

LEVINE ON THE MARXIAN TRADITION: From Idealist Roots to Nationalism and Internationalism

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Donald N. Levine's treatment of Karl Marx in his *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995) is an exemplary one by a non-Marxist scholar. In a careful reading, Levine places Marx inside the German idealist tradition. However, he overstates Marx's affinity to Ludwig Feuerbach and understates his continuing debt to G. W. F. Hegel. Levine also points to Marx's internationalism and cosmopolitanism, drawing on both biographical and theoretical material. In addition, he argues that Marx failed to grasp the importance of nationalism and ethnicity. Here, Levine has not considered sufficiently Marx's illuminating and substantial writings on nationalism, race, and ethnicity, particularly those on Poland, Ireland, and the United States. Nonetheless, some problematic features of Marx's writings on Jews and Judaism bear out part of Levine's critique.

Donald N. Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*, now five years old, is the best general study of sociological theory to appear in the past decade. I believe that it will continue to stimulate fruitful discussion for many years to come. Levine develops a fresh reading, based on a dazzling array of sources, of the major traditions of Western social thought and sociology. For each of the seven mainly national traditions in part two of the book—the Aristotelian, British empiricist, French (the Enlightenment, Comte, and Durkheim), German (German idealism, Simmel, and Weber), Marxian, Italian (Machiavelli, Mosca, and Pareto), and American (pragmatist)—he draws on sources in their original languages, offering a subtle account of classical sociological theory and its origins as a dialogue across a variety of Western cultures.

In keeping with the spirit of dialogue, Levine also engages a wealth of interpretation and argument. He sifts and debates not only the specialist literature on the leading classical thinkers but also, at great length (in part 1), the ways in which previous narratives of the history of sociological thought—from Parsons to Gouldner and from Nisbet to Martindale—have conceptualized the issue. Levine's approach differs from that of each of these well-known predecessors. For example, his focus on specific national traditions differs from that of Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) who, Levine writes, "had largely discounted those national differences" in favor of a perspective

stressing “convergence” (Levine 1995, p. 3). But rather than dismissing Parsons’s pioneering work, Levine continues to engage in a dialogue with him as well, not only in *Visions* but also in a recent article laying bare Parsons’s hidden and implicit affinities with Georg Simmel (Levine 2000).

I will focus on a single chapter within part two of *Visions*, the one on the Marxian tradition. As someone writing from within the Hegelian side of that tradition (see Anderson 1993; 1995; Plaut and Anderson 1999), I have occasionally been involved in a dialogue with Levine about the German and Marxian traditions in social theory. In an earlier dialogue (Anderson 1997), I wrote on how Levine takes up the Hegelian underpinnings of Marx’s thought and the place of Hegel within the German idealist tradition. This first journey through *Visions* enabled me to grasp, far better than previously, the importance of Immanuel Kant, not only for German idealism as a whole, but also as part of the background of Karl Marx. In the discussion below, I will return to the theme of Marx’s relation to G. W. F. Hegel, while also taking up Levine’s treatment of Marx on nationalism and ethnicity. Here, a new consideration of the argument in *Visions* (as well as the back-and-forth in a 1999 session at the Midwest Sociological Society on the book for which this contribution was originally written) has made me more aware of some of the contradictions in Marx’s thought, especially in his writings on Jews and Judaism.

SCHUMPETER AND LOBKOWICZ ON IDEALISM AND MATERIALISM IN MARX

Within the Marx scholarship, there is a long tradition of ill-informed and ideological commentaries by his critics. Unfortunately, there is an almost equally long one of distortion and vulgarization of Marx’s thought from within Marxism. Given this history, serious treatments of Marx by non-Marxist scholars stand out. Occasionally, these non-Marxist scholars have helped us to perceive aspects of Marx covered over by others. This has been especially the case with regard to the place of materialism and idealism in Marx’s writings, where non-Marxist scholars have sometimes been more astute than Marxist ones in uncovering the idealist dimensions of his thought. Unfortunately, most Marxist scholars have followed Friedrich Engels’s 1886 prescription, written three years after Marx’s death, to the effect that all of philosophy and social theory could be divided into “two great camps,” one “the camp of idealism” and the other “the various schools of materialism” (MECW 26: 14).¹ The latter materialist camp was the one with which Marx supposedly identified exclusively. Although Engels himself admired Hegel and never denied Marx’s debt to Hegel, the materialism-idealism dichotomy that Engels helped to create has distorted Marx’s work. Works by leading twentieth-century commentators, such as V. I. Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*, Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, and Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*, challenged Marxist orthodoxy on this point, but these texts have often been marginalized within the Marxian tradition.

