

Introduction

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I. Dominant Marxisms of the XIX and XX century

Few men have shaken the world as Karl Marx did. His death, almost unnoticed in the mainstream press, was followed by echoes of fame in such a short period of time that few comparisons can be found in history. His name was soon on the lips of the workers of Detroit and Chicago, as on those of the first Indian socialists in Calcutta. His banner image formed the backdrop at the first Bolshevik congress in Moscow after the revolution. His thought inspired the programmes and statutes of all the political and union organizations of the workers' movement, from continental Europe to Shanghai. His ideas changed philosophy, history and economics irreversibly.

Yet it was not long before attempts were made to turn his theories into a rigid ideology. Marx's thought, indisputably critical and open, even if sometimes tempted by determinism, fell foul of the cultural climate in late nineteenth-century Europe. It was a culture pervaded by systematic conceptions – above all by Darwinism. In order to respond to it, the 'Orthodox Marxism' newly born in the pages of Karl Kautsky's review *Die Neue Zeit* rapidly conformed to this model.

A decisive factor that helped to consolidate this transformation of Marx's *œuvre* was the forms in which it reached the reading public. Abridgements, summaries and truncated compendia were given priority, as we can see from the small print of his major works. Some bore marks of ideological instrumentalization, and some texts were recast by those to whose care they had been entrusted. This practice, encouraged by the incomplete state of many manuscripts at the time of Marx's death, was in some cases compounded by a kind of censorship. The form of the manual, though certainly an effective means of worldwide diffusion, also led to considerable distortions of his complex thought; the influence of positivism, in particular, translated it into a theoretically impoverished version of the original.¹

These processes gave rise to a schematic doctrine, an elementary evolutionist interpretation soaked in economic determinism: the Marxism of the Second International (1889–1914). Guided by a firm though naive belief in the automatic forward march of history, and therefore in the inevitable replacement of capitalism by socialism, it proved incapable of comprehending actual developments, and, breaking the necessary link with revolutionary praxis, it produced a sort of fatalistic passivity that contributed to the stabilization of the existing order.²

The theory of the impending collapse of bourgeois-capitalist society [*Zusammenbruchstheorie*], which found fertile soil in the great twenty-year depression after 1873, was proclaimed to be the fundamental essence of 'scientific socialism'. Marx's analyses, which had aimed to delineate the dynamic principles of capitalism and to describe its general tendencies of development,³ were

¹ Cf. Franco Andreucci, *La diffusione e la volgarizzazione del marxismo*, in Eric J. Hobsbawm et al. (eds), *Storia del marxismo*, vol. 2, Einaudi, Turin (1979), p. 15.

² Cf. Erich Matthias, "Kautsky und der Kautskyanismus", *Marxismusstudien*, Vol. II (1957), p. 197.

³ Cf. Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, Monthly Review: New York/London 1942, pp. 19 and 191.

transformed into universally valid historical laws from which it was possible to deduce the course of events, even particular details.

The idea of a capitalism in its death agony, destined to founder on its own contradictions, was also present in the theoretical framework of the first entirely Marxist platform of a political party, *The Erfurt Programme* of 1891 of German Social Democracy. According to Kautsky's expository commentary on it, 'inexorable economic development leads to the bankruptcy of the capitalist mode of production with the necessity of a law of nature. The creation of a new form of society in place of the current one is no longer something merely *desirable* but has become *inevitable*.'⁴ This clearly demonstrated the limits of the prevailing conceptions, as well as their vast distance from the man who had inspired them.

Russian Marxism, which in the course of the XX century played a fundamental role in the popularization of Marx's thought, followed this trajectory of systematization and vulgarization with even greater rigidity. Indeed, for its most important pioneer, Georgii Plekhanov, 'Marxism is an integral world outlook',⁵ imbued with a simplistic monism according to which the super-structural transformations of society proceed simultaneously with economic modifications. Despite the harsh ideological conflicts of these years, many of the theoretical elements characteristic of the Second International were carried over into those that would mark the cultural matrix of the Third International. This continuity was clearly manifest in the *Theory of Historical Materialism*, published in 1921 by Nikolai Bukharin, according to which 'in nature and society there is a *definite* regularity, a *fixed* natural law. The determination of this natural law is the first task of science.'⁶ The outcome of this social determinism, completely focused on the development of the productive forces, generated a doctrine in which 'the multiplicity of causes that make their action felt in society does not contradict in the least the existence of a *single law of social evolution*'.⁷

The degradation of Marx's thought reached its climax in the construal of Marxism-Leninism, given definitive form in Soviet-style 'Diamat' (*dialekticheskii materializm*), 'the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party'.⁸ Deprived of its function as a guide to action, theory here became its *a posteriori* justification. J. V. Stalin's booklet of 1938, *On Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*, which had a wide distribution, fixed the essential elements of this doctrine: the phenomena of collective life are regulated by 'necessary laws of social development' that are 'perfectly recognisable', and 'the history of society appears as a necessary development of society,

⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm, in seinem grundsätzlichen Teil erläutert*, J.H.W. Dietz: Hannover 1964, pp. 131f. Cf. the English translation by William E. Bohn first published in 1911: Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*, W. W. Norton & Co.: New York 1971, p. 117.

⁵ George V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, Lawrence & Wishart: London 1969, p. 21.

