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Interview:

Marx in the Contemporary Political Scenario

Interview with Marcello Musto by Sankar Ray & Nityananda Ghosh

Marcello Musto (1976) teaches Sociological Theory at York University (Toronto). His books and articles have been published worldwide in more than twenty languages. Among his edited and co-authored volumes, reprinted in several editions, there are: Karl Marx's 'Grundrisse': Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later (2008 - Indian edition: Manohar, 2013); Marx for Today and The International after 150 Years: Labour Versus Capital, Then and Now(2015), all published by Routledge. Recently, he has also edited the first anthology on the International Working Men's Association ever realized in English language, Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later (Bloomsbury, 2014). He responds to the questions posed by Sankar Ray & Nityananda Ghosh through email.

Q: Marx's theories and his critique of alienation are discussed, in a country like India, only in the academic circles, while the working class is the worst victim. What is the general trend of Marx's contemporary reception in the world?

A: Well, obviously the dramatical defeat of the international labour movement, at the end of the 20th century has significantly reduced the impact of Marxism from political parties, social movements and - more in general - the political sphere. But there are some signs of change in the world, and also the "return" of Marx in the academia is a positive phenomenon that might play a positive influence on the new generations.

In fact, despite all the predictions after 1989 that Karl Marx would forever be consigned to oblivion, scholars around the world have again been paying attention to him in the last few years. In a world beset with profound contradictions, analysts are once more turning to a thinker who, hastily dismissed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has become important for an understanding of the present.

After a near-total suspension for more than twenty years, Marx studies have resumed in many European countries – his works have reappeared in bookshops, and new editions of *Capital* have quickly sold out – as well as in the English-speaking world and Latin America (for example in Brazil). In particular, since the onset of the international financial crisis in 2008, academics, economic analysts and journalists from diverse political and cultural backgrounds are again recognizing the value of Marx's analysis of the inherent instability of capitalism, and of its self-generated cyclical crises which have such grave effects on political and social life. In all parts of the world, leading daily and weekly papers have also been discussing the contemporary relevance of Marx's thought.

An analogous consensus is enjoyed by the journals open to contributions discussing Marx and various Marxisms, just as there are now international conferences, university courses and seminars dedicated to this author. Finally, even if timidly and in often confused forms – from Latin America to Europe, passing through the alternative globalization movement – a new demand for Marx is also being registered in political terms (see the case of Greece, for example). Some commentators have described this context as "Marx renaissance".

What remains of Marx today? How useful his thought is to the struggle for emancipation and freedom? What part of his work is most fertile for stimulating the critique of our times? These are some of the questions that receive answers that are anything but unanimous.

If the contemporary Marx renaissance has a certainty, it consists precisely in the discontinuity in respect to the past that was characterized by monolithic orthodoxies that have dominated and profoundly conditioned the interpretation of this thinker. Even though marked by evident limits and the risk of syncretism, a season has arrived that is characterized by many Marxs, and indeed, after the age of dogmatism, it could not have happened in any other way. The task of responding to these problems is therefore up to the research, theoretical and practical, of a new generation of scholars and political activists.

Q: Let us move on alienation now. What are the main aspects of Marx's conception of alienation?

A: Alienation was one of the most important and widely debated themes of the 20th century, and Marx's theorization played a key role in the discussions. Yet, contrary to what one might imagine, the concept itself did not develop in a linear manner, and the publication of previously unknown texts containing Marx's reflections on alienation (like for example the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in 1932 and the *Grundrisse* in the 1960s) defined significant moments in the transformation and dissemination of the theory.

Unfortunately - and paradoxically - Marx's theory of alienation in capitalist society is mostly known through his statements included in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a very fragmentary text written by a young scholar who was just starting to study political economy.

In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation is presented as the phenomenon through which the labour product confronts labour 'as something alien, as a power independent of the producer'. Marx listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: 1) from the product of his labour, which becomes 'an alien object that has power over him'; 2) in his working activity, which he perceives as 'directed against himself', as if it 'does not belong to him'; 3) from 'man's species-being', which is transformed into 'a being alien to him'; and 4) from other human beings, and in relation to their labour and the object of their labour.

On the basis of this definition, many Marxists put the main emphasis on subjectivity, and their concept of alienation remained too narrowly focused on the individual. Moreover, often their account of Marx's concept based itself only on the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and showed a deep lack of understanding of the specificity and centrality of alienated labour in Marx's thought. This lacuna prevented them from giving due weight to objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product) and led them to advance positions that appear disingenuous in their neglect of the underlying structural relations.

Q: In your work you also criticize a "bourgeois" conceptualization of alienation, in which the specificity of capitalist mode of production was completely dismissed.

A: Yes, in the 1950s, for example, the concept of alienation also entered the vocabulary of North American sociology, with an approach quite different from Marxism. Mainstream sociology treated alienation as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations, and the search for solutions centred on the capacity of individuals to adjust to the existing order, not on collective practices to change society.

