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Smoke from the Volcanoes of Marxism?

Multifarious Theoretical and Political Debates

In the 1984 introduction to his *Theory of Social Systems*, the sociologist Niklas Luhmann painted an evocative picture of flying at a high level of abstraction over a “rather thick cloud cover” which offered occasional “glimpses of a land below”, including “a larger stretch of landscape with the extinct volcanoes of Marxism”.¹ It was, however, premature to draw the conclusion that the magma of these Marxist volcanoes had petrified. For sure there have been no major eruptions for some time. But anyone testing with the probes of conceptual history or the history of knowledge can soon see that beneath the sedimentary layers the Marxist lava has never been settled. The question remains whether these volcanoes will soon erupt again.

Marx is out – Marx is in. Looking back, it is noticeable how often theoretical and political debate turned away from Karl Marx and pronounced him ‘defunct’, only to turn back to him with surprising intensity and often in unexpected contexts.² This is an ambivalent finding. On one hand, in spite of its being shaken to the core by the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Eastern Bloc, the ‘Marxist–Leninist’ ideology has proven capable of remarkable continuity in some places, especially in the People’s Republic of China. This kind of power-saturated state Marxism is theoretically frozen and further intellectual eruptions are not to be expected.

On the other hand, the task of ‘re-reading’ *Capital* – Karl Marx’s main work from 1867 – has become more attractive.³ Capitalism’s vulnerability to crisis, persistent exploitation within global hierarchies and the worsening environmental crisis are all factors that have bolstered theoretical approaches that draw on is-

1 Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie sozialer Systeme* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 12–13.

2 For the most recent study of the debates around Karl Marx see: Jeff Diamanti, Andrew Pendarakis and Imre Szeman, eds., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

3 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I: The Process of Capitalist Production* (New York : The Modern library) (first published Hamburg: Meissner, 1867). An inventive new reading can be found in: Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Das “Kapital” lesen – aber wie?: Materialien zur Philosophie und Epistemologie der marxischen Kapitalismuskritik* (Hamburg: Argument Hamburg, 2013). See also the review by Mario Wimmer, “Marx neu lesen,” *Werkstatt Geschichte* 77 (2017): 111–116.

sues discussed by Marx. Close links are seen between social inequality and the exploitation of the natural world. Historians such as Timothy Mitchell and Andreas Malm have created models which demonstrate the connection between fossil fuels, industrial economic growth and capitalist regime of exploitation, not only from an economic perspective but also from a political point of view.⁴ The philosopher Kohei Saito assumes that Marx not only casually addressed the capitalist overexploitation and degradation of natural resources, but also placed them at the very centre of his theory of accumulation. In fact, Marx drew an analogy between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of labour. Towards the end of his life, he tried to prove that capital accumulation had natural limits.⁵

These and further considerations mean that approaches to Marxist theory have become more differentiated and that the notion of capital and the concept of capitalism has become increasingly complex.⁶ It is not easy to keep track of all the different strands, but then Marxism has never been famous for being easy. Any attempts to use Marx as the basis for a theoretically integrated global *total history* or even to develop any coherent analytical perspective have repeatedly failed for the simple reason that Marx intended his work to be polarising and broadly based rather than consensual and one-dimensional. It begins with the fact that Marx himself never wanted to be a ‘Marxist’.⁷ Within the Marxist community, both in internal debates and when countering critics of Marx, there is an enormously wide range of interpretations.

4 Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013); Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016); *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

5 Marx’ environmental criticism is addressed in: Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017). For a critique of this position, see the book review by Naeem Inayatullah auf adademia.edu. See also: John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-critique* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) and Elmar Altvater and Birgit Mahnkopf, *Grenzen der Globalisierung: Ökonomie, Ökologie und Politik in der Weltgesellschaft* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2007).

6 Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 86 (2014): 55–72. Friedrich Lenger, “Die neue Kapitalismusgeschichte: Ein Forschungsbericht als Einleitung,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 56 (2016), 1–36. See the “Varieties of Capitalism” debate: Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

7 ‘The only thing I know is that I’m not a Marxist’. Recorded twice as oral statements by Karl Marx in letters from Friedrich Engels: Engels to Conrad Schmidt on August 5 1890; Engels to Paul Lafarquet on August 27 1890; *MEW* Vol. 37 (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1967), 436.