⁶ Nikolai I. Bukharin, *Theory of Historical Materialism*, International Publishers: Moscow 1921, p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., p. 248. Opposing this conception was Antonio Gramsci, for whom "the posing of the problem as a research into laws, of constant, regular and uniform lines, is linked to a need, conceived in a puerile and naive way, to resolve peremptorily the practical problem of the predictability of historical events'. His clear refusal to reduce Marx's philosophy of praxis to a crude sociology, to 'a mechanical formula which gives the impression of holding the whole of history in the palm of its hand', (Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Valentino Gerratana (ed.), Einaudi: Turin 1975, pp. 1403 and 1428; *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart: London 1973, p. 428) took aim beyond Bukharin's text at the general orientation that later predominated in the Soviet Union.

⁸ Josef V. Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Lawrence & Wishart: London 1941, p. 5.

and the study of the history of society becomes a science'. This 'means that the science of the history of society, despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become a science just as exact as, for example, biology, capable of utilising the laws of development of society in order to make use of them in practice';⁹ consequently, the task of the party of the proletariat is to base its activity on these laws. The concepts of 'scientific' and 'science' here involve an evident misunderstanding. The scientific character of Marx's method, grounded upon scrupulous and coherent theoretical criteria, is replaced with a methodology in which there is no room for contradiction and objective historical laws are supposed to operate like laws of nature independently of human will.

The most rigid and stringent dogmatism was able to find ample space alongside this ideological catechism. Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy imposed an inflexible monism that also produced perverse effects in the interpretation of Marx's writings. Unquestionably, with the Soviet revolution Marxism enjoyed a significant moment of expansion and circulation in geographical zones and social classes from which it had, until then, been excluded. Nevertheless, this process of dissemination consisted far more of Party manuals, handbooks and specific anthologies than of complete texts by Marx himself.

The crystallization of a dogmatic *corpus* preceded an identification of the texts that it would have been necessary to read in order to understand the formation and evolution of Marx's thought.¹⁰ The early writings, in fact, were published in the MEGA only in 1927 (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) and 1932 (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*), in editions which – as already in the case of the second and third volumes of *Capital* – made them appear as completed works; the choice would be the source of many false interpretative paths.¹¹ Later still, some of the important preparatory works for *Capital* (in 1933 the draft chapter 6 of *Capital* on the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', and between 1939 and 1941 the *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, better known as the *Grundrisse*) were published in print runs that secured only a very limited circulation¹². Moreover, when they were not concealed for fear that they might erode the dominant ideological canon, these and other previously unpublished texts were subject to politically motivated exegesis along lines that were largely laid down in advance; they never resulted in a serious comprehensive revaluation of Marx's work.

While the selective exclusion of texts became common practice, others were dismembered and manipulated: for example, through insertion into collections of quotations for a particular purpose. Often these were treated in the same way that the bandit Procrustes reserved for his victims: if they were too long, they were amputated, if too short, lengthened.

Distorted to serve contingent political necessities, Marx became identified with them in many people's minds and was often reviled as a result. His theory passed into a set of bible-like verses that gave birth to the most unthinkable paradox. Far from heeding his warning against 'recipes for the cook-shops of the future',¹³ those responsible transformed him into the progenitor of a new social system. A most rigorous critic who had never been complacent with his conclusions, he

⁹ Ibid., pp. 13-15.

¹⁰ Cf. Maximilien Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme*, Payot: Paris 1974, p. 81.

¹¹ Cf., for example, Marcello Musto, 'Marx in Paris. Manuscripts and notebooks of 1844', *Science & Society*, vol. 73, no. 3 (July 2009), pp. 386-402; and Terrell Carver 'The German Ideology Never Took Place', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 107-127.

¹² See Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx's Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 years Later*, Routledge: London/New York 2008, esp. pp. 179-212.

¹³ Karl Marx, 'Postface to the Second Edition', in *Capital, Volume One*, Vintage: New York 1977, p. 99.

turned into the source of the most obstinate doctrinarism. A firm champion of a materialist conception of history, he was removed more than any other author from his historical context. From being certain that ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves’,¹⁴ he was entrapped in an ideology that gave primacy to political vanguards and parties in their role as proponents of class consciousness and leaders of the revolution. An advocate of the idea that a shorter working day was essential to the blossoming of human capacities, he was assimilated to the productivist creed of Stakhanovism. Convinced of the need for the withering away of the State, he found himself identified with it and used to shore it up. Interested like few other thinkers in the free development of human individuality, arguing against bourgeois right (which hides social disparity behind mere legal equality) that ‘right would have to be unequal rather than equal’,¹⁵ he was fitted into a conception that neutralized the richness of the collective dimension of social life into the indistinctness of homogenization.

II. Returns to Marx

Owing to theoretical disputes or political events, interest in Marx’s work has fluctuated over time and gone through indisputable periods of decline. From the early XX century ‘crisis of Marxism’ to the dissolution of the Second International, and from debates on the contradictions of Marx’s economic theory to the tragedy of ‘actually existing socialism’, criticism of the ideas of Marx seemed persistently to point beyond the conceptual horizon of Marxism. Yet there has always been a ‘return to Marx’. A new need develops to refer to his work – whether the critique of political economy, the formulations on alienation, or the brilliant pages of political polemic – and it has continued to exercise an irresistible fascination for both followers and opponents.

