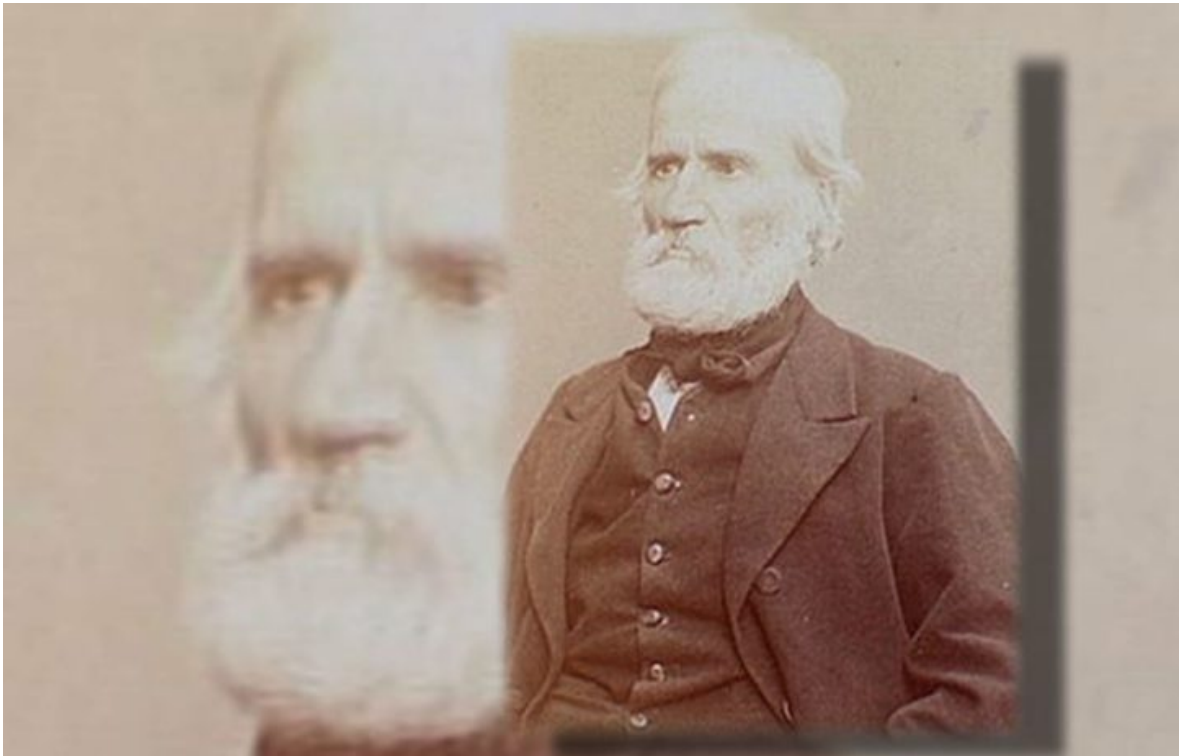


Blanqui and Marx



Louis-Auguste Blanqui.

I was struck by what may seem a minor point in the interesting exchange between [David Harvey](#) and [William Roberts](#) in *Jacobin* this spring. Toward the end of his review of [Marx's *Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*](#), Harvey encourages Roberts to “open up the question of Jacobin republicanism” and elaborate on “the relations between Marx and August Blanqui.” Roberts rather hastily dismisses Harvey’s objection, happily conceding that “it is certainly right that Auguste Blanqui and his followers play no role in my account of . . . *Capital*.”

Like Harvey, I found Roberts’s focus on *Capital*’s political dimension welcome and illuminating. Roberts, for example, clarifies what’s at stake in Marx’s polemics with

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and his relation to Robert Owen. Even if we set the question of Marx's interactions with the broad French revolutionary tradition to one side, however, Roberts's disparaging take on Blanqui raises a few issues that might be worth addressing — if only to give Blanqui himself a chance to contribute to the discussion.

In one sense, I know that these issues are peripheral for both Harvey and Roberts, whose concern is with Marx rather than Blanqui. But for more than a century now, disdain for the French insurgent has become something of an automatic reflex across a very wide spectrum of political opinion, not least among expert readers of Marx, and this entrenched consensus not only limits our appreciation of Blanqui but distorts our understanding of Marx as well, and of revolutionary politics in general.