Looking back, historically various reception strands can be identified. The first, emerging in the 1890s, is social democracy with its mobilising self-assurance by means of a ‘historical materialism’ suitable for the masses. After 1917, this was both rivalled by and co-existed with Marxism–Leninism, which became state official and was followed by Stalinism and Maoism. Although the various critical politico-economic analyses of capitalism and imperialism still interact with these ideologies, they provided new and distinct lines of reasoning. The works of Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital*⁸, and Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*⁹, acted as important catalysts here. At the same time came the development of ‘Western Marxism’¹⁰, represented since the 1920s by the ‘critical theory’ of the University of Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. In the post-war period, its epicentre shifted to France where at the beginning of the 1960s an esoteric theoretical language served to advance a comprehensive synthesis of structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism. More down-to-earth critics such as Edward P. Thompson rejected these attempts, calling them an ‘orrery of errors’ and later the ‘poverty of theory’.¹¹

In the early 1960s, Marxism was at its epistemological zenith. For all its many facets and inner rivalries, the theory of Marxism in all its shapes and forms was part of an overall process of questioning and self-reflection within society. In 1960, Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* claimed that Marxism was the untransgressable horizon of all thought. For him, this was not tantamount to certainty of knowledge. He rather was stretching the metaphor of a common boat sailing on the high seas of ignorance.¹² In emphasising this, he turned himself against the determinists among the Marxists, convinced that liberty was no more than the realisation of necessity, purported to be in possession of a scientific compass which would guide them to the far shores of Communism. Sartre, however, had broken with the French Communist Party in 1956 and insisted that liberty itself should be put on the rowing bench. By 1965, Marxism seemed to have aligned itself to structuralism. The stage on which the renewal

8 Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital. A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*, ed. Tom Bottomore (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981) (first published Vienna, Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1910).

9 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, ed. Dr. W. Stark (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1951) (first published Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts Paul Singer 1913).

10 Perry Anderson, *Über den westlichen Marxismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1978).

11 Edward P. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors” (1978), in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, ed. Edward P. Thompson (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1978/pot/essay.htm> accessed April 21, 2020.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

of Marxism was being played out was dominated by Louis Althusser's *For Marx* and the anthology *Reading Capital* (with Etienne Balibar, Jaques Rancière and others).¹³ Writing about this period in his *History of Structuralism*, François Dosse noted: "Marx became the interface of all research, a veritable common denominator in the social sciences."¹⁴

However, after the *annus mirabilis 1966*¹⁵ Marxism was plunged into a crisis. Sartre's unattainable horizon was shattered. Dialectics, based on the interaction of antagonistic forces, was pushed onto the back foot by a mode of thought oriented towards the never-ending play of differences. Criticism of the Hegel–Marx continuum was itself varied and reached from the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes through structural–functional approaches and the interpretive analytics of Michel Foucault to the post-modern perspective of François Lyotard. Nevertheless, this did not spell the end of engagement with Marxism. On the contrary, both with and alongside this anti-dialectic challenge, a broad spectrum of Marxisms prospered. Besides the revival of a dull 'state-monopoly capitalism' there was also a renaissance of more sophisticated Marxist theories. Significant examples are the crisis theories of 'late capitalism'¹⁶, the new gender history studies of the rise of housework in capitalism,¹⁷ and the diagnosis of a 'crisis of state planning' and of the transition to a 'crisis of the state' and to 'empire'.¹⁸

In 1976, as one of a team of authors, I also published in the 'critical tradition' of the theory of capital accumulation and crisis.¹⁹ The book dealt with the eco-

13 Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Rober Establet, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Macherey, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2015). This re-reading of Marx was initiated by Althusser in the mid 1960s: Louis Althusser, *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Maspero, 1965); Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1966).

14 François Dosse, *Geschichte des Strukturalismus, Vol. 1: Das Feld des Zeichens, 1945–1966*, (Hamburg: Junius, 1996), 447.

15 Dosse, *Strukturalismus*, 456 (chapter heading).

16 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973); Claus Offe, *Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staates: Aufsätze zur politischen Soziologie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1972).

17 Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden, "Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus," in *Dokumentation der Berliner Sommeruniversitäten: Frauen und Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen*, Juli 1976 (Berlin 1977), 118–199.

18 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge/Mass.: HUP, 2000); see also: Antonio Negri and Timothy S. Murphy, *Modernity and the Multitude* (Cambridge/Mass.: Polity Press, 2012).

19 Autorenkollektiv (Felix Müller, Hans Schäppi and Jakob Tanner), *Krise– Zufall oder Folge des Kapitalismus? Die Schweiz und die aktuelle Wirtschaftskrise: Eine Einführung aus marxistischer Sicht* (Zürich: Limmat Verlag, 1976), citation 9.

conomic crisis of 1974–1975 and was entitled *Crisis – Accident or a Consequence of Capitalism?*. In it we tried to use ‘a Marxist perspective’ to explain the prosperity of the *trente glorieuses* (‘glorious thirties’) between 1945 and 1973 and the subsequent economic setback. It was intended as an introduction, particularly for use in political education offered by trade unions. At the same time, its aim was similar to that of many other authors of the time²⁰, namely, to find a mathematical expression for Marx’s law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and to prove it empirically. From the point of view of its foundation on the labour theory of value, this endeavour can barely withstand retrospective evaluation. By contrast, its critique of capitalism and its analysis of the dynamics of crisis within capitalist economic and social systems seem more compelling than ever.

