CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: The Communist Manifesto A catechism becomes a manifesto

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The Communist Manifesto is the most translated, most widespread and most well-known of all the writings by Marx and Engels. It was first published early in 1848, just before the wave of revolutions all over Europe. Its immediate influence was, however, limited. It was only some decades later that it formed the first step in almost all introductions to the political theory of Marx.

In 1847, Marx and Engels had gained a crucial base of support in London, where the international Communist League had it headquarters. Both Marx and Engels lived at that time in Brussels. Marx was seen as the great rising star by the leading personalities in the London group, which had just changed its name from the League of the Just to the more militant League of Communists. Now, they needed a declaration of their political intentions. Marx was the man they choose for this task.

Engels had, however, already written a draft of around 20 pages on his own, called 'The Principles of Communism'. But there would be no final version without Marx's contributions. Engels also realized this, and there is nothing to indicate that Marx himself held any other opinion.

But Engels's draft would form the basis for the final text. It had the form of a traditional catechism, with questions and responses like 'What is communism?' and 'Will it be possible to bring about the abolition of private property by peaceful methods?' The programs of many radical groups had looked like this for a great many decades. As late as 1884, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg could write *A Small Catechism for the Underclass*. The Swedish historian of ideas Adrian Velicu has shown how

secular catechisms flooded the market during the French Revolution.[1] The form had obvious advantages: it was clear and simple, and it was well-known to gen*e*rations of women and men who had in years gone by been primed with various Christian catechisms. For Engels, with his strict religious upbringing, it was certainly a particular delight to use it for purposes other than Christian edification.

At the same time, the long series of questions and responses sounded both stiff and repetitive. Engels himself realized these limitations. In a letter to Marx, in which he enclosed his draft, he proposed that the final version should not be a catechism, but that the thing (*das Ding*) should be called a manifesto instead. The reason he gave was that historical development needed to be taken up, and it would be difficult to keep to such a rigid form. Nor was he satisfied with what he himself had achieved. The result was 'quite unsuitable', he said bitterly.[2]

It is entirely too harsh a judgment. As always, Engels had written a clear and lucid text that flowed elegantly and naturally. On the other hand, it is not at all on the level of the final *Manifesto*. Comparing Engels's 'Principles'with the final text, both in form and in content, is of some interest.

There was actually also another reason to speak of a 'manifesto' – a reason Marx and Engels themselves gave in the preface to a new German edition published in 1872. The Communist league had been a secret organization, but it would now no longer be so. It was time to *manifest* – to make clear what the organization stood for.[3]

Linguistically speaking, the *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (Manifesto of the Communist Party) bears the stamp of Marx in all essentials. Engels was also prepared to ascribe the fundamental ideas to Marx – they belonged 'solely and exclusively to Marx', he wrote in the preface to the 1883 German edition.[4] This is certainly an exaggeration. On the other hand, the

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[1] A. Velicu, *Civic Catechisms and Reason in the French Revolution* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[2] Engels in a letter to Marx, 23–24 November 1847, MEGA III/2, 121f; CW 38:149.

[3] Engels's 'Principles of Communism' can be found in MEW 4:361–380; CW 6:341–357. On the need to 'manifest' according to the 'Preface to the 1872 German Edition', 57, which corresponds to MEW 4:573; CW 23:174.

[4] Engels's preface to the 1883 German edition in MEW 21:3; CW 26:118.

wording is not Engels's. The only person who could have influenced this is Jenny Marx. This is at least what her biographer Ulrich Teusch wants to have us believe; a few lines in the only preserved manuscript are unmistakably written in her handwriting.[5]

But it is still without a doubt Karl who was responsible for most of the wording. What is most striking is the impact of the incomparable art of his writing in the small introductory preface and in the first section, 'Bourgeois and Proletarians'. Stylistic heights are reached there that Engels never even came close to but where Marx could find himself when neither the complicated diversity of the textual abstract nor the gravity of the preciseness of terms weighed down what he wrote.

The best pages in the *Manifesto* are unsurpassed in their kind; rarely, if ever, has anyone written so brilliantly on societal issues. The very first sentence has attained iconic status: 'A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism.' (The background is the panicked alarm of the contemporary European regimes at communist conspiracies; dangerous secret societies were suspected in every nook and cranny.) The memorable sentences follow in quick succession. Despite their being quoted *ad nauseam* and having served as lumber for countless book titles, they have never lost their radiance. Like all classical texts, they have also preserved their topicality. It is still possible to recognize our own time in the most well-known paragraph:

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In other word, for exploitation, veiled by religious

[5] On Jenny Marx's possible contribution to the wording of the Manifesto, see U. Teusch, *Jenny Marx: die rote Baronesse* (Zürich: Rotpunkt Verlag, 2011, 74 and the facsimile in the picture section (between 110 and 111).

