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Jean-Numa Ducange and Antony Burlaud, eds., *Marx, A French Passion. The Reception of Marx and Marxisms in France's Political-Intellectual Life*. Translated by David Broder. Boston: Brill, 2023. viii + 351 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$198.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9789004533530; \$198.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9789004533547. [Also available: Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024. 352 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9798888902110.]

By Donald Reid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

If Karl Marx is a French passion, as the contributors to this consistently excellent, always thought-provoking book suggest, this is a response to the passion that Marx had for France. He grew up in a Francophile household and lived in Paris as a young man, where he analyzed French society and politics in light of the philosophy he brought with him from Germany. France may not yet have offered him the economic site of a socialist revolution as he envisaged it, but it was the home of the French Revolution, an event that fascinated Marx. He never completed the book he began on the Revolution, but it is not surprising that the most influential Marxist historical narrative in France, taking various forms from Jean Jaurès to Albert Soboul, was of the Revolution as a product of class conflict. Marx wrote brilliant instant histories of the overthrow of the Second Republic and of the rise and fall of the Paris Commune. That Marx and his acolytes in France made the socialist revolution to come in France the necessary concluding chapter of the saga of the Revolution helped assure that French on the left would develop a passion for Marx. *Marx, A French Passion* complicates and develops the multiple dimensions of French interest in Marx, rather than bemoaning it, as François Furet did in the 1970s.[1]

The historians and political scientists who contribute to this collection of twenty-seven essays, initially published in French, are not concerned with presenting the correct interpretation of Marx, the interpretation of Marx that would allow the French to see the light. On the contrary, *Marx, A French Passion* is a work of political, social, and cultural history that examines the dissemination of Marx's thoughts and how they affected the presentation of Marx by political parties that claimed allegiance to him, from socialists to the communists to the extreme left. There are also chapters on the place of Marx's work in the humanities and the social sciences, in feminism and in Catholic political thought, and in situations in which individuals from Africa and China were introduced to Marxist thought in France. The "civilization" that French universalism claimed to provide also offered the tools to critique it. The collection does not argue that there is a French Marxism, but that understandings of Marx's oeuvre have developed as they challenged and advanced French political and intellectual enterprises in important ways.

Marx recognized that the French could have trouble with the first volume of *Capital*. As he wrote to his French publisher in 1872, “I do not take for my point of departure general ideas like equality etc., but on the contrary I begin from the objective analysis of economic relations such as they are. That is why the book’s revolutionary spirit reveals itself only gradually. What I fear, however, is that the dryness of the first analysis may deter the French reader” (p. 27). However, Gabriel Deville’s 1883 collection of passages from *Capital* made it accessible to a broad readership. In the decades before World War I, the socialist Jules Guesde latched on to a few central tenets about exploitation, class struggle, and internationalism in Marx’s thought. In his propagandizing, Guesde helped create a Marx who no longer seemed so abstruse and foreign to the French.[2] However, Guesde’s defense of the iron law of wages led Marx to tell Friedrich Engels “What I know is that I am not a Marxist” (p. 29).

Between the wars, socialists led by Léon Blum retained a place for Marx, often through reference to Deville’s compendium. They cited Marx to chastise members who veered to the right like Marcel Déat and to argue with the communists that the Soviet Union was not Marxist. Not surprisingly, the communists were more concerned than the socialists with instilling in members a familiarity with Marx. In the late 1920s, cadres in the party’s regional schools read *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Civil War in France*, and Deville’s compendium.

Classes for communist militants are the closest that the collection gets to examining what self-identified Marxists who were not party leaders or intellectuals of one stripe or another, and may not have been members of a party, meant by the appellation. There is a family resemblance in the Marxisms discussed in the collection, but these took different forms and levels of complexity depending on their audiences and *raison d’être*. In the 1968 years, texts by Marx became subjects of the baccalaureate exam in philosophy. Marxist professors, like Charles Max in Patrick Schulmann’s film comedy *Profs* (1985), were an oft-remarked presence in lycées. More recently, Marx has been included in the program for the *agrégation de philosophie*.

Essays in the collection show that the Communist party leader Maurice Thorez sought to publish works of Marx previously unavailable in French as part of an effort to rally intellectuals to the party in the 1930s; in the 1950s and 1960s, the party’s publication of a diversity of Marxist works continued this strategy of investing in intellectual spaces. Marie-Cécile Bouju shows how Marx’s texts published by the French party in the 1930s with the goal of making available politically reliable versions were refined as they passed from the translator to the French communist editor to a Soviet consultant, who had the final say.

If the reception of Marx in nineteenth-century France had been impeded by the allegiance of many French socialists to ideas associated with Proudhon and to the republic born of the Revolution, as well as Marx’s association with the hated Germany, the Communist party promoted work in the 1930s that placed Marx in the line of French rationalists beginning with René Descartes and Enlightenment thinkers, who were presented as Marx’s predecessors, rather than as thinkers he refuted.

Thorez reached out to Catholics in 1936 as did Roger Garaudy after the war. The Communist Party was never as anticlerical as the socialists and adopted, in terminology and in practice, elements like the catechism in presenting Marx to its followers. As Raymond Aron noted,

Marx's texts "have the necessary qualities to be endlessly commented on and transfigured into orthodoxy" (p. 286).[3] This encouraged the liturgical quality and the labeling of heresies that characterized the party's ways of dealing with Marx for the rank-and-file. Denis Pelletier offers a particularly rich chapter on the competition and dialogue of the Church and Marxism in France from Thorez's "hand extended" through the adoption of a militant language from Marxism by Catholics engaged in changing society. The Vatican and the Church hierarchy played the policing role of the Kremlin with their followers, intervening when they deemed necessary. This love/hate relationship between the Communist Party and the Catholic Church in France is one of the reasons that French Marxism fostered the passions that it did. However, notes Françoise Blum, if the party had qualities of the Church, the atheism that characterizes Marxism alienated many Africans.

