

# Book Review | The First Marx: A Philosophical Introduction by Douglas Burnham and Peter Lamb

*In The First Marx: A Philosophical Introduction, Douglas Burnham and Peter Lamb bring together Marx's early writings in order to shape them into a distinct political philosophy. This is a diligently and rigorously researched work, writes Tarique Niazi, that will serve as a must-have primer for both early and advanced students and scholars of Marx.*



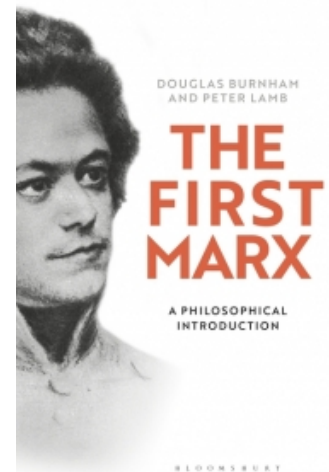
Statue of Karl Marx, Berlin. Picture [fhwrdh/CC BY 2.0](#) licence

***The First Marx: A Philosophical Introduction.* Douglas Burnham and Peter Lamb. Bloomsbury. 2019.**

*The First Marx* is an ambitious attempt at the ingenious reconstruction of Karl Marx as authors Douglas Burnham and Peter Lamb pore through voluminous sources to pick up the fragments of Marx's early writings to sculpt him into a philosopher. Chronologically they concentrate on his oeuvre spanning the 1830s–40s, in particular tapping into such works as *The German Ideology*, *On the Jewish Question*, *The Holy Family*, *Paris Manuscripts*, *The Theses on Feuerbach* and Marx's doctoral dissertation (*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*), in addition to his letters, notes, journalism and a vast number of biographies.

Although literature on Marx's intellectual evolution is overabundant, portraying him as a philosopher or cohering his thoughts into a distinct philosophy is scarce, if not rare. This drought speaks to Marxist scholars' reluctance to regard Marx as a philosopher. Burnham and Lamb, however, take this less-trodden path with their vigorous endeavour to place Marx into the snug corner of philosophy.

This effort may sound ironic in light of Marx's own derision in *The Theses on Feuerbach* of philosophers for overthinking the world at the expense of its transformation. Yet, Marx's early writings do bear the seal of his brief romance with idealism, and its roots in Hegelian philosophy. Burnham and Lamb go so far as to claim that 'had Hegel never written his philosophical works Marx simply would not have had the particular ideas that he had' (70). Marx, nevertheless, came out of Hegel's spell by the time he finished his doctoral dissertation that was partly a critique of Hegel's idealism, which led him to the development of his antithesis: historical materialism.



As a result, many scholars of Marx shun Marx's early writings in favour of those that brightened his later years. They mark out this later Marx as the 'mature Marx' to whom they gravitate. The laudatory adjective of 'mature', though, has an unflattering dialectic. If there is a mature Marx, there also has to be an 'immature Marx'. Burnham and Lamb have inventively eluded this linguistic trap by giving their work a temporally resonant title: *The First Marx*. This title signifies the chronological distribution of Marx's writings, instead of an evolution from 'implied immaturity' to 'assumed maturity'.

Burnham and Lamb therefore mine Marx's early writings for a philosophical account of five of his key theoretical constructs: production; alienation; exploitation; change; and emancipation. They have ordered these concepts on the touchstone of their interconnectivity and resounding reciprocity. Production, Marx writes, defines humans, but alienation strips them of their characteristic as 'species-being' (i.e. social being). Alienation produces and is produced by exploitation, an end of which requires social change to emancipate humanity. The proletariat are the harbinger of social change and emancipation. As the overarching 'universal class', the proletariat's self-emancipation will herald human emancipation.