Up to the mid-1970s, Marx was everywhere. Anyone who went to university to study humanities or social sciences in a western European country at the beginning of the 1970s was immediately introduced to fields of theory which were unmistakably shaped by Marxist theories. Looking at the whole spectrum of historical research from the *Annales* historians, social history and ‘world-systems analysis’, the history of everyday life, cultural history and microhistory, right through to gender history, historical anthropology and postcolonial studies, the history of knowledge and important perspectives in environmental history, it can be seen that the most important theoretical innovations in the study of history and cultural theory can only be explained in the context of Marx – whether for or against him – even if Marx himself is sometimes conspicuous by his absence.²¹

Images of Marx and the ‘Marx Effect’

However, Marx is generally not absent but ever-present, even if only as a stereotyped reference. As such he is reduced to several specific roles. The sociologist

20 Still the most impressive in terms of its mathematical grounding and nuanced conclusions: Hans-Werner Sinn, “Das Marxsche Gesetz des tendenziellen Falls der Profitrate,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 131 (1975): 646–696. http://www.hanswernersinn.de/dcs/1975_ZGS131_Marxsches_Gesetz_Profitrate.pdf. Accessed April 21, 2020.

21 For the influential Marxist traditions in Cultural Studies see: <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-911> Accessed April 21, 2020. Overviews tend to waver between acceptance and disassociation. The complexity of the relations and the interaction in all these cases is shown by the example of the ‘*Annales*’ by: Peter Schöttler, *Die “Annales”-Historiker und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2015), chapter 11, 203–220.

Wolfgang Essbach recently identified four stereotyped images of Marx: the “radical journalist” around 1850, the “intellectual socialist and leader of the international labour movement” around 1870, the “founder of historical materialism” around 1900 and “the theorist of the revolution” in the mid-1920s.²² Essbach points out that these four figures prevent the recourse to an authentic Marx. The search for what he really meant by what he wrote only engenders a mystification of origins. All those who battle their way through Marx’s writings today are reading through the kaleidoscope of previous interpretations. However hard they try, neither language nor theory can wholly avoid being influenced by this kind of cross-fading of images.

Considering the appropriation of Marx in the years around 1968, Essbach argues convincingly that the 1968 protest movements did not create a genuinely new image of Marx. On the contrary, in their first “hippy phase”, he argues, they combined the first and last images (celebrating the radical journalist as the theorist of the revolution), whereas later, in the “communist-group (*K-Gruppen*) phase”, they concentrated on the second and third images, that is on the leader of the First International and the intellectual founder of historical and dialectical materialism. Further, he wonders whether a fifth Marx image has been created since the end of the Cold War, that of the “classic” Marx. Could it be that Marx has now become “a great figure in our discipline, a social scientist of historical standing”²³, who has to hold his own with Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Maurice Halbwachs, Hannah Arendt, Norbert Elias and others? If this were the case he would be relieved of his unique position as the ultimate reference for a critical theory of capitalist society. He would be neutralised as one of many players in the market of ideas.

In fact Marx has already been relativised and historicised. Nowadays ‘Marx’ always means ‘after Marx’ in both senses of the phrase.²⁴ Three different contexts were (and are) particularly important for my own exploration of Marx. The *first* is Arendt’s Marx critique. In the 1950s she depicted Marx as both sympathiser and opponent of Friedrich Nietzsche. Arendt describes the partisans’ logic which was evident in thinkers like Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. It was particularly distinct in the case of Marx, because he defined politics as class struggle

²² Wolfgang Essbach, *Marxbilder 1848 bis 1968: SWR 3 Tele-Akademie, Sendung vom 21.10.2018*, see: <https://swrmediathek.de/player.htm?show=276a0fc0-d1dd-11e8-9a07-005056a12b4c> Accessed April 21, 2020.

²³ See e.g. Heinz D. Kurz, “Hin zu Marx und über ihn hinaus,” *Perspektiven der Wirtschaftspolitik*, 19,3 (2018), 246–265, 263.

²⁴ Rahel Jaeggi and Daniel Loick, eds., *Nach Marx: Philosophie, Kritik, Praxis* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

and thus identified any theoretical alignment as a positioning in the system of political coordinates. The result was: pro-Marx = progressive, anti-Marx = reactionary.²⁵ Arendt rejected this antagonism and instead emphasised what Marx and Nietzsche had in common. Both had brought about a radical reversal. In her view, Marx had turned Hegel ‘upside down’ and seen dialectics not as an intellectual transformation but as a material process, while Nietzsche turned Platonism around and demanded the ‘revaluation of all values’.²⁶ Arendt found both of these reversals equally daring and ‘extraordinarily significant’, but suggested that neither of them transgressed the basic problem but reified it on a different level. This interpretation invalidates the idea that Marx had made a quantum leap forward in thinking.

