

14 The Anti-radical Classicism of Karl Marx's Dissertation

Kiran Pizarro Mansukhani

Introduction

Recently, classicists have started to acknowledge Karl Marx's dissertation *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841) as a work of classical scholarship. These sparse references to the text, however, are noticeably brief and ideologically inconsistent. In their respective attempts to defend classics' continued relevance, Mary Beard and Simon Goldhill both mention Marx's work in passing.¹ Each refers to his dissertation to show that classics as a discipline is not fundamentally anti-progressive, leaning on the revolutionary's name to support their case. One of the few instances of scholarship on the dissertation in classics is Paul Cartledge and David Konstan's entry on "Marxism and Classical Antiquity" in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. The two point out the dissertation's existence to claim Marx "retained a lifelong interest in classical antiquity, spicing his writings with a wealth of allusions to ancient texts".² The rest of the entry then focuses on these allusions to ancient slavery and Marx's influence on the study of antiquity. In all these cases, Marx's classical training is assumed to have some degree of influence on his communist thought. Such proof of classics' revolutionary potential would be welcome news for anyone wishing to defend the discipline, especially from renewed inquiry into its imperialist and white supremacist origins. Though to outline the relationship between the dissertation as classical scholarship and Marx's revolutionary tendencies, further exegesis is needed than provided in these sources. It is still necessary to connect the dissertation to classics in the 19th century and map their influence on Marx's later communist thought.

This chapter provides a preliminary example of this type of inquiry by placing the work in its historical context, as opposed to evaluating the integrity of its philosophical arguments. It suggests that Marx inherited his Eurocentric tendencies from his classical education and scholarship, leaving his later body of work open to this critique.

First, the chapter situates Marx's classical education within 19th-century Germany. Marx received some of his earliest classical education in the German Gymnasium, which had been recently reformed by Wilhelm Von Humboldt. His later work on classical subjects was within a philosophy department, motivated by philosophical questions laid out by G.W.F. Hegel. Both of these theorists based their

work on a German ideal known as *Bildung*, translated as “education”, “cultivation” or “culture”.

Then, it identifies connections between the dissertation and these articulations of *Bildung* as they appeared in Humboldt’s and Hegel’s work, as well as within the curriculum of the Gymnasium. It argues that Marx’s choice of Epicurean subject matter was influenced by the above. There was a shared dismissal of non-European societies and Hellenistic Greece from historical study, and Marx only protests against the exclusion of the Hellenistic age. He does not question the framework of *Bildung* which motivates this exclusion, instead attempting to show how Epicurean thought embraces *Bildung*. Marx makes his argument through his account of Epicurean atomism. He claims that Epicurus solves a traditional problem of Democritean atomism through its emphasis on the atom as an individual “self-consciousness” entity.³ This language also echoes his predecessors’ account of *Bildung*, which stated that the purpose of education was to shape self-conscious individuals. This model of the individual, however, was based on traditionally masculine, European features and the treatment of non-European societies as lacking historical importance. The prototype for this individual was thus the white, European man. Marx’s emphasis on “redeeming” Epicurus through this language of individuality and self-consciousness displays an effort to assimilate Hellenistic philosophy into a Eurocentric paradigm.

This chapter concludes by considering the influence of the dissertation’s Eurocentrism in the concept of historical materialism, as well as pushback against its traditional formulation from later non-Western and non-white Marxists. Though these later Marxists recognise Marx’s Eurocentrism, they update Marx’s revolutionary vision rather than abandon it entirely. While Marx’s dissertation reproduces the field’s Eurocentric epistemology, this alone does not deem Marx and Marxist thought outdated. Instead, the dissertation serves as a reminder to scholars of the classical world that individual scholars and bodies of thought can change radically over time through constant, pointed critique. No scholar is obligated to live in the shadows of previous epistemologies articulated by their predecessors, and new ways of knowing and existing can always be realised.

Situating Marx’s Classicism

Karl Marx’s classical education, shaped by the cultural forces of 19th-century Germany, would seem foreign to classicists today. Marx was born in 1818, soon after Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1767–1835) overhaul of the Prussian educational system from 1809–1810,⁴ and wrote some of his earliest surviving work on antiquity as a student in the Gymnasium.⁵ As is the case in modern day Germany, the Gymnasium was the most elite institution of secondary education in the 19th century and served as a precursor to a university education or public office.⁶ Unlike Germany today, the only students admitted to the Gymnasium were boys from upper- and middle-class families,⁷ and as such the curriculum had to reflect the values of this demographic. The primary purpose of classical education in the

Gymnasium was to showcase works which promoted those values relevant to their social class⁸ rather than provide well-rounded exposure to classical antiquity.

