

Christina Morina, *The Invention of Marxism. How an Idea Changed Everything*, translated by Elizabeth Janik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). 560 pp. ISBN 9780190062736.

[PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION]

Group biographies are nothing new (ask Plutarch) but they are having something of a moment, and the history of socialism offers a rich vein of possible subjects. Christina Morina's new book provides a 'group portrait' of the eight men and one woman who are said to have 'invented' Marxism.

'Marxism', of course, takes many different forms. The variety purportedly invented here is the first stable form of Marxism *after Marx*, the variant of Marxist socialism that became a dominant European presence in the thirty years or so between Marx's death (in 1883) and the beginning of the Great War. Morina calls this 'Marxism' *sans phrase*, but, given that diversity, I refer to it here as 'classical Marxism'. ('Second International Marxism' would also have been a close synonym.)

Classical Marxism, so understood, is connected with, but distinct from, the writings and activism of Karl Marx himself. It is variously, in Morina's characterisation, 'a school, a worldview, a weapon, a doctrine for explaining the world, and a program for changing it'. And it is portrayed here as the creation of the nine protagonists who together formed its 'founding generation'. Listed in ascending date of birth, they are: Jules Guesde (1845-1922); Karl Kautsky (1854-1938); Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932); Victor Adler (1852-1918); Georgi W. Plekhanov (1856-1918); Jean Jaurès (1859-1914); Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924); Peter B. Struve (1870-1944); and Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919).

These nine individuals form a group, albeit a politically and philosophically diverse one, with variegated chronological and geographical locations. They don't constitute an age cohort; the eldest was twenty five when the youngest was born. And they lived and worked in very different circumstances; primarily in France, Austria, Germany, and Russia. Nonetheless, the claim that they form a group is not implausible. The shared characteristics emphasised here include: being amongst the first serious students of Marx's work; self-identifying as 'Marxist intellectuals' of a distinctively engaged kind; helping develop this new '*Weltanschauung*'; and establishing a 'transnational network' (constituted by their personal and political interactions) which sustained and spread that worldview.

In the title of the original German edition – Morina's book was first published as *Die Erfindung des Marxismus. Wie eine Idee die Welt eroberte* (Siedler Verlag, 2017) – classical Marxism was the idea which 'conquered the world'. In this English edition, it is now the idea that 'changed everything'. The title overreaches in both languages, although it might be unfair to blame the author for the hyperbole of their publishers. (This monograph is Morina's second, based on her *Habilitation* at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. Her first book, *Legacies of Stalingrad* (2011), explores contrasting memories of the Eastern Front in post-war Germany.)

Given both the titular emphasis on ideas, and the theoretical reach and ambition of those nine protagonists, it is perhaps surprising that the theories and arguments of the latter are emphatically not the focus of this new book. Their conflicting

theoretical commitments are not much discussed, and that little discussion is not always satisfactory. Indeed, Morina sometimes conveys a certain kind of historians' impatience at philosophical efforts at precision or depth. She declines, at least explicitly, to get involved in evaluative engagement with the theories of her protagonists ('an endless series of theoretical and programmatic quarrels'), and says she is 'tempted' to characterise her own contribution to the historicization of classical Marxism as an '“unideological”' one. The rhetorical caution is evident in her use of scare-quotes, but the self-description remains striking.

Morina is not obviously engaged with the wider historical context either; for instance, there is comparatively little discussion of the social, political, or intellectual circumstances that were conducive to the development of classical Marxism. The importance of that context is not, of course, denied – there are passing references to industrialisation and the expanding authority of science (*Vernwissenschaftlichung*) – but it is apparent that her real interests and attention are elsewhere.

In particular, Morina is preoccupied with the 'lived experience' of this group of Marxist writers and activists during 'their coming of age'. She is concerned especially with the similarities, rather than the differences, operative in the early lives of her individual protagonists. This interest in their overlapping motivations and experiences during their formative years is developed over the three central sections of the book (entitled 'socialization', 'politization', and 'engagement').

'Socialisation' is concerned with some of what is known of the impact of family, schooling, and early reading. This is the realm of their 'pre-socialist' formation, and, in this context, Morina is primarily interested in the importance of education, especially early literacy – more than, say, class background or political events – for the formation of her protagonists. Their material circumstances are noted, but the formative communalities – from childhood through youth to early adulthood – revolve around their education inside and outside of their families. For instance, Morina discusses the early literary enthusiasms of her nine protagonists, enthusiasms often combining both iconoclastic and classical authors from their respective 'national' traditions. Linguistic competences are also noted; all of them spoke four languages or more. And there is a discussion – which felt a little perfunctory to this reader – of what is called the Jewish 'heritage' of Adler, Bernstein, and Luxemburg.