The *second* context in the discussion involves the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who anchored Marx in a specific historical tradition. In his 1965 study *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, he describes the theoretician of capital, together with Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, as ‘masters of suspicion’.²⁷ These three, he says, were striving to expose what was socially evident as the effect of a hidden essence (Marx: ‘all history is the history of class struggle’). Consequently, the ruling consciousness for Marx is necessarily a wrong one. From this point of view, the impenetrable is the non-existent.²⁸ Any socially produced ‘appearance’ is ideology because it supports the illusion that consciousness is the source of all meaning, whereas in fact, meaning is determined by other completely different factors (for Marx, by the commodity mode of value; for Nietzsche, the form of discourse; for Freud, the structure of the psyche). This classification, according to Ricoeur, means that Marx represents an intellectual stance whose systematic premise is that the role of social ‘appearance’ is to obscure deeper insights into social, cultural and psychological connections. For Ricoeur, Marx is a theoretician who denounces any form of trust in existing

25 Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Political Thought,” in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs* (= *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Vol. 6*) (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 245–255, 245.

26 Hannah Arendt, “Von Hegel zu Marx,” in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs* (= *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Vol. 6*) (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 89.

27 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: YUP, 1970), 33 and 35.

28 Emil Angehrn, “Vom Sinn des Sinnlosen: Die Herausforderung der Psychoanalyse für die Philosophie,” in *Freuds Aktualität (Freiburger literaturpsychologische Gespräche. Jahrbuch für Literatur und Psychoanalyse, Vol. 26)*, eds. Wolfram Mauser and Joachim Pfeifferd, (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006), 85–96. <http://www.jp.philo.at/texte/AngehrnE1.pdf>; Accessed April 21, 2020.

circumstances as naïve and assumes that the only way to penetrate this social context of delusion is by means of suspicion based on dispassionate distrust.²⁹

Third there is Jacques Derrida, who in 1993, thirty years after Ricoeur, coined this necessity for suspicion ‘Hauntology’ (an amalgamation of haunting and ontology). In his book *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida adopts an approach of ‘unfaithful fidelity’ (*une fidélité infidèle*) towards Marx, whose impetus for international criticism of society he says, can only be maintained if the theoretical premises of his work are subjected to fundamental questioning.³⁰ The spectre metaphor used by Derrida takes up a motif from the Communist Manifesto of 1848 and helps resist the temptation to idealise Marx as a timeless revelation of the communist future through the medium of class struggle and to endow him with a higher, even religious aura. Derrida’s account helps us to understand why Marx triggered a tremendous theory effect rather than being an outstanding hero of the intellectual world. Derrida’s deconstruction apparatus manages to undermine Hegel’s hubris in seeing himself as the embodiment of the absolute and the voice of the ‘Weltgeist’ (world spirit), who found knowledge of himself through his phenomenological work. It also undermines the image of ‘progress’ around which the eschatology of political Marxism crystallised. Marx has no salvation to offer, insists Derrida, but if one is prepared to put in the effort, he can be useful as a productive theoretical force.

Together these three relativising contexts show the theoretical productivity and the epistemological limitations of Marx. They deflate exaggerated expectations and demonstrate the wide variety of ways his work can be appropriated. This seems to me to be essential to make it possible for continuing to engage with Marxist approaches and defending them against alternative theories.

Democracy and Liberty

One of the most firmly-held convictions of the twentieth century was that socialism came at the expense of liberty while capitalism came at the expense

²⁹ Alison Scott-Bauman, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009); Andrew Dole, *Reframing the Masters of Suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Marx Gespenster. Der Staat der Schuld, die Trauerarbeit und die neue Internationale* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2004). Derrida uses this term “fidélité infidèle” for his own work. Entretien avec Jean Birnbaum, “Je suis en guerre contre moi-même,” *Le Devoir*, September 4, 2004, <https://www.ledouvoir.com/lire/62927/entretien-avec-jacques-derrida-je-suis-en-guerre-contre-moi-meme>. Accessed April 21, 2020.

of equality. The trade-off between these two basic principles began in the French Revolution and soon became an undisputed absolute. Historians and social scientists, however, would do well not to consider the demand for liberty – or freedom or liberation, as it was referred to in the socialist tradition – to be in competition with the theory of equality.

