

# BOOK REVIEW:

**Andrew Hartman, *Karl Marx in America*. University of Chicago Press, 2025. 510 pages. ISBN 978-0226537481.**

*Karl Marx in America* is an exciting and much-needed book, arriving as it does on the heels of, on the one hand, a brewing Red Scare in the US that is currently working to disrupt, even dismantle, the US system of higher education as we know it because of trumped-up fears about the evils of “cultural Marxism,” and, on the other, a growing anti-Trump movement whose precise political demands and horizons are still taking shape. The ambition of Hartman’s remarkable book is registered in its heft—some 510 pages—and the span of its chapters, which chronicle for us not just Marx’s own engagements with American conditions over the course of his writings, but his transit through American thought and radical movements from the 1840s to the present day. The book’s most important intervention is its assertion that America mattered to Marx and, in turn, that Marx left an indelible mark on America, despite the fact that he’s so far been, as Hartman points out, “rarely considered alongside such luminaries as [Adam Smith, John Locke, and Thomas Paine]” (2). But equally dazzling, perhaps, is Hartman’s commitment to telling the extraordinary story of the ongoing resurrections and transformations of Marx in his many American incarnations—from “Working Class Hero” to “Bolshevik,” from “Prophet” to “Red Menace,” from “Theorist” to “Specter Haunting Twenty-First Century Capitalism”—in a way that speaks equally forcefully to readers beyond the academy. That it manages to do so is truly no mean feat.

For the field of intellectual history, one of the prime contributions of this book is the way that it suggests, counterintuitively but nevertheless convincingly, that Marx’s thought has underpinned (even structurally shaped) the work of a number of American thinkers who were hell-bent precisely on skewering his life and legacy. As Hartman aptly puts it, “[o]ur very understanding of America as it developed across the twentieth century is underwritten by a subterranean Marx” (249). But for my purposes the book comes most vividly to life in its final chapter, where it sketches for us the most chromatic portrait of not just how various thinkers have reinhabited Marx over the first quarter of the twenty-first century, but how Marx has animated the emergence—and more to the point, the “*socialist dreams*”—of a variety of political movements in our own time, from Occupy Wall Street and the “Time for \$15” campaign to Black Lives Matter and climate change activism. Perhaps not coincidentally, this is also the chapter where Hartman spells out for readers his own turn to Marx and personal investment in telling us the story of *Marx in America*. As he writes, “[n]ot unlike countless people in this book, I turned to Karl Marx to try to make sense of the world and possibly change it” (455). This is also the chapter where the productive *messiness* of the actual working life of US radical movements comes most fully to the fore and, in turn, where we see not the diametrical rift between, say, anarchist and Marxist thought that we have long come to expect, but instead the way that these ostensibly warring leftist factions often work

alongside and at times co-animate one another, as, for example, when Occupiers in New York, Oakland, and Atlanta turned to the work of David Graeber, as well as to David Harvey, Angela Davis, and Slavoj Žižek; or when Black Lives Matter activists drew on the socialist and Black Feminist thought of the Combahee River Collective, as well as the ethos of *horizontalidad* championed by both the Zapatistas and OWS.

These unruly conjunctions complicate the categories to which we assign radical action and the precise lines of thought that might be said to underwrite their coming to be—lines that can, at times, seem otherwise rather ideologically firm in this book. But they also speak, I think, to the ways that seeing Marx as a more prominent force in American life than has so far been recognized—the key insight of this book—might *also* allow us to begin to more fully account for the ripples of his work in American radical culture that move *beyond* the borders of Marxism (or socialism) *per se*.