'Politization' is concerned with the emotional and intellectual impact of their individual discovery of, and early engagements with, Marx's writings. Discussion of their 'individual paths to Marx' is divided into two periods differentiated chronologically and geographically. Readers learn about Guesde, Jaurès, Bernstein, Kautsky, and Adler, who were variously living and learning in London, Paris, Zurich and Vienna, between 1878 and 1888. And then about Plekhanov, Struve, Lenin, and Luxemburg, who were located in Geneva, Warsaw, and St Petersburg, between 1885 and 1903. Morina appears keen to resist two alternative accounts of her protagonists' appropriation of Marx; namely, that this reception should be seen as the result, either of a purely rationalistic exercise, or of a quasi-religious 'conversion'. It is rather best understood, she concludes, as the result of a long and emotional experience of illumination; Marx's work 'promised enlightenment, not salvation' to the founding generation of classical Marxism.

'Engagement', is concerned with their earliest explorations of the social world experienced by the members of the group, and the discussion is again organised in two parts. There is an account of Morina's protagonists' initial engagement with the living and working conditions of contemporary workers. Their various portrayals of a 'part-real, part imagined' working class helped consolidate the social scientific ambitions of classical Marxism. However, their exposure to working class life varied considerably; from Adler's extensive and first-hand experience (as a doctor and later factory inspector), to Struve's limited and unproductive contact with ordinary workers. Morina also outlines their specifically political engagement, their more direct partisan attempts at changing the world during and around the Russian Revolution of 1905-6. That latter engagement came from different directions: three of her protagonists were active on the ground (Lenin, Luxemburg, and Struve); five responded as 'distant critics and commentators' (Kautsky, Bernstein, Adler, Guesde, and Jaurès); and one was *sui generis* (Plekhanov emblematically retreating to his study). Their respective theories of revolution, more generally, are said to conform to Iring Fetscher's threefold distinction between 'pseudo-revolutionary parliamentarianism' (Kautsky, Bernstein, Adler, and Jaurès), 'democratic revolutionism' (Luxemburg, Plekhanov, and Guesde), and 'elite revolutionism' (Lenin).

The intellectual and institutional coherence of classical Marxism was not long-lasting; already put under pressure by debates over 'revisionism' and the mass strike, it was fractured by the start of the war in 1914. Morina's substantive discussion ends even earlier, with those disputes and competing accounts of the Russian Revolution of 1905-6 (the one revolutionary event that all her protagonists experienced and engaged with).

The book concludes with some summary reflections and a typology. Based on the nature of their interaction with social reality, and the sources of knowledge that this involved, Morina identifies three character types evident amongst her writers and activists. First, there are 'fieldworkers', who engage with the world primarily through first-hand experience, and whose understanding is often shaped empathetically (Adler, Bernstein, and Jaurès, embody elements of this character type). Second, there are 'adventurers' who engage with the world primarily through the experience of others, and whose understanding often involves outrage rather than empathy (Luxemburg, Guesde, and the young Plekhanov, embody elements of this character type). And third, there are 'bookworms', who engage with the world primarily through texts, and whose understanding is often theoretical and calculating (Lenin, Kautsky, and Struve, embody elements of this character type). Of course, these are ideal types, and real world combinations are also possible. For instance, Morina portrays the 'professional revolutionaries' – that is, Luxemburg, Lenin, Guesde, and Plekhanov – as all various combinations of bookworm and adventurer. None of them, it seems, is a fieldworker.

*The Invention of Marxism* reflects considerable work and contains much historical detail. My critical reaction to it is not straightforward; there are elements that I liked, but I was not quite persuaded by the project as a whole. I offer four observations here (two critical and two more positive).

First, is a critical concern about scope. I started the book open-minded about the potential of group biographies to illuminate, but found myself increasingly hesitant about the scope of this particular example – where the protagonists form such a large

group, with such diverse views and circumstances. Morina's focus is on the commonalities in the lived experience of nine individuals who played this formative role in the emergence of classical Marxism. Commonalities between them are, in due course, unearthed, but they often struck me as a little underwhelming in character.