The concept of liberty developed by Marx is highly compatible with a democratic society. He rarely mentioned communism as an aim. When he did, (such as in his 1875 critique of German social democracy and its Gotha programme),³¹ he made it clear that individual freedom and ‘rich individuality’ took precedence over schematic equality or abstract justice. This striking preference for liberty or freedom has often been overlooked. The main reason is that the tensions between anarchists and Marxists, which first surfaced in the early 1870s in the International Labour Association, seemed to express a sharp antithesis between federalism and centralism. On one side were the bottom-up anarchists surrounding wild Mikhail Bakunin and on the other the top-down communists under the thumb of Marx. This juxtaposition is misleading, because the split was about something completely different. Marx criticised Bakunin’s tendency towards authoritarian violence, ‘barracks communism’ and a ‘levelling out of classes and individuals’.³² Marx’s objection to Bakunin was the same as his objection to capitalism – both prevented the individual from finding self-fulfilment.³³ Marx, on the contrary, wants the liberated individual. He is a philosopher of freedom.³⁴

However, this does not mean that Marx’s writings offer concrete insights into the theory of democracy. This becomes particularly clear by comparing Marx’s *Capital* and Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.³⁵ Both works advance the theory that capitalism and democracy are incompatible or in a strong contrast. But their approaches are strikingly different. Marx’s *Capital* contains powerful descriptions of the capitalist labour process, whereby “the pro-

31 Karl Marx, *Kritik des Gothaer Programms*, 1875, published posthumously (1891) by Friedrich Engels, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Werke (MEW)*, Vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973), 13–32.

32 Urs Marti, *Die Freiheit des Karl Marx: Ein Aufklärer im bürgerlichen Zeitalter* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2018), 236–246, 238, 241.

33 This is not to dispute the importance of the role individuality plays in anarchism and the collectivist, violence-prone tendencies in party-Marxist strands; these statements refer precisely to the writings of Bakunin that Marx studied and criticised.

34 Michael R. Krätke, *Karl Marx und die Kritik des Gothaer Programms*, unpublished paper, Lancaster University, <https://lancaster.academia.edu/MichaelKr%C3%A4tke>. Accessed April 21, 2020.

35 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Vol. I, in *MEW* Vol. 23 (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1972); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge/Mass.: Belknap, 2014) (first published 2013).

ductive activity of the human organism” expresses itself as “abstract human labour”.³⁶ Democracy as a social institution and legal construction is hardly mentioned. In fact, Marx ignores the intrinsic value of institutionalised democratic structures. He understands political violence as ‘economic power’ and vice versa. If capitalists are not willing to relinquish control voluntarily when the bell tolls for private property at the moment of revolution, he writes, the “class dictatorship of the proletariat” will appear “as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally”.³⁷ In this context, categories such as the rule of law, checks and balances and formal processes are of little use.

At the same time Marx sublimates the principle of democracy. In his early works he draws enigmatic parallels between democracy and communism. In the same way as democracy is “the riddle of all constitutions solved”, he says communism is “the riddle of history solved” and knows it.³⁸ This inconsistency has frequently been alluded to. Although Marx is a political writer through and through, he never developed a systematic political theory that would have satisfied his own analytical standards in his study of capitalism. What Marx did was to react to political movements and class struggles in particular situations but at no stage in his life was he willing or capable of providing a stable theoretical basis for the concept of the political and the idea of democratic socialisation.³⁹

Piketty adopts a completely contrasting approach. He does not base the capitalist accumulation mechanism on a labour theory of value and although his descriptions are often lengthy, the labour process remains completely underexposed.⁴⁰ Workers are treated by him as citizens and, in respect of their purchasing power, as consumers (whereby the gender aspect is generally disregarded). Piketty’s central question is whether and how “democracy can regain control over capitalism” someday.⁴¹ As distinct from “the human disasters caused by Soviet-style centralized planning”,⁴² he consistently argues for “so-

36 Marx, *Das Kapital*, 61, 510.

37 Karl Marx, *Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich* (1850), in *MEW*, Vol. 7 (Berlin: Karl Dietz, 1973), 89.

38 Karl Marx, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie 1834/3/44,” in *MEW*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Karl Dietz, 1976), 231; Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* (1844),” in *MEW*, Ergänzungsband, 1. (Berlin: Karl Dietz, 1968), 536.

39 Bruno Bosteels, “Political Theory,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx*, eds. Jeff Diamanti, Andrew Pendakis and Imre Szeman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 585–596. On 585, Etienne Balibar is cited.

