

**Norman Arthur Fischer**

*Marxist Ethics within Western Political Theory: A Dialogue with Republicanism, Communitarianism and Liberalism*

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**Reviewed by Bruno Leipold**

Studies examining the relationship between Marx and Marxism and other traditions of political thought, such as communitarianism and liberalism, are relatively commonplace. Comparisons with republicanism are less frequent, though there is some evidence of increasing interest. Norman Arthur Fischer's study is unique in that it undertakes the ambitious task of both comparing and integrating the ethical positions of all three traditions with Marxism. The result, Fischer argues, is that Marxist ethics can finally 'take its proper place within the story of Western political theory' (16). Bringing Marx and Marxism into contact with these three traditions indeed reveals several interesting and important insights into Marx's writings and the history of Marxism. However the overall project suffers from its over-ambitiousness and a lack of clarity in its presentation and structure. I therefore remain unconvinced of the attractiveness of a liberal, communitarian, and republican Marxism, or at least in the form presented here.

The book contains four central chapters, divided into two parts, bookended by an Introduction and substantive Conclusion. Part One sets out the republican aspect of the argument. Fischer sees three key moments in republican Marxism, (1) Marx's 1843 writings and excerpts on the state, (2) Marx's writings on the 1871 Paris Commune, and (3) Marx and Engels's late engagement with Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), and Fischer spends two chapters examining these moments. Part Two deals, somewhat surprisingly, with some of Marx and Engels's less well-known writings on property forms in an attempt to set out what position on property the liberal communitarian Marxist should take. It is

left to the concluding chapter for Fischer to engage properly with the thornier issues of integrating liberal and communitarian insights into Marxism. I will focus most of my comments on what Fischer has to say about republicanism, partly because this is where my specialism lies, but more importantly because this is where most of the book's original contributions are found and because the later discussions of property, liberalism and communitarianism were not always entirely clear to me.

One of the principal virtues of the chapters on republicanism is the attention they bring to Marx's neglected 1843 excerpts from Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, and Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, known to scholars as the Kreuznach notebooks. (Until very recently these excerpts have only been available in the, prohibitively expensive, *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, and were only published in 1981; the International Institute for Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam has however now made their entire Marx/Engels archive [freely available online](#), and this might hopefully lead to greater awareness of these excerpts). As Fischer rightly notes, what is fascinating about these excerpts is that they were written in the same 1843 summer where Marx was grappling with central issues of the modern state, engaging particularly with Hegel and producing his much better known and more extensive *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. That Marx was at the same time reading and taking notes from these three classics of republican thought should affect our interpretation of that text and his writings in this period as a whole. As Fischer writes, 'to juxtapose Marx's almost completely ignored excerpts from classic modern expressions of republic public-spirited participation with his better-known early political writings is eye-opening' (34). Fischer carefully leads us through these excerpts and convincingly explores Marx's evident concern for citizen public participation. (The republican threads in the 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* have also been explored by Abensour (2011) and Leopold (2007, 245-54)).

I would however have liked to have seen greater awareness in this discussion of the interpretive difficulties raised by these excerpts. While the excerpts are indeed very exciting for Marx scholars (and historians of political thought wishing to see one of the greats of the 'canon' tackle some of its other members), they are also somewhat disappointing. Scholars hoping to find an extensive engagement with Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Rousseau's great works, perhaps peppered with some of Marx's characteristically caustic comments, are instead faced with what is essentially just a long list of copied-out quotations. The entire set of excerpts contains just seven interspersed comments by Marx, which are primarily one or two sentence summaries of the views expressed. The closest Marx comes to expressing an explicit opinion on his readings is when he says that one of Rousseau's footnotes is 'curious' (Marx 1981 [1843], 93). Consequently, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about Marx's endorsement or rejection of an idea or the precise influence it had on his thought. Fischer's analysis however fails to display this interpretative nuance, often treating an excerpt by Marx's as straightforward evidence of his approval and understanding. He writes for example that 'Marx's excerpts from Part Two of *Du contrat social* ... show his interest in this unusually populist version of democratic republicanism' (39), 'Machiavelli's populism was ... not only economic, but also based on faith in ordinary people, as Marx makes clear in his excerpts' (96), and twice in one page Fischer assumes that Marx extracting something from Rousseau shows his 'clear understanding' (40) of Rousseau. Excerpts by themselves cannot produce this kind of interpretive certainty. We copy quotes out of books for many reasons, including if we do not understand it or disagree with it. A similar difficulty arises when Fischer writes that 'Marx's three pages of excerpts from Machiavelli's *Discourses* go straight to the heart of republican public-spiritedness [*sic*]' (24). One might just as easily ask why did Marx *only excerpt three pages* when the original is some 500 pages long? All of this is not to say that the interpretation Fischer places on the excerpts is seriously misguided or unlikely, only that it cannot be stated with such certainty.