Marx may have received training in classical languages at the secondary level, but it was not his primary focus at the tertiary and doctoral levels. While his dissertation was on ancient Greek subjects, it was towards a degree in philosophy, not philology.⁹ It responds to a disciplinary question introduced by philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) in his lectures on the development of Greek philosophy.¹⁰ Marx also incorporates work from early modern philosophers such as Pierre Bayle,¹¹ Pierre Gassendi¹² and Gottfried Leibniz¹³ as credible sources for ancient philosophy. Unlike contemporary ancient philosophy scholars, Marx lacked important primary sources for pre-Socratic and Epicurean philosophy, such as the Diels-Kranz fragments, Usener's 1887 collection¹⁴ and the Herculaneum papyri. While Marx interacts with his limited primary sources, he is motivated by philosophical questions as opposed to philological ones.

Thus, the dissertation *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* is also based on an understanding of classical antiquity that may be unfamiliar to the contemporary classicist. The surviving sections of the dissertation make a relatively uncontroversial claim: Epicurean atomism is markedly different from Democritean atomism. What is unusual is how Marx situates this argument within the history of philosophy and the language he uses to defend his argument. In Part One of the dissertation, Marx explicitly states that he will use Epicurean atomism to respond to his contemporaries' biases against Hellenistic philosophy. These anti-Hellenistic biases include the belief that Greek philosophy somehow "withered" after the death of Aristotle.¹⁵ Hellenistic philosophy was considered an "almost improper addition"¹⁶ to the history of philosophy, a view certainly not held today. In Part Two, Marx uses the atom and swerve to come to a bold conclusion about the historical importance of Epicurean thought. Epicurean atomism, for Marx, is ultimately "*the natural science of self-consciousness*. This self-consciousness under the form of abstract individuality is an absolute principle".¹⁷ In other words, Epicurus affirms that notions such as "self-consciousness" and "individuality" are guaranteed fixtures in nature. In the dissertation, Marx responds to a widespread dismissal of Hellenistic thought. He feels the need to defend Epicurean atomism through its relationship to the supposedly innate principle of individuality, a notably Hegelian tendency.¹⁸ As a result, the dissertation addresses the philosophical concerns of Marx's immediate predecessors through the language they use to describe Graeco-Roman antiquity and philosophy.

Bildung and a Eurocentric Narrative of Progress

This view of the Hellenistic age and the emphasis on individuality is borrowed from a German ideal known as *Bildung*, which shaped classical education and scholarship in the 19th century. Broadly speaking, *Bildung* was "understood both as a process of education, cultivation, and development, and as its result".¹⁹ This process was the self-formation of the individual, and the result the full self-realisation of one's individuality.²⁰ Only through this self-realisation did theorists of

Bildung believe that humanity as a whole could realise its full potential.²¹ Translated as “cultivation”, “education”²² or “culture”,²³ *Bildung* was sometimes qualified with the adjectives “classical” or “humanistic”,²⁴ demonstrating the depth of its relationship with classics. Humboldt and Hegel drew inspiration from classical antiquity while contemplating the terms of this self-realisation, then situated different eras of antiquity into this teleology of human development as they saw fit.²⁵ In doing so, they reduced the study of the ancient world to pure utility, as it pertained to their own vision of the fully realised individual. In this era, this individual was a white, European man.²⁶

While Humboldt's influence on Marx is not as explicit as Hegel's, he shaped the curriculum under which Marx studied classical antiquity.²⁷ Humboldt's educational reforms were oriented around his own interpretation of *Bildung*.²⁸ For Humboldt, the goal of an individual's self-development “is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole”.²⁹ One must learn how to unite differing capacities under a fully realised individual. This undertaking, however, cannot occur in isolation. The process of *Bildung* can only take place within a society that enables one to encounter a variety of experiences, so as to exercise their capacities and provide the freedom to pursue them.³⁰ Humboldt explicitly bases this idealised relationship between individual and society on classical antiquity,³¹ especially classical Athens, which he believes decayed with the arrival of Philip and Alexander.³² He reasons that “the ancient examples explained the necessity to connect, in the present, bourgeois involvement and patriotism with the ideal of individual autonomy”.³³ Humboldt believed that classical Athens held knowledge critical for improving his contemporary society. He further cemented the necessity of this relationship by building an image of a modern German citizen that emulated the classical Athenian.³⁴ Humboldt's conception of the German citizen with Greek inheritance not only solidified the need to study classical antiquity, but also “reinforced the idea of being a citizen of a superior cultural nation”.³⁵ Under Humboldt's description of *Bildung*, classical Athens was tied to a sense of German cultural superiority.