What do such ripples look like in practice at a moment before our own? Take, for example, the description that Margaret Sanger offers us of the radically cross-party sodalities that took shape in her small New York apartment in 1910, which is to say in those heady days ahead of both the socialist Eugene V. Debs sweeping six percent of the popular vote in the 1912 election *and* the Russian Revolution, which seemed to many radicals at the time to be the dawn of everything they had dreamed of, whatever their future party affiliation. As Sanger puts it in her 1938 autobiography:

Our living room became a gathering place where liberals, anarchists, Socialists and I.W.W.'s could meet. . . . Any evening you might find visitors from the Middle West being aroused by Jack Reed, bullied by Bill Haywood, led softly towards anarchist thought by Alexander Berkman. When

throats grew dry and oratory waned, someone went out for hamburger sandwiches, hot dogs and beer, paid for by all. The luxuriousness of the midnight repast depended upon the collection of coins tossed in the middle of the table, which consisted of about what everybody had in their pocket. These considerate friends never imposed a burden of either extra work or extra expense. In the kitchen everyone sliced, buttered, opened cans. As soon as all were replenished, the conversation was resumed practically where it was left off. (70)

Put a different way, attending to the wider gravitational force of Marx's thinking and the messier constellations it sometimes summoned forth in the everyday lived experience of US radicals seeking to overturn capitalism and remake the world is largely beyond the scope of Hartman's book, which is, after all, at its core an *intellectual* history of Marx in America, but its final chapter (and wider intervention) nevertheless opens up new vistas on how that work might begin to be undertaken.

Coming to Hartman's book as a nineteenth-century literary scholar and cultural historian, I now want to situate *Marx in America* alongside some recent work in my own field with which it seems quite powerfully to resonate. While Hartman does not explicitly engage with this radical turn in literary studies, *Marx in America* nevertheless seems to me to be speaking to it, and certainly making a contribution to the conversation these other books have launched within nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Americanist literary and cultural studies.

Over the past decade, several books have worked to overturn two critical commonplaces about the Left in America: namely, the idea that—à la Werner Sombart—we never had much of one, and that the story of the Left, such

as it was, is one first and foremost of *failure*. Holly Jackson's groundbreaking 2019 book *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* makes this case by chronicling the lives and experiments of a series of nineteenth-century American radicals who dreamed of overturning capitalism, evangelical Protestantism, and the nuclear family as they then knew and lived it, but so too by considering how Marx's early writings took hold in movements—such as abolitionism—now often remembered simply as “reformist.” Her most important intervention, perhaps, for my field has been recovering the deeply anti-capitalist imaginary working across a variety of seemingly disparate American radical circles. As she puts it, “[d]rawn into one flash-point issue, they would soon find that it was inextricable from other oppressive systems. . . . As Wendell Phillips reflected after thirty years agitating for abolition, universal suffrage, and labor rights, he had been awakened as a young man to the fact that slavery ‘had poisoned everything it touched.’ It was a not a single institution but *the invisible, toxic framework of the entire society*” (xiii). Jackson's additional key claim is that the reason we are so prone to regard the story of American radicalism as one of failure is because many of its once unthinkable radical dreams—whether of the women-able-to-wear-trousers or the eight-hour-working-day variety—became invisible to us as such once they became a normalized part of everyday life. That process of erasure takes with it the long histories of struggle that went into their realization. But it also becomes the ground on which, Jackson argues, seeming radical failures at given prior moments more rightly become, in her words, “slow-release” radical successes from the vantage point of a slightly longer view.

John Funchion's important work, in his 2015 book *Novel Nostalgias: The Aesthetics of Antagonism in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature*, on what he terms late-nineteenth-century “left nostalgia” has helped bring renewed attention to

the ways that US radicals returned to the recent past—and often, moments of seeming failure—to, as he puts it, “reanimat[e] the revolutionary past to serve”—rather than *evade*—“the exigencies of the present.” This reading dovetails with my own work in *Sensational Internationalism: The Paris Commune and the Remapping of American Memory in the Long Nineteenth-Century* to recover how a seventy-two day uprising that might seem to be part only of someone else's history and, more to the point, a total failure, came to be celebrated, reimagined, and at times actually restaged each March in America as a joyous form of countercultural (and notably extranational) memory-making engaged in by a remarkably diverse set of US radicals, among them postbellum activists like Victoria Woodhull and Wendell Phillips, Social Gospel proponents like George Herron, Socialists like Daniel De Leon, Jack London, and Eugene V. Debs, anarchists like Benjamin Tucker and Emma Goldman, and Wobblies like Big Bill Haywood, as well as (of course) the CPUSA.