40 Piketty tends to use ‘assets’, ‘wealth’ and ‘capital’ more or less synonymously.

41 Piketty, *Capital*, 570.

42 Piketty, *Capital*, 532.

cial-democratic avenues”. Piketty is not interested in providing a manual for class struggle but in “contributing, however modestly, to the debate about the best way to organise society and the most appropriate institutions and policies to achieve a just social order ... under the rule of law, which should apply equally to all and derive from universally understood statutes subject to democratic debate.”⁴³

Politics and democracy are key categories for Piketty, whereas in Marx’s work they only appear as derivatives of class struggle. For Arendt, this militant over-politicisation has turned down into institutional depoliticisation. She considers Marx dreadfully ‘unpolitical’ because he was not prepared to take politics seriously as a space where a society can reach an understanding on the institutional and material conditions under which it operates. The significance of Marx’s work lies neither in his economic theories nor in its revolutionary content, but in the stubbornness with which he clung to these two chief new perplexities, was her harsh verdict.⁴⁴ It is indeed the case that Marx places too much faith in his concept of freedom and that this results in his being a weak theorist of democracy. This is a serious deficiency, and it helps explain why a hostile takeover of Marxism by authoritarian and dictatorial movements has been possible. It is also a further reason why the problem of politics and the necessary conditions for a democratic society must be placed at the core of Marxist-based theoretical models.

Marxist Anthropology and Value Analysis

Most Marxist debates in the German-speaking world have focussed on the philosophy of history, political economy and commodity aesthetics. Debates in the Anglosphere and France, on the other hand, particularly within social and cultural anthropology, have for a long time concentrated on the question of Marxist anthropology. Marx’s many ethnographic writings do not constitute a discrete level of observation but record the manifestations of capitalist exploitation across all social scales, from global imperialism and the world market through the analysis of individual regions and countries to micro-worlds of the capitalist factory where exploitation practices are concentrated. This suggests re-reading of *Capital*, in which Marx portrays social power relations as material violence and social coercion and provides a vivid description of how labour is in

⁴³ Piketty, *Capital*, 31

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Political Thought,” 248.

fact subsumed under capital and how this is inscribed in the human body. Marx vividly evokes the “incessant sacrificial feast of the working-class” in which that “monstrosity, an industrial reserve army, kept in misery in order to be always at the disposal of capital” coexists with the “absolute disposability of humans for the changing requirements of labour”.⁴⁵

Ideas such as these became highly relevant in the late 1970s, when neoliberalism advanced to become the ruling ideology of political activity in many economically advanced countries, especially in the United States and Britain. Efforts to bring Marxism up-to-date intensified, not only on the left, but also within scientific research. However, the new methodological approaches that were nominally based on Marx were diametrically opposed to each other. In 1980, the so-called Analytical Marxism (AM) project was launched. Its major impetus came from Gerald A. Cohen’s *Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*⁴⁶ and its main protagonists were Jon Elster, David Miller and John Roemer. This approach was like trying to combine fire and water. AM wanted to apply paradigms of rational choice theory and methodological individualism to Marx’s critique of capitalism in a way that was in accordance with analytical philosophy. Its goal was to rationalise Marx by operationalising the terminology. It aimed to clear the ideological fog that surrounded the Marxism of class struggle and seemed to be blurring scientific analysis. Cohen called this ‘Non-Bullshit Marxism’ which was to bridge the gap between the social sciences and contemporary philosophy. It was an ambitious project that was guided by a rigid but theoretically stringent model of rationality. In the 1990s, however, it lost its impetus and mutated into a politically undefined “new Marxist research on an analytical basis”.⁴⁷

In the same period there was an upsurge in approaches of cultural anthropology towards ‘the social’ and social anthropology of ‘the cultural’. Two seminal works here were Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History* and Sidney Mintz’ history of sugar, *Sweetness and Power*.⁴⁸ They both aspired to a global history of capitalism, adding substance to an approach whose potential is still by no means exhausted. This is evident in Frederick Cooper und Ann Laura Stoler’s

⁴⁵ Marx, *Das Kapital*, 511.

⁴⁶ Gerald A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

⁴⁷ Marco Iorio, “Analytischer Marxismus,” in *Marx-Handbuch. Leben – Werke – Wirken*, eds. Michael Quante and David P. Schweikard (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 351.

⁴⁸ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles: University of California Press) 1982; Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, New York: Viking 1985).

*Tensions of Empire*⁴⁹ and Thomas Carl Patterson's *Karl Marx, Anthropologist*.⁵⁰ In their introduction to *Capitalism and Global Anthropology: Marxism resurgent* Patrick Neveling and Luisa Steur quite rightly refer to "fundamental inspirations for 21st century anthropology".⁵¹