Pronounced dead after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marx has again become the focus of widespread interest. His ‘renaissance’ is based on his continuing capacity to explain the present; indeed, his thought remains an indispensable instrument with which to understand and transform it. In face of the crisis of capitalist society and the profound contradictions that traverse it, this author who was over-hastily dismissed after 1989 is once more being taken up and interrogated. Thus, Jacques Derrida’s assertion that ‘it will always be a mistake not to read and reread and discuss Marx’¹⁶ – which only a few years ago seemed an isolated provocation – has found increasing approval.¹⁷

¹⁴ Karl Marx, ‘Provisional Rules of the International Working Men’s Association’, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (hereafter MECW) vol. 20, New York: International Publishers, 1985, p. 14.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW vol. 24, Lawrence & Wishart: London 1989, p. 87.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, Routledge: London, 1994, p. 13.

¹⁷ In recent years, newspapers, periodicals and TV or radio programs have repeatedly discussed the current relevance of Marx. In 2003, the weekly *Nouvel Observateur* devoted a whole issue to the theme *Karl Marx – le penseur du troisième millénaire?* Soon after, Germany paid its tribute to the man it once forced into a 40-year exile: in 2004, more than 500,000 viewers of the national television station ZDF voted Marx the third most important German personality of all time (he was first in the category of ‘contemporary relevance’), and during the national elections of 2005 the mass-circulation magazine *Der Spiegel* carried his image on the cover, giving the victory sign, under the title *Ein Gespenst kehrt zurück*. The same year, a poll conducted by BBC Radio Four gave Marx the accolade of the philosopher most admired by its listeners. And, after the outbreak of

Furthermore, the secondary literature on Marx, which all but dried up twenty years ago, is showing signs of revival in many countries, both in the form of new studies and in booklets in various languages with titles such as *Why Read Marx Today?*¹⁸ Journals are increasingly open to contributions on Marx and Marxisms, just as there are now many international conferences, university courses and seminars on the theme. In particular, since the onset of the international economic crisis in mid-2007, academics and economic theorists from various political and cultural backgrounds have again been drawn to Marx's analysis of the inherent instability of capitalism, whose self-generated cyclical crises have grave effects on political and social life. Finally, although timid and often confused in form, a new demand for Marx is also making itself felt in politics – from Latin America to the alternative globalization movement.

III. Marx and the First World Financial Crisis

Following the defeat of the revolutionary movement that rose up throughout Europe in 1848, Marx convinced himself that a new revolution would emerge only after the outbreak of a fresh crisis. Settled in London in March 1850, having received expulsion orders from Belgium, Prussia and France, he ran the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, a monthly that he planned as the locus for 'comprehensive and scientific investigation of the economic conditions which form the foundation of the whole political movement'.¹⁹ In *The Class Struggles in France*, which appeared as a series of articles in that journal, he asserted that 'a real revolution ... is only possible in periods when ... the modern forces of production and the bourgeois forms of production come into collision with each other. ... A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis.'²⁰

During the same summer of 1850 Marx deepened the economic analysis he had begun before 1848, and in the May-October 1850 issue of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue* he reached the important conclusion that 'the commercial crisis contributed infinitely more to the revolutions of 1848 than the revolution to the commercial crisis'.²¹ From now on economic crisis would be fundamental to his thought, not only economically but also sociologically and politically. Moreover, in analysing the processes of rampant speculation and overproduction, he ventured to predict that, 'if the new cycle of industrial development which began in 1848 follows the same course as that of 1843-47, the crisis will break out in 1852'. The future crisis, he stressed, would also erupt in the countryside, and 'for the first time the industrial and commercial crisis [would] coincide with a crisis in agriculture'.²² Marx's forecasts over this period

the recent economic crisis, in all parts of the world, leading daily and weekly papers have been discussing the contemporary relevance of Marx's thought.

¹⁸ For a full survey, see Part Two of this volume: 'Marx's Global Reception Today'. One of the significant scholarly examples of this new interest is the continuation of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), the historico-critical edition of the complete works, which resumed in 1998 after the interruption that followed the collapse of the socialist countries. See Marcello Musto, 'The rediscovery of Karl Marx', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52, n. 3 (2007), pp. 477-98.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Announcement of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*', MECW 10, p. 5.

²⁰ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, MECW 10, p. 135.

²¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Review: May-October 1850', MECW 10, p. 497.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 503.

of more than a year proved to be mistaken. Yet, even at moments when he was most convinced that a revolutionary wave was imminent, his ideas were very different from those of other European political leaders exiled in London. Although he was wrong about how the economic situation would shape up, he considered it indispensable to study the current state of economic and political relations for the purposes of political activity. By contrast, most of the democratic and communist leaders of the time, whom he characterized as ‘alchemists of the revolution’, thought that the only prerequisite for a victorious revolution was ‘adequate preparation of their conspiracy’.²³

In this period, Marx also deepened his studies of political economy and concentrated, in particular, on the history and theories of economic crises, paying close attention to the money-form and credit in his attempt to understand their origins. Unlike other socialists of the time such as Proudhon – who were convinced that economic crises could be avoided through a reform of the money and credit system – Marx came to the conclusion that, since the credit system was one of the underlying conditions, crises could at most be aggravated or mitigated by the correct or incorrect use of monetary circulation; the true causes of crises were to be sought, rather, in the contradictions of production.²⁴