Some authors even considered alienation to be a positive phenomenon, a means of expressing creativity, which was inherent in the human condition in general. Another common view was that it sprang from the fissure between individual and society.

American sociology generally saw alienation as a problem linked to the system of industrial production, whether capitalist or socialist, and mainly affecting human consciousness. This major shift of approach ultimately downgraded, or even excluded, analysis of the historical-social factors that determine alienation, producing a kind of hyper-psychologization that treated it not as a social problem but as a pathological symptom of individuals, curable at the individual level.

Whereas in the Marxist tradition the concept of alienation had contributed to some of the sharpest criticisms of the capitalist mode of production, its institutionalization in the realm of sociology reduced it to a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social norms. In the same way, the critical dimension that the concept had had in philosophy (even for authors who thought it a horizon that could never be transcended) now gave way to an illusory neutrality.

Another effect of this metamorphosis was the theoretical impoverishment of the concept. From a complex phenomenon related to man's work activity and social and intellectual existence, alienation became a partial category divided up in accordance with academic research specializations. American sociologists argued that this methodological choice enabled them to free the study of alienation from any political connotations and to confer on it scientific objectivity. But, in reality, this a-political 'turn' had evident ideological implications, since support for the dominant values and social order lay hidden behind the banner of de-ideologization and value-neutrality.

So, the difference between Marxist and American sociological conceptions of alienation was not that the former were political and the latter scientific. Rather, Marxist theorists were bearers of values opposed to the hegemonic ones in American society, whereas the US sociologists upheld the values of the existing social order, skillfully dressed up as eternal values of the human species. In the American academic context, the concept of alienation underwent a veritable distortion and ended up being used by defenders of the very social classes against which it had for so long been directed.

Q: Let us now go back to Marx. What should be the main textual references for Marx's conception of alienation, if the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* represent an important but partial elaboration of Marxian ideas?

A: Well, beside the very significant pages of the *Grundrisse* where Marx exposed his mature and more advanced concept of alienation, one of his best accounts of alienation is contained in the famous section of *Capital* on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', where he shows that, in capitalist society, people are dominated by the products they have created. Here, the relations among them appear not 'as direct social relations between persons, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things'.

Two elements in this famous passage of *Capital* mark a clear dividing line between Marx's conception of alienation and the one held by most of the other theorists of alienation.

First, Marx conceives of fetishism not as an individual problem but as a social phenomenon, not as an affair of the mind but as a real power, a particular form of domination, which establishes itself in market economy as a result of the transformation of objects into subjects. For this reason, his analysis of alienation does not confine itself to the disquiet of individual women and men, but extends to the social processes and productive activities underlying it.

Second, for Marx fetishism manifests itself in a precise historical reality of production, the reality of wage labour; it is not part of the relation between people and things as such, but rather of the relation between man and a particular kind of objectivity: the commodity form.

In bourgeois society, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated alienation from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities. *Pace* those who deny that a theory of alienation is present in Marx's mature work, we should stress that commodity fetishism did not replace alienation but was only one aspect of it.

The theoretical advance from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital* and its related materials does not, however, consist only in the greater precision of his account of alienation. There is also a reformulation of the measures that Marx considers necessary for it to be overcome. Whereas in 1844 he had argued that human beings would eliminate alienation by abolishing private production and the division of labour, the path to a society free of alienation was much more complicated in *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts.

Marx held that capitalism was a system in which the workers were subject to capital and the conditions it imposed. Nevertheless, it had created the foundations for a more advanced society, and by generalizing its benefits humanity would be able to progress along the faster road of social development that it had opened up. According to Marx, a system that produced an enormous accumulation of wealth for the few and deprivation and exploitation for the general mass of workers must be replaced with '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'. This type of production would differ from wage labour because it would place its determining factors under collective governance, take on an immediately general character and convert labour into a truly social activity. This was a conception of society at the opposite pole from Hobbes's "war of all against all"; and its creation did not require a merely political process, but would necessarily involve transformation of the sphere of production.

The post-capitalist system of production, together with scientific-technological progress and a consequent reduction of the working day, creates the possibility for a new social formation in which the coercive, alienated labour imposed by capital and subject to its laws is gradually replaced with conscious, creative activity beyond the yoke of necessity, and in which complete social relations take the place of random, undifferentiated exchange dictated by the laws of commodities and money.

Q: There is a sort of elitist character that confines the debate on alienation merely to seminars, symposia and high-priced books? What is the way out of it?

A: Actually, this is not a new problem, but something that already happened in the past, when alienation was mostly a concept used by philosophers, with small impact in the political arena. Bringing the theory of alienation outside these circles and this "merely" intellectual space is something that requires a strong political and social movement.

