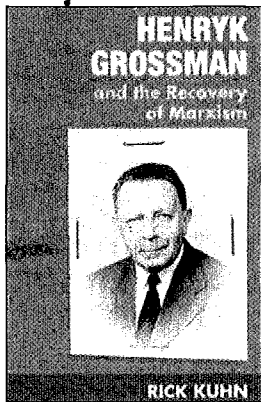


Full Marx



Henryk Grossman was a communist activist and academic, who was born in Kraków in 1881 and died in Leipzig in 1950. Grossman was one of the most original and important theorists of Marxism in the first half of the 20th century, yet he is barely remembered within either the left or academia, in sharp contrast to his contemporaries like Geörgy Lukács or Antonio Gramsci.

Rick Kuhn's intellectual biography recovers Grossman for Marxism, powerfully making the case for his significance both historically and today. It is a great work of scholarship, drawing on primary sources dispersed in archives along the complex diasporic routes which Grossman traversed: from Habsburg Galicia to imperial Austria, back to Poland, to pre-war Germany, Paris, London, New York and back to East Germany. Kuhn's sources – reflecting both the transnational experience of Ashkenazi Jewry and the internationalism of the Marxist milieu – are in Polish, German, Yiddish and English.

This biography is also a great work of *Marxist* scholarship. Although its focus is on one man's life, it sees this life enmeshed in wider webs of social reality: in history as the ebb and flow of class struggle. We get relatively little sense of Henryk the man, the husband, the father; instead we get Grossman the organic intellectual.

For many Jewish Socialist readers, the most interesting part of the book will be the description of Grossman's involvement in the Yiddish workers movement in Galicia before the First World War. Born into the assimilated, Polish-speaking Jewish bourgeoisie, Grossman became a Social Democrat and immersed himself in the Jewish proletariat, learning Yiddish for this purpose. Kuhn describes Grossman becoming an 'organic intellectual' of the working class during this period – a term he takes from Gramsci, who contrasts the labour movement's organic intellectuals to the institutionalised 'traditional intellectuals', who he saw as the 'filing clerks of the ruling class'. The process of immersion in the Yiddish masses by intellectuals from more privileged classes was a feature of the historical Jewish workers movement, and is worth exploring more thoroughly than Kuhn does. I remain unconvinced that Grossman, bourgeois-born and academic by profession, remained an 'organic intellectual' of the proletariat beyond his brief periods of grassroots party activism.

The growing Jewish socialist movement before the First World War had a complex place in Austro-Hungarian Social Democracy. The Austro-Marxist leadership of the 'General' (empire-wide) party developed a sophisticated theory of national cultural autonomy that led to a federalised party. Jews, however, were not recognised as a 'nationality', and so were expected to assimilate to the dominant nationality. In Galicia, this meant that the party (the

Polish Social Democratic Party – the PPSD) was dominated by an orientation towards Polish nationalism and an increasing convergence with the right-wing drift of the Pilsudski's Polish Socialist Party across the border in Prussia and the Kingdom of Poland. Proletarian Galician Jews in the party, with Grossman emerging as their theorist and spokesperson, took up the Bundist idea of Jewry as a nationality, deserving of the same autonomy, and eventually broke with the PPSD to form the Jewish Social Democratic Party (JPSD), which was never recognised by the General party.

The case of the JPSD exposes the limits of the Austro-Marxist account of nationality. Their idea of national cultural autonomy was enormously influential on Jewish movements like the Bund, Dubnow's folkists and Chaim Zhitlovsky's Yiddishism – with the key difference that these, like the young Grossman,³ saw Jews as a *nation* rather than simply a faith group that could assimilate into other nations. The conceptual language of that period had no way of thinking about *ethnicity*, something less metaphysically grounded than a nation but bound by a sense of common destiny which was not purely religious.