This German nationalist conception of *Bildung* was reflected in the classics curriculum of the newly reformed Gymnasium.³⁶ The Greek world of the Gymnasium only went up to “Philip and Alexander”,³⁷ ignoring the Hellenistic world entirely. Ancient Greek was only taught because “the study of its grammar helped develop formal mental discipline, and literature presented the pupil with the best available examples of human culture in an original, unmixed form”.³⁸ Mental discipline and the “best” examples of human culture were needed to help students undertake the process of *Bildung*,³⁹ and these were deemed best taught by classical literature. This cultural superiority was not uniformly recognised across ancient Greek literature. Humboldt himself preferred Attic Greek above all other dialects because of the abundance of these examples compared to other eras and regions of Greece.⁴⁰ Students only received enough language training necessary to be exposed to these handpicked examples of supposed human excellence, rather than gain the competency necessary for philological study.⁴¹ Philologists also considered geographical and climatic factors when evaluating this cultural superiority in the ancient world,⁴²

which resulted in several non-European societies being excluded from historical study. Due to the influence of *Bildung*, Marx's classical education was not concerned with providing a comprehensive overview of the Graeco-Roman world, but reinforcing Humboldt's conception of German cultural superiority through its supposedly Greek heritage.

Hegel holds a similar bias against the Hellenistic era, but unlike Humboldt justifies this with a systematisation of cultures and historical eras based on their ability to promote *Bildung*. Jennifer Herdt states that Hegel's "entire philosophical project is nothing less than a project of *Bildung*".⁴³ For Hegel, *Bildung* is not merely the self-realisation of the individual for the sake of humanity's collective yet secular development, but a process oriented towards a universal spirit.⁴⁴ According to Hegel, this process moves in stages manifested through different eras and individuals, and each era progresses towards an ultimate and full self-consciousness or a purity of thought.⁴⁵ This progress is not merely evaluated based on the schools of thought which came out of particular periods and regions, but physical markers of their environment such as the geography and climate.⁴⁶ For him, the area that could best support historical progress is "the temperate zone; or, rather, its northern half, because the earth there presents itself in a continental form".⁴⁷ In other words, history only truly occurs in Europe. He ranks different regions and eras based on their proximity to Europe and whiteness,⁴⁸ designating Black Africans as unable to achieve *Bildung*.⁴⁹

Hegel's dismissal of the Hellenistic age is partially based on the expansion of the Greek world into Asia and Egypt.⁵⁰ Hegel also evaluates the historical importance of Epicurean thought based on its place in this teleology. In a series of lectures Hegel delivered on the atomist, he "had presented Democritus (and fellow atomist Leucippus) as part of the cycle of early Greek philosophy which traces a dialectic of 'pure thought'".⁵¹ Hegel labels Democritean thought as an early stage in the development of history. Epicurus' return to atomism then indicates the lack of historical progress in the Hellenistic age.⁵² His evaluation of Epicurean thought corresponds to his assessment of the era overall, that it failed to further promote Greek culture due to contact with Asia. For Hegel, *Bildung* is an explicitly racist process, striving towards a universal purity realised through the deliberate exclusion of non-white peoples from history.

