ANOTHER MARX FOR THE LEFT TODAY: INTERVIEW WITH MARCELLO MUSTO

by Vesa Oittinen and Andrey Maidansky

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1. You have published already several studies on Marx and many of them depart from the recent research situation created by the publication of MEGA2 (the new historico-critical editions of Marx and Engels collected works). Do you indeed think that the new and hitherto unknown materials published there will change profoundly our picture of Marx and Marxism?

I have been working many years with the volumes of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA2) and have tried to pay great attention, in my work, to the recent philological discoveries related to the writings of Marx already known but previously edited in an incorrect way, as well as to the previously unpublished materials, like the preparatory drafts of *Capital* or Marx's notebooks of excerpts that appeared in the last few years. These materials, to give you an example, brought to light thousands of editorial interventions made by Engels to Marx's *magnum opus* and demonstrated that, far from espousing a conclusive economic theory, volume II and III of *Capital* were by and large provisional notes under development.

My personal experience is a little example of the impact that the MEGA2 might have on scholars of Marx, since I can assure you that when I was a PhD student the training periods I did at the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* in Berlin – the academy where the headquarter of this edition is based – and the researches I conducted at the *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* in Amsterdam – the institute where two thirds of Marx's manuscripts are kept (the other third is kept at the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History of Moscow) – enriched deeply, and from many point of views changed, my interpretation of Marx.

Having said that, I have never shared with some other interpreters of Marx what could be called the "drama of the discovery". From the end of the Sixties (I'm thinking to the famous article - *The Unknown Marx* - written by Martin Nicolaus in 1968 for the *New Left Review*, which became the prelude to first translation into English of the *Grundrisse*[i]) many authors have repeatly spoken

of an "unknown Marx". In the last decade, for instance, two books have been published with the same title: one by the famous Hispanic American scholar Enrique Dussel[ii], and another by the Japanese professor Takahisa Oishi[iii]. I never agreed with those who, recently, put too much enphasis on the new editions of Marx's previously never published materials, because I don't believe that, after the *Grundrisse*, there has been another bulk of important manuscripts that could change our understanding of Marx to the point of speaking of an "unknown Marx". Further information on this subject might be found in the collection *Karl Marx's Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years After*, which I edited for Routledge in 2008.

Anyway, the new manuscripts published by MEGA2 made possible the reconstruction of important phases of Marx's thought, that only a few interpreters have investigated until now. Let's take Marx's critique of political economy as example: the great majority of the scholars of this topic have considered only certain periods of Marx's development, often jumping straight from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), and from the latter to the first volume of *Capital* (1867), or, at best, examining *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). Today, thanks to MEGA2, things have changed, at least for serious interpreters of Marx. By using new research materials it is possible to reconstruct all the stages of Marx's critique of political economy, and hence to offer a more exhaustive account of the formation of Marx's thought than those, sometimes very ideological, that were produced in the past. And this could be very important and useful for those who are interested in using Marx's ideas to understand, criticize and change the world today.

Maybe, if we should use an expression to summarize the possibilities opened by MEGA2, I would say that this edition gives us the scholarly basis to read "another Marx". And with this expression I don't mean at all an old classic that has nothing to do with politics and class struggle, but an author who is very far from the one whose work was utilized as bible-like verses in Soviet Union or in the so-called "actually existing socialist" countries.

2. Which of Marx's ideas do you think were especially distorted or not understood by his followers? For example in the foreword to the volume *Sulle tracce di un fantasma* (Roma, Manifestolibri 2005) that you have edited, you criticized Plekhanov's idea that Marxism should be "a complete worldview".

Plekhanov, like many other Marxists after him, was guilty of building a rigid conception of society and history. And his ideas became very influential among Russian revolutionaries – and not only Russian, due to his international reputation at the time. In my opinion, this conception, based on a simplistic monism in which economic developments are decisive for other transformations of society, had very little to do with Marx's own conception. It is much more related to the cultural climate of the time, in which positivism and determinism played a big role.

In the preparatory manuscripts for the third volume of *Capital*, Marx wrote that he was trying to present the "organization of the capitalist mode of production, in its ideal average", and hence in its most complete and general form. So, I am not saying that Marx was not interested in reaching "a complete worldview" or that he did not want to be a systematic thinker, if we want to use this expression. I have tried to argue that his generalization was very different from the one made by Plekhanov and, even worse, later by the fathers of that inflexible monism called *Dialekticeskij materialism*.

Anyway, the list of Marx's ideas that have been misunderstood or completely dostorted by some of his "followers" or by the self-professed custodians of his thought is very long. Distorted by different perspectives into being a function of contingent political necessities, he was assimilated to these and defamed in their name. From being critical, his theory was utilized as bible-like verses. Far from heeding his warning against "writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future", these custodians transformed him, instead, into the illegitimate father of a new social system. A very rigorous critic and never complacent with his conclusions, he became instead the source of the most obstinate doctrinarianism. A firm believer in a materialist conception of history,

he was removed from his historical context more than any other author. From being certain that "the emancipation of the working class has to be the work of the workers themselves", he was entrapped, on the contrary, in an ideology that saw the primacy of political vanguards and the party prevail in their role as proponents of class-consciousness and leaders of the revolution. An advocate of the idea that the fundamental condition for the maturation of human capacities was the reduction of the working day, he was assimilated to the productivist creed of Stakhanovism. Convinced of the need for the abolition of the State, he found himself identified with it as its bulwark.