The philosophical account of the first Marx in the book emerges from these key theoretical constructs. Burnham and Lamb describe Marx's idea of production as his philosophical anthropology, which 'inverts the Hegelian image of humanity as a vehicle for the history of spirit, and instead understands human species being as essentially *concrete, social and self-producing*' (10). As for Marx's concept of alienation, it is central to his philosophy. It is grounded in his idea of production, and threads through his constructs of exploitation, change and emancipation.

In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx sees alienation arise in the very fact of production, when the fruit of human labour becomes the property of another person(s), forfeiting producers' control over their product (i.e. embodied labour), and engendering the dominant institution of private property, which Pierre-Joseph Proudhon famously phrased as 'theft'. In a propertied society, the products human produce become commodified (exchanged for money) and work as a means to an end, rather than being the defining feature of productive humans. This is how the very act of production turns into alienation, as Marx states in *Paris Manuscripts*: 'How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself' (69).

Marx locates alienation in the broader political and economic systems that produce it, and thus infers 'a close, organizational link between alienation and exploitation' (10). Marx analyses the state and political economies as exploitative organisations. The state, in his view, develops as a 'pseudo-community' that attempts to reconcile diverse interests in what is portrayed as a 'natural society'. The presence of a division of labour and private capital, however, contradicts this portrayal. Of particular note here is Marx's theory of human nature that he contends is averse to alienation and exploitation. Contrary to human egoism which is conventionally understood to be the basis of human behaviour, in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*, Marx argues human nature to be altruistic. He explains that human productiveness is carried out with fellow humans because being cooperative and collective is human nature. In these features of human nature, Marx observes the possibility of human emancipation through an end to alienation and exploitation. Burnham and Lamb conclude that alienation in Marx's writings is a philosophical, rather than natural, trait, which is a consequence of social arrangements that humans can collectively escape.

Change is the core idea of Marx's doctoral dissertation on *The Difference Between Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, which Marx deploys to analyse the contradictions of political economies. Burnham and Lamb see in this idea an inverted Hegelianism because it is materialist and an account of humanity as the self-productive 'species being'. The dialectic of change, according to Burnham and Lamb, is both:

an account of the philosophy of history (especially the advent of capital from feudalism) and a philosophy of revolutionary praxis – that is, the conditions under which the exploited (eventually identified as the proletariat) forms itself as an immediate and universal expression of human being (10).

As a philosopher of praxis, Burnham and Lamb argue, Marx searched for the path to human emancipation. In keeping with this search, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Friedrich Engels traced the idea of communism to its preceding versions which they found reactionary, and developed an account of humanity that pointed to the inhuman situation of alienation and exploitation, whose end requires social change for human emancipation.

In the conclusion, Burnham and Lamb test their reconstructed Marxian political philosophy to explain the contemporary human condition: specifically consumerism, helplessness and the ecological crisis. Consumerism, Burnham and Lamb posit, is at the heart of the contemporary ecological crisis which is anchored in human alienation from nature and production (production and nature, in Marxian philosophy, are inextricably linked as all production, to Marx, is transformed nature). To explain the ecological-social relationship, in *Paris Manuscripts* Marx makes a philosophical distinction between human and nonhuman (external) nature, and ties the two in the human transformation of nature for survival, which, to Marx, represents nature's 'use value'; the commodification of nature for profit to him denotes nature's 'exchange value'. In contemporary society, it is the commodification of nature that is alienating humans from nature and production, and fuelling both consumerism and ecological destruction. Burnham and Lamb note that the modern capitalist economy is based on consumerism, and by extension ecological overshoot, leaving the vast swath of humanity 'helpless' (alienated) to reverse either.

In *The First Marx*, Douglas Burnham and Peter Lamb diligently and brilliantly build a temporally resonant Marx out of his early writings, and garner his splintered insights to work as a distinct political philosophy. They have equally productively and generatively applied Marxian ideas to the contemporary human condition in ways that open the door to future research and scholarship on Marx. *The First Marx* will long endure as a must-have primer for both early and advanced students and scholars of Marx.

*This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).*

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