Finally, Jill Richards's recent book *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the Literary Avant-Garde* crosscuts modernist literary studies and histories of international human rights to offer a fascinating rereading of the insurgent possibilities of first-wave feminism and international socialism, and more broadly what Richards terms the “socialist and avant-garde radicalisms” of the early twentieth century. Richards's most powerful claim, one that builds on insights from Kristin Ross's work on May 1968, is that doing justice to this radical history requires us to abandon the retelling of its story from the vantage point of its always already having failed. As Richards puts it,

[e]very radical political struggle in the following pages . . . inarguably, indisputably, *failed* in terms of its stated ambitions. But that failure, seen from the present, tells us very little. It could not necessarily be

foretold by the participants involved. It says nothing about the working existence of politics on the ground or aesthetic formations intertwined with them. To begin with tragedy constructs a narrative based upon the ending that *was*, as though . . . every political action were always already pointing to that ending. At our present moment, it seems more useful to take up the *force of this antagonism* rather than the tragedy of its failures. (20)

A book of Hartman's astonishing scope cannot be without the occasional blind spots. Although there are glimpses in *Karl Marx in America* of a world outside the US that impinges on the radical US reception of Marx—the emergence of the USSR, Soviet tanks rolling into Hungary in 1956, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the emergence of the Zapatista movement—these glimpses are rare, as it often keeps its focus fairly tightly bound within American borders and American historical developments. That makes a certain kind of sense given the immense swathe of time (and intellectual history) being undertaken here, but it also undercuts readers' ability to discern the degree to which international events—and internationalism as ideology and lived activist practice—are being lived and debated in any given moment. I was surprised by how little attention the Commune got here—despite how often Marxists (Lenin in particular) returned to it in their writings and how much its brutal suppression shaped how Bolsheviks and CPUSA members alike conceived of the forces arrayed against them. I was similarly surprised that May 1968 makes no cameo in the book's account of Marx's New Left return in the 1960s, and that Salvador Allende's Chile—whose working existence famously drew in a number of young American radicals such as Charles Horman, who wanted to see it unfold in real time, and whose brutal repression in turn was a profoundly formative moment for a generation of US radicals—appears here only with the

mention of Augusto Pinochet's coup and the Chicago Boys' free market interventions in the country after 1973. Put a different way, to what degree can we tell the story of Marx in America (or of American radicalism, more broadly) as a story that unfolds principally *within* our own national borders?

It's also the case that the Russian Revolution itself, connected to but also beyond the story that John Reed told about it, captivated the "socialist dreams" of a wide range of radicals in its early days, and continued to do so for reasons that don't come into much relief here. This could make it harder for an unfamiliar reader to understand what first drew American radicals to the Communist Party in the 1920s, or even why admiration for the USSR might have been hard for some of them to let go of given that the USSR in its actual working (or imagined) existence tends to only enter the sightline as an always already repressive (even totalitarian) Stalinist state. What readers unfamiliar with this history would not be likely to have to hand, in other words, is the knowledge of the initial broad range of changes that the Russian Revolution ushered in—for example, the institution of no-fault divorce (1918), the decriminalization of homosexuality (1922, 1926), the legalization of abortion (1920), and the establishment of publicly-funded day care centers (1918)—which were warmly welcomed by US radicals within and outside the Party, many of whom had themselves been longtime campaigners for exactly such changes in the US as part of *or in addition to* their own anti-capitalist politics. Or take, for example, the 1935 CPUSA pamphlet *Women in Action* authored by Sasha Small, who would be later grilled by the House Un-American Activities Committee for precisely this pamphlet's incendiary promise that "[t]he Communist Party is the only party which fights for equal rights for women, equal pay for equal work, social insurance, all the everyday needs of working women, farm women, housewives of every nationality

and color" (55). Although *Karl Marx in America* does not take up these capacious hopes, Hartman nevertheless powerfully positions us to begin to see anew the way that Marx lived on in these pre-twenty-first century "socialist dreams" and continues to shape the struggles of our own moment in ways at once more profound and more subterranean than we otherwise might remember.

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