> and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

Or stop a moment before the sentence: 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' We still live in this world.[6]

But this also says that the promises for the future that the *Manifesto* contains have never come true. Russia's October Revolution never came close to what Marx pointed out in advance, and its results now belong entirely to the past. The Chinese analogue was at least equally as far from the prototype of 1848, and the more than sixty-year dictatorship there has been alloyed with an equally implacable capitalism. In today's China, Marx's words about the solid melting into air and the holy being profaned are just as applicable as they are in most refined capitalist countries.

But with this, we are already well into the content of the *Manifesto*. Let us stay here.

It is striking that the *Manifesto*, with its just over thirty pages of text, contains so much more than Engels's 'Principles' does in seventeen. This is due in part to the fact that the *Manifesto* discards the catechism's responses to questions of the kind 'In what way does the proletarian differ from the slave? From the serf?' and so on, which take up a lot of space. Tellingly enough, Engels provided no answer to a question that he nonetheless asked regarding the difference between the proletarian and the craftsman; the question may simply have been a sensitive one, considering that craftsmen made up the majority of the text's immediate recipients.

Such matters were settled in the *Manifesto* with a few terse formulations. The question of the relationship of the craftsman to the industrial worker is given a response in one sentence, which also provides information on a range of other societal classes. It speaks of '[t]he lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the artisan, the peasant', all of which are now on the path to sinking down into the proletariat because their capital is too little to cope with the competition from modern industry.[7]

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[6] The quotes are taken from CW 6:483, 486f and 487. In MEW 4 the corresponding pages are 461, 464f and 465, respectively.

[7] 'The lower middle class…', MEW 4: 472; CW 6:494.

The *Manifesto* portrays contemporary society as an enormous centrifuge. From its violent movements, some are pushed upward, becoming members of the ruling class: the capitalists – or, in another word, the bourgeoisie. Many more are on the way down, more quickly or more slowly; farmers, craftsmen, merchants – all are gradually proletarianized. They seek to preserve their position in vain; they become reactionary.

The implacable path downwards that most are compelled to take is common to so many. Nor are the well-educated spared. Once they were surrounded by respect, but now the bourgeoisie has 'converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers'.[8]

The phrase 'wage laborer' rouses wonder: are the doctors and the others becoming proletarians? Are all wage laborers simply workers – the doctor and the dean, the lawyer and the novelist? The reader finds no answer. This is not that strange. The *Manifesto* depicts ongoing development but is always hurrying on ahead in the direction of what awaits in a nearer or more remote future. The perspective in time is undetermined. The tense is at the same time the present and the future.

The same thing thereby also applies to the revolution that stands in focus further on in the *Manifesto*. It seems that the bourgeoisie's fateful hour could strike tomorrow, but the text can equally readily be interpreted so that the great upheaval will only take place in a more far-off future when society has been transformed even more radically. The workers join together in this process, and they struggle to keep their wages up. Here and there, it leads to riots. 'Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time.' In the long run, their situation continuously worsens.

The authors of the *Manifesto* are still adherents of 'the iron law of wages'. There is nothing strange there; the doctrine was entirely predominant at the time, especially among economists. Only later would Marx – and following him, Engels – abandon it.[9]

The important thing about the workers joining together is instead that their combined forces increase, the more people are pushed down into proletarian impoverishment from development. Even their intellectual

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[8] 'converted the physician…', 465 and 487 respectively.

[9] 'Now and then...' 471 and 493 respectively. Marx later distances himself from the iron law of wages.

capacity is improved when people who previously found themselves higher up on the class ladder are forced to climb down. The fact that a small part of the ruling class joins the revolutionary workers is also part of the advantages (Engels must be counted among this minority).