Take the example of their early formation, discussed in the 'socialization' chapter, covering the shared patterns in 'their transition to young adulthood, their experiences as readers, and their engagement with reality'. For example, they were all raised in 'mostly warm' family homes with an affinity for learning and literature, an interest in current affairs, and a developed sense of curiosity about the world. They similarly shared a self-confidence, and a faith in their own contribution to understanding and changing the world. And the impact of their reading of Marx was non-trivial, although evidence of their first engagement with his writings is often elusive and incomplete. These commonalities – family enthusiasm for learning, individual self-confidence, and the formative impact of Marx – did not surprise or unsettle any of my previous views about this group of socialist intellectuals. The worry, expressed starkly, is that the search for lived commonalities here is successful at a level of generality that is unremarkable in its results.

Second, alongside that quasi-methodological worry about the project as such, I had a nagging substantive doubt about the – oddly both central and marginal – position of Friedrich Engels. In a familiar strand of the wider literature, Engels is the leading candidate for any vacancy for the role of 'inventor' of classical Marxism. (Especially amongst those hostile towards classical Marxism, Engels is often single-handedly blamed for its supposedly simplified and reductive worldview.) I initially thought that Morina might challenge the responsibility claim here, pressing the case for her own nine protagonists. For instance, at one point she calls Engels the 'alleged' inventor of classical Marxism, and whilst allowing that he offered 'dynamic support' to this founding generation, insists that he did so from outside, belonging as he did to another and earlier context. However, that support is also deemed essential, and we are told that her protagonists could not have 'invented' it without Engels's help. In short, without Engels's efforts 'there would be no [classical – DL] Marxism'.

The concern here is twofold. There is a missed opportunity to question the extent of Engels's responsibility for the emergence of classical Marxism. The most that might be said, in this context, is that Morina draws some of the focus away from Engels. In addition, there looks to be a certain tension between her insistence that classical Marxism was the 'generational project' of her nine protagonists, and the idea that Engels was jointly responsible for its invention (that without him it would not exist). At the very least, I wanted a more precise unpacking of the contours of shared responsibility here.

More positively, I also offer two remarks.

First, there is no doubt about the historical importance of Morina's subject matter. It is easy to forget the scale of the European socialist movement in the era of the Second International, and it is important to realise that millions of its supporters learnt their socialism, not from Marx – much of whose corpus (outside of the *Manifesto* and *Capital*) was unpublished or unavailable – but from the popular and polemical writings of this founding generation of classical Marxism.

Not all of these works are much read today, but these popularising interpretations undoubtedly played a formative role in the emergence of a distinctive account of Marx's ideas that remains operative. Morina identifies some of the key texts here as: Kautsky's *Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* (a popular overview first published in 1887); Bernstein's *Social and Private Property* (which appeared as the first volume of the 'Social Democratic Library' in 1885); Plekhanov's *Socialism and Political Struggle* (an early political work published from Geneva in 1883); Jaurès and Guesde's *The Two Methods* (the proceedings of their 1900 Lille debate about socialists working with bourgeois parliaments); Lenin's *What is to be Done?* (the infamous pamphlet on party and class published in 1902); and Luxemburg's *Introduction to Political Economy* (that part of her party lectures on economics first published in 1909-10). The account of Marx's ideas that emerges from this literature is not always accurate or complex, but it was hugely influential, not only at the time, but also in shaping subsequent impressions of his thought.

Second, and finally, whilst I may not have been convinced by the project as a whole, its component elements are often engaging and interesting. Tastes vary, but there are many pleasing and thought-provoking historical details in the book. Readers are introduced to a plump nine year old Jaurès who loved to learn as much as he loved to eat, greedily digesting Latin grammar alongside roast goose. The book also reproduces some striking pages from Kautsky's early sketchbooks (c. 1872-73) full of enthusiastically drawn romantic figures. And there are interesting descriptions of several working spaces: Guesde's study (in 1878) is seemingly decorated with portraits of Saint-Simon and Owen alongside (more predictably) Lassalle; whilst Plekhanov's tastes, in this respect, seem to have been more classical, with Voltaire, Goethe, Belinsky, and Chernyshevsky, joining Engels, on the walls of his study in Geneva.

This kind of attention, alongside the use of illustrations, provides a welcome reminder of the cultural dimension of socialist movements. Those descriptions of working environments, for instance, give a material sense of the intellectual traditions in which some of Morina's protagonists situated themselves. More generally, however, it was this kind of individual detail, rather than the synthesising conclusions, that engaged me most. This suggestion that the book is perhaps less than the sum of its part is not intended to be dismissive. I was rather reminded of confronting a large and ambitious painting whose composition does not quite work, but whose details still charm and provoke interest.

David Leopold