

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Barbour, Charles. *The Marx Machine: Politics, Polemics, Ideology*. Toronto: Lexington Books, 2012. 148 p, \$75 hardback (978-0-7391-1046-1).

The central organizing theme of Barbour's book is that, "Marx's work is neither unified as a single 'body,' nor shorn in half by one definitive 'break.' [...] but] consists of a multitude of little breaks, skips, snaps, cracks, fissures, relays, gaps, and so on" (98). He thus aims to displace Althusser's depiction of Marx's *oeuvre* as divided by one constitutive epistemological break (7-10; cf. Althusser and Balibar 2009). In Barbour's interpretation, Marx developed various writing "machines" (20) that variously intervene as means for experimenting with his own understanding of the relationships between words, things, and practices. This notion of "machine," drawn from Deleuze and Guattari, highlights how things, people, events, and texts come to be connected and the concept is central to Barbour's argument. For him, an analysis of the textual effects of these connections creates possibilities for new interpretations (20). Provocatively, Barbour contends that "Marx's texts seem to work by breaking or breaking down. For it is precisely there where they come apart that they open onto the possibility of different readings..." (99). This poststructuralist literary focus on Marx as a reader and writer oriented to the "specific efficacy" (7) of the arts predominates, and discussions of Marx's deployments of Cervantes and Shakespeare are peppered throughout. However, this marginalizes Marx's own commitment to a scientific/naturalist approach articulated in *Capital* (see 12). Barbour's considerations are focused on the massive "pivotal" (44) text of *The German Ideology* since, "*The German Ideology* [...] is all about the relationship between the kinds of things that happened on the streets in Leipzig on August 12, 1845 [i.e., the Leipzig Massacre of liberal protestors], and the kinds of things that happen when people—including Marx and Engels themselves—sit down to write books (4). Most editions of *The German Ideology* present only a portion of Marx and Engels' text, neglecting its extensive polemics and parodies of two significant figures in mid-nineteenth century German philosophy, Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner; Barbour redresses this oversight.

Chapter One attends to Marx's interpretations of his own work to show that for Marx, "it is never a question of reducing politics to some

more fundamental economic or material base” (23; cf. 37). It helpfully discusses Marx’s dissertation on the differences between the atomisms of Democritus and Epicurus, to which Barbour returns in Chapter Three. Marx’s re-reading of classical atomism is shown to be inflected by Bauer, his teacher, and leading Hegel scholar and theologian of the day, who emphasized the freedom of subjective self-consciousness. Barbour well explicates how Marx’s critique of Hegel’s yields the critical concept of “hegemony” that refers to how “one class” is taken as the “stand in for society as a whole” (32). This process is illustrated with an analysis of the 1844 weavers’ strike in Silesia to show how Marx and Engels understood communism as “the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things” (34).

Chapter Two well conveys what can be got by Barbour’s approach with its focus on the complicated publication history of *The German Ideology*. Barbour finds that Marx’s rhetorical tactics, especially the use of copying and parody, produce differences in Marx’s positions. In particular, “parody criticizes the opponent with one hand while poaching the rhetorical force of their discourse with the other” (54). Barbour helpfully summarizes Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own*, with its valorization of self-conscious self-determination. Ironically, frequently quoting Stirner line by line, Marx and Engels show how instances of the freedom of the singular subject are rather the product of social relations. Such negations pave the way for Barbour’s discussion of Marx and Engels’ non-economistic emphasis on social relations, exchange, and their prioritizing of collective life.

Chapter Three delves into debates about “essences” through Marx’s “historical materialism” that confronts the constitutive aporia of history: history is perpetually attendant to “absences,” dealing with “what is no longer, and what remains to come” (75). Marx’s critique of Feuerbach’s conception of “species-being” is shown to be a response to Bauer’s privileging of individual creative freedom. Marx and Engels reconceptualize Feuerbach by stressing the dynamism of the “unity of difference” among people in the “ensemble of social relations” (83). In doing so, Barbour argues, Marx developed a “fractured concept of essence—one that attends to temporal change and spatial distinction” (p 83-84). The chapter concludes with compelling insights drawn from Derrida, Heidegger, and Marx’s writing about Epicurean atomism, to challenge linear conceptions of history. The fourth chapter begins by discussing Marx’s work on Jacques Peuchet’s 1838 *Mémoires tirés des archives de la police de Paris*, especially its analysis of suicide, and would be of interest to specialists in classical social theory. Barbour’s critical reflections on fiction and ideology in Marx, via a lucid explication of Zizek, are compelling. The

chapter also includes incisive discussions of the self-pleasuring qualities of the valorization of self-consciousness, and the virtues of human-machine relations.

Barbour concludes the book by engaging with Marx's axiomatic egalitarianism, one resonant with contemporary thinkers like Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. He argues that this egalitarianism challenges conventional politics and contemporary ideas about "the political," viewed as an expanded domain of the "institutionalization of conflict" (129). Key here is the assertion that everyone has the capacity to directly engage in politics without having to offer "any further justification" (135). Rancière's argument that the commands of a dominant group always depend on the collective's capacity to understand a command, is linked to Marx's conception of communism (138) about which Barbour himself is equivocal (127).

The strength of the book is found in the attention given to Marx's rhetorical techniques. This is an important but neglected issue in sociology: *the crafting of language* is itself *work/produced*; sociology cannot be reduced to *reportage*. The main weakness of the book is its own rhetorical strategy of using Althusser as its foil (p 7-10). There are occasional appreciative gestures toward Althusser's work coupled with the repetition of standard, frequently unpersuasive criticisms (see p 60-62). But the quality of the book is undermined rather than enhanced by its use of Althusser. Indeed, for all of his opposition to "orthodoxy" Barbour's handling of Althusser is about as orthodox as it comes. For instance, Althusser explicitly states that a "symptomatic reading" of Marx aims to investigate the epistemological relation between the formation of concepts, questions, and the object of Marx's knowledge (Althusser and Balibar 2009). For Althusser, Marxist philosophy is less an issue of articulating orthodoxy than it is of explicating the kinds of questions Marx worked to pose, a point lost on Barbour. Surprisingly too, Barbour fails to note that *Reading Capital* articulates a broad-reaching critique of essentialism, especially when it comes to understanding history (Althusser and Balibar 2009: 39-43). The consequent irony is that Althusser works better as an *ally* for Barbour's project rather than its foil. In short, Barbour makes a fair case for re-reading Marx as the *bricoleur* of discursive assemblages even if the overall depiction of Marx and Althusser will be disappointing for many. Still, Barbour's reflexive problematization of rhetorical production in light of contemporary social and political thought warrants consideration.

REFERENCES

Althusser, Louis and Balibar, Etienne. 2009. *Reading Capital*. New York: Verso.

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