But the working class not only grows – it is also feminized. This fact, which Marx only gave intimations of in a few figures without notes in the *Manifesto*, is given a few lines of attention here. It says that men's labor 'is superseded' by women's because labor through machinery no longer requires great bodily strength. Gender and age have become inessential in general, and women and children cost less (it is unclear why women do). 'All are instruments of labour.'[10]

The second chapter of the *Manifesto*, 'Proletarians and Communists', is shorter than the first one and contains a number of interesting explanations. It observes, for example, that communism does not abolish property in general, only 'bourgeois property' – ownership of the means of production such as machinery, purchased labor and so on. But on the other hand, this property tends to push out all others to become the only kind. – The capital is not a personal, but a 'social power'. The capitalists do not appear as a number of concrete individuals but as the bearers of the impersonal power that both supports and permeates the society where capitalism reigns.[11]

In the *Manifesto*'s day, communists were accused of their battle against private property also being a battle against the family. Of course, the authors responded; the bourgeois family must be abolished. Only among the bourgeoisie was it fully developed. The proletarians were forced into breaking up their families, and prostitution flourished in contemporary society.[12]

Engels's 'Principles' are much more illustrative on that point. Engels said that the relationship between the sexes would become completely private and would only be the business of those it immediately concerned. Women would no longer be dependent on men, nor would children be dependent on their parents. The accusation that communists would decree

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[10] 'All are...', 469 and 491 respectively.

[11] 'bourgeois property', 475 and 498 respectively. – 'a social power', 475 and 499 respectively.

[12] The *Manifesto* on the family, 478f and 502 respectively.

women to be owned in common strikes back against bourgeois society, in which prostitution flourished.[13]

The reason for the *Manifesto*'s more evasive statements can only be the subject of speculation. We know that Engels and Marx had different views on marriage in the age in which they lived. Is that why the answers are so vague in the text Marx was responsible for? Perhaps so. But we know nothing for certain.

On the other hand, both the original and the final *Manifesto* are equally unambiguous as regards upbringing and education: it will become a common affair.

The accusation that communism would destroy eternal values such as freedom and justice are emphatically dismissed. The coming upheaval would cast off 'certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms'.[14]

This statement also lacks clarity, and above all gives rise to a number of questions. Even after the revolution, people will be conscious beings – but what will then fill their consciousness? We are given no information about it.

But another question is even more pressing: *What are the ideas that engage those opposing contemporary society? Where do they get their ideas and ideals from?* They are obviously borne by a pathos that has its roots in the distant past. Ideas of resistance turned against the reigning power can be traced back for millennia. No one knew that better than Marx himself, who throughout his life regarded Prometheus, who defied the gods, as his ideal.

What will remain of this after the revolution? Would Prometheus and what he stood for – the eternal spirit of revolt – lose their urgency? Would Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Goethe sink into an indifferent past? Would Balzac's depictions of a cynical social apparatus that bred careerists and losers become only a curiosity?

In other texts both before and later, Marx made use of Hegel's key concept of *Aufhebung* – sublation – which meant that something was both abolished and raised to a higher level. In that case, the best of the inherited culture would certainly lose its earlier, class-based holdings but at the same time be refined and deepened.

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[13] Engels, 'Principles'; MEW 4: 377, CW 6:354.

[14] 'certain common forms', 480f and 504 respectively.

Perhaps Marx had found these forms of thought entirely too complicated for a text that, in principle, could be read and understood by everyone. But the consequence was that society after the revolution only appeared as a total contrast to the world Marx and Engels were living in. It was otherwise featureless. Everything would be good, yes—but how?

The unsurpassed depiction in the first chapter of capitalist society is succeeded by a second chapter that raises more questions that it gives answers. Greater clarity only makes an appearance with a ten-point program on what the communist party wanted to achieve. The list, which modifies but in all essentials agrees with its counterpart in Engels's 'Principles', contains everything from the expropriation of landed property, equal obligation for everyone to work, and the centralization of the transport system in the hands of the State to free public education of all children and strongly progressive taxation. On a few points, the enumeration of the *Manifesto* diverges from the one Engels stood for. It is perhaps telling that Engels was satisfied with heavy taxation of inheritances, whereas the final version—the one Marx wrote—simply demands that the right of inheritance be abolished. Engels's idea on large palace where residence and work would be combined, and industry and agriculture meet, disappeared.[15]

But all these measures, whether in the one version or the other, are only steps on the road towards a future society—the one only described through a series of negations: it is classless, without exploitation and without the kind of morals born out of the rule of one class over all the others.

Medieval philosophy spoke of a *via negativa*, a road to knowledge that ran through negations. It is the same road Marx and Engels embarked upon, in an entirely different area.

One reason for the reticence on the society of the future is the fear of fancifully depicted utopias that were prevalent at the time, which both Marx and Engels had also found a great attraction in not so long ago. That fear, which at the same time contained a great fascination, found expression in the third chapter of the *Manifesto*, which deals with various kinds of socialist and communist literature. There was a model here in Engels as well, but the difference in comparison with the final version in the *Manifesto* is great.

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[15] The enumeration of measures after the revolution in 'Principles', MEW 4:373f and CW 6:350f; in MEW 4:481f and CW 6:505 respectively.