Despite the economic prosperity, Marx did not lose his optimism concerning the imminence of an economic crisis, and at the end of 1851 he wrote to the famous poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, an old friend of his: ‘The crisis, held in check by all kinds of factors..., must blow up at the latest next autumn. And, after the most recent events, I am more convinced than ever that there will not be a serious revolution without a commercial crisis.’²⁵ Marx did not keep such assessments only for his correspondence but also wrote of them in the *New-York Tribune*. Between 1852 and 1858, economic crisis was a constant theme in his articles for the North American newspaper. Marx did not look upon the revolutionary process in a determinist manner, but he was sure that crisis was an indispensable prerequisite for its fulfilment. In an article of June 1853 on ‘Revolution in China and Europe’, he wrote: ‘Since the commencement of the eighteenth century there has been no serious revolution in Europe which has not been preceded by a commercial and financial crisis. This applies no less to the revolution of 1789 than to that of 1848.’²⁶ The point was underlined in late September 1853, in the article ‘Political Movements: Scarcity of Bread in Europe’:

neither the declamation of the demagogues, nor the twaddle of the diplomats will drive matters to a crisis, but ... there are approaching economical disasters and social convulsions which must be the sure forerunners of European revolution. Since 1849

²³ Karl Marx, ‘Reviews from the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue* No.4’, MECW 10, p. 318. One example of this was the manifesto ‘To the Nations’, issued by the ‘European Democratic Central Committee’, which Giuseppe Mazzini, Alexandre Ledru-Rollin and Arnold Ruge had founded in London in 1850. According to Marx, this group were implying ‘that the revolution failed because of the ambition and jealousy of the individual leaders and the mutually hostile views of the various popular educators’. Also ‘stupefying’ was the way in which these leaders conceived of ‘social organization’: ‘a mass gathering in the streets, a riot, a hand-clasp, and it’s all over. In their view indeed revolution consists merely in the overthrow of the existing government; once this aim has been achieved, “the victory” has been won.’ (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Review: May-October 1850’, MECW 10, pp. 529-30).

²⁴ See Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 3 February 1851, MECW 38, p. 275.

²⁵ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Freiligrath, 27 December 1851, MECW 38, p. 520.

²⁶ Karl Marx, ‘Revolution in China and Europe’, MECW 12, p. 99.

commercial and industrial prosperity has stretched the lounge on which the counter-revolution has slept in safety.²⁷

Traces of the optimism with which Marx awaited events may be also found in the correspondence with Engels. In one letter, for example, from September 1853, he wrote: 'Things are going wonderfully. All h[ell] will be let loose in France when the financial bubble bursts.'²⁸ But still the crisis did not come.

Without losing his hopes, Marx wrote again on the crisis for the *New-York Tribune* in 1855 and 1856. In March 1855, in the article 'The Crisis in England', he argued:

A few months more and the crisis will be at a height which it has not reached in England since 1846, perhaps not since 1842. When its effects begin to be fully felt among the working classes, then will that political movement begin again, which has been dormant for six years. ... Then will the two real contending parties in that country stand face to face – the middle class and the working classes, the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.²⁹

And in 'The European Crisis', which appeared in November 1856, at a time when all the columnists were confidently predicting that the worst was over, he maintained:

The indications brought from Europe ... certainly seem to postpone to a future day the final collapse of speculation and stock-jobbing, which men on both sides of the sea instinctively anticipate as with a fearful looking forward to some inevitable doom. That collapse is none the less sure from this postponement; indeed, the chronic character assumed by the existing financial crisis only forebodes for it a more violent and destructive end. The longer the crisis lasts the worse the ultimate reckoning.³⁰

During the first few months of 1857, the New York banks stepped up their volume of loans, despite the decline in deposits. The resulting growth in speculative activity worsened the general economic conditions, and, after the New York branch of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company became insolvent, the prevailing panic led to numerous bankruptcies. Loss of confidence in the banking system then produced a contraction of credit, a drying up of deposits and the suspension of money payments. From New York the crisis rapidly spread to the rest of the United States of America and, within a few weeks, to all the centres of the world market in Europe, South America and the East, becoming the first international financial crisis in history.

After the defeat of 1848, Marx had faced a whole decade of political setbacks and deep personal isolation. But, with the outbreak of the crisis, he glimpsed the possibility of taking part in a new round of social revolts and considered that his most urgent task was to analyse the economic phenomena that would be so important for the beginning of a revolution. In that period, Marx's work was remarkable and wide-ranging. From August 1857 to May 1858 he filled the eight notebooks known as the *Grundrisse*, while as *New-York Tribune* correspondent, he wrote many

²⁷ Karl Marx, 'Political Movements. - Scarcity of Bread in Europe', MECW 12, p. 308.

²⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 28 September 1853, MECW 39, p. 372.

²⁹ Karl Marx, 'The Crisis in England', MECW 14, p. 61.

³⁰ Karl Marx, 'The European Crisis', MECW 15, p. 136.

articles on the development of the crisis in Europe. Lastly, from October 1857 to February 1858, he compiled three books of extracts, called the *Books of Crisis*.³¹

In reality, however, there was no sign of the long-awaited revolutionary movement that was supposed to spring up along with the crisis, and this time, too, another reason for Marx's failure to complete the manuscript was his awareness that he was still far from a full critical mastery of the material. The *Grundrisse* therefore remained only a rough draft. He published in 1859 a short book that had no public resonance: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Another eight years of feverish study and enormous intellectual efforts would pass before the publication of *Capital, Volume One*.

IV. Capitalism as an historical mode of production

The writings that Marx composed a century and a half ago do not contain, of course, a precise description of the world today. It should be stressed, however, that the focus of *Capital* was not on XIX century capitalism either, but rather – as Marx put it in the third volume of his *magnum opus* – on the ‘organization of the capitalist mode of production, in its ideal average’³², and hence on its most complete and most general form.