Although Grossman left Galicia and moved away from this perspective, developing a more orthodox Marxist position similar to Rosa Luxemburg's SDKPIL, he 'never formally repudiated the Jewish religion ... [On leaving Kraków], Grossman continued his formal affiliation to the Jewish community. For official purposes, this remained the case for the next 40 years [i.e. until his death].' After the First World War, he worked in the Statistical Office in the new Poland, but broke with it when it sought to fudge the census results to obscure the size of the Jewish and other non-Polish peoples in the new state – a re-run, in some ways, of his conflict with the Austro-Marxists, who were similarly wilfully blind to Jewish peoplehood.

It was in the next phase of his life, affiliated to the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, that Grossman developed his unique contribution to Marxism: his recovery of Marx's theories of political economy. To get a full measure of his achievement, you need to read Kuhn's book but, in short, what Grossman did was show that Marx's method was always to start with the most simple, general features of capitalism, and then build a model that was increasingly able to account for the concrete complexity of its specific instances. Thus for Grossman the heart, the essence, of capitalism is the relationship of exploitation involved in the extraction of profit from workers. The limit, therefore, of the self-expansion of capital is the resistance of the workers; the inherent contradictions and antagonisms involved in this lead to the tendency of the capitalists' rate of profit to fall. Capital constantly innovates to stave off this eventuality – by globalising the capitalist

HENRYK GROSSMAN AND THE RECOVERY OF MARXISM

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market, by shifting into finance capital – but these only displace the coming crisis. (Reading this book as the credit crunch bit was a salutary experience!)

Grossman was a committed Leninist who joined the Communist movement in Poland after the October Revolution – at great personal cost: spells in prison and the end of his marriage. Kuhn portrays Grossman's recovery of Marxist economics as comparable to Lenin's recovery of Marxist politics and Lukács and Karl Korsch's recovery of Marxist philosophy. For me, Kuhn is absolutely right to put Grossman's achievement on this level, but I also believe that Grossman's theory opens up the possibility of a more radical reclaiming of Marxism than Lenin's. Lenin's politics ultimately disenfranchise the working class, handing the task of their emancipation to a vanguard party of intellectuals who alone are able to develop a correct consciousness of capitalism (in contrast to the workers, who remain trapped in trade union consciousness). Grossman, in contrast, illustrates Marx's dictum that only the proletariat, with its 'radical chains', can break these chains. By focusing on capitalism's essence, the production process, rather than its surface appearance, market relations, Grossman demonstrated the class power of the proletariat.

The radicalism of Grossman's economics was at odds with his political practice after 1918. With a few blips, he remained loyal to (if not always active in) the Communist movement, even as it moved further from Leninism in the Stalin years; indeed, his decision

to move to totalitarian East Germany after the Second World War consummated this loyalty. Kuhn is very good on how Stalinism maintained its grip on such a creative intellectual. In some ways, cocooned in academia, it seems as if Grossman compartmentalised his worldview. In his area of expertise, economics, he defended his radical theory against Stalinist orthodoxies; in other areas, he deferred to the Party's wisdom. The portrayal of his almost childish enthusiasm for the new proletarian GDR, and then of its gradual purging of all his closest associates after his death, is heartbreaking.

In describing the final years of Grossman's life, as an exile from Hitlerism in New York and then in Stalinist Leipzig after the war, Kuhn's biography allows us to see a more personal side to Grossman. The importance of friendship (glimpsed mainly through the accounts of his close friend, the writer Christina Stead) emerges; as with other émigrés (such as Hannah Arendt), friendship clearly had a key role in sustaining him in exile. His profound grief at the death of his sons and wife in the Holocaust comes across as a powerful theme too: although his wife and sons are more or less absent from the biography, their haunting presence in death is striking. The politics of friendship and, above all, the shadow of the Shoah as a scar across the Jewish experience of modernity are two things that exceed a class analysis and demonstrate the limits of Marxism as a tool for understanding our time.

Ben Gidley