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Abstract

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Keywords

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Fifty-one years elapsed between the 1968 publication of Shlomo Avineri's seminal book on "The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx" and his recent biography of Marx under review here. Avineri has returned to the subject of Marx on the request of the editors of the Yale University Press Jewish Lives series. It may be worth noting that the time space between the two works is longer than Marx's entire literary career and it seems hardly worth mentioning just how much the world has changed in those five plus decades, in ways of fundamental significance to both subject and author. The author has a fair amount to say about the relevance of the former, specifically the fall of the Soviet system but remains discretely silent on his own place in a much changed world. As to his reading of Marx, Avineri's interpretation remains both favorable and consistent with his earlier work – and we might also guess that much the same could be said about Avineri himself. Avineri's earlier book on Marx has served to introduce a couple of generations of students to a humanistic and democratic understanding of Marx's thought with a heavy emphasis on its Hegelian basis.

The difficulty with Avineri's approach to Marx has always been that it underestimates the salience of Marx's shift from philosophical to revolutionary criticism as the touchstone of his life's work and as succinctly stated in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach; "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." As this reviewer has emphasized in a recent *CRCP* article, Marx's political commitment must be understood as consistently receiving his first priority whether it be his work as a newspaper editor in the years leading up to the revolutions of 1848 or his subsequent efforts on behalf of emerging socialist movements during his years of exile. After his critique of Proudhon, aptly titled The Poverty of Philosophy (the title is a play on the Proudhon's "Philosophy of Poverty" but it works effectively on multiple levels) published in early 1847, Marx's subsequent focus is on the critique of political economy and political analysis, including his paid work as a correspondent for the New York Tribune. This is not to claim an "epistemological break" in Marx's work, he always remained a dialectician and regarded Hegel as "a mighty thinker" but the problem with approaches like Avineri's is that they render Marx as a figure fit for the academic canon rather than treat him in full measure as a revolutionary within the biographical and historical context he lived out in exile.

A prime example of the difficulty with Avineri's approach is found in his treatment of Marx's discussion of the fetishism of commodities in the first chapter of *Capital*, volume 1 (1867). Arguably, this is one of (if not the) most significant of concepts that emerges from Marx's critique of political economy and its broad influence on many fields of study is undeniable. Yet in Avineri's view, the concept of commodity fetishism is an "echo" of "Marx's earlier philosophical writings," (p. 140) namely the unpublished manuscripts from 1844 in which Marx was working out his understanding of Hegel's and Feuerbach's concepts of alienation. Avineri in effect inverts Marx's development, treating the more focused (and published) analysis of how commodities in capitalist society serve to obscure actual social relations as a kind of after effect of the more diffuse discussion that Marx, rightfully in this reviewer's judgment, left unpublished. While the shortcomings of Marx's early work on alienation are beyond the scope of this review, it is worth noting that Avineri moves quickly from a single page of discussion of this "echo" to a

much more extended discussion of Marx as advocate of a peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism; Marx as “nascent social democrat?,” is what is suggested in a sub-title.

It is certainly true that Marx on more than one occasion indicated that the working class in some countries might come to power through lawful means but this needs to be understood in the broader frame of Marx’s maturing perspective that there was no one singular path to socialism. Far from it, if Marx teaches us anything it should be to understand human history as a process and like the processes of natural history and evolution (charted out by Darwin, to whom Marx compared himself) it is a process without a subject, in other words no Spirit or Idea has predetermined its pathways. Avineri’s Marx is one who appears to project the author’s own social democratic preferences. This reviewer certainly shares at least some of those same inclinations but it is anachronistic to project the author’s perspective, formed in late 20th century democratic socialist politics back onto the very different and diverse contexts Marx’s was trying to understand in the 19th century.

One part of Marx’s work that Avineri does give more attention to in this book are the writings on the 1848 revolution in France (primarily, *The 18th Brumaire* and *Class Struggles in France*). These analyses of the interplay of class, politics, and power were given relatively short shrift in Avineri’s earlier work. Here they are presented as re-assessments by Marx of his revolutionary expectations, as he and Engels had expressed them in the *Communist Manifesto*, for instance. Undeniably true, that Marx constantly reassessed the balance and interplay of social forces in his writings is a basic strength, yet as presented by Avineri they provide the basis for his social democratic reading of Marx. However in a world where the gains of the working class movements have been traumatized by the rise of neo-liberalism and now neo-fascism it is remarkable that Avineri does not reassess the optimism of his own progressivist understanding. Avineri’s own country, Israel has moved ever further rightwards in the direction of quasi-theocracy and intensified, aggressive domination of the Palestinians, yet Avineri himself appears to be in about the same ideological space that he occupied in 1968, at least so far as Marx scholarship is concerned.

Avineri is surely one of the best possible choices to contribute a Marx biography to the Jewish Lives series. He provides interesting detail on Marx’s Jewish heritage and the context and conundrums confronted by 19th century German Jewish intellectuals. Avineri emphasizes the enormous pressure they faced to leave Judaism and convert to Christianity in order to gain access to the secular professions and education. Heine, Mendelssohn, and Gans along with Marx are names we can associate with this pattern; with Moses Hess, a key figure in Marx’s own political trajectory being an exception who returned to Judaism and is also notably an important figure for Avineri as both a subject of his scholarship and a touchstone of his own political commitments. There is also a tantalizing discussion of Marx’s relationship with the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz (they met when both were seeking medical treatment at a spa) that Avineri rightly notes leaves us curious at what might have passed between them in their discussions.

Avineri tells us that the request to write for the Jewish Lives series led him to a “sleepless night” before he chose to accept the request. He opens the book’s Preface with a citation of an Isaiah Berlin essay on Marx in which Berlin attributes Marx’s revolutionary politics to Jewish prophetic-messianism. Perhaps, notes Avineri, but it can just “as easily have its roots in the Christian” (p. x) tradition. Indeed, as was true for all educated Germans of Marx’s era, his prose is imbued by and replete with references drawn from Luther’s translation of the bible, well reflecting the Protestant educational context in which the very young Marx began. Avineri here possibly understates the degree to which Marx was detached from Jewish identity, since after all the decision to convert was made by his father rather than himself and hence one concern that he never had to struggle with in the same way his comrades Heine and Hess did.

Much then as in 1968, Avineri presents us with a democratic and humanistic Marx, strongly inflected by left-Hegelianism in all his works and it is surely praiseworthy that he does so in a literate English prose that is both accessible and enjoyable to read. If one pays close attention, there are some new insights to be gleaned here, although there is much that is left unexplored and critical questions left unexamined. One is left uncertain if there is an audience for which this book is to be recommended. For the scholar-activist readers of this journal, I think the new insights are fairly slim. For its ostensibly intended audience, I suspect as well, that too much is left unsaid.