One non-Marxist scholar who took us beyond Engels’s truncated view of materialism and idealism was the great economist Joseph Schumpeter, who as a young man was a colleague of Max Weber. In his 1942 masterwork *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Schumpeter concluded that “the economic *interpretation* of history has often been called the materialistic interpretation.” He added: “But it is entirely meaningless. Marx’s

philosophy is no more materialistic than is Hegel's, and his theory of history is not more materialistic than is any other attempt to account for the historic process by the means at the command of empirical science" (p. 11). Referring to Weber's sociology of religion and especially *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Schumpeter then puts the issue even more sharply: "Marx did not hold that religions, metaphysics, schools of art, and political solutions were either reducible to economic motives or of no importance. He only tried to unveil the economic conditions which shape them and which account for their rise and fall. The whole of Max Weber's facts and arguments fits perfectly into Marx's system" (ibid.). However, wrote Schumpeter, the problem was that even Engels defined Marx's standpoint "as meaning precisely that individuals and groups are swayed primarily by economic motives" (ibid.).

Nicholas Lobkowitz, the Thomist scholar and cofounder of the journal *Studies in Soviet Thought*, although not as well known as Schumpeter, has been another important non-Marxist commentator on Marx. In his major work *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx*, Lobkowitz makes several important contributions. One of them is to show how, even when Marx in 1844 was attacking Hegel for recognizing "only . . . abstract mental labor," he "does not accuse Hegel of having treated labor as if it was a thought activity." Instead, writes Lobkowitz, Marx argues that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is "a coded description of the development of humanity in terms of labor." Marx's critique of Hegel comes in at the point where he "accuses him of having in the *Phenomenology* described human history in terms of a dialectic of consciousness, not in terms of a dialectic of labor" (Lobkowitz 1967, p. 322).

LEVINE ON THE IDEALIST DIMENSION IN MARX

Levine's chapter on Marx in *Visions* follows the tradition of Schumpeter and Lobkowitz, and he refers directly to Lobkowitz at several points. As with Schumpeter and Lobkowitz, Levine, while not denying Marx's materialism, places him firmly within the German idealist tradition. On the one hand, and on the materialist side, Levine (1995, p. 14), suggests, correctly in my view, that "what drew Marx from Kant to Hegel was apparently Hegel's ability to anchor the realm of human freedom in the vicissitudes of human history." On the other hand, here on the idealist side, Levine notes, again correctly in my view, that "Marx's lifelong devotion to the ideal of human freedom" persisted throughout his life, "even though his subsequent turn to historical materialism would appear to contradict it" (p. 220). Levine's entire discussion of Marx's philosophical roots falls in this vein, capturing well the curious mix of German idealism and historical materialism that came together in Marx's thought, one that was already emerging in "the active, critical version of Hegel's philosophy that Marx broached in his dissertation of 1841" (p. 214). In this sense, the opening pages of Levine's chapter on Marx clarify the often-neglected idealist side of Marx's thought, not only in his youth but also throughout his life. Levine does so without ignoring the influence of British political economy or French socialist thought, each of which are given their due as part of what he terms Marx's "cross-national itinerary" (p. 212).

The strong points of Levine's treatment of the German idealist strand in Marx build upon those in his authoritative chapter on the German tradition in sociology, in which the influence of Kant stands out in sharp relief. However, one carryover from the latter chapter is not entirely fortuitous, for in reading as much Kantianism as he does into the

early Marx, Levine at times minimizes the specifically Hegelian roots of Marx's thought. Thus, the specifically Hegelian categories appropriated by Marx, such as contradiction, negation of the negation, and the concrete universal, are not brought out.

