defends her against herself: “You have followed the voice of Nature, who never deceives, but your religion and laws contradict her.”

His cavern, far from the earth whose surface “is soiled by so many crimes,” is a more appropriate place for the disabused Timon. “Every day I bless the happy moment when I was inspired to break with the whole human species and bury myself in the bowels of the earth.” Timon offers Agatha a Rousseauian alternative to life in the caves, that of joining him in going to Zoé’s Canada, “and strolling with me amid beautiful forests, where noble savages will build us a dwelling without luxury, but healthy and tranquil.”

But it was not to be: despite Zoé’s return to France with a miracle cure “composed by the savages of Canada” it is too late: Agatha, as all melodrama demands, dies.

Timon, however, meets a happy misanthropic end, abandoning France and going to live among “the savage forest dwellers.” There he also melodramatically manages to save Saint-Almont from being killed by the Iroquois he was attempting to convert. Saint-Almont is cured of his priestly vocation, Timon lives as happily as an unhappy man can, and Maréchal repeats, to end the novella, that we must “return to the peaceful laws/of Nature: only she is right.”

He died in 1803, and was buried in a religious ceremony arranged by his wife Marie-Anne-Nicolas — who he called Zoé, a believing Catholic.

MITCHELL ABIDOR


The somewhat cryptic title of this book refers to one of the main areas of recent controversy around Marxism. “Classical” Marxism claims to be based upon a scientific theory of history, historical materialism, derived from Hegel, which portrays history as a progressive and dialectical process of development through a series of fixed stages. This has been subject to a familiar barrage of criticisms by numerous contemporary French thinkers according to which Marxism is made into a form of historicism which portrays history as a fixed unilinear process, a Hegelian grand narrative that is supposed to
give a teleological guarantee of progress, and which cannot recognize the existence of unique “events,” ruptures and breaks in history. This has become such a familiar litany of charges that it is usually simply gestured at. One of the distinguishing features of this book is that it describes and discusses them in a detailed and critical way.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first deals with classical Marxism, and focuses on Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. It concentrates particularly on the idea that development occurs through a dialectic of quantitative and qualitative changes in which incremental and quantitative changes give rise eventually to a radical, qualitative change. This was enshrined by Engels as one of his three “laws of dialectic,” and by subsequent Marxists in the classical tradition, including Lenin. Coombs follows Althusser in arguing that this philosophy assimilates breaks and ruptures to “the cumulative, teleological structure of the dialectic” (38), and hence that it “cannot think discontinuous events” (92). It leads to a “fusion of evolution and revolution” (43) which has the political effect of negating the revolutionary significance of Marx’s philosophy.

Faced with the awkward fact that Marx himself uses these Hegelian ideas in some very prominent places, Coombs resorts to the time-honored tactic of blaming Engels for them. Following Althusser, he simply asserts that Marx’s references to the dialectic of quantity and quality are mere marginal and insignificant “rhetorical gestures” and “speculative flourishes” (57). Lenin, too, espoused these ideas and he too is duly accused of capitulating to evolutionism, mainly on the grounds that he advocated Taylorist methods to increase production in Soviet factories (68).

The second section of the book describes some of the main sources of these ideas, particularly in Althusser and Badiou. There is also a chapter on Quentin Meillassoux, but this seems somewhat marginal since there is little discussion of either Marxism or the philosophy of history in his work.

Coombs provides a good account of this body of work, but what is particularly noteworthy is his critique of it. He endorses Althusser’s and Badiou’s aim to rid Marxism of Hegelian dialectic, and to “place discontinuous events at the heart of historical intelligibility” (9). In his early work, Coombs argues, Althusser made important and necessary criticisms of the sort just outlined of classical Marxism. But in his later work he “took a wrong turn in the right direction” (164) when he criticized his own “rationalist excesses,” but then he came to reject the very idea that philosophy can provide knowledge, and ended up with what he called “aleatory materialism,” a philosophy of mere contingency which makes no attempt to understand historical processes (110). Badiou follows a similar path and also ends up with “a self-referential rationalism that cannot transcend the arbitrariness of its construction” (138).
Coombs thus presents classical Marxism and recent French theory as polar opposites: classical Marxism emphasizing historical continuity, the French theorists discontinuous "events." The former leads to evolutionism and gradualism, and obscures or denies the revolutionary dimension of Marx's ideas; the latter leads to the dissolution of history into a series of disconnected and unintelligible events and the abandonment of any science of history. Neither pole is satisfactory.