Marx explicitly situates the dissertation within his predecessors' systematisation of historical progress in Part One. In this section, his goal is to assimilate Epicurus into this periodisation of antiquity rather than push back against it. The dissertation opens with a scathing assessment of Greek philosophy:

Greek philosophy seems to have met with something with which a good tragedy is not supposed to meet, namely, a dull ending. The objective history of philosophy in Greece seems to come to an end with Aristotle, Greek philosophy's Alexander of Macedon, and even the manly-strong Stoics did not succeed in what the Spartans did accomplish in their temples, the chaining of Athena to Heracles so that she could not flee.⁵³

Though this appears to be a general statement about Greek philosophy, it clearly refers to philosophy from Athens. First, there is the comparison of philosophy to tragedy, a genre also associated with Athens. Marx contrasts the Stoics, the philosophers of the *Stoa Poikile*, with Athens' traditional rival, Sparta. While Pausanias attests to this Spartan temple to Athena,⁵⁴ Marx speaks metaphorically in this passage. He mentions an "objective history of philosophy" where the history of thought progresses linearly until it reaches Aristotle. Hellenistic philosophy, including its Stoic branch, was unable to continue this march forward. Here, Marx is invoking Hegel's systematisation of the history of philosophy and explicitly says so in his preparatory *Notebooks*.⁵⁵ This condescending view of Hellenistic thought also harkens back to Humboldt's curriculum for the Gymnasium, which similarly placed classical Athens on a pedestal. The dissertation revolves around this construction of classical Athens as the apex of human wisdom, made possible through a tradition of devaluing ancient societies outside of Europe.

While Marx perhaps exaggerates this view for the sake of mockery, he does not push back against this "objective history". Instead, he disagrees with his contemporaries' assessment of Hellenistic thought and wishes to rehabilitate Epicurus' image for them. He attempts to show that the progression of knowledge did take place within and through the Hellenistic schools, asking "[a]re they not the prototypes of the Roman mind, the shape in which Greece wandered to Rome?"⁵⁶ The purpose of defending Epicurean thought is to show its historical importance. By fixing Hegel's oversight, Marx can defend the integrity of older philosopher's teleology. Yet Marx does not wish to question this notion of progress past antiquity. Marx claims that his study of the Hellenistic schools is "not at all concerned with their significance for culture [*Bildung*] in general, but with their connection with the older Greek philosophy".⁵⁷

Here, Marx acknowledges a contemporary cultural relationship between Hellenistic thought and *Bildung*. Marx could be alluding to multiple connotations of *Bildung*, all of which fall under the translator's choice of "culture". He was exposed to this relationship as early as the *Gymnasium* and in the dissertation actively engages with Hegel's articulation of it. Marx, however, does not question the necessity of this contemporary norm built on exclusion. Instead, the project of the dissertation is to promote the inclusion of one group of thought by revealing previously unacknowledged similarities with those traditionally included. Thus, the dissertation is situated against the backdrop of *Bildung*, a tradition that valued ancient Greek thought based on its relationship to an overtly racist, Eurocentric notion of historical progress.

Bildung and the Individual as European

Marx assimilates Epicurean thought to this notion of progress by articulating the relationship between individuality and the atom. He believes Epicurus's main contribution to atomic theory is the idea of the "swerve", which triggers a process that allows the atom to fully distinguish itself as unique and material.⁵⁸ The description

of this process of the atom's self-realisation incorporates terminology that Marx's predecessors associated with *Bildung*. This relationship to *Bildung* is strengthened by comparisons between the atom's individuality and human individuality.

It is important to note no existing Epicurean fragment contains this language of the "swerve".⁵⁹ The main source for this is the *clinamen* in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*,⁶⁰ written almost 200 years after Epicurus' death. Marx also uses Lucretius as his primary source for Epicurean thought, arguing his account of the swerve provides a solution to a philosophical issue articulated by Democritus. According to Marx, Democritean atomism cannot account for how imperceptible atoms could cause perceptible objects.⁶¹ Both Democritus and Epicurus are materialist philosophers, meaning they believe only matter exists.⁶² Underlying all matter, for both philosophers, are imperceptible objects called atoms and the space between them called void.⁶³ Democritus posits that while perceived reality is true,⁶⁴ it cannot show the imperceptible atoms and void.⁶⁵ In his frustration, Democritus turns to the empirical sciences to find an explanatory principle that governs the relationship between the atom and appearance.⁶⁶ Marx identifies Democritus' approach as a "universal" one – the older atomist turns to the physical world to solve philosophical problems.

In contrast, Epicurus' approach marks a "subjective" shift away from Democritus' "universal" approach to atomism, by turning to the nature of the individual atom itself. Marx's succeeding analysis shows the movement of the history of philosophy from the external to the internal, with the individual as the new centre of philosophical discourse.

