

NOTE: This is a review that I wrote for the *Monthly Review* in 2023. Since the book was already five years old at the time and my review is largely negative, we decided to not publish it in the journal.

## Fusaro on Marx and Epicurus

Diego Fusaro, *Marx, Epicurus, and the Origins of Historical Materialism* (Pertinent Press, 2018), 166 pages, hardcover.

Diego Fusaro argues that in addition to the three commonly acknowledged sources of Marxism (French socialism, Hegelianism, political economy), there is a fourth one, Epicureanism, which has not been paid enough attention to. Fusaro is not the first to discuss the influence of Epicurus on Marx, but a book length treatment of this topic is always welcome.

On the face of it, however, the book is not well made. It is full of minor orthographical mistakes (e.g. p. 68: “define” instead of “divine”), odd formulations (e.g. p. 131: “convincement”), and inaccuracies (e.g. p. 47: Atlantis as the carrier of the world in Greek mythology). Some more proofreading would have been useful. Also, Fusaro only refers to a fraction of the available literature, and he quotes his primary sources by page numbers from (sometimes arcane) translations. Marx’s dissertation, for instance, is quoted from a translation by some Michael George, self-published under the title *Karl Marx: Doctoral Dissertation*, which Fusaro, to add some confusion, lists as “*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, ed. and trans. by George Michael (Manchester: Google Books).” Since when does Google publish books in Manchester? Many readers will prefer references to the standard English edition (CW) or one of two German editions (MEGA, MEW) of Marx’s works, as well as up to date translations of Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus, and Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* (Fusaro does not refer to the latter at all, although it is

in fact one of his main sources).<sup>1</sup> It looks like the the book is not targeted at an academic audience, which will be fine if it is an interesting and instructive read.

Besides going through some passages where Marx mentions Epicurus, Fusaro highlights five topics of interest: (1) Epicurean and Marxian materialism, more specifically (2) atomism, (3) the rejection of religion, (4) the subordination of science to practical matters, and (5) the infamous *clinamen* (swerve) of the atoms and its relation to free human agency.

Concerning materialism, Fusaro claims that for Marx, Epicurus is one of the founders of “a tradition that ... leads directly to Communism” (p. 99). If Marx indeed thought this, one might wonder where he went wrong. There is no obvious reason why materialism, Epicurean or not, could not equally well lead to capitalism. In fact, it does: Our scientific worldview is thoroughly materialistic, and so far, this certainly has not directly or even only predominantly led to communism. So what is it about Epicurean materialism that would make Marx think it directly leads to Communism? Some more convincement would be appreciated.

Is Marx an atomist? Whereas Marx develops and defends a form of materialism, I don't know of any place where he actually gives a fig about whether this materialism is atomist or not. He does not talk about physical atoms at all, except occasionally in his discussions of Democritus and Epicurus. When he uses the word “atom”, it is almost always in a metaphorical sense, like when he speaks of humans as atoms. And in this metaphorical sense, as Fusaro rightly points out (ch. 8), Marx has no sympathies whatsoever for atomism. Humans are not like individual atoms that may join together to form communities; rather, they can be individuals only in a community. So I don't think there is any sense in

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<sup>1</sup> Such readers may instead want to begin with, and follow the references in, Elizabeth Asmis, “A Tribute to a Hero: Marx's Interpretation of Epicurus”, in: Donncha O'Rourke, ed., *Approaches to Lucretius*, Cambridge University Press 2020, p. 241-258.

which Marx could be classified as an atomist. If this is so, Epicurean atomism is not a source of his thought.

As for his attitude towards religion (ch. 4), I am not sure Epicurus should be called Marx's source either. Marx is certainly excited about the Epicurean claim that the gods are nothing but perfect humans, but this is mostly because the idea is, as it were, in the air. Marx reads into Epicurus what already thinks, so in the end the source of Marx's rejection of religion is the Hegelian left, and he superimposes it onto Epicurus.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the status of science, there is some limited correlation between Marx and Epicurus. Both think of science as instrumental for, and thus secondary to practical matters (ch. 7). But this is, I think, where it ends. Marx employs a science of human behaviour, economics, to address political problems. Epicurus uses physics in order to demonstrate that there is no afterlife and that the gods do not care about us, so that we can start caring about more important things. I do not see much commonality between these two projects.

Finally, the swerve (*clinamen*, ch. 9).<sup>3</sup> Fusaro briefly mentions that the word *clinamen* is used by Lucretius, but given that he keeps talking about "Epicurus' *clinamen*", the average reader might be surprised to hear that Epicurus never explicitly talks about the swerve in his extant writings. To be sure, Lucretius introduces the notion in order to elaborate on an Epicurean view, and many others confirm that Epicurus held such a view. Nonetheless, it does matter whether we know a view first or second hand. Given the fascination that the *clinamen* theory has elicited in Marx and some of his readers, more precision and

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<sup>2</sup> As John Foster points out to me, Marx could not have read Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* before writing his dissertation, so my point here is not very strong.

<sup>3</sup> For an instructive discussion of the swerve in Epicurus, see Walter Englert, "Voluntary Action and Responsibility", in: Philip Mitsis, ed., *Oxford Handbook on Epicurus and Epicureanism*, Oxford University Press 2020, p. 221-249.

detail would have been appropriate.