In the final part of the book, Coombs looks for a middle path between these extremes. He is determined to retain the idea of a science of history. He wants to understand how gradual development and sudden breaks can be connected, and he argues that useful material for this can be found in complexity theory and the concept of emergence.

It has long been recognized that studies of biological evolution may shed light on historical processes. Marx welcomed Darwin's work for this reason, and Marxist thinkers have taken an interest in this field ever since. Coombs is particularly impressed by work that has created computer simulations of emergent phenomena. What these simulations demonstrate is that gradual changes continued beyond a certain point can give rise to the relatively sudden development of radically new forms.

"Emergence" in this context is precisely the same phenomenon as Hegel and Engels describe in the dialectical language of quantity–quality leaps. Hegel's logic is clearly not the last word on the subject; no sensible Marxist would claim that. Contemporary work in complexity theory may be useful in taking this understanding forward. It has created some new instances of emergence and, importantly, it has demonstrated that they can be generated artificially. This will aid the study of conditions that lead to such transitions. However, there is no reason to think that it will lead to a refutation of Hegelian dialectic. Quite the contrary, it seems to confirm how valuable and penetrating was Hegel's understanding of processes of change.

It seems to me that Coombs is unduly impressed by these computer studies. This goes together with an uncritical deference to the natural sciences and mathematics more generally, evident in this book and deeply entrenched in the Althusserian strand of recent French philosophy. Thus, Coombs devotes lengthy and obscure sections to Hegel on the mathematical infinite and Badiou on set theory, which add little of substance to the overall argument as far as I can see. A strong theme in Althusser's work is his insistence on the autonomy of science. Coombs sees this as a reaction to the political interference in the sciences in the Soviet Union which culminated in the Lysenko Affair. This was indeed disastrous. However, to react to it by asserting the absolute autonomy of science, and an absolute distinction of science from ideology, is hardly satisfactory. A subtler and more nuanced approach is needed. Science and mathematics do have a very considerable measure of
autonomy, but in the end this is only relative. There is an important kernel of truth in the classical Marxist view that all ideas, including the sciences and mathematics, are social and historical products, and this too should be acknowledged. Regrettably, there is little discussion of these issues here.

For all that, however, this is a valuable and important book. For the most part it is written in a clear and attractive fashion. It gives a good overview of this important field of issues; and, most importantly, it seeks to bring Marxism and recent French theory back into a dialog which has been lacking for a long time now, and that is to be welcomed.

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There would seem to be no reason for another biography of Eleanor Marx after Yvonne Kapp’s exhaustive two volumes (1972, 1976). Of course the chronology is identical, mostly so are the sources, although Holmes only once refers to Kapp as “a valuable guide.” Yet this work stands on its own because Holmes presents Eleanor Marx as a fighting socialist feminist, who was nevertheless tragically enmeshed in the patriarchy of her time. Where Kapp’s style was chatty and slightly antiquated, Holmes’ is passionate and vividly contemporary, perhaps to reach millennials, and she indulges in uninhibited support or shaming of Eleanor’s family, friends and enemies. Holmes is no academic historian, bleached of emotion into an intended objectivity.

Born in 1855 to Karl Marx and his wife, Jenny von Westphalen, Eleanor — whom Holmes consistently (and annoyingly) refers to by her childhood nickname Tussy — became the favorite daughter of Karl Marx, who homeschooled her. Besides his towering intellectual influence and that of her “second father,” Friedrich Engels, Eleanor was significantly shaped by the women in her life: her mother, her “second mother,” the life-long family servant Helen (Lenchen) Demuth, and Engels’ companion Lizzy Burns. But while family could be a shelter and its strong women models for life, it could