The Insurgent Marx

For starters, dismissing Blanqui obscures crucial aspects of Marx's own activities during some of his life's most urgently practical moments, notably the revolutions of 1848–1850. Marx's notorious and no doubt uncomfortably Blanquist March 1850 "[Address to the Communist League](#)" best demonstrates the two men's common ground. "While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible," Marx and the other authors of the Address insist that "it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, until the proletariat has conquered state

power” and established itself as the dominant force internationally.

Given these priorities, what must prove decisive is the workers’ “courage, determination, and self-sacrifice,” their capacity to “keep the direct revolutionary excitement alive as long as possible,” to use all necessary force against their enemies, and thereby to secure a genuine and lasting victory. For the same reason, the workers should remain “armed and organized” right to the end of this period of revolutionary transition, and should insist on “the most determined centralization of power in the hands of the state authority [. . .]. As in France in 1793 so today in Germany it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralization.”

It would be easy to [show](#) that this whole program is broadly consistent with Blanqui’s own position in 1848-1850, and in [another well-known text](#) written around the same time Marx concedes that the new “communism” or “revolutionary socialism” that he hoped might rally the French proletariat is one “for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of Blanqui. This socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest,” and so on.

Nevertheless, Roberts suggests that “Blanqui’s conspiratorial Jacobinism was relatively inconsequential and uninteresting.” That’s not an opinion that would have commanded widespread agreement in socialist circles in

either the aftermath of 1848 or in the runup to 1870–71, no more in London’s divided *émigré* community than in Paris itself. It’s also hard to square this judgement with Roberts’s own explicit interest in the Paris Commune of 1871, a political sequence in which Blanqui’s immediate influence — unlike Marx’s — was far from inconsequential.

Roberts further suggests in passing that [Richard Hunt](#) dealt with the Marx-Blanqui relationship “exhaustively and authoritatively” back in the mid-1970s. For all its undeniable merits, however, Hunt’s book refers to virtually none of Blanqui’s writings, and ignores or downplays Marx’s occasional acknowledgement of the French revolutionary’s importance. Indeed, like [Hal Draper](#) in his work on Marx and “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” Hunt’s approach to the topic is heavily influenced by his interpretation of the subsequent (and thoroughly consequential) Marx-*Lenin* relation — in other words, by his determination to distinguish, at all costs, a good democratic Marx from the bad tyrannical Bolshevik. Neatly severing Marx from the figure he long recognized as “the head and the heart of the proletarian party in France” certainly makes it easier to dissociate him from the Jacobin past on the one hand and a Bolshevik future on the other. More broadly, as Roberts urges in *Marx’s Inferno*, it separates Marx from any voluntarist conception of “freedom as collective self-realization or collective self-mastery.”

Even Roberts might concede, however, that this Marx seems at odds with an author who sometimes insists on the distinctive way that, unlike other animals, “man

makes his life activity itself an object of his [will and consciousness](#),” or who, in an important chapter of *Capital* itself, refers to man’s “sovereign power” and capacity to “change his own nature,” and who stresses our ability to determine our own ends and to sustain the disciplined, “purposeful will” required to realize them. Roberts shows little interest in the Marx who understands the transition from capitalism to communism as the “[development of all human powers](#)” and “the [control and conscious mastery](#) of these powers.” Nor does he appear to recognize the Engels who, in a widely read [summary](#) of their position, concludes that “it depends only upon ourselves to subject [social relations] more and more to our own will, and, by means of them, to reach our own ends,” thereby completing “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.” Roberts’s “de-voluntarized” Marx also aligns more easily with the neo-Roman republican conception of freedom as non-domination, an idea that Roberts adopts and affirms in his book, with some qualifications, via Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner. In *Marx’s Inferno*, Roberts, citing Alan Wood, explains that the “far-fetched” reading of Marx he “would most like to displace” is the (neo-Jacobin?) one that “attributes to Marx a notion of freedom as individual and collective self-mastery,” writing:

If this reading is correct, then Marx’s problem is certainly not a republican one, since human freedom understood as self-mastery “requires not only that people should not be . . . subject to the arbitrary will of others; it requires also that the social relations in which they stand should be products of their own will”

Roberts downplays the evidence that Marx might have accepted a version of this requirement, up to a point, in order to read him in less exalted and more respectable terms. Roberts is certainly sensitive to the risks of anachronism, but to suggest that we should approach Marx from the perspective of a fundamentally (though not exclusively) aristocratic tradition — one whose representatives include, to list some of Pettit's points of reference, Polybius and Cicero, James Harrington and Algernon Sydney, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison — may say more about contemporary political theory than about Marx's own priorities.

