

KORSCH, KARL. Briefe 1908–1939. Hrsg. von Michael Buckmiller, Michel Prat und Meike G. Werner. Briefe 1940–1958. Hrsg. von Michael Buckmiller und Michel Prat. [Karl Korsch Gesamtausgabe, Band 8, 9.] Stichting beheer IISG/Offizin, Amsterdam, Hamburg 2001. 1740 pp. Ill. € 149.00; DOI: 10.1017/S0020859003041178

In 1978, Michael Buckmiller from the University of Hanover started editing the complete works of Karl Korsch. By then, Korsch was already a legend; a lot of his writings had been republished in various forms, especially those from the years 1918–1922 when he was actively engaged in the struggle for socialization and soviet (or workers' councils) democracy in Germany. He gained further respect as a leading critic of both versions of Marxist orthodoxy, Leninism and Kautskyanism, whose deeply rooted affinity he exposed, in spite of official polemics. His writings, especially his small volume on Karl Marx published in English in 1938 for the first time, were rediscovered and devoured by young aspiring neophytes of Western Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s. For many young intellectuals – particularly in Germany – he became the paragon of a critical Marxism. His friendship and collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, a companionship that lasted from the 1920s until Brecht's death in 1956, earned him further fame as the "teacher" of many left-wing intellectuals and artists in Weimar Germany.

Buckmiller was the first to make full and good use of the Korsch papers at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Since 1978, six volumes have been published, all of them with the active support of the IISH. Volumes 8 and 9 of the "Complete Works" edition will be followed soon by volume 4 (in two parts), containing the writings from the 1920s, when Korsch was the leading theorist of the KPD and became one of the most outspoken critics of communist and Comintern politics on the left. Volume 7, to be published in 2004, will contain Korsch's various writings from the period when he lived in the USA from 1936 until his death in 1961. Many of these texts, in particular a great number of fragmentary drafts for articles and outlines as well as notes for books planned, are being published for the first time (they include the texts relating to Korsch's planned "Buch der Abschaffungen", dealing with the possible future of socialism). The final volume according to the publishing plan, volume 6, will be devoted to Karl Korsch's book on Karl Marx, published for the first time in English in 1938, in Morris Ginzberg's series on "Modern Sociologists", and republished in New York in 1963.

The two volumes reviewed here provide a lot of first-hand and first-rate material not only for a biography of Karl Korsch himself but also for a better understanding of the life and times of the intellectual left in the twentieth century. Of course, it is not complete. A lot of the correspondence was lost when Korsch was forced to leave Germany in 1933 and during his long years of exile; some letters, regarded as too personal were destroyed after his death. Nonetheless, more than 600 letters, both from the collections of the IISH and from various private collections, are published here – most of them for the first time. The

majority of the letters (more than two-thirds) date from 1933 or later, the correspondence ending in 1958 when Korsch fell incurably ill and had to be hospitalized. There are considerable gaps in the correspondence, especially in the 1920s, the years when Korsch was most active both inside and later, after being expelled in 1926, outside the Communist Party. There are just five letters from 1924, none from 1925, and just one from 1926. All the letters come with an extensive and meticulous commentary by the editors, referring to names and events as well as books and manuscripts. Volume 9 provides a chronological list of all the letters published, as well as an index of all the addressees and recipients of the letters and a general name index.

For anyone interested in the intellectual history of the German left in the twentieth century, volume 8 provides quite a discovery. It documents at length Korsch's involvement as a young student and budding jurist with neo-Kantianism and the movement for life reform (*Lebens-reform*), especially the "free student movement", which propagated democratic self-government of the universities as well as various other forms of associative democracy (in schools, in towns and villages, and even in monasteries). Nearly 100 letters written between 1908 and 1919 by Korsch to Walter Fränzel, the intimate friend of his youth, highlight these hitherto unknown idealistic beginnings of his intellectual development. During World War I the friendship was broken.