The individual was similarly prioritised by Marx's predecessors, especially within accounts of *Bildung*. For Humboldt and Hegel, the model of the individual achieving self-realisation was the white, European man. Humboldt saw the development of the individual as the *telos* of *Bildung*.⁶⁷ To achieve this goal, a method and model was needed to encourage, "the full development of the individual and the full development of the community of mankind being interdependent".⁶⁸ The individual had to be educated in a manner that taught one how to exist as an independent yet social being. This required one to learn how to navigate different kinds of social interactions and incorporate them into one's sense of self. In the Gymnasium, this was realised through classical instruction. The Graeco-Roman world, as stated previously, was deemed to have the culture and history best able to promote *Bildung*. As a result, "Languages, and in particular Latin and Greek, were a main subject, and also considered the medium of *Bildung* because these languages in particular were seen to have a rich historical tradition and therefore to enable access to 'manifold worldviews'".⁶⁹ This meant ancient language instruction was the best method for developing this socially interactive sense of self. The model for this individual was taken from Humboldt's idealised antiquity, specifically the traditionally male Athenian citizen.⁷⁰ Such an individual was supposed to have "strength and independence"⁷¹ while "[l]iving in the love of others is delightful but weak, effeminate".⁷² The purpose of *Bildung* is to develop autonomy within society, with this autonomy being seen as a masculine trait and its opposite, co-dependence, seen as feminine. The preference for instruction via classical antiquity

and its modelling on classical Athens also demonstrates that this autonomous individual was modelled off the white, European male.

The notion of the individual developed through interaction is also present in Hegel's work. The individual's development is but part of the development of the whole universe, as a part of a "world spirit".⁷³ For Hegel, this development takes place through his account of the dialectic. He stages the dialectic as "a dramatic struggle arising from the encounter of two self-consciousnesses . . . nothing else but an account of *Bildung* of self-consciousness, which undergoes the formative development toward its 'in and for itself' existence".⁷⁴ Unlike a Platonic dialectic, which is based on an argument between two physical interlocutors, a Hegelian dialectic addresses a concept's self-definition as it exists in the world. The dialectic situates individual concepts against one another. Once a concept is met with its opposite, there is no choice but to clarify the definition of each.⁷⁵ Constantly bombarded with oppositions, the concept becomes more and more clearly defined as it has to continuously distinguish itself. Self-consciousness includes not only awareness of the self but how the individual contextualises this self-awareness. The dialectic is thus not limited to uncovering semantic definitions. This dialectical process of *Bildung* is "not a purely individual undertaking; it is a social enterprise that takes place in the historical and social world (the world of spirit) through various interactions with other individuals".⁷⁶ Like Humboldt, Hegel connects individual and social development. The process of achieving *Bildung* also contributes to the growth of one's society. Given that Hegel's ideal society is based in the "temperate" areas of Europe, it follows that the individual who can achieve *Bildung* is the white, European man.⁷⁷

Marx identifies the atom with the process of *Bildung* by associating it with individuality, self-consciousness and social interaction. With the swerve, Marx argues that Epicurean thought is able to articulate the individual nature of the atom and its relationship to the physical world. The swerving atom becomes a "self-conscious" individual, realised through its interactions with other atoms.⁷⁸ Marx introduces the swerve by describing the relationship between the atom and different types of atomic motion. There are three types of motion: the atom's free fall through the void, the decline away from this straight path, and then repulsion (or collision) with other atoms.⁷⁹ When the atom falls in a straight line, it does not come into contact with other atoms.⁸⁰ As a result, it is unable to determine whether it is an existing individual.⁸¹ Humboldt too warns that individuality cannot be realised through monotonous action,⁸² and for Hegel, self-recognition cannot begin without an encounter with another existence.⁸³

During the swerve, the atom first declines, acknowledging its independence from the set path of its fall.⁸⁴ Then, repulsion occurs.⁸⁵ Upon this encounter with other atoms, the individual atom can finally be confirmed as such. The atom's self-consciousness is ultimately realised through this context, the manifestation of its relationship to other atoms.⁸⁶ In other words, the singular atom recognises itself as distinct because it can confront and still exist separately from other atoms. Once atoms recognise themselves en masse through frequent collisions and encounters, they create observable material objects,⁸⁷ thereby solving the problem put forth by Democritus.