Further theoretical impulses for Marxist anthropology emerged from its confrontation and cooperation with related approaches. The French ethnologist Marcel Mauss was particularly qualified for a dialogue with Marx. Although he was not a Marxist himself, he shared Marx's criticism of capitalism. He saw the Soviet system as nothing but a travesty of the capitalist market system. In his major work of 1923/4, *Essai sur le don* (English: *The Gift* 1925), Mauss summarily dismissed the utilitarian optimisation paradigms of the neoclassical economy.⁵² Mauss was a reform socialist with revolutionary aspirations and the fact that every kind of human interaction was forced into market price categories was to him European capitalist prejudice.⁵³ His idea of a 'gift economy' which is neither structured by optimising self-interest nor by calculated reciprocity enabled him to make a cultural comparison of various forms of gift exchange. The more the principle of wastefulness of the gift contrasts with the accumulation dynamic of capital, the clearer various parallels between Mauss and Marx become. An example would be the attempt to understand economic transaction models as a 'total social phenomenon' and relate them to emotional dispositions, or the analysis of 'alienation' and 'objectification' evident in so many different, even opposing forms of socialisation.⁵⁴ Such reference, however, assume an eclectic self-conception, present in the *Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences So-*

49 Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: UCP, 1997); vgl. auch Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times* (Durham: DUP, 2016).

50 Thomas Carl Patterson, *Karl Marx: Anthropologist* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

51 Patrick Neveling and Luisa Steur, "Introduction," *Focaal*, 82, Special Issue: Capitalism and Global Anthropology: Marxism resurgent (Dec 1, 2018): 1–15, 3. This introduction gives many clues to the variety of reception and further development of Marx' anthropology in France. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2018/10/11/focaal-volume-2018-issue-82-capitalism-and-global-anthropology-marxism-resurgent/> Accessed April 21, 2020.

52 Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*. *Vorwort Florence Weber* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 2008). For the reception of this work in the anthropology of the 21st century see: David Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

53 For a critical discussion of Marcel Mauss see: Don Kalb, "Trotsky over Mauss: Anthropological Theory and the October 1917 Commemoration," in *Dialectical Anthropology* 42, no. 3 (2018): 327–343.

54 David Graeber, "Give it away. On Marcel Mauss," in *Free Words* <http://www.freewords.org/graeber.html>; Accessed April 21, 2020.

ciales (M.A.U.S.S.). This movement began in 1980 – at exactly the same time as ‘Analytical Marxism’– and caused a furore with its 1997 *30 Theses for the New Left*.⁵⁵

Those approaches to Marxist anthropology and capital analysis that are historically oriented avoid presentist short-circuits as well as a relativist historicism and suggest a model of multiple temporalities.⁵⁶ Here simultaneity generally proves to be the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’. Seen from this angle, the idea of a homogeneous global ‘capitalist mode of production’ is not plausible. It would make more sense to study various different combinations of capital accumulation, market types, gift economies, everyday routines and lifeworld habits. Then a Marx-inspired approach is able to relate the transformation of societies to concepts such as commodification, exploitation, globalisation, social inequality, fictitious capital and financial capital accumulation regimes.⁵⁷

Critique of Capitalism beyond the Labour Theory of Value

In terms of the analysis of the production of added value and the increasingly organic composition of capital, Marx is situated in the context of factory capitalism and working world of the nineteenth century. There are still a number of authors today who consider labour value theory to be fundamentally valid and updateable; in my view, it makes far more sense to examine the rise of financial market capitalism as the emergence of a new regime of capital accumulation that requires a new value theory. Over recent decades, ‘fictitious capital’, referred to by Marx in the context of stock exchanges and the creation of credit, has gained overwhelming dominance.⁵⁸ The term ‘financialisation’ has made it possible to conceptualise the process by which the managing class has seized a growing share of aggregate value added.⁵⁹ It also shows how the shareholder

55 Christian Papilloud, “MAUSS: Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales,” in *Kultur: Theorien der Gegenwart*, eds. Stephan Moebius and Dirk Quadflieg (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), 394–408.

56 Wimmer, *Das Kapital*.

57 Michael Brie and Claus Thomasberger, “Die neue grosse Transformation,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 3 (2019): 119–123.

58 Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge/Mass: HUP, 2016).

59 Greta R Krippner, “The Financialization of the American Economy,” in *Socio-economic Review* 3 (2005): 173–208.

value maxim has reversed the labour theory of value, because appreciation in value and the capitalisation of the stock exchanges is interpreted exclusively as a consequence of investor activity.⁶⁰ This assumption can be considered as a productive fiction, causing real effects and being one of the major causes of increasing inequality of distribution of income and wealth in most countries.