Revolutionary Theory

Leaving aside the admittedly sterile question of Blanqui's influence upon Marx (or vice-versa), we might want to pause before accepting Roberts's curt claim that "Blanqui produced almost nothing by way of a distinctive theory." Granted, for most of his active life Blanqui paid more attention to conspiratorial organization and direct political intervention than to abstract reflection. He [certainly despised](#) the "impudence and presumptuousness" of "those theorists who treat revolutionaries with contempt, on the pretext that they do not have a definite model or formula for rebuilding and replacing what is in the process of collapsing." He impatiently condemned "Fourierism, Saint-Simonianism, communism, and positivism" for trying, each in their own way, "to erect a new series of penal colonies, in which humanity will enjoy the happiness of being fettered in perfected chains." Blanqui never lost his scorn for those who pretended to

offer theoretical advice to the people of the future, and a characteristic passage from his text on "[Communism, The Future of Society](#)" (1869) gives a nice indication of both his priorities and his writing style, and of the optimism that distances him so clearly from that "antidemocratic elitism" which critics like Hunt and Draper associate with him:

The capitalist doctrine [. . .], in its solicitude, enjoins communism, its young rival, to lay out all the details of the future form of social organization in advance and in full, to resolve every difficulty that it delights in predicting, and to satisfy its curiosity with a building that is completely finished from the cellar to the attic, without omitting a single nail or peg.

"What will the citizen of the new Salente do with themselves, with their time, with their dreams of travel or of repose? Who will do the washing up? Who will sweep up? Who will empty the chamber pots and clear out the latrines? Who will extract the coal from the mines, etc.?" All these impertinent questions deserve a single response: "That concerns neither you nor me."

Ah! What! Here are forty to fifty million people, all highly educated, better prepared than if they had been taught by members of the Academy, all armed to the teeth against violence and ruse, all sensitive to the slightest provocation, as skittish as wild horses. In their midst, no trace of that execrable and execrated thing called a government could rear its head; not a shadow of authority, not an iota of constraint, not a hint of influence! These forty million future capacities will tower head and shoulders above everyone who is alive today —

and yet we are supposed to think that they will need, in order to organise themselves, our advice, our rules, our harsh discipline! We are supposed to think that without us they will not know where to find shirts and breeches, and that, unless we warn them against it, unless we warn them against it, they will try to ingest through their ears things that should be chewed and swallowed! It is too much. As for me, if they were to come and disturb me in my tomb with their question about chamber pots, I would tell them straight: “If you do not know how to plug up your nose, plug your backside instead.”

No doubt Blanqui’s rejection of such social theory, like many aspects of his work, is itself hasty and simplistic, but we should at least recognize that he had both a practical and a principled reason for this stance.

As a matter of principle, and anticipating the sort of position that Rosa Luxemburg, as well as Lenin and Trotsky, would soon embrace, Blanqui insisted that only revolutionary change can promise social justice. Blanqui took this simple point more seriously than any of his contemporaries.

As he wrote in “[The Sects and the Revolution](#),” a popular uprising defies prediction or instruction, and rejects even the most impeccably egalitarian “social dogmatism”: Revolutionaries in no way claim to be able to invent a whole new world on the basis of their knowledge and intelligence alone . . . No! No-one knows or holds the secrets of the future. Even the most clear-sighted among us have only hazy premonitions at best, passing and vague glimpses. Only the revolution, in clearing the terrain, will reveal the horizon, slowly lift the veil, and open up the

routes, or rather the multiple paths, that lead to the new order.

As a matter of abstract theory, no doubt anyone can proclaim that a republic worthy of the name must mean, as Blanqui [wrote in March 1848](#), “the emancipation of the workers . . . the end of the reign of exploitation . . . the advent of a new order that will free labour from the tyranny of capital.” The real problems lie in the fraught and unpredictable sequence of events that might bring about this advent. In the battle between old and new, only the new as such — radical and unexpected change — can clarify the ways forward. “Nothing illuminates the way, nothing lifts the veil of the horizon, nothing resolves problems like a great social upheaval,” Blanqui explains. Only a revolution can lift this veil, he maintains, because the established order’s very establishment makes it resistant to analysis and tends to preserve it from even the most penetrating social criticism. By its nature, Blanqui writes, “the established order is a barrier that conceals the future from us and covers it in an almost impenetrable fog.”