Marx's demonstration that the atom meets this requirement of self-consciousness defends Epicurus' position in Hegel's teleology of progress.⁸⁸ Nor does Marx stray far from his earlier classical education, meant to guide individuals through manifold social interactions towards self-realisation. He explains the importance of atomic repulsion through the process of human individuation, saying that "man ceases to be a product of nature only when the other being to which he relates himself is not a different existence but is itself an individual human being".⁸⁹ The individual atom cannot confirm its existence as such in its default state of merely falling through void, failing to interact with other atoms. Marx likens this to human cultivation, where the individual cannot move beyond their most basic instincts except when encountering other human beings. The atom's process of individuation can thus be seen as parallel to a person's self-realisation, aligning it with the process and *telos* of *Bildung*. By doing this, Marx assimilates the atom to a conception of individuality modelled on the white, European man.

Though Marx later criticises Epicurus' understanding of individuality, this was only to say that the philosopher had just fallen short of Hegel's own account.⁹⁰ For Epicurus' pre-Hegelian innovations, Marx champions him as "the greatest representative of Greek Enlightenment".⁹¹ With this final description of Epicurus, Marx makes it clear that his interpretation of the individual atom is based on his predecessors' Eurocentric account of the individual.

Critiquing Marx's Classical Inheritance

Marx begins the dissertation by declaring his intention to expand on its subject matter in later work but was soon forced to discard the study of antiquity soon after submitting the piece in 1841.⁹² His mentor, Bruno Bauer, was dismissed from the University of Bonn in 1842, which severed Marx's only connection to a university position and academic career.⁹³ A lack of prospects led Marx to abandon his academic pursuits and become a journalist at the *Rhineland News*.⁹⁴ His first exposure to communist thought took place during this period from 1842 to 1843, after finishing the dissertation.⁹⁵ Marx's eventual critiques of capitalism were strongly influenced by conditions of the working poor he reported on. He admits in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that "as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, I experienced for the first time the embarrassment of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests".⁹⁶ After a lifetime of studying classics and philosophy, Marx did not think seriously about economics until he had to write on "material" issues, as opposed to theoretical, academic work.

There, Marx makes it clear that his musings on classical subjects themselves were not directly responsible for his conversion to the communist cause. Scholars such as Wilfried Nippel are perhaps correct to insist that references to antiquity in Marx's later work "have their proper place in footnotes".⁹⁷ According to Nippel, scattered mentions of antiquity, such as Roman class relations in the Manifesto,⁹⁸ were simply used as points of comparison to explain changes in class relations over time.⁹⁹ For Marx, ancient class relations belong to a distant past, providing little analytical insight into present conditions. The ancients themselves were not

the primary focus of Marx's anti-capitalist critiques, nor can one show a causal relationship between his study of classics and political radicalisation.

While Marx may not have been radicalised by studying classics, it is still possible to make the case that Marx's dissertation had some influence on his later work. In the dissertation, one may see the early workings of a key facet of Marxism known as historical materialism or the materialist conception of history.¹⁰⁰ There is considerable debate about how developed the materialist theory is in the dissertation versus Marx's later work, though some degree of influence is clear.¹⁰¹ One description of historical materialism can be seen in "Wage Labour and Capital":

*Thus the social relations within which individuals produce, the social relations of production, change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces. The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations society and specifically a society as a definite stage of historical development, a society with a peculiar, distinctive character.*¹⁰²

What makes this conception of history "materialist" is its basis in phenomena external to the individual, such as production of goods and the social relations required for the production and exchange of goods.¹⁰³ Different historical eras are defined by how these different facets of production and society interact. Marx's solution to the Epicurean issue takes a similar form – what distinguishes the unrealised atom from the realised is the shift in its relations, from the isolated fall to the different components of the swerve. Yet if historical materialism developed out of Marx's classical scholarship, this should be a cause for concern rather than a point of pride.