Levine is careful not to fall into the error of so many who have misread and over-emphasized Marx's early links to Ludwig Feuerbach. It was during this period that, according to Engels and others, Marx really began to break totally with idealism. Lobkowitz (1967, p. 251) has refuted this in a careful analysis, describing Marx's period of "enthusiasm for Feuerbach" as "short-lived" and "from the very beginning, not without critical overtones."² While Levine is no doubt aware of this, and passes over the Marx-Feuerbach relationship fairly quickly, in the end, I believe that he fails to give adequate importance to Marx's continuing direct engagement with Hegel's work up through the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx wrote these texts after he had begun to reject Feuerbach and after he had read widely in both French socialism and British political economy. It was only in the last of the *1844 Manuscripts*, the "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," that Marx critically appropriates important categories from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, such as the negation of the negation. He used the latter concept throughout his life, including in the closing pages of volume 1 of *Capital*. I cannot therefore fully agree with Levine's rather imprecise statement that in the 1840s Marx "proceeded to debunk Feuerbach on the basis of a more thoroughgoing 'materialistic' conception of history" (p. 215). Instead, I would like to suggest that many of Marx's attacks on Feuerbach relate to what he sees as the latter's failure fully to appreciate the critical and revolutionary side of Hegelian idealism.

Let us consider two examples. First, we could examine the opening paragraphs of Marx's "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," a central essay in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Here Marx, it is true, praises Feuerbach as "the only one who has a *serious*, critical relation to the Hegelian dialectic" and for having "laid the foundation of genuine materialism and real science" (MECW 3: 328, translation slightly altered). However, Marx soon begins to attack Feuerbach, not for insufficient materialism, but because, he writes, "Feuerbach regards the negation of the negation only as the contradiction of philosophy with itself, as philosophy which affirms theology" (MECW 3: 329). Thus, Marx here attacks Feuerbach's dismissal of the negation of the negation, a core Hegelian category, not his lack of a thoroughgoing materialism.

Second, in his 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx writes of the "defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included)" for failing to view the world not only "in the form of the object" but also "subjectively." The latter aspect, evidently a very important one to Marx, he adds, "was set forth abstractly by idealism" (MECW 5: 3). Therefore, Marx suggests that despite its limitations, some aspects of (Hegelian) idealism go beyond Feuerbach.

While on the whole Levine gives substantial weight to the impact of German idealism on Marx, in my view he nonetheless underplays somewhat the specificity of Marx's Hegelianism, as against the influence of German idealism more generally. More importantly, he misses the idealist and specifically Hegelian ground of Marx's critique of Feuerbach. I do not deny what has been termed Marx's historical materialism (a term he never used, however); instead, I suggest that his materialism had an idealistic dimension. Such ambiguities, which he has handled so well elsewhere (Levine 1985), seem to elude him here.

DID MARX REJECT THE CATEGORIES OF NATIONALISM AND ETHNICITY?

One point that separates Hegel from Kant is Hegel's concept of the concrete universal versus the abstract type of universal that skips over particularity and difference. In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel ([1812–1816] 1969, p. 604) writes of a type of universal that is “concrete” because “it contains determinateness” or particularity, thus including not merely “the first negation” of existing reality but also the second negation. When the universal achieves this type of particularity, Hegel adds, “it is a creative power” (p. 605). Hegel also attacks Kant for allegedly staying at the level of an abstract universal that “remains utterly separate from reality” (p. 592). Specific examples of this difference can be drawn from Hegel and Kant's respective attitudes toward social and political questions. For example, Kant puts forth a number of laudable but very abstract universals in his argument for perpetual peace, exhorting people and rulers to behave peacefully for the common good but discussing nothing in the way of existing social processes that were currently pushing toward that end. In contrast, Hegel roots his concept of human emancipation in the specific and more contradictory social realities of the Reformation and the French Revolution, where what he sees as the universal of the human quest for emancipation has attempted to particularize itself, albeit incompletely and ultimately unsuccessfully. For Marx, who follows Hegel in much of this, the universal idea of freedom particularizes itself in his epoch in the form of the working-class movement for self-emancipation. However, he also suggests that it could particularize itself in the form of movements for national self-emancipation.

This difference between Marx and Hegel, on the one hand, and Kant, on the other, may have some bearing on Levine's (1995, p. 227) treatment of what he terms Marx's “rejection of nationality.” While most would agree that Marx was a firm internationalist, as have been many other thinkers such as Dante with his notion that the world was his country, Levine goes further. He favorably cites Isaiah Berlin to the effect that Marxism has “a peculiar incapacity . . . to account for ethnicity, nationalism,” and other particularistic phenomena (p. 229). Levine acknowledges in passing Marx's “sympathy for national movements in Ireland and Poland late in his life” (p. 227). However, he builds his argument that Marx rejected the dimensions of nationalism and ethnicity mainly around statements in the *Communist Manifesto* to the effect that the global capitalist market tends to create uniform conditions everywhere.

