

Studies on Epicurus' Influence on Marx

Post by "Titus" of May 11, 2020 at 1:35 PM

These are some notices about my personal research on the connection between Epicurean philosophy and its reception by Marx. Don't take them too seriously.

Some years ago I discovered an interesting connection between Marx and Epicurus. I had read the verses of Lucretius on cultural evolution and suddenly I reminded what is so called "historical materialism". I had to laugh out loud because I thought perhaps Communism might evolve only some steps further. I did so, because I reminded that Marx completed his Dissertation in March 1841 about "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature". It's quite interesting because De Rerum Natura is perhaps the only book from classical antiquity, trying to compare some elements of Democritean and Epicurean philosophy. For sure, Lucretius had to be one of Marx's most important resources.

This was just the start of my reserach about the connection between Marx and Epicurean philosophy. Just a funny fact and it seemed to be just a remindable similarity.

I wasn't able to forget about the topic, so I checked some years later Marx's dissertation. And I really wondered about, because Marx's refers in his dissertations introduction to the letter to Menoikeus:

"Philosophy, as long as a drop of blood shall pulse in its world-subduing and absolutely free heart, will never grow tired of answering its adversaries with the cry of Epicurus:

Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them, is truly impious."

(<https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/w...es/foreword.htm>)

This passage gives several information: First: Marx knowed the letter to Menoikeus. Second: He also refers to in matter of critique of religion. Third: We should not underestimate the influence of Epicurus on Marx (especially, because Marx also did reserach on hellenistic philosophy in his youth).

The whole topic is so interesting to me, because the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach is always said to have had influenced Marx heavenly. Heavenly in kind of critique of religion and heavenly in kind of materialism. Ironically, his basic work "The Essence of Christianity" was published also in 1841, perhaps some months later than Marx' dissertation. My conclusion is, perhaps, just perhaps, you could forget about Feuerbach. Marx didn't need Feuerbach.

I know little about Marx and I know little about Feuerbach. I know nothing about their personal connection. These are the points I have to evolve my knowledge. Unfortunately, there is rare primary literature on the topic. Just cultural scientists and marxists copying from each other.

At the moment, my hypothesis is the following: Marx was heavenly influenced (from several sources and) by Epicurus, from which he borrowed some key ideas. Later, writers like Feuerbach also did influence Marx, but perhaps they rather served as a mirror to Marx. Feuerbach was a compaignon in the same era. Feuerbach was a person to refer to and to talk with. Who would refer to Epicurus, this old philosopher? We also have to remind that in the 19th century Epicurus was just available to an elite who was able to handle classic Latin and Greek.

If there might have been a great influence of Epicurean philosophy on Marx, this influence logically might been overwritten by the living philosophers of that era.

Finally, I would like to share a sweet piece of chocolate with you. Erich Fromm mentions the mentioned quote by Epicurus in his book "Marx's Concept of Man" but without mentioning Epicurus. He handles this quote just global, as a sign of Marx's refering to classical antiquity philosophers. He lists every other philosopher... but not the one.

Post by “Cassius” of May 11, 2020 at 2:46 PM

I agree this is an area where we need a lot more discussion. I think [Martin](#) knows a lot more about this than I do; I just haven't had the time to track down the details. I do remember reading that essay by Marx several years ago and not getting a lot out of it, so i am sure there is a big picture that I am missing.

Post by “Joshua” of May 15, 2020 at 4:55 PM

I wrote this post earlier. I wasn't sure if I should post it, since I'm largely out of my depth here. I'll drop it here anyway—think of it as the words of an overconfident contrarian interlocutor. It doesn't really feel like my voice when I read it again; I'm not even sure that it is actually my opinion.

Quote

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. **The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.**

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. **To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.**

from Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. I've highlighted in bold the passages where he departs significantly (in my view) from Lucretius.

It is true that Lucretius (and Epicurus) developed a critique of religion that derived in part from its role in biological and cultural evolution. But the urging to abandon religious fear—and, by extension, religion's false consolations—is an urging that Epicurus presents on its own foundation. The secondary case—the urging for Man to abandon his soulless economic conditions through revolution—is one that was never made; indeed, one that seems not to have been considered.