We learn almost nothing new from the scant remains of his correspondence about Korsch's activities during the November Revolution, when he joined the USPD and served on the first government commission dealing with the issue of the nationalization (*Sozialisierung*) of German industry, soon becoming a prolific writer on issues of nationalization and the theory of socialism, publishing his first major works on Marxist theory while starting a political career as a Member of Parliament and serving as Minister of Justice in Thuringia for a very brief period (which became fatal to his academic career as a professor of law at Jena University). The story of those years is told in the introduction to both volumes by Michael Buckmiller. For the period 1929 onwards, more letters have been retrieved and we obtain a better and more detailed view of Korsch's intellectual life and his activities as a theorist and teacher of the left without party affiliations. By then, he had been expelled from the Communist Party, lost his seat in the *Reichstag*, published two of his major works (*Marxismus und Philosophie* in 1923 and his lengthy critique of Kautsky's magnum opus, *The Materialist Conception of History*, in 1928), and become engaged as a scholar and teacher in various intellectual circles of the left, including the Philosophische Gruppe and the Studienzirkel "Kritischer Marxismus". His friendship and long-lasting collaboration with Bertolt Brecht as well as with other artists and writers dated from those years, when Berlin was something of a cultural and intellectual metropolis. The bulk of the correspondence deals with Korsch's life in exile, from 1933 onwards.

From the very beginning, he contributed dozens of reviews to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, although never a longer article – actually, he had been one of the founding members of the Institut für Sozialforschung, remained close friends with Felix Weil, and corresponded with Friedrich Pollock, Leo Löwenthal and Max Horkheimer for many years, although he remained an outsider. Why Korsch stayed on the sideline of the institute's activities even after it had been moved to the USA, where he himself arrived in 1936, is not easy to explain. In terms of intellectual concerns and inclinations, he had a lot in common with Horkheimer, and, to a lesser degree, with Adorno. Since the early 1920s he had been struggling with the problem of Marxism and philosophy and trying to re-establish the true and original sense of Marx's "materialistic" point of view as well as the

scientific content of “dialectical” reasoning as expounded in Marx’s work. Pursuing his studies, he had become a specialist in advanced mathematical, statistical methods in the social sciences and had acquainted himself with the actual state of the art of methodological debates – the positivism of the “*Wiener Kreis*” as well as American pragmatism. The only specialization he actually missed was economics, although he had prepared a new edition of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* in 1932.

In spite of his outstanding qualifications and various efforts, he never managed to attain a tenured, regular job at any university in the United States. For a short period only, between 1943 and 1945, he taught at Tulane University in New Orleans – at the level of assistant professor. According to the US standards valid then, but not today, he was simply “too old”. So he became something rather German: a “private scholar” (*Privatgelehrter*), although in a US environment, living on a small grant from the Institut für Sozialforschung until 1951 and supported by his wife, Hedda Korsch, who worked as a Professor of English at several US colleges. As he lacked a regular public of students and colleagues, many of his letters became rather lengthy essays in the guise of personal letters – especially his letters to Paul Mattick and to Paul Partos. With both, although to different degrees, he shared many of his plans and thoughts and collaborated regularly for many years. He renewed his friendship with Ruth Fischer – the leader of the KPD who had been expelled in 1926 like Korsch himself. Working for Harvard University, Fischer became a renowned writer on Stalinism and Soviet politics. Again, Korsch became her highly esteemed adviser and discussion partner in matters of Marxist theory and politics; with a few breaks, they corresponded from 1950 to 1957.

Korsch’s most prominent correspondent, of course, was Bertolt Brecht, who regarded himself as Korsch’s disciple and addressed him as “the teacher” or “my teacher”. Hardly a dozen letters (from 1934 to 1948) from Korsch to Brecht (plus some to Brecht’s son, Stefan) could be retrieved. In the last letter in this edition, from Korsch to Hans Bunge, dated 28 June 1958, he gave a short outline of his collaboration with Brecht, which lasted more than thirty years. At times, in the early 1930s in Berlin and in exile in Sweden, they worked and lived rather close together. Korsch was quite frank in his correspondence with his famous friend, expounding his ever-changing plans as well as his rather persistent theoretical views to Brecht at length. In his relation with Brecht, Korsch remained the teacher – as Brecht acknowledged (“you will always remain a teacher, as long as you live”). Some of Brecht’s many unfinished projects, including his novel on the life of Julius Caesar and, from 1945 onwards, his various efforts to rewrite the Communist Manifesto in verse and to present it as a piece of didactic poetry (*Lehrgedicht*), were warmly supported by Korsch, who spared neither his criticism nor his – generally detailed and lengthy – advice when it was asked for (see, for instance, his letter to Brecht, dated 15 April 1945, in volume 9, pp. 1092–1099). They disagreed on many issues of world politics – especially the changing character of the Soviet regime and the role of the USA in the postwar world – but did so like gentlemen, always using the formal “*Sie*” in their correspondence until the end.

