

B. Ricardo Brown Version of Book Review of Terrell Carver's *The Postmodern*,
Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998 Marx for Critical Sociology
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Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, Intro.,
biblio., 243 pages. \$38.50 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

In an odd sense, much of what passes for Marxist scholarship bares a strange resemblance to fundamentalist biblical scholarship, i.e., the stubborn mining of the texts for whatever elements might justify a contemporary political stance. Various texts are selected for their importance while others are ignored (the dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus) or treated with a polite smile of embarrassment (e.g., the love poems). Usually such texts appear only in the chronologies of bibliographical citations, as if to say “This was Marx, but it was Marx before he was Marx”.

The question of what constitutes the “works” of Marx has remained unresolved. The history of Marxism is not simply the history of revolutions failed, successful, or betrayed, it is also the history of the sometimes deadly disputes over what Marx said. So many have declared that “I am a Marxist,” so many who hold such wildly different interpretations of Marx’s writings, that often it appears that there are as many Marxes as there are Marxists. Terrell Carver’s incisive *The Postmodern Marx* indeed argues that there is good reason for this seeming chaos. “There have always been multiple Marxes, and each one is a product of a reading strategy. A reading strategy involves a choice of texts in a biographical frame, philosophical presuppositions about language and meaning, and political purpose--whether acknowledged or not” (234).

The aim of Carver’s own reading strategy is clear, he wants to offer “an alternative to readers who think they might be interested in Marx,” and he has equally clearly succeeded. This collection of essays, parts of which appeared in other publications between 1975 and 1998, explores the complexities of Marx’s work as well as the readings that have come to weigh upon his work like the famous nightmare of the *German Ideology*. In doing so, this collection of essays makes a significant contribution to Marxist scholarship. Carver supplies the means with which new readers of Marx can avoid getting lost in the morass of Marxist polemics which often invoke Marx without ever seriously addressing his texts.

Carver’s argument begins with the assumption that we can not return to the time before polemics and purges. There can be no pure, true, “return to Marx” because we ourselves have created “multiple Marxes”. Moreover, we have the complexity of Marx as a writer, whose use of the multiple forces of language, such as irony, satire, parody, reason, and persuasion, is masterful. Carver seeks this fragmented author by attempting to “look carefully at Marx’s language and at the language around Marx, to see what emerges”(4). The Marx that emerges here is far more complex and interesting than many might think upon reading the book’s title. Critical of earlier chronologies and editions, Carver stays extremely close to the texts themselves as well as their social context. This is perhaps what makes his own reading so persuasive.

A number of essays here should be carefully studied by anyone who has an interest in Marx, but sociologists should especially take notice. All too often our

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exposure to Marx's texts ends after the completion of our theory requirements in graduate school, and even if we continue to engage Marx, we do so based upon that early reading. Marx is much more than one of the "founders of the discipline" of sociology (he did not write on sociology, that being the domain of Comte and his followers), a mere political economist (*Capital* and the *Grundrisse* are, after all, immanent critiques of political economy), or a originator of "conflict theory" (he was an active revolutionary). He can not be confined by the present categories of orthodoxy, nor for that matter is he open to just any *postmodern* interpretation.

The latter point is well argued in Carver's critique of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. Carver sees Derrida's work as an imaginative interpretation, and one which strays from the texts and the language of Marx as soon as either are encountered. Derrida may claim that he wanted to remain "focused on the word," Carver says, but Marx's words often disappeared. One passage illustrates the differences that exist between a reading like Derrida's and Carver's.

Overall, Derrida's reading of Marx leaps about from trope to trope, text to text, in a way that is bereft of political contextualisation in any extensive sense.... This explains to me why for most of the book Derrida seems to read the opening of the *Manifesto* so perversely, believing that Marx portrays communism as a spectre ('of a communism then to come') in order to announce that one day it will *return* to haunt Europe and its reactionary powers. By contrast I read this passage as a fairly straight forward claim that the 'spectre of communism' is an apparition created by right-wing hysteria, and as such bears a merely fantastic relationship to the real doctrines and views which Marx and Engels were at pains in the *Manifesto* to announce openly to the world (13).