A clue to this may be found in Epicurus' refusal to instate in his Garden a Pythagorean-style 'commune', which he believed would betray a lack of trust among its members. Possibly Epicurus would not have been surprised by what followed. What Marx desired was to re-invert the mistaken inversion; to correct what was badly wrong in mankind's relationship with the material, both spiritually and economically—the halo, *and* the 'vale of tears'. Both of these were best represented in the ancient world by Platonism; it had a class or a caste system. It had an ethereal and incomprehensible metaphysic. It had a political theory, not only descriptive but prescriptive. *That* was the system Marx inverted. *That* was the original error whose over-correction and mirror-image was Marxism.

Where Marx and Plato sought to instruct nations, Epicurus addressed himself to individuals. Where Marx and Plato denied to the poor masses¹ the capacity to arrive at metaphysical truths, Epicurus taught even slaves.

Epicurus did not build castles in the air. He developed a philosophy on the ground that was prudent and practical, and tailored to lived experience. It didn't call for a revolution in political life—nor did it call for a philosopher king. It called only for the mental discipline of the student, and a willingness to try.

He didn't engineer a utopia; he plotted the course of a happy life. If he has an heir among political theorists, we should look not to Marx, but to Thomas Jefferson.

¹For Marx, the "oppressed"; for Plato, the 'baser metal'.

Post by “Cassius” of May 15, 2020 at 5:28 PM

Joshua speaking only for myself I know that I too consider myself out of my depth in dealing with Marx because I haven't studied him nearly well enough to know where to attack the problem.

But I do know this: I can't read that excerpt without sensing something very "off" -or at least, very different from - Epicurean analysis.

A sentence like "*It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality*" seems totally disconnected from the kind of clear and direct analysis which is characteristic of Epicurus. What is "human essence"? What is "true reality"?

"The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo."

There seems to be a lot of "poetry" going on here which doesn't seem calculated to enlighten, but to grip the emotions - maybe the word is mesmerize, and I can't help but think about Lucretius' descriptions of Heraclitus' appeal to people who are overly impressed by word play.

I am very open to finding helpful applications of Epicurean philosophy wherever I can find them, but I have never been able to find anything particularly helpful, at least for me, in Marx's analysis. They Utilitarians (as discussed recently in other threads) definitely yes, but not in Marxism.

In fact, though I am surely no fan of conventional religion, that passage almost makes me think that conventional religion might be in some respects more "sane" than Marx himself. I am not sure I can imagine Marx making the kind of remark that Epicurus made in the letter to Menoeceus about it being better to believe the myths of religion than the views of hard determinism.

Post by "Martin" of May 16, 2020 at 3:09 AM

"I am not sure I can imagine Marx making the kind of remark that Epicurus made in the letter to Menoeceus about it being better to believe the myths of religion than the views of hard determinism."

You are spot on with this one. Marx' historicism is a kind of hard determinism. Different from the passivity of other proponents of determinism, Marx recommended betrayal of democracy and gross atrocities in order to accelerate establishment of communism as the predetermined end state of history.

Post by "Martin" of May 16, 2020 at 4:08 AM

I compared the section quoted by Joshua with what I guess is the German original and found the following mistakes in the translation:

"..., which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world" is only formally correct. The German adjective "verkehrt" translated here as "inverted" should be translated here as "wrong", and with that meaning, the phrase makes more sense:

"..., which is a wrong consciousness of the world, because they are a wrong world".

"..., weil das menschliche Wesen keine wahre Wirklichkeit besitzt"

has been falsely translated with

"... since the human essence has not acquired any true reality"

and should instead be translated with

"... because the human essence has no true reality".

(By the way, that section, in which Marx recognizes religion as a human phantasy, was one of two texts which provided rationalization to abandon belief in the Abrahamic god when I was about 18 years old.)

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2020 at 5:33 AM

Very interesting Martin! Those word corrections do make it more clear. I doubt I will ever be much of a fan but his observations on religion may indeed be useful in some ways.

Post by “Cassius” of May 16, 2020 at 8:12 AM

"Opiate of the people" is both unforgettable and very descriptive.

Post by “Don” of May 16, 2020 at 8:21 AM

Thanks, [Martin](#), for those insights using the original German. This demonstrates again how important it is to go back sometimes to non-English original texts, whether written in German, Latin, Greek, etc., to really understand what authors are trying to say.