It is the "historical" aspect of historical materialism that is most heavily critiqued by Marx's critics, since his Eurocentric approach to history produces a similarly Eurocentric model of revolutionary thought.¹⁰⁴ The dissertation foreshadows this by self-consciously restricting itself to a particular notion of "classical" history. It attempts to insert Epicurus into this history by showing that his work meets criteria defined by an aggressively Eurocentric intellectual tradition. Marx bases historical materialism on a similar conception of history. He considers his contemporary Europe the apex of human development, categorising progressive stages of economic development as "Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production".¹⁰⁵ The most backwards and undeveloped epoch, for Marx, is referred to as "Asiatic", implying 19th-century Asia was less developed than ancient Greece and Rome.¹⁰⁶ Due to this Eurocentric view of history, Marx also limits the membership of the revolutionary class. Marx and other European socialists developed the notion of the proletariat, the working class with revolutionary potential, from the working class of Industrial England and France.¹⁰⁷ Rural peasants and the unemployed were considered part of the *lumpenproletariat*, classes incapable of enacting revolution.¹⁰⁸ Marx, in the *Manifesto*, describes the proletarian struggle as "the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority".¹⁰⁹ Marx distinguishes the proletariat from these other social classes and from those outside of Europe by characterising it as an independent self-consciousness,

echoing his earlier description of the atom. Therefore, if Marx's economic theory develops out of his classically oriented dissertation, then it inherits its problems: a narrow Eurocentrism combined with a limited conception of the historical subject.

Marx's classicism thus makes him a liability to those attempting to use leftist thought to defend the continued relevance of the study of antiquity. This does not mean that the Marxist tradition has ceased to be relevant beyond the ivory tower. Marx was no prophet and could not predict the ever-shifting winds of history, especially when it did not conform to his Eurocentric expectations. Towards the end of his life, he was already struggling to grasp the anomalous rise of Japan as an industrial and imperial power on par with Europe.¹¹⁰ Marx's model for the modes of production crumbled as soon as it appeared and was further desecrated by Marxist anti-colonial theorists. Marxist movements arose across Asia in response to both Western and Japanese colonialism, including in Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines.¹¹¹ These movements challenged their societies' supposed lack of historical development and redefined the role of the peasantry in revolutionary struggle.¹¹² Pan-African thinkers such as Amílcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah also critique the notion that African societies were frozen in a primitive state prior to contact with the West.¹¹³ In the United States, increased automation and subsequent unemployment led thinkers like James Boggs to suggest that even the goal of revolution needs to change. No longer should the industrial workers aspire to control the means of production that they work with but have these newly automated means of production work for them.¹¹⁴ To realise this would require a revolution that included those unemployed by automation,¹¹⁵ a class Marx considered to be *lumpenproletariat*. Marx's initial articulation of the conditions for revolution, in light of these historical shifts, appears sorely outdated. Yet these theorists still recognised the power of Marx's vision of collective struggle and did not turn away from his thought. They sought to identify its oversights and update it for a modern age and, in doing so, envisioned a more just world. Refusing to leave this world in the abstract realm of ideas, they then strove to realise it by materially improving the conditions of the marginalised. Through education, activism and international solidarity that stretched past their comfortable national boundaries, these movements cultivated global citizens who recognised the humanity, individuality and potential of all human beings. Perhaps this is the lesson our field should learn from the Marxist tradition, regardless of Marx's relevance to the study of the ancient world.

Conclusion

Marx's dissertation therefore exemplifies how difficult it is for any scholar of the ancients to detach themselves from the ideological bases of their education. This chapter does not claim that the dissertation is intentionally racist but enclosed in an epistemology so Eurocentric that it produces structurally racist arguments. Rather than redeem the radicality of classics, it provides the discipline another means to reflect on its racist attitudes. Accepting the cultural and epistemological framework provided by his predecessors' work on *Bildung*, Marx's argument accepts Eurocentric norms as timeless universals, thereby operating within a mythical pre-history

of the West. He then applies this *telos* to the study of ancient philosophy, making even metaphysical arguments reproduce these cultural biases. Should scholars of the ancient world wish to move beyond such a mythos in critical ancient world studies, they must critique the cultural and intellectual milieu in which even the most philosophically abstract work was formed. The assumption of the abstract as objective and outside of the philosopher's social context only serves to reinforce the notion of the "universal". Similarly, the harmlessness of Marx's dissertation should not be assumed *a priori* based on its author's later work. The dissertation was a beginning, a snapshot of where the thinker began before his political radicalisation. It alone cannot account for where his work ended up and how far his influence continues to lead, well beyond his death. If classics wants to distance itself from its Eurocentric legacy and reform the field's image, perhaps it should forget trying to claim Karl Marx's dissertation.