It was in the decades after the war that the passion for Marx blossomed. Marx influenced a wide range of French thought. Some thinkers became *marxisant*, a term introduced after the war that, according to the Google Ngram of texts published in French, had a hundred-fold increase in usage from 1945 to 1981, before experiencing a gradual decline in succeeding decades.[4] Aron, the subject of an excellent essay by Gwendal Châton, dealt in depth with Marx: "We have all become Marxists in a sense," he said (p. 287). Louis Althusser directed those who expressed an interest in Marx to Aron's work. Aron was critical of the central elements of Marx's work, but, in turn, he could criticize Jean-Paul Sartre and Althusser for having only a partial vision of Marx's corpus. In another context, engagement with Marx could be an important way after the war for a figure like the economic historian Henri Denis to atone for corporatist heresies during the Vichy regime.

A couple of the essays devote particular attention to the efforts of Althusser and his students to differentiate the scientific Marx from the humanist Marx with the goal of taking the party in a new direction. As Guillaume Fondu and Jean Quétier show, Althusser and the authors of *Reading Capital* re-translated Marx as part of their development of new interpretations of his work. While socialists and communists used references to Marx to criticize one another, interpretation of Marx constituted the discourse in which Trotskyists, Maoists and others on the far left contested the hegemony of the Communist Party and of Althusserian structuralism.

The Google Ngram shows that there was a three-fold increase in the appearance of "Marx" in texts published in France during the thirty glorious years (of Marx as well) between 1944 and an all-time peak in the mid-seventies.[5] These were the decades when French Marxism changed from being largely a matter of political allegiance and debates on the French left to becoming important in a range of cultural and intellectual fields in France, as well, often setting the terms of discussion within them. During the 1968 years, the paperback revolution helped assure that works by Marx and about Marxism became widely accessible. This was also the time when Karl Marx was enshrined in a Pléiade edition, under the direction of Maximilien Rubel, a Marxist critic of the Leninist party as antithetical to Marx's project, who brought in Jean Malaquais to hone the translations of Marx stylistically. Such competition forced the communists to update the quality of the translations and scholarly apparatuses of its editions of Marx' works.

However, Marxism lost the place it had established for itself in history, sociology, literary theory, and economics in the late 1970s and 1980s. This suggests the close relationship of the

academy and politics in France. François Mitterrand schooled himself in Marxism and learned to refer to Marx during his courtship of the communists in the 1970s but dropped reference to him later when his presidency took another direction. Socialists followed suit during and after Mitterrand's time in office. The frequency of reference to Marx in French texts began to fall in the late 1970s, eventually declining to its 1944-1945 level in 2018, the year that this collection was published in France.

*Marx, A French Passion* is not about what Marx and Marxist analysis reveals about France, but what the French reveal about themselves in their engagement with Marx, in a way that a study of Freud in the United States could do. Marx may be appealing to the French because of the importance he gave to what is particularly French--the Revolution and its sequels--but the centralization of French institutions helped promote the spread and implantation of political and intellectual modes of thought, including that about Marx. Audiences for *Marx, A French Passion* beyond Marxologists and historians of the French left in politics and intellectual life include global intellectual historians and historians of the transmission of ideas who recognize that the confrontation with a body of thought cannot be understood in isolation from the textual, linguistic, political and cultural contexts in which readers, listeners and viewers confront it. There is no conclusion to the volume that might have posed directions for further research. These could include how Marxisms in France compare in both their breadth and nature with those in other national political and intellectual cultures, like those of Italy or the United States.[6] How does the online availability of Marx's works in French translation affect their reception and interpretation in France? Is there a renaissance of engagement with Marx in France, in which, as Antoine Aubert suggests, Marx has become more "critical" and "emancipatory" than "revolutionary" (p. 260), or have we witnessed the passion of Marx and will tomorrow's movements of social and political transformation in France turn for inspiration elsewhere? Among the merits of the essays in this collection is the range of sites they analyze, from translations to classrooms to public celebrations. Future works in this vein will need to be equally adventurous.

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François Dosse, “Marx and French Historians”

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## NOTES

[1] Donald Reid, “François Furet and the Future of a Disillusionment,” *The European Legacy* 10:2 (April 2005): 193-216. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/108477052000330110>

[2] Robert Stuart, *Marxism at Work: Ideology, Class and French Socialism during the Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Robert Stuart, *Marxism and national identity: socialism, nationalism, and national socialism during the French fin de siècle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

[3] On one “endlessly commented” text, see Donald Reid, “Inciting Readings and Reading Cites: Visits to Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 545-70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244307001412>

[4] Google Ngram viewer  
[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=marxisant&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=fr&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=marxisant&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=fr&smoothing=3) (viewed 27 August 2024).

[5] Google Ngram viewer  
[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Marx&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2018&corpus=fr&smoothing=3&case\\_insensitive=false](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Marx&year_start=1800&year_end=2018&corpus=fr&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false) (viewed 27 August 2024).

[6] Catherine Golliau, “Karl Marx en version français [interview with Jean-Numa Ducange],” *Le Point*, 10 May 2018. For Ducange, the United States is “the country that has the greatest number of brilliant Marxist intellectuals and others who are specialists,” but it is also the land that, lacking a Marxist political culture in its parties, elected the two Bushes and Trump.  
[https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/karl-marx-en-version-francaise-10-05-2018-2217407\\_3.php#11](https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/karl-marx-en-version-francaise-10-05-2018-2217407_3.php#11).

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