When he was writing *Capital*, capitalism had developed only in England and a few other European industrial centres. Yet he foresaw that it would expand on a global scale, and formulated his theories on that basis. This is why *Capital* is not only a great classic of economic and political thought, but still provides today, despite all the profound transformations that have intervened since the time it was written, a rich array of tools with which to understand the nature of capitalist development. This has become more apparent since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of the capitalist mode of production to new areas of the planet like China. Capitalism has become a truly worldwide system, and some of Marx's insights have revealed their significance even more clearly than in his own time.³³ He probed the logic of the system more deeply than any other modern thinker, and his work, if updated and applied to the most recent developments, can help to explain many problems that did not manifest themselves fully during his lifetime. Finally, Marx's analysis of capitalism was not merely an economic investigation but was also relevant to the understanding of power structures and social relations. With the extension of capitalism into most aspects of human life, his thought turns out to have been extraordinarily prescient in many fields not addressed by XX century orthodox Marxism. One of these is certainly the transformations brought about by so-called globalization.

In his critique of the capitalist mode of production, one of Marx's permanent polemical targets was ‘the eighteenth-century Robinsonades’, the myth of Robinson Crusoe as the paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*, or the projection of phenomena typical of the bourgeois era onto every other society that has existed since the earliest times. Such a conception presented the social character of production as a constant in any labour process, not as a peculiarity of capitalist relations. In the same way, civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] – whose emergence in the eighteenth century had

³¹ These notebooks have not yet been published. Cf. Michael Krätke, ‘Marx's “Books of Crisis” of 1857-8’, in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx's Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, cit., pp. 169-75.

³² Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, International Publishers: New York [n.d.], p. 577.

³³ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, London: Cambridge University Press 1995.

created the conditions through which ‘the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate’ – was portrayed as having always existed.³⁴ In *Capital, Volume One*, in speaking of ‘the European Middle Ages, shrouded in darkness’, Marx argues that ‘instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterizes the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production.’³⁵ And, when he examined the genesis of product exchange, he recalled that it began with contacts among different families, tribes or communities, ‘for, in the beginning of civilization, it is not private individuals but families, tribes, etc., that meet on an independent footing’.³⁶

The classical economists had inverted this reality, on the basis of what Marx regarded as fantasies with an inspiration in natural law. In particular, Adam Smith had described a primal condition where individuals not only existed but were capable of producing outside society. A division of labour within tribes of hunters and shepherds had supposedly achieved the specialization of trades: one person’s greater dexterity in fashioning bows and arrows, for example, or in building wooden huts, had made him a kind of armourer or carpenter, and the assurance of being able to exchange the unconsumed part of one’s labour product for the surplus of others ‘encourage[d] every man to apply himself to a particular occupation’.³⁷ David Ricardo was guilty of a similar anachronism when he conceived of the relationship between hunters and fishermen in the early stages of society as an exchange between owners of commodities on the basis of the labour-time objectified in them³⁸.

In this way, Smith and Ricardo depicted a highly developed product of the society in which they lived – the isolated bourgeois individual – as if he were a spontaneous manifestation of nature. What emerged from the pages of their works was a mythological, timeless individual, one ‘posited by nature’³⁹, whose social relations were always the same and whose economic behaviour had a historyless anthropological character. According to Marx, the interpreters of each new historical epoch have regularly deluded themselves that the most distinctive features of their own age have been present since time immemorial.

Against those who portrayed the isolated individual of the eighteenth century as the archetype of human nature, ‘not as a historical result but as history’s point of departure’, Marx maintained that such an individual emerged only with the most highly developed social relations.

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, cit., p. 83.

³⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, cit., p. 88.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 357. This mutual dependence should not be confused with that which establishes itself among individuals in the capitalist mode of production: the former is the product of nature, the latter of history. In capitalism, individual independence is combined with a social dependence expressed in the division of labour (see Karl Marx, ‘Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*’, MECW 29, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 465). At this stage of production, the social character of activity presents itself not as a simple relationship of individuals to one another ‘but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing’ (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, cit. p. 157).

³⁷ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, London: Methuen 1961, p. 19.

³⁸ See David Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons. 1973: 15; cf. Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, in MECW 29, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 300.

³⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin: New York 1973, p. 83.

Thus, since civil society had arisen only with the modern world, the free wage-labourer of the capitalist epoch had appeared only after a long historical process. He was, in fact, ‘the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century’.⁴⁰

The mystification practised by economists regarded also the concept of production in general. In the 1857 ‘Introduction’, Marx argued that, although the definition of the general elements of production is ‘segmented many times over and split into different determinations’, some of which ‘belong to all epochs, others to only a few’,⁴¹ there are certainly, among its universal components, human labour and material provided by nature. For, without a producing subject and a worked-upon object, there could be no production at all. But the economists introduced a third general prerequisite of production: ‘a stock, previously accumulated, of the products of former labour’, that is, capital.⁴² The critique of this last element was essential for Marx, in order to reveal what he considered to be a fundamental limitation of the economists. It also seemed evident to him that no production was possible without an instrument of labour, if only the human hand, or without accumulated past labour, if only in the form of primitive man’s repetitive exercises. However, while agreeing that capital was past labour and an instrument of production, he did not, like Smith, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, conclude that it had always existed.

