



Karl Marx: The Burden of Reason (Why Marx Rejected Politics and the Market)

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Marx can hardly be counted a ‘contemporary’ political theorist, and yet his work evidently remains a crucial resource for political theorists to consider, even if only to show how far we need to travel from Marx in order to remain/become truly ‘radical’ (or not). All too often therefore the figure ‘Marx’ serves more as a totemic device in theoretical discussion than a figure of consequence in his own right. It is from this point of view that Allan Megill’s study is to be heartily welcomed. This, it becomes clear, is a work of serious scholarship by a historian of ideas who is prepared to let Marx speak for himself, and to see (as it were) what happens. It is also welcome because this is one of the first academic studies that I can think of which is based on a thorough reading of the MEGA2 edition of the collected works which, as Megill argues, is a much more satisfactory basis for the proper study of Marx’s work than the first.

This is, however, still a study with a plot. This is not, in other words, an examination or a summary of Marx’s *oeuvre* for the sake of itself. What Megill wants rather is answers to two vexing questions that he thinks have never satisfactorily been explained in the existing literature. The questions are: why did Marx reject the market? and, secondly, why did Marx reject politics. In search of the solution to these conundrums Megill concentrates on the early work, i.e. from the doctoral thesis to *The German Ideology* making certain forays into later work, and in particular the 1859 *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. It is clear that Megill has read and thought about Marx’s work *in toto*, but it is nonetheless his arguments are formed in relation to these works in particular. Now for the seasoned Marx scholar, this already looks problematical, for of course the early works and indeed the 1859 preface are frequently viewed as idiosyncratic from the point of view of the method and substance of Marx’s greatest work, *Capital*, about which Megill has relatively little to say. Not being a seasoned Marx scholar, I was unworried about such an approach in itself. What concerned me more was that the answers Megill gives to his questions seemed more nearly to reflect the methodological shortcomings and emphases of these earlier texts than those of the ‘substantial’ mature works. Thus one can easily imagine a rebuff to Megill being written along the lines of ‘if only you had concentrated on the proper/mature/scientific Marx ...’.



My concerns are, however, different in that even allowing for the above issues, Megill has a tendency to overcode his analysis with his own views about what is and what is not 'rational'. This, it is clear, is a 'social democratic' and very 'American' text, which is to say that Megill comes at Marx from the standpoint that it is 'unrealistic' to imagine that we could dispense with the market and indeed politics more generally. This lack of realism is then taken to imply that there must be a flaw in Marx's argument preventing him from seeing how central the market and politics are to our lives. Part of the aim of the text is thus to expose the flaw in Marx's thinking so that we can begin to discuss what *is* of genuine value in his approach. This looks like an even-handed approach, but I think it leads to shortcomings in the analysis. The obvious problem here is that an argument may be 'unrealistic' and indeed 'unreasonable', but still be right. There were numerous occasions (and particularly in the concluding chapter) when it occurred to me that what I was reading was a critique based not on the attempt to refute the philosophical or theoretical premises underpinning Marx's argument, but one based on 'common sense' argumentation of the 'of course it couldn't possibly work' variety. Most of those to whom this text will be of interest will surely not want to be told why it is that, after all, we still need the market, even of a 'moderate' social democratic kind. They want to know where in the chain of reasoning concerning the nature of capitalism Marx has 'got it wrong' (if he has).

The other related problem concerns the notion, central to the text, that Marx's hostility to the market and politics can be traced back to some fundamental methodological or conceptual shortcoming, which Megill posits as Marx's 'rationalism' or desire for epistemic order. Megill shows very convincingly that Marx does (in pomo speak) over-totalize; he does crowd out chance, contingency, luck as features of human existence. What I find less compelling, however, is the argument that it is this rationalist underpinning that is the sole or even primary reason for his rejection of the market and politics. Rationalism and the desire to put social life on a 'scientific' basis may be *one* of the reasons for Marx's hostility, but surely the ethical and moral case Marx sets out against capitalism is *just as* important, if not more so. From his earliest writings it is after all clear that Marx felt a deep repugnance towards a system that (as he saw it) placed profit before human development and commodity production ahead of production for the satisfaction of human need. He also despised social hierarchy, the violence of states, the artificiality of politics in class society (etc. etc.), features of capitalism which were not only extant in Marx's time, but which arguably remain so in ours. It is for these and related reasons that the idea of a 'capitalism with a human face' seemed an absurd and preposterous one to Marx, and not just because his philosophical system or methodological approach lent itself to holistic or radical solutions. Surely Marx's radicalism is at least as much a reflection of his outright moral



and ethical hostility to capitalism and wage labour as it is to any feature of his *method*. In light of the above, one might be tempted to reverse Megill's findings and say that his methodological holism followed his ethical and moral critique rather than vice versa — and I think with good reason. The question we need to ask ourselves is: would Marx have come to the conclusions he did with a different method? I suspect the answer is, *contra* Megill, 'yes'. If this is true, then I think this problematizes at least part of the rationale of the text which is to show that if Marx had been less totalizing he would have been a social democrat, or at least been able to countenance social democratic remedies to the problems of capitalist society instead of calling for its overthrow. I fail to be convinced by such a reading of Marx, for reasons just enunciated. Marx is an 'unreasonable' and 'unrealistic' thinker. To try to make him sound otherwise is, I fear, not only a doomed operation, but one which risks losing the very qualities that make some of us want to read him.

I have in this review dwelt on what I perceive to be some shortcomings of Megill's work; but it would be entirely inappropriate to finish on this note given the quality, not to speak of the courage, of the undertaking. Despite my not having addressed them, the virtues of the text greatly outweigh any vices, accepting that there are any. I believe Megill has given us something of real worth here. In particular his readings of the significance and origin of the early work is excellent; his attempts to unravel the ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings of Marx's work as a whole are particularly illuminating; and I can't think of a better account of the materialist basis of 'historical materialism'. Above all, one simply revels in the academic and intellectual quality on offer here: scholarship, thought, and engagement of a rare kind. Megill has, as Wittgenstein put it, gone 'the bloody hard way', and it shows.

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