The understanding of republicanism used in the book is primarily focused on the value it places on public-spiritedness and on the contribution this can make to Marxism. A further interesting contribution Fischer could have explored is the republican opposition to arbitrary power. This aspect of republicanism has of course been brought to particular attention by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, who argue that republicanism has a distinct conception of freedom as non-domination. This idea and the associated language of dependency, slavery, and servitude have clear echoes in the Marxian and Marxist critique of capitalism. By itself, the absence of this idea in the book is no major shortcoming, since it cannot be expected to cover everything. But its absence becomes rather strange when Fischer writes that the primary contribution of liberalism to his overall project is the value it places on negative liberty, which he defines as 'liberty of the person to be free of domination' (6). However Pettit and Skinner's whole point has been that what distinguishes republicans from liberals is that republicans see freedom as non-domination, whereas liberals hold to a narrower understanding of non-interference. Regardless of whether Pettit and Skinner are right to differentiate the two traditions on this basis, failing to engage with the point is an unfortunate oversight (especially since their work is referenced at several other points). Fischer might also have considered engaging with some of the literature that has developed around the republicanism of Marx's Young Hegelian contemporaries (Breckman 1999, Moggach 2006), rather than seeing Marx's engagement as solely directed to the past.

Other aspects of Fischer's discussion of republicanism are however more positive. There is an interesting and original discussion of how Marx's support for strict mandates for delegates in his *The Civil War in France* (1871) is foreshadowed by Rousseau's much earlier discussion in *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1772) (63-5). Fischer also engages in a lengthy discussion of Marx's engagement in his *Ethnological Notebooks* with Morgan's influential *Ancient Society*. Here, Fischer again brings critical attention to a neglected part of

Marx's corpus, and thereby brings to light Marx's extensive knowledge of the Ancient Greek and Roman republican history (83-95).

Integrating republicanism and communitarianism into Marxism is of course much less controversial than Fischer's final pillar: liberalism. Marxism's relationship to liberalism is a thorny one, and Fischer falls clearly on the side that believes Marxism has to incorporate a substantial portion of liberalism (177). His discussion is unlikely to convert Marxists committed to liberalism's irrelevance, nor will it provide Marxists friendly to liberalism with a substantially new set of insights. Fischer's broad point, that the liberal value of negative liberty must be respected and incorporated into Marxism, seems inoffensive. His insistence on it however can manifest itself in peculiar ways. One section, for example, explores whether the strict delegate mandate system advocated by Marx is 'compatible with liberalism' (66). Fischer answers no, because citizens giving representatives strict mandates conflicts with the negative liberty of conscience of the representatives (68-9). He further argues that demanding such a strict overlap of values between citizens and representatives is too communitarian and conflicts with the liberal element in his Marxism (70).

I found this argument unpersuasive. First, we can question whether mandates actually inhibit representatives' liberty of conscience. They are still free to hold and spread their views in their role as citizens. In their role as legislators however, they are not allowed to legislate as they see fit since they are tied to the specific mandate given to them by their constituents. Since they took this position willingly and knowingly I fail to see why it inhibits, in the relevant way, their liberty of conscience. Second, even if it does inhibit their liberty of conscience why is it an overriding consideration? Fischer's weighting of the representatives' liberty of conscience strikes me as bizarre. Marx's advocacy of delegate mandates is, I believe, one of the crucial ways in which his radical democratic ideas are distinguished from the institutions of liberal democracy. He supports it because he thinks it is a mechanism by which representatives are forced to track the will

of the people who elected them. That seems an obviously far more important consideration to me. If adding liberalism to a republican/communitarian Marxism requires this kind of concession (and I am not sure that it does), then they are probably better off without it.

The reference to 'Marxist ethics' in the title of the book reflects Fischer's unapologetic support for the importance of ethics, justice and morality in Marxism. He goes so far as to say that it is 'only through ethics that Marxist class theory can take its proper place within the story of Western political theory' (16). Given the multitude of original contributions Marx made to political theory (on the state, on ideology, his philosophical anthropology and historical materialism) this assessment seems unbalanced. In any case, given the intense disputes about the importance of ethics to Marx and Marxism, Fischer's defence of its validity is short and comes surprisingly late in the book (163-4). Perhaps that it is wise, since it is such well-trodden ground, though it means that those Marxists skeptical of the role of ethics are unlikely to be convinced that this is an important part of their tradition. Indeed, Fischer's opening promise that he 'uncovers ... a specific tradition of Marxist ethics' that 'occup[ies] a firm, albeit buried place within Marxism' (1, 4), remains largely unfulfilled. He mentions a few Marxists who share some of the tradition's positions (10), but no extensive effort is made to trace the tradition in later Marxism. His comment that he does not 'attempt to show that alternate tradition Marxist ethics is consistent with anything close to all the major theses stated by Marx or other Marxists' (4), is inadvertently revealing. Fischer's Marxism ends up being a relatively lonely one.

Of less substantial consequence, but still irksome, is the inconsistent referencing followed throughout. Rousseau's classic work is sometimes *Du contrat social*, sometimes *The Social Contract*. Marx's 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' is rendered as 'CGP', when other equally long titles are named in full. The references to Marx and Engels's writings might have been streamlined by using, for example, the Marx Engels *Collected Works*, rather than a number of different

single work editions. The publisher also could have done more to remove the rather higher than average number of typos.

In closing, a note on the use of 'Western' in the title and throughout the book. Fischer repeatedly states that his aim is to incorporate Marx and Marxism, and show that it is worthy of incorporation, into the 'great Western canon' (2). At a time when political theorists and historians of political thought are trying to deconstruct that same canon, this seems an anachronistic aim. It also gives the unfortunate impression that Marx and Marxism are a peculiarly Western inheritance, when surely they belong to everyone.

## References

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