The point is made in greater detail in a section of the *Grundrisse*, where the conception of capital as ‘eternal’ is seen as a way of treating it only as matter, without regard for its essential ‘formal determination’ (*Formbestimmung*). According to this,

capital would have existed in all forms of society, and is something altogether unhistorical. ... The arm, and especially the hand, are then capital. Capital would be only a new name for a thing as old as the human race, since every form of labour, including the least developed, hunting, fishing, etc., presupposes that the product of prior labour is used as means for direct, living labour. ... If, then, the specific form of capital is abstracted away, and only the content is emphasized, ... of course nothing is easier than to demonstrate that capital is a necessary condition for all human production. The proof of this proceeds precisely by abstraction from the specific aspects which make it the moment of a specifically developed *historical* stage of human production.⁴³

If the error is made of ‘conceiving capital in its physical attribute only as instrument of production, while entirely ignoring the economic form [*ökonomischen Form*] which makes the instrument of production into capital’,⁴⁴ one falls into the ‘crude inability to grasp the real distinctions’ and a belief that ‘there exists only one single economic relation which takes on different names’.⁴⁵ To ignore the differences expressed in the social relation means to abstract from the *differentia specifica*, that is the nodal point of everything.⁴⁶ Thus, in the ‘Introduction’, Marx writes that ‘capital is a general [*allgemeines*], eternal relation of nature’, ‘that is, if I leave out just

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴² John Stuart Mill *Principles of Political Economy*, vol. I, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London 1965, pp. 55f.

⁴³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, cit., pp. 257-8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 591.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 249.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

the specific quality which alone makes “instrument of production” and “stored-up labour” into capital’.⁴⁷

In fact, Marx had already criticized the economists’ lack of historical sense in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations – the relations of bourgeois production – are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.⁴⁸

For this to be plausible, economists depicted the historical circumstances prior to the birth of the capitalist mode of production as ‘results of its presence’⁴⁹ with its very own features. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*:

The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and *natural* (not historical) form of production then attempt ... to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not-capitalist – because he is still becoming – as the very conditions in which he appropriates *as capitalist*.⁵⁰

From a historical point of view, the profound difference between Marx and the classical economists is that, in his view, ‘capital did not begin the world from the beginning, but rather encountered production and products already present, before it subjugated them beneath its process’⁵¹. Similarly, the circumstance whereby producing subjects are separated from the means of production – which allows the capitalist to find propertyless workers capable of performing abstract labour (the necessary requirement for the exchange between capital and living labour) – is the result of a process that the economists cover with silence, which ‘forms the history of the origins of capital and wage labour’.⁵²

A number of passages in the *Grundrisse* criticize the way in which economists portray historical as natural realities. It is self-evident to Marx, for example, that money is a product of history: ‘to be money is not a natural attribute of gold and silver’,⁵³ but only a determination they

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in MECW 6, Progress: Moscow 1976, p. 174.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, cit., p. 460.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 675.

⁵² Ibid., p. 489.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 239.

first acquire at a precise moment of social development. The same is true of credit. According to Marx, lending and borrowing was a phenomenon common to many civilizations, as was usury, but they ‘no more constitute credit than working constitutes industrial labour or free wage labour. And credit as an essential, developed relation of production appears *historically* only in circulation based on capital.’⁵⁴ Prices and exchange also existed in ancient society, ‘but the increasing determination of the former by costs of production, as well as the increasing dominance of the latter over all relations of production, only develops fully ... in bourgeois society, the society of free competition’; or ‘what Adam Smith, in the true eighteenth-century manner, puts in the prehistoric period, the period preceding history, is rather a product of history.’⁵⁵ Furthermore, just as he criticized the economists for their lack of historical sense, Marx mocked Proudhon and all the socialists who thought that labour productive of exchange value could exist without developing into wage labour, that exchange value could exist without turning into capital, or that there could be capital without capitalists.⁵⁶ Marx’s aim was therefore to assert the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production: to demonstrate, as he would again affirm in *Capital, Volume Three*, that it ‘is not an absolute mode of production’ but ‘merely historical, transitory’.⁵⁷

This viewpoint implies a different way of seeing many questions, including the labour process and its various characteristics. In the *Grundrisse* Marx wrote that ‘the bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic stage of social development that the necessity of the objectification of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their alienation’.⁵⁸ Marx repeatedly took issue with this presentation of the specific forms of the capitalist mode of production as if they were constants of the production process as such. To portray wage labour not as a distinctive relation of a particular historical form of production but as a universal reality of man’s economic existence was to imply that exploitation and alienation had always existed and would always continue to exist.

Evasion of the specificity of capitalist production therefore had both epistemological and political consequences. On the one hand, it impeded understanding of the concrete historical levels of production; on the other hand, in defining present conditions as unchanged and unchangeable, it presented capitalist production as production in general and bourgeois social relations as natural human relations. Accordingly, Marx’s critique of the theories of economists had a twofold value. As well as underlining that a historical characterization was indispensable for an understanding of reality, it had the precise political aim of countering the dogma of the immutability of the capitalist mode of production. A demonstration of the historicity of the capitalist order would also be proof of its transitory character and of the possibility of its elimination. Capitalism is not the only stage in human history, nor is it the final one. Marx foresees that it will be succeeded by an ‘an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force’.⁵⁹

V. Why Marx again?

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 535.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 248.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital, volume III*, cit., p. 240.

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, cit., p. 832.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital, volume one*, cit. p. 171.

