrich provides evidence that Marx planned at least five publications concerning the philosophy of religion between 1840 and the spring of 1842, as well as planning a journal on atheism with Bauer.

The exact motivation for Marx's doctoral dissertation, "The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature" is unclear, though Heinrich shows that religious and political concerns, broadly understood in the context of Hegelianism, are clearly evident.

In discussing the dissertation, Heinrich rightly questions the common practice of straightforwardly labeling the very young Marx a Young Hegelian. Some dense notes that Marx later added to the dissertation are of particular interest. In them, Marx makes broad claims regarding philosophy and the Hegelian system.

In particular, his concern is the relationship of philosophy to the world. Marx boldly writes: "As the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly, that its realization is also its loss, that what it struggles against on the outside is its own inner deficiency." (314)

Marx identifies two different participants in this world historical struggle, again showing his concern for historical agency, which he characterizes as "the liberal party" and "positive philosophy," both of which, he says, fail to reach their intended goal.

To whom Marx refers here has been subject to some scholarly debate. Many writers have suggested the distinction is between Left and Right Hegelians. Heinrich argues that "the liberal party" most likely represents those whom we call Young Hegelians, but also most other Hegelians, while "positive philosophy" refers to a group of speculative theists who wanted to go beyond Hegel theologically.

While Marx sides tentatively with the "liberal party" in these notes, he unambiguously distances himself from both sides. I have argued elsewhere that Marx here pits two sides of the Young Hegelian movement (roughly Bauer vs. Feuerbach) against each other, making Young Hegelianism a

contradictory philosophical/political project.

Ultimately, though, what is most significant is that Marx already stands back at least to some degree from Young Hegelianism, a point which may impact interpretations of later early writings.

Marx's most important work comes after 1841, and most readers of Marx barely engage with the texts covered by Heinrich here. Nonetheless, for those interested in Marx and his development, this account is absorbing. The volume ends abruptly. The reader will want to simply turn the page and begin the next chapter. For now, we will have to await the publication of volumes two and three. The analysis of Marx's better-known texts within the rich context Heinrich is guaranteed to provide should be fascinating and provocative.

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P.S.

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