Post by “Titus” of May 17, 2020 at 6:24 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

He didn't engineer a utopia; he plotted the course of a happy life. If he has an heir among political theorists, we should look not to Marx, but to Thomas Jefferson.

For sure, this is the central criticism of Marx(ism) and also of a lot of other authors on Epicurus: The garden philosopher didn't construct an utopia that tries to change the world politically. But it doesn't mean that Marx wasn't inspired by his intensive reading of writings of Epicurean descent. The only question is to what degree Marx got influenced by Epicurus. But this question is very hard to answer. I would never believe Marx to be an Epicurean, but I believe in the flow of philosophical information. Epicureanism is like the Museo del Prado in Madrid and Marx got inspired by visiting the paintings of the old masters to draw his own picture.

Marxists present(ed) Epicurean philosophy as an incomplete building, but often as a fine one. I had a look on a old book about the central teachings of Marxism-Leninism. Before the author started his critique he only had the honest words on Epicurus.

Post by “Joshua” of May 17, 2020 at 7:53 PM

Oh, certainly it's worth exploring, Titus! In fact we ought to try to know as much as we can about it. Our critics will see a thread toward Marx as a weak point to begin with in unraveling the whole cloth.

Thanks also to Martin for his insight into the German. I should strive for Cassius' discipline when it comes to presenting multiple translations.

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 15, 2024 at 1:55 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

(<https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/w...es/foreword.htm>)

The *catbull* link to the dissertation seems to be broken, so I've formatted and uploaded excerpts from the Second Edition of the *Marx-Engels Reader*, translated by Robert C. Tucker: <https://twentiers.com/marx/>

Post by “Pacatus” of October 20, 2025 at 4:23 PM

My interest (as a once-upon-a-time economist) lies in broadly-defined Marxian ***economic*** analysis, rather than Marxist (and, especially, such as Leninist/Maoist) political movements. That distinction was brought to me, as a graduate student, by a professor who described himself as “Marxian, but not Marxist.” Unfortunately, I had little opportunity to study Marxian economics then.

Even the Nobel Laureate economist Vassily Leontief (who developed input-output analysis at Harvard, and eschewed pure theory - e.g., of neoclassical economics - for reality-based analysis) thought that Marx’s *Capital* was a cogent analysis of capitalism, though Leontief himself was not particularly “Marxian.” Following the “great recession” of 2008, even such non-Marxian economists as Nouriel Roubini - who actually did predict the collapse (unlike some “stopped clock” economists) - revealed that they drew upon Marxian analysis, though not solely.

Of course, there are modern interpretations - and intramural critiques - of that analysis, including, I think, of Marx’s embrace, albeit with materialistic modification, of Hegel’s dialectic. One Marxian analysis of *Capital* that I read described Marx’s dialectic process therein as one of incorporating multiple perspectives on a situation - rather than the simpler thesis-antithesis-synthesis often presented - in recognition that no one has a “view from nowhere” so to speak.

I am currently reading a book called *Marxian Economics: An Introduction*, by Notre Dame economist David Ruccio. How far I will get, I don’t know. 🤔 If I find anything relevant to Epicureanism - say, compacts of social justice - I’ll slap it in here.

[I have generally been in the Post-Keynesian-Institutionalist school of thought - which many think is closer to the original Keynes (of the *General Theory*) than later accommodations to neoclassical thought.]

Post by “Pacatus” of October 20, 2025 at 4:31 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

The catbull link to the dissertation seems to be broken, so I've formatted and uploaded excerpts from the Second Edition of the Marx-Engels Reader, translated by Robert C. Tucker:

Thank you! This is so much better than the translation that I have. Kudos!

Post by “DaveT” of October 21, 2025 at 9:33 AM

I had read an interesting book: *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*, by Bernard Yack (Princeton University Press, 1986) awhile back that touched on Marx's focus on economics as the way for mankind to be free of nature's roadblocks to ultimate freedom (hunger, want, depredation etc.). The discussion traced the different foci of those philosophers on the means to attain freedom as they defined it. Perhaps it might be a decent companion piece to the economic contrasts of Marx to Epicurus.