Korsch’s book on Marx, written in German and published in English in 1938 in the author’s own translation, had its greatest impact on the neo-Marxists of the 1960s and 1970s, long after its author’s death. If there is anything specific about this new wave of “Western Marxism”, it is the insight that Marx’s lifelong project, the critique of political economy, was meant to be and actually was something much more radical than a socialist textbook on economics – an insight largely due to Korsch. As we can now see from his letters, Korsch had already started a “rethinking Marxism” project of his own and largely

on his own in the 1940s. His later projects all revolved around plans, outlines, and drafts for another major work on Marx and the history of Marxism, a book in which Korsch wanted to demonstrate the full power of the methodical rule he had already put forward in his *Marxismus und Philosophie* of 1923: in order to understand and evaluate the strengths as well as the limits of Marx's achievements as the founding father of a new social science, one has to apply the "materialist conception of history" to Marx himself and to Marxism itself. A historical materialist explanation of Marxism, its rise, its crises, its fall and its possible resurgence in different guises was the one great project of Korsch's intellectual life from the early 1920s onwards. In the course of this project, he realized how many and how large the "unsettled problems of Marxism" were that Marx had left as part of his rich legacy.

In this respect, Korsch's correspondence with Roman Rosdolsky is most interesting and one of the most remarkable discoveries we owe to these new volumes. Their correspondence started in 1950 and lasted until 1954 (there are some thirty letters from Korsch to Rosdolsky, published for the first time in volume 9, and there are more letters from Rosdolsky to Korsch in the Rosdolsky papers at the IISH, which will be published soon). Both were Marxist scholars in exile, both were excluded from universities and research institutes, and both were seriously and for the first time studying Marx's manuscripts of 1857–1858 – first published in the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1941, though their publication went largely unnoticed. These long and detailed (but unfinished) manuscripts, which became familiar as *Grundrisse*, the very first version of which was later to become Marx's *Capital*, were crucial for the revival of serious scholarly interest in Marx's writings in the 1960s and later. Theodor W. Adorno and many younger scholars in Germany discovered them and realized that they were as important for an understanding of Marx's work as the discovery of the Parisian manuscripts of 1844 some thirty years earlier. Although Korsch did not produce anything like Rosdolsky's seminal study on the *Grundrisse* (Rosdolsky's *Making of Marx's "Capital"* was published posthumously in 1968), he was one of the first Marxist intellectuals to understand fully its importance – especially with respect to the unsettled problems of Marxism. The correspondence between Korsch and Rosdolsky again documents one of the many voluntary collaborations of his scholarly life, Korsch commenting at length on Rosdolsky's work in progress, while explaining the changing outlines of his own unfinished magnum opus on Marxism and telling his friend about his own efforts. Some of his letters to Roman Rosdolsky seem rather prophetic as regards the future development of Western Marxism: Marxism has become "literature", hence a potential victim of academic fads in the style of American social science. The philosophers are back again: while Marx was trying to get away from philosophy, and succeeded to a large extent, Lukács, Marcuse and their followers tried to turn this whole process again and to retranslate Marx's theory into a Hegelian style and language (see Korsch's letter to Roman Rosdolsky, dated 17 July 1953, in volume 9, p. 1532).

Much of Korsch's correspondence from 1933 onwards is an ongoing comment and self-reflection – in correspondence with friends – on his plans and projects and the various drafts and outlines for books never finished; he also constantly refers to his work on articles and reviews. These two volumes certainly make one eager to reread Korsch. They also whet our appetite for the many drafts and unpublished manuscripts of Karl Korsch that will be published in volume 7 of the present edition. In fact, they leave us craving this next volume.

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