Equally as strong as the first chapter, it bears completely the stamp of Marx's singular style of writing with its brilliant details.[16]

The description begins with the one furthest from the *Manifesto*'s own standpoint, namely what is here called 'Feudal Socialism'. Capitalism is criticized here for having broken the feudal bands and also for having called forth a revolutionary proletariat. There are crucial similarities between this kind of socialism and Christianity, and Marx is not surprised:

> 'Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached in place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christan Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burning of the aristocrat.'[17]

'Petty-Bourgeois Socialism' is treated with greater sympathy, pointing out a hero: the Swiss political economist and historian Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi. Sismondi, who was born back in 1773 and died in 1842, belonged to a different generation than Marx. He had been influenced by Adam Smith, but objected to the passion of Smith and other economists for constant growth. Humanity, not production, should be at the center. The current system bred constant crises and created poverty for the many in society. Sismondi's ideal was, rather, a system in which smallholders and petty bourgeois could live a good, secure, and relatively equal life.[18]

In the following section, Marx and Engels drew nearer themselves, or rather their own development. The subject is 'German, or 'True', Socialism'. This, the authors said, was the inevitable result when German philosophers and aesthetes met French socialist and communist literature. France had undergone the bourgeois revolution that the Germans still had before them, which is why the Germans would devote themselves to 'interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy'.[19]

The criticism is ruthless. But Marx, with good reason, had to count himself among the Germans who had begun their wanderings toward

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[16] Engels on the various socialist movements in MEW 4:377F and CW 6:355f.

[17] On 'Feudal Socialism', 482ff and 507f respectively.

[18] Petty-Bourgeois Socialism, 484f and 509f respectively.

[19] 'German, or "True", Socialism', 485–488 and 510–513 respectively.

socialism and communism with ideas about the essence of humanity and its alienation. The chief expression for this entire stigmatized literary genre is and remains the *Manuscripts*. The world did not yet know about them.

Proudhon, once the object of Marx's admiration, was dismissed under the heading of 'Conservative, or Bourgeois Socialism'. It was his book on the philosophy of misery that was being pilloried. Proudhon's dream, it was said, was a bourgeoisie without the proletariat. It is a crushing judgement, but not a fair one. Proudhon's ideal society was a society in which no one lived in misery or was subjected to oppression.[20]

More positive is the description of 'Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism'. Of all the sections in the chapter, this is the one that likely influenced the age they lived in and the future the most. It was through this section that the term 'utopian socialism' became a natural component of the political vocabulary. Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier have been nailed to this term. They were utopians. They built castles in the air.

The reader who has only this idea with them will certainly be surprised that the picture being painted here has such markedly light sides. The early socialist and communist systems certainly belonged to a time when the proletariat was still in an immature stage of its development. The path to liberation lay in the gloom. Fourier and the others were not prepared to carry out any politics—least of all anything revolutionary—but were inspired instead to various experiments with miniature societies that were doomed to fail.

But this kind of socialism or communism was not only utopian. It was critical as well. The word *critical* has a central place in Marx's vocabulary, as it had during his entire Young Hegelian period and in other respects in the entire tradition from Kant. Being critical did not mean simply being negative. Someone developing criticism in Marx's meaning illuminates an object or a phenomenon so that its anatomy and method of functioning are exposed. Critical analysis thereby indirectly opens the path for a program of action.

In the *Manifesto*, it says that authors in the tradition from Saint-Simon and Fourier 'attack every principle of existing society' and that they thereby 'are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class'. What they say about future society, on the other hand, is to be regarded

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[20] 'Conservative, or Bourgeois Socialism', 488f and 513f respectively.

as pure utopias—for example that the antithesis between town and country is to be abolished, that the institution of the family is to be dissolved, and that the State alone will administer production.[21]

There is much to say about this brief text. As regards the elements pointed out as purely utopian, their counterparts can be glimpsed in quite many texts by both Marx and Engels—in fact, even in the *Manifesto* (at least concerning marriage). The utopian in them had to be attributed to the lack of concrete ideas about how all these new things would be realized. The authors of the *Manifesto* pointed out in particular that the critical utopians had had no idea of the crucial significance of the class struggle.

It is also worth nothing that the nuanced assessment of the critical utopians had no counterpart in Engels's 'Principles'. It was Marx's point of view that found expression in these pages. Only he could also create a sentence like this: 'They still dream of experimental realisation of their social Utopias, of founding isolated 'phalanstères', of establishing 'Home Colonies', of setting up "Little Icaria" – duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem…'.