This is connected to the way in which Levine places Marx outside any of the national traditions in sociology and social thought, even the German one. There is much truth in his argument here. Levine emphasizes not only Marx's early intellectual journey through German idealism, French socialist thought, and British political economy, creating his own distinctive perspective out of this journey. He also points to issues in Marx's personal biography. These include an event when Marx was only six: his father's conversion of the family, whose ancestors included prominent rabbis, to Lutheranism, part of an attempt to escape discrimination by the Prussian state. Levine takes account as well of Marx's long separation from Germany. In support of Levine's emphasis here, one could note that Marx arrived in London, the cosmopolitan center of the world capitalist system, at age thirty-one in 1849 and lived there uninterruptedly for thirty-four more years until his death in 1883. Within a couple of years, he was writing articles in English for the *New York Tribune* and he later composed core theoretical works such as *The Civil War in France* (1871) in that language. Nonetheless, there has been a persistent

effort to identify Marx as a German thinker, rather than as the cosmopolitan he was, who was almost as fluent in English and French as in German and who by the end of his life seemed to have no interest in returning to Germany.

But Levine goes too far when he implies that, because of this cosmopolitan and internationalist perspective and experience, Marx had little comprehension of nationalism and ethnicity. The problem with Levine's argument (and with that of many others) is that it ignores the vast corpus of Marx's writings on nationalism, colonialism, and ethnicity. Specialist scholars have for several decades challenged the dominant notion that Marx ignored nationality and ethnicity (Haupt, Löwy, and Weill 1974; Cummins 1980; Benner 1995) but so far with far less success than those who have challenged conventional interpretations of Marx's materialism.

Even in the *Communist Manifesto*, the text most often cited in an effort to prove Marx's rejection of nationality, there is a frequently overlooked passage that refers to one of Marx's lifelong passions, the cause of Polish national emancipation. Thus one can find in the *Manifesto*, in addition to Marx and Engels's frequent references to the exploitation of labor by capital, a reference to "the exploitation of one nation by another" (MECW 6: 503). With respect to the Polish national movement, they also specify that they "support the party that insists on an agrarian revolution as the prime condition for national emancipation, that party which fomented the insurrection in Cracow in 1846" (MECW 6: 518). Thus, although their support for Polish national emancipation was strong, Marx and Engels were nonetheless critical of conservative strands of nationalism. A decade later, Marx suggested that support for Poland was a litmus test for revolutionary movements as a whole, writing to Engels that the level of their support for Polish freedom was "the external thermometer" by which one could measure "the intensity and viability of all revolutions since 1789" (MECW 40: 85). Marx continued to concern himself with Poland in similar fashion throughout his life. For example, in 1863, in the wake of another Polish insurrection, he made hundreds of pages of notes for a pamphlet that was never completed.

Marx's writings on Ireland are quite similar in form and scope. At times, he argued against the abstract universal of an immediate class unity between English and Irish workers. Instead, he suggested that unless the English workers were to lose their superior attitude toward the Irish, a strong labor movement would not be possible in England, where the Irish formed a subproletariat in the urban centers; moreover, antagonism between English and Irish workers strengthened capital. In addition, he held that the English landowning class in Ireland was a bulwark of support for capitalism in England. Later on, he concluded that a change in the attitude of the English workers from one of superiority toward the Irish to one of support for the Irish quest for national independence would be a crucial precondition for any forward movement of labor within England itself. This led him to write in 1870 of the need "to awaken a consciousness in the English workers that for them the national emancipation of Ireland is no question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but the first condition of their own social emancipation" (MECW 43: 475). Many of these writings are readily available in the volume *Marx and Engels on Ireland and the Irish Question*, whereas the Russian publishers responsible for most of our editions of Marx never made his writings on Poland as accessible as those on Ireland, for obvious political reasons.

One could also mention Marx's extensive writings on slavery and racism in the United States, many of them collected in the volume *Marx and Engels on the Civil War*

in the United States. Some concepts from Marx's Civil War writings found their way into *Capital*, where he wrote that the American experience had shown that "labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" ([1867–1875] 1976, p. 414). These texts were an important part of the theoretical ground of W. E. B. Du Bois's classic study, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Marx's writings on Poland, Ireland, and the American Civil War run thousands of pages and include many yet unpublished excerpt notebooks still languishing in the archives.³ In addition, there are his extensive writings on China and India as well as the *Ethnological Notebooks* of 1880–1882, in which he takes up gender and social structure in tribal, premodern, and non-Western societies.