At the beginning of the 1960s, for example, the diffusion of *Capital* and of the *Grundrisse* among students and political activists paved the way for a conception of alienation different from the one then hegemonic in sociology and psychology. It was a conception geared to the

overcoming of alienation in practice – to the political action of social movements, parties and trade unions to change the working and living conditions of the working class. The publication of what (after the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in the 1930s) may be thought of as the 'second generation' of Marx's writings on alienation therefore provided not only a coherent theoretical basis for new studies of alienation, but above all an anti-capitalist ideological platform for the extraordinary political and social movement that exploded in the world during those years.

In that fantastic epoch, alienation - we can say - left the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities, took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles, and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

Q: Please tell us about the importance of the concept of alienation in the past decades and also who are the present thinkers in the world that are still working on alienation.

A: In the 1960s a real vogue began for theories of alienation, and hundreds of books and articles were published on it around the world. There was an irresistible fascination of the theory of alienation. It was the age of alienation *tout court*. Authors from various political backgrounds and academic disciplines identified its causes as commodification, overspecialization, anomie, bureaucratization, conformism, consumerism, loss of a sense of self amid new technologies, even personal isolation, apathy, social or ethnic marginalization, and environmental pollution. If we want to establish an example with recent times, I would say that only the concept of globalization has had a similar impact and fortune.

The concept of alienation seemed to express the spirit of the age to perfection, and indeed, in its critique of capitalist society, it became a meeting ground for anti-Soviet philosophical Marxism and the most democratic and progressive currents in the Catholic world. However, the popularity of the concept, and its indiscriminate application, created a profound terminological ambiguity. Within the space of a few years, alienation thus became an empty formula ranging right across the spectrum of human unhappiness – so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified.

Therefore, beside the political defeat of the critical left, which made of the critique of alienation one of its most important flags, it is understandable why the debate and the publication on this concept have decreased in the past decades.

Recently, the German philosopher Rahel Jaeggi has published a book entitled *Alienation* (2014 - original German edition 2005), which has re-opened the debate on this concept, but her approach is different from Marxian critique of capitalist society.

Q. Now back to Marx more in general. Some people say that Marxism would live only as an academic tool, as a classic of philosophical thought. Do you agree with this position?

A: If Marx isn't identifiable with the carved Sphinx of the grey 'actually existing socialism' of the twentieth century, it would be equally mistaken to believe that his theoretical and political legacy could be confined to a past that doesn't have anything more to give to current conflicts, to circumscribe his thought to a mummified classic that has no relevance today, or to confine it to merely academic specialism.

The return of interest in Marx goes well beyond the confines of restricted circles of scholars as does the significant philological research of MEGA2, dedicated to demonstrating the diversity of it in respect to the large number of his interpreters. The rediscovery of Marx is based on his persistent capacity to explain the present: he remains an indispensable instrument for understanding it and being able to transform it.

Faced with the crisis of capitalist society and the profound contradictions that traverse it, there is a return to question that author set aside, too quickly, after 1989. Thus, Jacques Derrida's affirmation of 1994, that "it will always be an error not to read, re-read and discuss Marx", which only a few years ago seemed to be an isolated provocation, has found increasing approval.

Q: Is Marx still relevant today?

A: Of course the writings that Marx composed a century and a half ago do not contain a precise description of the world today. It should be stressed, however, that in *Capital* Marx tried to present the "organization of the capitalist mode of production, in its ideal average," and hence in its most complete and most general form. He foresaw that capitalism would expand on a global scale and formulated his own theories on that basis. That is why Marx's *oeuvre* is not only a great classic of economic and political thought, but still provides a framework today for understanding all the profound economic and social transformations that have meanwhile occurred, including a rich array of instruments to use in understanding the nature of capitalist development.

If updated and applied to the most recent developments, Marx's accounts of the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production offer effective means for explaining many of the problems of contemporary society that became fully developed only in the twentieth century.

With the development of capitalism into a system that invades and permeates most aspects of human life, anyone can see that Marx's thought has been extraordinarily prescient in many fields not addressed by twentieth-century orthodox Marxism. We can say that some of Marx's analyses have revealed their significance even more clearly than in his own time.

Q: Finally, what are your future plans in terms of publications?

A: The next two years will be very significant for the scholars of Marx. 2017 will be a turning point for the studies on *Capital*. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of its first publication (1867 - 2017) there will be many new volumes and conference analyzing the most important concepts of one of the books that changed the world. The same in 2018, the year of Marx's 200th birthday. Among my forthcoming books there are three monographs and edited volumes dedicated to Marx's *magnum opus* (*The Formation of Marx's 'Capital'*, Pluto, 2017); to his life (*Another Marx: An Essay in Intellectual Biography*, Bloomsbury, 2017); and to his contemporary relevance in our contemporary society (*The Marx Revival*, Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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