A genuine process of social renewal can only begin once the forces that maintain existing social relations have been fatally undermined, one way or another. “The ideas that would reconstitute society,” [he wrote](#), “will never take shape so long as a cataclysm, by dealing the old, decrepit society a mortal blow, has not freed its captive elements whose spontaneous and rapid fermentation will organize the new world.”

As far as [Blanqui is concerned](#), revolutionary change not only plays the central role in social transformation, but it

also *thinks* more than even the most insightful theoretical account:

All the powers of thought, all the greatest efforts of intelligence are unable to anticipate this creative phenomenon that can break out at any given moment. One can prepare the cradle, but not bring to life the long-awaited being. Right up until the moment of death and rebirth, the doctrines [that will serve as the] bases of the future society, remain vague aspirations, distant and hazy glimpses. They are like a blurred and floating silhouette on the horizon, the contours of which cannot be determined or grasped by human efforts.

During periods of renovation a time also comes when discussion, exhausted, is no longer capable of moving so much as an inch further towards the future [l'avenir]. In vain it tires itself out attempting to lift an insurmountable barrier to thought, a barrier that only the hand of revolution can break. [. . .] Let us destroy the old society — we shall find the new one beneath the ruins. The final blow of the pickaxe will bring it out, in triumph, into the light of day.

In other words, Blanqui does not oppose theory per se. Instead, he enthusiastically embraces the revolution's capacity for inventive thought. "A revolution improvises more ideas in one day," he [wrote](#) in July 1852, "than the previous thirty years were able to wrest from the brains of a thousand thinkers. This is because a revolution transforms a glimmer that once floated like a cloud in the minds of a few into a light that shines forth from the minds of everyone." If then "the ideas that will generate the new society must precede and prepare the

movement,” these ideas as such are obvious, and already familiar, indeed overly so: what alone is transformative, and startling, are the tumultuous sequences that seek to realize them.

As far as political practice is concerned, therefore, Blanqui thinks theoretical disputes matter only insofar as they help orient and consolidate collective resolve. If

“Proudhonists and the communists are equally ridiculous in their reciprocal diatribes,” [Blanqui argues](#), this is partly because:

[T]hey do not understand the immense benefits of doctrinal diversity. Every shade of opinion, every tendency has its mission to fulfill, its part to play in the great revolutionary drama, and if this multiplicity of systems seems baneful to you, you overlook the most irrefutable of truths: “Enlightenment only springs from discussion.” ... These theoretical debates, this antagonism between schools are the republican party’s greatest strength; they are what constitutes its superiority over the other parties, struck with paralysis and petrified in their old unchangeable form. We are a living party; we have movement, spirit, life. The others are nothing but cadavers.

Nonetheless, this movement counts for nothing if it is not itself revolutionary through and through. Theory cannot plan a more equitable future nor can it tell our descendants what they must do. Theory confirms what we must do, here and now, in order to break with an indefensible past.

Revolutionaries, [Blanqui writes](#), “clearly see the shortcomings and evils of the old order. They have put on

trial the guilty parties who are currently blocking humanity's path. They have judged and convicted them. They will execute them." And if social theorists' ideas pose further obstacles, then they too deserve condemnation for the same reason:

After having first brought them into the world, the revolutionaries have now buried all these would-be founders of societies, who have only insulted and cursed them. The parricidal sons have perished as a result of their crime. They are now nothing more than a remote, fading memory.

It's not hard to see why Roberts, like Hunt and Draper, finds Blanqui unimpressive. All the same, a more generous reading of his unavoidably fragmented and interrupted writing might concede that, when he was could put pen to paper, he had some incisive things to say about popular insurrection, military force, the state, the press, religion, indoctrination, scientific method, mass education, universal suffrage, electoral manipulation, and so on. Among other things, he sketched some penetrating (if not proto-Nietzschean) analyses of contemporary appeals to free will on the one hand and positivist fatalism on the other; even his thoroughly [amateur exercises](#) in [speculative astronomy](#) have offered writers like Walter Benjamin and Jacques Rancière some [food for thought](#).