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have described this ‘new spirit of capitalism’ in detail. In another study entitled *Enrichissement* (‘Enrichment’), Boltanski and Arnau Esquerre advance the thesis that in recent decades the accumulation of capital has been reconfigured, with far-reaching consequences.⁶¹ The theory is that it is no longer mass production and a correspondingly ‘throw-away’-society that produce the dynamic of economic growth but an appreciation in the value of the past, which then becomes a scarcity factor and is instrumentalised as a resource for increasing value all over the place. Anything seen as ‘heritage’, ‘vintage’ or ‘historical’ is integrated in a value-creating narrative and appreciates in esteem and consequently in monetary worthiness across the whole spectrum of commodified objects, from rare specimens, connoisseur antiques, and cult works of art at record-breaking prices to ‘historical’ city quarters and buildings. The combination of tradition, security and exclusivity deepens class divisions and represents the transition from an imagined future (as the driver of added value production) to a valourised past (as the trigger of increasing value). Boltanski and Esquerre point out the ‘statistical indeterminacy’ of this process; they assume that the ‘national accounts’ (or ‘national accounting’) that was developed in the course of the twentieth century is not up to adequately measuring these new value-added chains that are intimately interwoven with stories and rituals. There is a parallel to be drawn here with Marx’s unwillingness to provide his theorems with a statistical basis (identified by Piketty). Just as it would have been helpful if Marx had paid more attention to quantification, it is important today for historians writing from an interdisciplinary angle to combine cultural approaches about new forms of wealth production with purposeful empirical and statistical research strategies.

The accumulation regime described by Boltanski and Esquerre certainly does not represent the main vector of contemporary societal evolution. Rather it comes in stark contrast to the huge increases in factory capitalism and proletarianisation currently observed in many regions of the world. For several de-

⁶⁰ Jakob Tanner, “Wirtschaften, Wertlogik und die ‘Religion des Kapitals’,” in *Wirtschaften. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, eds. Karl Braun et. al. (Marburg: MAKUFEE, 2019), 91–108.

⁶¹ Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello, *The new spirit of capitalism* (London: Verso 2007); Luc Boltanski and Arnau Esquerre, *Enrichissement: Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

caes, diverse political factions have promoted industrialisation processes which can be analysed using Marx's tools.⁶² Similarly, applying a broader concept of 'labour' inspired by Marx could be a promising way of cataloguing the growing importance of reproductive and care work, as well as the seemingly limitless reserves of informal employment, jobs in the shadow economy and other types of invisible work.⁶³ It can also be applied to the rise of 'human capital' and the proliferation of micro-businesses around the world and the analysis of persistent forms of slavery and many types of bonded labour.⁶⁴ Any attempt to write a global history of labour and work is doomed to fail unless it includes these worldwide and widely ramified power structures and inequalities, (neo)colonial domination techniques and international capital markets, while remaining aware of the relational concept of capitalism.⁶⁵ In the context of global warming, the concept of a 'capitalocene' is also gaining explanatory power because, in contrast to the popular catchword 'anthropocene', which represents the causation complex of climate change in terms of general human activity, it embraces the power structures of a resource-intensive economic growth that externalises both hazardous work processes and pollutants, thereby creating 'toxic commons'.⁶⁶

Such an attempt to assemble a toolbox of different approaches to 'Marx beyond Marx' and to use them in innovative ways will no longer cling to Marx as its principal authority.⁶⁷ The 'theoretical practice' of the past 150 years which was inspired by Marx has produced many ideas that he as the 'spiritus rector' of Marxism had not thought of or had not thought through. Thompson, the British

62 As far as such processes are still regarded as achievements of a "Marxism-Leninism", such theories must not be treated as explanans, but as explanandum.

63 Brigitta Bernet and Jakob Tanner, eds., *Ausser Betrieb: Metamorphosen der Arbeit in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Limmat-Verlag, 2015).

64 See also: The Global Slavery Index: <http://www.globallslaveryindex.org/> and the Report "The Global Slavery Index 2014": http://d1p5uxokz2c0lz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Global_Slavery_Index_2014_final_lowres.pdf. Accessed April 21, 2020. For new approaches see: Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage: Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

65 The leading journal in the field is called "International Labor and Working-Class History". Marcel van der Linden, "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012): 57–76.

66 Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Erik Loomis, *Out of Sight. The Long and Disturbing Story of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe* (New York: The New Press, 2015).

67 Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, eds., *Über Marx hinaus: Arbeitsgeschichte und Arbeitsbegriff in der Konfrontation mit den globalen Arbeitsverhältnissen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2009); Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx. Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).

Marxist who aspired to a cultural history of the social, expressed this by saying “Marx is on our side; we are not on the side of Marx.”⁶⁸ This partisan statement has an epistemological flipside. The reason why Marx has remained relevant is not because he paved a way from the nineteenth century to the present, but because in his infallible sense for exploitation and the global scope of the problems he addressed, his ideas have remained productive for the kind of theoretical state of the art research carried out nowadays on this planet under the terms set by digital capitalism. This explains why once again more smoke is rising over the volcanic cataracts of Marxism. And Marx is still standing out there in front with a smoking gun.

⁶⁸ Quoted from: Stephen Henry Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester: MUP, 1987), 12.