Liberated from the abhorrent function of *instrumentum regni*, to which it had been consigned in the past, and from the chains of Marxism-Leninism from which it is certainly separate, Marx's work has been redeployed to fresh fields of knowledge and is being read again all over the world. The full unfolding of his precious theoretical legacy, wrested from presumptuous proprietors and constricting modes of use, has become possible once more. However, if Marx no longer stands as a carved sphinx protecting the grey 'actually existing socialism' of the XX century, it would be equally mistaken to believe that his theoretical and political legacy can be confined to a past that has nothing more to give to current conflicts. The rediscovery of Marx is based on his persistent capacity to explain the present: he remains an indispensable instrument for understanding it and transforming it.

After years of postmodern manifestoes, solemn talk of the 'end of history' and infatuation with vacuous 'biopolitical' ideas, the value of Marx's theories is again more and more extensively recognized. What remains of Marx today? How useful is his thought to the workers' struggle for freedom? What part of his work is most fertile for stimulating the critique of our times? These are some of the questions that receive a wide range of answers. If one thing is certain about the contemporary Marx revival, it is a rejection of the orthodoxies that have dominated and profoundly conditioned the interpretation of his thought. Although marked by evident limits and the risk of syncretism, this new period is characterized by the multiplicity of theoretical approaches.⁶⁰ After the age of dogmatisms, perhaps it could not have been otherwise. The task of responding to the challenge, through researches both theoretical and practical, lies with an emerging generation of scholars and political activists.

Among the 'Marxes' that remain indispensable, at least two may be mentioned here. One is the critic of the capitalist mode of production: the tireless researcher who studied its development on a global scale and left an unrivalled account of bourgeois society; the thinker who, refusing to conceive of capitalism and the regime of private property as immutable scenarios intrinsic to human nature, still offers crucial suggestions for those seeking alternatives. The other is the theoretician of socialism: the author who repudiated the idea of state socialism, already propagated in his time by Lassalle and Rodbertus, and envisaged the possibility of a complete transformation of productive and social relations, not just a set of bland palliatives for the problems of capitalist society.

Without Marx we will be condemned to critical aphasia. The cause of human emancipation will therefore continue to need him. His 'spectre' is destined to haunt the world and shake humanity for a good while to come.

VI. Appendix: Chronological Table of Marx's Writings

Given the size of Marx's intellectual output, the following chronology can only include his most important writings; its aim is to highlight the unfinished character of many of Marx's texts and the chequered history of their publication. In relation to the first point, the titles of manuscripts that he did not send to press are placed between square brackets, as a way of differentiating them from finished books and articles. The greater weight of the former in comparison with the latter emerges as a result. The column relating to the second point contains the year of first publication, the bibliographical reference and, where relevant, the name of the editor or editors. Any changes that these made to the originals are also indicated here. When a published work or manuscript was not written in German, the original language is specified. Finally, the following abbreviations have been

⁶⁰ Cf. André Tosel, *Le marxisme du 20^e siècle*, Paris: Syllepse 2009, pp. 79f.

used in the table: MEGA (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 1927-1935); SOC (*K. Marks i F. Engel's Sochineniia*, 1928-1946); MEW (*Marx-Engels-Werke*, 1956-1968); MECW (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 1975-2005); MEGA² (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 1975-...).

| Year | Title | Information about editions |
|---------|--|---|
| 1841 | [<i>Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature</i>] | 1902: in <i>Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Ferdinand Lassalle</i> , ed. by Mehring (partial version). 1927: in MEGA I/1.1, ed. by Ryazanov. |
| 1842-43 | Articles for the <i>Rheinische Zeitung</i> . | Daily published in Cologne. |
| 1843 | [<i>Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State</i>] | 1927: in MEGA I/1.1, ed. by Ryazanov. |
| 1844 | Essays for the <i>Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher</i> | Including <i>On the Jewish Question</i> and <i>A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right</i> . Only one issue, published in Paris. The majority of copies were confiscated by the police. |
| 1844 | [<i>Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844</i>] | 1932: in <i>Der historische Materialismus</i> , ed. by Landshut and Mayer, and in MEGA I/3, ed. by Adoratskii (the editions differ in content and order of the parts). The text was omitted from the numbered volumes of MEW and published separately. |
| 1845 | <i>The Holy Family</i> (with Engels) | Published in Frankfurt-am-Main. |
| 1845 | [<i>Theses on Feuerbach</i>] | 1888: appendix to republication of <i>Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy</i> by Engels. |
| 1845-46 | [<i>The German Ideology</i>] (with Engels) | 1903-1904: in <i>Dokumente des Sozialismus</i> , ed. by Bernstein (partial version with editorial revisions). 1932: in <i>Der historische Materialismus</i> , ed. by Landshut and Mayer, and in MEGA I/3, ed. by Adoratskii (the editions differ in content and order of the parts). |
| 1847 | <i>Poverty of Philosophy</i> | Printed in Brussels and Paris. Text in French. |
| 1848 | <i>Speech on the Question of Free Trade</i> . | Published in Brussels. Text in French. |
| 1848 | <i>Manifesto of the Communist Party</i> (with Engels) | Printed in London. Began to circulate widely in the 1880s. |
| 1848-49 | Articles for the <i>Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Organ der Demokratie</i> | Daily appearing in Cologne. Includes <i>Wage Labour and Capital</i> . |
| 1850 | Articles for the <i>Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue</i> . | Monthly printed in Hamburg in small run. Includes <i>The Class Struggles in France from 1848 to 1850</i> . |
| 1852 | <i>The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte</i> | Published in New York in the first issue of <i>Die Revolution</i> . Most of the copies were not collected from the printers for financial |