From Theory to Practice

But if Roberts isn't drawn to Blanqui's attacks on high theory, he might be more interested in one of the articles he dashed off as a young man — shortly before the French prison system deprived him of anything

resembling the academic freedom Marx would later enjoy in London. Here, [Blanqui observes](#) that capitalist exploitation relies, as a matter of course, on the systematic “despoilment” of the workers, who are prevented from accumulating the fruits of their own labor:

[S]ince land and capital are sterile in themselves and only acquire value through labour, and since they are also the raw materials that the active forces of society must put to work, the result is that the immense majority of citizens, who are completely excluded from the distribution [partage] of these materials, find themselves forced to toil on land whose produce they do not reap, and to enrich through their labour an idle minority that gathers up everything . . . The honey produced by the bees is devoured by hornets.

Blanqui wrote this little text and several others like it in the early 1830s, a good decade before Marx started to reflect on the conditions of alienated labor (to say nothing of the extraction of surplus value). To underline where Blanqui and Marx overlap and where they diverge, it is worth citing the former at some length.

One of the most interesting passages begins by acknowledging the difference between ancient slavery and modern wage slavery and concludes with an anticipation of communism as the abolition of private property:

After eighteen centuries of a constant struggle undertaken against privilege and for the principle of equality, slavery could certainly not be re-established in all its naked brutality at the very heart of the country [i.e.

France] that bears the brunt of this struggle. But if it does not exist in name, it exists in fact, and the right to property, while more hypocritical in Paris than in Martinique or ancient Rome, is neither less insolent nor less aggressive. Servitude does not mean being the transferable slave of a man, or being a serf attached to his land [glèbe]; it means being completely dispossessed of the instruments of labour, and then being put at the mercy of those privileged groups who usurped them, and who retain through violence their exclusive ownership of these instruments that are indispensable to the workers. This monopolisation [accaparement] is thus a permanent despoilment. From this it becomes clear that it is not one or another political form of government that maintains the masses in a state of slavery, but rather the usurpation of property presented as the fundamental basis of the existing social order. For from the moment a privileged caste passes on land and capital through inheritance, all other citizens, though not condemned to remain slaves of any given individual, nevertheless become absolutely dependent on that caste, since their only remaining freedom is the choice of which master will rule over them. It is apparently in this sense that today the rich are said to provide workers with employment. Yes, undoubtedly they employ them, just as the Romans employed their slaves and the colonisers employ their Negroes, so as to nourish their all-consuming idleness from the sweat of these workers. Even if they agree to leave their victims just enough bread to spare them from death they do so only out of self-interest, just as one might add a few drops of oil onto the cogs of a mechanism to prevent rust from

causing it to break down. Moreover, it is in the interest of the wealthy that the workers are able to perpetuate their miserable flesh so as to bring into the world the children of the slaves who are destined one day to serve the children of the oppressors, and thereby continue from one generation to the next this dual, parallel inheritance of opulence and poverty, of pleasure and pain, that constitutes our social order. When the proletarian has suffered enough and has provided replacements to suffer after him his only remaining task is to go and die in a hospital so that his desiccated corpse can serve to teach doctors the art of healing the wealthy.

From where, I ask, does this horrific degradation of a great people originate, if not from the principle of property that confers on an idle aristocracy the exclusive and hereditary ownership of the instruments of labour which should belong only to those who use them to work?

One obvious difference between Marx and Blanqui is that for Blanqui, the most basic operation at work in the forced extraction of surplus value is indeed self-evident, a flagrant matter of everyday experience that calls for little or no theoretical reflection. What it demands, in his view, is an immediate and practical response. Marx certainly took a more nuanced position on this question, and it would be absurd to claim that Blanqui ever tried to develop a theoretical account of “the command of unpaid labour” that could rival Marx’s monumental critique of capital.

It’s also obvious that Blanqui’s own political perspectives are compromised in a number of ways, not least by an

ugly misogynistic streak that runs parallel to his hatred of religion and spiritualism, especially of Catholicism.

To suggest that some parts of Marx might be usefully read with Blanqui — and indeed with Rousseau and with the Jacobins whom Rousseau inspired — is not at all to say that we should displace Marx in favor of Blanqui. Far from it. But if today, as Harvey suggests and as Roberts agrees, we stand poised on the verge of “a grand battle to redefine Marx’s legacy, both intellectual and political,” then we should consider all the factors that contributed to this revolutionary inflection.