For starters, it is not entirely clear what the swerve is. Lucretius describes it as a minimal, random deviation from the straight downwards movement of an atom, but this could happen in two ways: (1) an atom moves sideways for a bit and then continues to move in the same direction as before, i.e. downwards, or (2) an atom begins and continues to move in a slightly different direction, and no longer perfectly downwards. Given that things fall down and never sideways, the former is more likely, but Marx appears to assume the latter.

The next important question would be in what sense the swerve is random. The swerve is clearly a motion, and as such, it has a definite form (say, “minimal sideways motion”). Further, Lucretius speaks of the swerve as one of the *causes* of movement, besides collision and weight (*De rerum natura* 2.285-6). A cause might produce its effect at a random time, or to a random degree, but if *everything* about what a thing does (time, place, result, degree, ...) were random, it could not be called a cause. Things are causes only to the degree to which what they do is predictable. Random events, insofar as they are random, have neither cause nor causality. Therefore, to the extent to which the swerve is a cause, the deviation it causes cannot actually be purely random. This is admittedly rather mysterious, and it deserves much more discussion than I can give it here. My point is that Fusaro does not even appear to notice that there might be a problem here.

Then, of course, there is the question of how the swerve is supposed to relate to human freedom, as both Lucretius and Marx assert. It should be clear that nothing that is due to mere chance should be called human agency. What we freely choose to do is what we are responsible for; what we do due to some random physical impact is not. To the extent to which Lucretius suggests that every free action involves a swerve, there is considerable interpretative work to do. How could he be satisfied with an account of human agency that appears to identify freedom with mere randomness? And again, if the swerve is not a

random event, but also not necessitated, then what is it?

Lucretius, by the way, is under no obligation to tell us how the swerve makes free agency possible. What he offers is an indirect proof for the existence of the swerve. He asserts (1) that free agency would not be possible if everything was completely determined, that (2) there is indeed free agency, and that therefore, (3) there must be something like the swerve: some indeterministic change in the behaviour of some atom. Lucretius does not argue that humans are free *because of* the swerve. He assumes without argument that they are free, and he argues that they could *not* be free *without* the swerve. This is an important difference. That there could be no free agency without a swerve does not mean that the swerve causes such agency, or that all free agency involves a swerve.

Most likely, Lucretius will see the relation between chance and free agency as Epicurus puts describes it towards the end of his *Letter to Menoecus*:<sup>4</sup> Some things happen by necessity, others by chance, and *still others* are up to us. So there are, according to Epicurus, *three* kinds of causes in the world, namely (1) deterministic ones, such as weight and collision, (2) indeterministic ones like the swerve, and (3) causes that act freely, doing what is up to them. The *third* are the true causes of free actions. Humans act freely if they act “out of themselves”, as opposed to being subject to deterministic or indeterministic external causes. Now of course, since everything consists of atoms, there must be some way in which this third form of causality can be reduced to and arise out of the causality that applies to atoms. There must be some possible story that connects human agency to atomic motion. In book 25 of *On Nature* (which Marx could not have known), Epicurus offers such a story. Roughly, he suggests that we come to be causes out of ourselves by repeatedly making certain decisions and thus building a character that will then reliably determine our future choices. And the initial choices that add up to our character are ultimately only possible because of the

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<sup>4</sup> I take this and the following from Englert.

swerve. If this is true, then there are two types of undetermined agency. One of them is an act of random choice from which we may learn, given proper guidance by others, how to act and who to be. Such random choices are not as such morally significant, that is, since they are due to external causes, we are not actually responsible for them. The other form of undetermined agency is a considered choice, due to a character that is already to some degree formed. Such choices are up to us, and we are morally responsible for them. These are the ones that are important in ethics, and they are at best *indirectly* due to the swerve.

So much for Epicurus. There is a related story to be told about Marx.<sup>5</sup> Marx seems to have a sense for the ambiguous status of the swerve, in between a cause and a random event. This is why he argues that in the swerve, the atom negates its external determinedness (*Unselbständigkeit*, MEW 40:281). Marx thus assimilates the swerve to a cause out of itself. It is not a random impulse that is external to the atom, but rather what Aristotle would call a principle of motion of rest *within* the atom. This is why Marx associates the swerve with free human agency. Seen this way, the point is not that all free agency is due to chance, it is that the swerve is actually more than a random event: it is a motion by which the atom asserts its independence and realizes its own nature.

All this goes far beyond what Fusaro does. I mention it because I think this is the actually interesting stuff that one should discuss in a book about Marx and Epicurus. Fusaro simply takes for granted that the swerve explains human agency, vaguely calling it a “symbol of human freedom” (p. 147), but he does not seem to wonder at all how this is supposed to work in detail. He comes close to contrasting two interpretations of the swerve, as a internal principle of motion and rest (Bloch’s “vital principle”), or as mere randomness (Althusser’s “aleatoric materialism”). But he does not actually see the difference between them.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I follow Asmis.

Fusaro closes by admitting that rather than proposing a solution to an interpretative issue, his book has been an attempt to trace a problem. He is right about that. The book does not answer any of the important questions. If the issue is that people have not paid sufficient attention to Marx' relation to Epicurus, Fusaro's book does not solve this issue. Fusaro goes over the dissertation and later discussions of Epicurus by Marx and Engels, he highlights a couple of topics, but he still does not pay enough attention to the intricacies of Marx's Epicureanism.

Toronto Metropolitan University

Boris Hennig