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|---------|--|---|
| | | reasons. Only a small number reached Europe. The second edition – revised by Marx – appeared only in 1869. |
| 1851-62 | Articles for the <i>New-York Tribune</i> | Many of the articles were written by Engels. |
| 1852 | [<i>Great Men of the Exile</i>] (with Engels) | 1930: in <i>Arkhiv Marksa i Engel'sa</i> (Russian edition). The manuscript had previously been hidden by Bernstein. |
| 1853 | <i>Revelations concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne</i> | Published as an anonymous pamphlet in Basle (nearly all two thousand copies were confiscated by the police) and in Boston. Republished in 1874 in <i>Volksstaat</i> (with Marx identified as the author) and in 1875 in book form. |
| 1853-54 | <i>Lord Palmerston</i> | Text in English. Originally published as articles in the <i>New-York Tribune</i> and <i>The People's Paper</i> , and subsequently in booklet form. |
| 1854 | <i>The Knight of the Noble Consciousness</i> | Published in New York in booklet form. |
| 1856-57 | <i>Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century</i> | Text in English. Though already published by Marx, it was subsequently omitted from his works and published in the “socialist” countries only in 1986, in MECW. |
| 1857 | [<i>Introduction</i>] | 1903: in <i>Die Neue Zeit</i> , ed. by Kautsky, with various discrepancies from the original. |
| 1857-58 | [<i>Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy</i>] | 1939-1941: edition with small print run. 1953: republication allowing wide circulation. |
| 1859 | <i>Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i> | Published in Berlin in a thousand copies. |
| 1860 | <i>Herr Vogt</i> | Published in London with little resonance. |
| 1861-63 | [<i>Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (manuscript of 1861-1863)</i>] | 1905-1910: <i>Theories of Surplus-Value</i> , ed. by Kautsky (in revised version). A text conforming to the original appeared only in 1954 (Russian edition) and 1956 (German edition). 1976-1982: manuscript published in full in MEGA ² II/3.1-3.6. |
| 1863-64 | [<i>On the Polish Question</i>] | 1961: <i>Manuskripte über die polnische Frage</i> , ed. by the IISG. |
| 1863-67 | [<i>Economic manuscripts of 1863-1867</i>] | 1894: <i>Capital. Volume Three. The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole</i> , ed. by Engels (who also used later manuscripts published in MEGA ² II/14 and the forthcoming MEGA ² II/4.3). 1933: <i>Volume One. Unpublished Chapter VI</i> , in <i>Arkhiv Marksa i Engel'sa</i> . 1988: publication of manuscripts of <i>Volume One</i> and <i>Volume Two</i> , in MEGA ² II/4.1. 1992: publication of manuscripts of <i>Volume</i> |

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| | | <i>Three</i> , in MEGA ² II/4.2. |
| 1864-72 | Addresses, resolutions, circulars, manifestos, programmes, statutes of the International Workingmen's Association. | Texts mostly in English, including <i>Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association</i> and <i>The Fictitious Splits in the International</i> (with Engels). |
| 1865 | [<i>Wages, Price and Profit</i>] | 1898: ed. by Eleanor Marx. Text in English. |
| 1867 | <i>Capital. Volume One. The Process of Production of Capital</i> | Published in a thousand copies in Hamburg. Second edition in 1873 in 3,000 copies. Russian translation in 1872. |
| 1870 | [<i>Manuscript of Volume Two of Capital</i>] | 1885: <i>Capital. Volume Two. The Process of Circulation of Capital</i> , ed. by Engels (who also used the manuscript of 1880-1881 and the shorter ones of 1867-1868 and 1877-1878, published in MEGA ² II/11). |
| 1871 | <i>The Civil War in France</i> | Text in English. Numerous editions and translations in a short space of time. |
| 1872-75 | <i>Capital. Volume One. The Process of Production of Capital</i> (French edition) | Text reworked for the French edition, which appeared in instalments. According to Marx, it had a "scientific value independent of the original". |
| 1874-75 | [<i>Notes on Bakunin's Statehood and Anarchy</i>] | 1928: in <i>Letopisi marxisma</i> , with a preface by Ryazanov (Russian edition). Manuscript with excerpts in Russian and comments in German. |
| 1875 | [<i>Critique of the Gotha Programme</i>] | 1891: in <i>Die Neue Zeit</i> , ed. by Engels, who altered a few passages from the original. |
| 1875 | [<i>Relationship between Rate of Surplus-Value and Rate of Profit Developed Mathematically</i>] | 2003: in MEGA ² II/14. |
| 1877 | "From <i>Kritische Geschichte</i> " (a chapter in <i>Anti-Dühring</i> by Engels) | Published in part in <i>Vorwärts</i> and then in full in the book edition. |
| 1879-80 | [<i>Notes on Kovalevskii's Rural Communal Property</i>] | 1977: in <i>Karl Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion</i> , ed. by IISG. |
| 1879-80 | [<i>Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner's Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie</i>] | 1932: in <i>Das Kapital</i> (partial version). 1933: in SOC XV (Russian edition). |
| 1880-81 | [<i>Excerpts from Morgan's Ancient Society</i>] | 1972: in <i>The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx</i> , ed. by the IISG. Manuscript with excerpts in English. |
| 1881-82 | [<i>Chronological excerpts 90 BC to approx. 1648</i>] | 1938-1939: in <i>Arkhiv Marksa i Engel'sa</i> (partial version, Russian edition). 1953: in Marx - Engels - Lenin - Stalin, <i>Zur deutschen Geschichte</i> (partial version). |