Notes

- 1 Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction: Very Short Introductions* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Mary Beard, "Do the Classics Have a Future? | Mary Beard," accessed 19 July 2022, www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/01/12/do-classics-have-future/; Mary Beard, "Why Classics Matters: Times Literary Supplement," *Mary Beard: A Don's Life* (blog), accessed 21 August 2020, www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/why-classics-matters/; Simon Goldhill, *Review of The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today, by Eric Adler and Literature Squared: Self-Reflexivity In Late Antique Literature, by Jesús Hernández Lobato and Óscar Prieto Domínguez, Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (24 February 2021), <https://bmc.brynmaur.edu/2021/2021.02.45/>. Note that Goldhill misidentifies Marx's PhD in philosophy as classics.
- 2 Paul Cartledge, and David Konstan, "Marxism and Classical Antiquity," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3991>.
- 3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/31171>, 72. For the English text of the dissertation, I will use the page numbers associated with this edition. Italicisations will be taken from the original text unless otherwise noted. The title of the dissertation will be abbreviated as "Difference".
- 4 David Sorkin, "Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (Bildung), 1791–1810," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44, no. 1 (1983): 55.
- 5 David McLellan, *Marx Before Marxism*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan, 1980), 34.
- 6 James C. Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 16.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Anke Wischmann, "The Absence of 'Race' in German Discourses on *Bildung*: Rethinking *Bildung* with Critical Race Theory," *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21, no. 4 (2018): 479.
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- 19 Jennifer A. Herdt, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*, *Forming Humanity* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.
- 20 *Ibid.*
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- 22 Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany*, 16.
- 23 Wischmann, "The Absence of 'Race' in German Discourses on *Bildung*," 479.
- 24 Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany*, 19.
- 25 See Stefan Rebenich, "The Making of a Bourgeois Antiquity: Wilhelm von Humboldt and Greek History," in *The Western Time of Ancient History: Historiographical Encounters with the Greek and Roman Pasts*, ed. Alexandra Lianeri (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 119–137; Marina F. Bykova, "Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung," in *The Palgrave Hegel Handbook: Palgrave Handbooks in German Idealism*, ed. Marina F. Bykova, and Kenneth R. Westphal (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 427.
- 26 Wischmann, "The Absence of 'Race' in German Discourses on *Bildung*," 477.
- 27 For more on Marx and Humboldt see: Franz-Michael Konrad, "Wilhelm von Humboldt's Contribution to a Theory of Bildung," in *Theories of Bildung and Growth: Connections and Controversies Between Continental Educational Thinking and American Pragmatism*, ed. Pauli Siljander, Ari Kivelä, and Ari Sutinen (Brill, 2012), 120–121.
- 28 David Sorkin, "Wilhelm von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (*Bildung*), 1791–1810," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44, no. 1 (1983): 55.
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- 32 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften, Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Königlich Preussische, vol. 3, 17 vols. (De Gruyter, 1968), 172.
- 33 Rebenich, "The Making of a Bourgeois Antiquity: Wilhelm von Humboldt and Greek History," 132.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Constanze Güthenke, "'Enthusiasm Dwells Only in Specialization': Classical Philology and Disciplinarity in Nineteenth-Century Germany," in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-Ming Kevin Chang (Harvard University Press), 275.
- 38 Wischmann, "The Absence of 'Race' in German Discourses on *Bildung*," 479.
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- 44 Bykova, "Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung," 426.
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- 49 Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 116.
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- 54 Pausanias 3.15.6. Many thanks to Vanessa Stovall for finding this reference.
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- 56 Marx and Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, 35.
- 57 *Ibid.* German text is taken from Karl Marx, "Differenz Der Demokritischen Und Epikureischen Naturphilosophie," *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*, 1, no. 1 (1972): 22.
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- 60 Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.225–50.
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- 64 Marx and Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, 40.
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- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 Bykova, "Hegel's Philosophy of *Bildung*," 433.
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- 75 Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 66.
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- 78 Marx and Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, 52.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 48.
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- 83 Bykova, "Hegel's Philosophy of *Bildung*," 435.
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- 103 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 52.
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- 105 Marx and Engels, "Marx on the History of His Opinions (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)," 5.
- 106 There are other modes of production named in the *German Ideology* (cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Charles Tucker, 2nd ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 151–153). The theory of the five modes of production, primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism, is considered a Stalinist interpretation of Marxist production (cf. Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 224).
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- 110 Germaine A. Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 127.

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