However, there are two major instances of insensitivity, even blindness, to ethnicity and nationalism on Marx's part that need to be mentioned. First, there are the fairly extensive but problematically ethnocentric 1850s writings by Engels on Pan-Slavism and the South Slavs, in which these peoples are termed inherently reactionary and unhistoric nations, a position that Marx seemed to share, at least to a certain degree.

Second and more importantly, since they unquestionably concern Marx directly, there are the very problematic references to Jews and Judaism throughout his work. A considerable number of what would today be considered anti-Semitic characterizations crop up in Marx's writings. For example, in the otherwise very interesting paragraph from the 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach" on idealism and materialism that I cited above, Marx also attacks Feuerbach for having developed a notion of praxis that was "defined only in its dirty-Jewish [*schmutzige jüdischen*] form of appearance" (MECW 5: 6). This text was not intended for publication and elsewhere in the unpublished material, such as Marx's letters to Engels, even more strongly virulent references can be found. However, Marx also made some extremely problematic comments on Jews in his *published work*. Such references marred his otherwise penetrating critique of liberal democracy in his 1843 essay "On the Jewish Question" and also some of his later work, especially *Herr Vogt* (1860).⁴ Several Marx scholars have argued with some justice that similar references abound in the writings of nineteenth-century secular radical intellectuals, including others of Jewish origin such as the poet Heinrich Heine (Rubel in Marx 1982; see also Draper 1978). Others have pointed to the limitations of the secular and assimilationist perspective shared by Marx and many other pre-twentieth-century writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who, while supporting political and civil rights for Jews, nonetheless continued to make very troubling pejorative comments about Jewish life and culture (Traverso 1994; Jacobs 1998). None, not even Marx's strongest defenders on this issue, however, have suggested that Marx himself made a significant positive contribution on the issue of Jews and Judaism.⁵

Marx's references to Judaism and Jews are certainly problematic. They show the downside of a universalistic secular outlook that, by condemning all religion, sometimes fails to distinguish between the impact of such attacks on a dominant religion and those on a persecuted minority one. These references lend support to Levine's contention that Marx missed the significance of ethnicity. (He does not refer specifically to such remarks in *Visions*, although he did so in his response to the discussion of the book at the 1999 Midwest Sociological Society session.) However, I would argue that these remarks, as problematic as they are, are for the most part occasional ones that are not typical of Marx's overall discussions of nationalism and ethnicity. (I leave aside the important psychological issue of Marx's possible personal ambivalence toward his own Jewish origins.)

The Hegelian notion of the concrete universal, with which I believe Marx was working in the vast majority of his writings on nationalism and ethnicity (those on Ireland, Poland, etc.), would allow for a strong type of internationalism that, at the same time, would show a great sensitivity to social particularity and difference with regard to nationality and ethnicity. Were Marx to have advocated a notion of internationalism that skipped over the dimensions of nationality and ethnicity, he would have been fallen into what Hegel considered to be Kant's abstract type of universalism.

As a whole, Levine's chapter contains a serious and engaging treatment of Marx, especially concerning the roots of Marx's thought in German idealism. However, on some aspects of Marx's relation to Hegel and to Feuerbach, I have raised questions and problems. With regard to nationalism and ethnicity, I believe that, while Levine has mounted an interesting critique of Marx, that critique is weakened by a failure to engage more of Marx's writings on these and related topics.

NOTES

1. Here and elsewhere, MECW refers to Marx and Engels (1975–1998).
2. For other substantial critiques of the standard interpretation of Marx's relation to Feuerbach, see Marcuse (1941) and Dunayevskaya (1973). For a spirited defense of the notion of a strong affinity between Marx and Feuerbach, see Althusser ([1965] 1969).
3. For discussions of the incomplete publication of Marx's writings and the attempt by the new *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* to rectify this situation, see Anderson (1998), Hecker (1998), and Rojahn (1998).
4. Here is not the place to discuss Marx's 1843 essay and the vast debate around it, but for a good recent treatment, see Ingram (1988). Padover has created a convenient digest of the problematic references by Marx to Judaism and Jews (Marx 1974).
5. However, Traverso (1994) and others have argued persuasively that later theorists in the Marxian tradition such as Trotsky and Benjamin did so, under the impact of Nazism.

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