Preface

Which Marx?

The return to Marx following the economic crisis of 2008 has been distinct from the renewed interest in his critique of economics. Many authors, in a whole series of newspapers, journals, books, and academic volumes, have observed how indispensable Marx's analysis has proved to be for an understanding of the contradictions and destructive mechanisms of capitalism.[1] In the last few years, however, there has also been a reconsideration of Marx as a political figure and theorist.

The publication of previously unknown manuscripts in the German MEGA^2 edition,[2] along with innovative interpretations of his work, have opened up new research horizons and demonstrated more clearly than in the past his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour.[3] It is no exaggeration to say that, of the great classics of political,

[1] For a global perspective of the reception of Marx's work throughout the world from 2000 to 2010, see the second part of the volume Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx for Today* (New York: Routledge, 2012), entitled 'Marx's Global Reception Today', pp. 170–234.

[2] For an updated state of the art of this edition see Marcello Musto, 'New Profiles of Marx After the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA^2)', *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 49 (2020), n. 4: 407–19.

[3] See in particular the recent Marcello Musto (ed.), *The Marx Revival: Key Concepts and New Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

economic and philosophical thought, Marx is the one whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

As it is well known, *Capital* remained unfinished because of the grinding poverty in which Marx lived for two decades and because of his constant ill-health connected to daily worries.[4] But *Capital* was not the only project that remained incomplete. Marx's merciless self-criticism increased the difficulties of more than one of his undertakings and the large amount of time that he spent on many projects he wanted to publish was due to the extreme rigor to which he subjected all his thinking. When Marx was young, he was known among his university friends for his meticulousness. There are stories that depict him as somebody who refused 'to write a sentence if he was unable to prove it in ten different ways'.[5] This is why the most prolific young scholar in the Hegelian Left still published less than many of the others. Marx's belief that his information was insufficient, and his judgements immature, prevented him from publishing writings that remained in the form of outlines or fragments. But this is also why his notes are extremely useful and should be considered an integral part of his oeuvre. Many of his ceaseless labours had extraordinary theoretical consequences for the future.

This does not mean that his incomplete texts can be given the same weight of those that were published. One should distinguish five types of writings: published works, their preparatory manuscripts, journalistic articles, letters, and notebooks of excerpts. But distinctions must also be made within these categories. Some of Marx's published texts should not be regarded as his final word on the issues at hand. For example, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was considered by Friedrich Engels and Marx as a historical document from their youth and not as the definitive text in which their main political conceptions were stated. Or it must be kept in mind that political propaganda writings and scientific writings are often not combinable. These kinds of errors are very frequent in the secondary literature on Marx. Not to mention the absence of the chronological dimension in many reconstructions of his thought.

[4] Marcello Musto, 'Introduction: The Unfinished Critique of *Capital*', in: Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx's Capital After 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–35.

[5] See Paul Lafargue, in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 32.

The texts from the 1840s cannot be quoted indiscriminately alongside those from the 1860s and 1870s, since they do not carry equal weight of scientific knowledge and political experience. Some manuscripts were written by Marx only for himself, while others were actual preparatory materials for books to be published. Some were revised and often updated by Marx, while others were abandoned by him without the possibility of updating them (in this category there is *Capital*, Volume III). Some journalistic articles contain considerations that can be considered as a completion of Marx's works. Others, however, were written quickly in order to raise money to pay the rent. Some letters include Marx's authentic views on the issues discussed. Others contain only a softened version, because they were addressed to people outside Marx's circle, with whom it was sometimes necessary to express himself diplomatically. Finally, there are the more than 200 notebooks containing summaries (and sometimes commentaries) of all the most important books read by Marx during the long-time span from 1838 to 1882. They are essential for an understanding of the genesis of his theory and of those elements he was unable to develop as he would have wished.

New Profiles of a Classic Who Has Still a Lot to Say

Recent research has refuted the various approaches that reduce Marx's conception of communist society to superior development of the productive forces. In particular, it has shown the importance he attached to the ecological question: on repeated occasions, he denounced the fact that expansion ofthe capitalistmode of production increases not only the theft of workers' labour but also the pillage of natural resources.[6] Another question in which Marx took a close interest was migration. He showed that the forced movement of labour generated by capitalism was a major component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to fighting this was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labour.