This lingering dream turned the followers of Fourier and the others into reactionaries who did not want to know about the rapid development of recent years but dreamt back to the time when their teachers lived and worked.

These crushing formulations get their acerbity against the background of the 1840s being a great decade for a singular number of small-scale social experiments. Many people – particularly in France – dreamed of realizing Étienne Cabet's ideal society of Icaria. *Phalanstères* sprang up in many

[21] 'Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism', 489–492 and 514–517 respectively. – The numerous attempts at small utopian societies is dealt with in Manuel & Manuel. One account of the specifically American experiments is Berry 1992. Especially interesting are the experiments in the spirit of Fourier (83–92) and the attempt to realize Cabet's Icaria, for which Cabet himself – having left Europe, where it was difficult to work – was (as time went on) the increasingly dictatorial leader (107–115). The especially American variant that arose under the name of 'perfectionism', created by John Humphrey Noyes, is also of particular interest. Its ideology was called 'Bible communism', and the experimental society practiced common property and general promiscuity under the name of 'mixed marriage'. Each member had to submit to the criticism of the others in a way that is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution in China. But the leader himself was exempt from that kind of ordeal (92–98).

quarters, especially in the New World. Owen's ideal society, New Lanark, still existed in southern Scotland and inspired many. The second- and third-generation followers of 'the Critical-Utopian Socialists and Communists' were important competitors of the communist movement that Marx and Engels were part of constructing.

These movements are the subject of the very last pages of the *Manifesto*. The authors mention developments in a series of different countries. The account is quite succinct, and the main attention is directed towards Germany because 'that country [was] on the eve of a bourgeois revolution'. That revolution was particularly eventful because it would take place at a higher level of development than the analogous upheavals in seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century France. The proletariat had managed to go farther than the workers in both of the other times and places.

There and everywhere, the communists wanted to make common cause with other democratic forces. But they did not conceal their goal: a society that could only be created 'by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions'. The proletarians had nothing to lose but their chains. They had 'a world to win'. That is why they had to unite, wherever on earth they were located.[22]

The *Manifesto* was published in late February, 1848. Its triumphal march did not begin immediately. Quite the opposite—the pamphlet long remained largely unnoticed. Only decades later did it become an important introduction, not only to Marx's view of society and political programs but also to socialism and communism in general.

But a series of translations of the pamphlet were published during its first few years. Marx and Engels spoke proudly of them in the preface to the new German edition, published in 1872. The enumeration concluded with information about a Danish translation.[23] But that was a mistake—the translation was Swedish and done by Pär Götrek, an eccentric bookseller who early on introduced socialist and communist ideas to Sweden. It is possible that he had help from a few journeymen with experiences from the rebellious metropoles of the Continent. The translation had the placid title *Kommunismens röst* (The Voice of Communism), and it replaced the militant

[22] The last pages of the *Manifesto*, 'Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties', MEW 4:492f, CW 6:518f.

[23] On translations according to Marx and Engels, see MEW X:573, CW 23:174.

'Working men of all countries...' in the original with the somewhat more stylish but still deeply controversial motto 'Folks röst är Guds röst' (The voice of the people is the voice of God). These words had tradition on their side, at least; ultimately they go back to Hesiod, the oldest named Greek poet, who in his *Works and Days* asserted that even the speech of common people is divine in its way.[24]

The first English translation came out in 1850. It was done by Helen Macfarlane, a Scottish Chartist, journalist, and philosopher, and was published in four parts in George Julian Harney's newspaper *Red Republican*. Macfarlane had a splendid knowledge of German philosophy, especially as regards Hegel. Marx esteemed her highly and was indignant when she was treated poorly by Harney. She was 'the only collaborator on his insignificant little rag who really has any ideas. On his rag, a *rara avis*'. Macfarlane's translation is lively and imaginative. In her version, the famous first line runs: 'A frightful hobgoblin stalks throughout Europe. We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of Communism.'[25]

But in the year 1848, it was rather quiet regarding the *Manifesto*. Nor did Marx have time to reflect particularly much on the pamphlet that had just come out into print. It so happened that revolution—the revolution he had just pointed out in advance—broke out in Paris during the days the *Manifesto* had left the printing presses.

With the exception of the two first paragraphs, this text is a part of the English translation of my biography A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx (transl. by Jeff Skinner, London & New York: Verso Books, 2018).

[24] As far as I know, the only literature on Götrek is in Swedish, above all Gamby 1978; regarding the translation of the *Manifesto*, see 200–211. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, verse 763.

[25] Marx's letter to Engels, 23 February 1851, CW 38:295f. On Helen Macfarlane's life and work, see Black 2004.