The other side, that of orthodoxy and tradition, is equally critiqued. Carver examines two relationships that marxist often take for granted: that of Marx/Hegel and Marx/Engels. Carver's examinations of both Marx's reliance on Hegel on the one hand, and the actual degree of collaboration with Engels on the other, are perhaps the most important portions of *The Postmodern Marx*. There will be few who, after reading Carver's assessments, will not have some core assumption about Marx shaken loose from its mooring. In terms of Marx and Hegel, Carver does not attempt to excise or explain away the Hegelian content of Marx, nor does he submit to the view that Marx merely developed Hegel's ideas. As Carver says, to be involved in political/philosophical activity was to be engaged with Hegel ("Who wasn't?" he asks.) Instead, Carver attempts to show that it is through Hegel that Marx engaged fundamental philosophical questions, questions that predate Hegel. The general knowledge of Hegelian positions provided a convenient avenue to explore and critique philosophical concepts from a wide range of philosophers. And if the questions predate Hegel, why focus upon Him and not the many other equally qualified candidates for influence, like Aristotle, Democritus, Epicurus, Shakespeare, etc.? Simple engagement with Hegel is not enough to justify the "marriage" of Hegel and

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Marx. Carver argues persuasively that this was a creation of Engels in “The Gospel according to Engels”:

Before the 1850’s a ‘Hegel-Marx’ narrative would have looked odd or otiose....Once past 1848 and into the 1850s a Hegel-Marx narrative was really required, as the politics of Hegelian intellectual codes had faded out..... The Hegel-Marx narrative was created by Engels to explain away this problem, by arguing that Hegel was still relevant, and by enabling Marx’s audience to get in touch with his message, once the Hegelian context had been set. As the story emerged in Engels book review of August 1859, Marx appears as Jesus to Hegel’s John the Baptist (almost!). Or at least Marx appears as the successor German philosopher, and revolutionary inverter of philosophical truth. As Marx was hardly a household name, Engels needed a peg to hang him on, and Hegel seemed an appropriately august figure....His encyclopedic pretensions, his philosophical inscrutability, his nationalistic appeal were all to Engels’ purpose. But Engels move begs the question whether Marx had to be hitched to anyone else at all, or if so, whether it had to be Hegel? Why not just present Marx as a critic of economic science, a veteran communist of the 1840s, and an effective German stylist un beholden to anyone in particular? Or indeed as a polymath of astounding originality (186-188)?

This is underscored by Carver’s examination of the differences between Marx and Engels regarding Hegel. Carver asserts that the degree of collaboration between Marx and Engels may not have been as great as we have believed. He does this through a close reading of the changes each made to the text of the *German Ideology* as well as their writings on each others work. In the end, Carver is led to conclude that we have all but ceased to read Marx, and instead all too often read Hegel and Engels. At best, we have constructed a new Holy Family of Hegel-Engels-Marx where Marx has become the embarrassing child kept in the attic.

Space in a review obviously does not allow for a nuanced summary of arguments and conclusions. Those mentioned are simply the most important and provocative for the interpretation of Marx within sociology and social theory, but there are many other enlightening essays in this work. Marx’s stylistic precision, his use of critique, concepts of political economy, narrative, and his intervention into politics are given attention. The concluding chapter on gender and women in Marx’s texts is special attention for those interested in the continuing dialogue between feminism and Marxism.

It is always a pleasure to find a work that, while on first glance may be simply going over old ground, dearly rewards readers by challenging them to think about their most basic assumptions on a subject, exposes them to the latest scholarship, makes the work of Marx come alive with a new vitality, and helps the reader encounter Marx’s work on its own terms and not as the final culmination or degeneration of someone else’s project.

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