Furthermore, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages

[6] See for example Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).

of colonialism. These considerations are all too obvious to anyone who has read Marx, despite the skepticism nowadays fashionable in certain academic quarters.

The first and preeminent key to understand the wider variety of geographical interests in Marx's research, during the last decade of his life, lies in his plan to provide a more ample account of the dynamics of the capitalistmode of production on a global scale. England had been the main field of observation of *Capital*, Volume I; after its publication, he wanted to expand the socio-economic investigations for the two volumes of *Capital* that remained to be written. It was for this reason that he decided to learn Russian in 1870 and was then constantly demanding books and statistics on Russia and the United States of America. He believed that the analysis of the economic transformations of these countries would have been very useful for an understanding of the possible forms in which capitalism may develop in different periods and contexts. This crucial element is underestimated in the secondary literature on the—nowadays trendy—subject 'Marx and Eurocentrism'.

Another key question for Marx's research into non-European societies was whether capitalism was a necessary prerequisite for the birth of communist society and at which level it had to develop internationally. The more pronounced multilinear conception, that Marx assumed in his final years,[7] led him to look more attentively at the historical specificities and unevenness of economic and political development in different countries and social contexts. Marx became highly skeptical about the transfer of interpretive categories between completely different historical and geographical contexts and, as he wrote, also realized that 'events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, lead to totally disparate results'.[8] This approach certainly increased the difficulties he faced in the already bumpy course of completing the unfinished volumes of *Capital* and contributed to the slow acceptance that his major work would remain incomplete. But it certainly opened up new revolutionary hopes.

Marx went deeply into many other issues which, though often underestimated, or even ignored, are acquiring crucial importance for the political

[7] See Marcello Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx, 1881–1883: An Intellectual Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[8] Karl Marx, 'Letter to *Otechestvennye Zapiski*', MECW, vol. 24, p. 201.

agenda of our times. Among these are individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the critique of nationalism, and forms of collective ownership not controlled by the state. Thus, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, it has become possible to read a Marx very unlike the dogmatic, economistic and Eurocentric theorist who was paraded around for so long. One can find in Marx's massive literary bequest several statements suggesting that the development of the productive forces is leading to dissolution of the capitalistmode of production. But it would be wrong to attribute to him any idea that the advent of socialism is a historical inevitability. Indeed, for Marx the possibility of transforming society depended on the working class and its capacity, through struggle, to bring about social upheavals that led to the birth of an alternative economic and political system.

Alternative to Capitalism

Across Europe, North America, and many other regions of the world, economic and political instability is now a persistent feature of contemporary social life. Globalization, financial crises, the ascendance of ecological issues, and the recent global pandemic, are just a few of the shocks and strains producing the tensions and contradictions of our time. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, there is a growing global consensus about the need to rethink the dominant organizing logic of contemporary society and develop new economic and political solutions.

In contrast to the equation of communism with dictatorship of the proletariat, espoused in the propaganda of 'actually existing socialism', it is necessary to look again at Marx's reflections on communist society. He once defined it as 'an association of free individuals'.[9] If communism aims to be a higher form of society, it must promote the conditions for 'the full and free development of every individual'.[10]

In *Capital*, Marx revealed the mendacious character of bourgeois ideology. Capitalism is not an organization of society in which human beings, protected by impartial legal norms capable of guaranteeing justice and equity, enjoy true freedom, and live in an accomplished democracy.

[9] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 171.

[10] Ibid., p. 739.

In reality, they are degraded into mere objects, whose primary function is to produce commodities and profit for others.

To overturn this state of affairs, it is not enough to modify the distribution of consumption goods. What is needed is radical change at the level of the productive assets of society: 'the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production'.[11] The socialist model that Marx had in mind did not allow for a state of general poverty but looked to the achievement of greater collective wealth and greater satisfaction of needs.

This collective volume presents a Marx in many ways different from the one familiar from the dominant currents of twentieth-century Marxism. Its dual aim is contributing to a new critical discussion of some of the classical themes of Marx's thought and to develop a deeper analysis of certain questions to which relatively little attention has been paid until recently. The result is a collection that will prove indispensable for all specialists in the field and which suggests that Marx's analyses are arguably resonating even more strongly today than they did in his own time.

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[11] Karl Marx, 'Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers Party', MECW, vol. 24, p. 340.

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