I do not think I have enough room here to answer this question as it would deserve. Therefore, I will focus on only one topic - perhaps the most important aspect, after all, of what happened to Socialism in the twentieth century: the conception that in Communist society there is no place for the individual; that the post-capitalistic association among workers conceived by Marx was a liberticidal society, a regime of oppression without civil rights or political guarantees. This is the biggest paradox that could have happened to Marx. And it is scandalous for those who know his oeuvre. I have read many philosophers and classics of political thought and have encountered only a few thinkers who were interested (and politically engaged!) in the free development of the individuality of *all* women and men (not only of a privileged class). And I believe that this point is fundamental for the political parties and the social movements that still look at Marx as a source of inspiration. They should be able to challenge the right-wing parties and ideologies to regain possession of the flag of freedom, which is in the hands of the right today. Just to give you an example, the name of the new populistic political party of Berlusconi in Italy is *The People of Freedom*: a blasphemy!

3. You have several times contended that incompleteness and fragmentariness are essential characteristics of Marx's theoretical inheritance and cited Marx's preferred motto: *de omnibus dubitandum*. To recall such facts may be quite appropriate when guarding Marx's heritage against dogmatic interpretations, but should we not be afraid that in trying to avoid the Scylla of dogmatism we run into the Charybdis of relativism?

Yes, I agree. This could be a concrete risk and dangerous error, especially in an era where relativist and post-modernist approaches are so widespread and influential. We should try to avoid this mistake. And this is possible, if we do not forget the two parts of the equation. We always have to recall that Marx wanted to complete his Herculean work. Incompleteness and fragmentariness are characteristic of Marx's *oeuvre* because the subject matter for the critical examination of his writings was, very often, so vast that it would have taken many years to address it with the seriousness and critical consciousness he had. And we must not forget it, if we do not want to make the same mistakes of the many Marxists who, in recent decades, considered the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to be a book (for some a book that was even more important and useful than *Capital* volume I!); or *Capital* volume II and III as the final words that Marx had to say on the subjects examined in those manuscripts.

On the other side, I believe it was absolutely necessary to criticize dogmatic Marxism, and to do it vigorously. This was – and there is so much to do, yet – one of the most obvious tasks for a new generation of scholars and political activists, who believe that Marx still has a lot of things to say for understanding and changing the world. How is it possible today to reopen a space for the Marxian critique of capitalism – a real space, not a minoritarian, marginal and merely testimonial one – for the political parties and the social movements of the Left, that still look at Marx as an indispensable critical source for the struggle against capitalism, if we do not clear the ground from the dogmatism of the old Marxism-Leninism? How could the anticapitalist Left return to speak to workers and young generations, for example, if we are not able to tell them that we have very little to do (and Marx even less) with many of the societies built in the name of Socialism in the second part of the twentieth century? And this not because we do not consider those pages a part of the history of the workers' movement, but because we believe that the "return to Marx", to his critical

conception, represents an opportunity to use some of the best critical instruments to understand and criticize capitalism. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of the capitalist mode of production to new areas of the planet (China and India, for example), capitalism has become a truly worldwide system, and some of Marx's analyses have revealed their significance even more clearly than in his own time. This, of course, is said without adopting a new apologetic approach to this author; or believing that the writings that he composed a century and a half ago contain a precise description of the world today; or, indeed, neglecting Marx's contradictions and mistakes.

I tried to work with this spirit on the new collection I am editing at the moment and that I am going to publish soon: *The Marx Revival. Essays on the Critique of Contemporary Society* (Palgrave, forthcoming 2011). The purpose of this project was exactly to create a collective volume in which a number of prestigious international scholars (such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Moishe Postone, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and many others) consider, by re-reading Marx today, how his thought is still pertinent and useful for a critical understanding of the world. A scholarly book, but written especially for the anticapitalist Left that is going through a very difficult time.

4. You refer to the usefulness of Marx's ideas for new parties and social moments of the Left. There have indeed, especially in West Europe and the USA, been some new approaches to Marx's theoretical heritage. To mention one example only, Antonio Negri, famous for his book *Empire*, has tried to re-interpret Marx departing from the concepts of "living labour" (which he later merged with the allegedly Spinozistic idea of the "multitude") and of "general intellect" (an expression Marx used in the *Grundrisse*). However, these developments seem already to go beyond the confines of what one could call Marxism.

Without going too much into the critique of Negri's work, and into his theorical vagueness and political contradictions (which perhaps represent one of the reasons for his success), on which many articles have been written in recent years, it might be interesting to notice that, surely, some of the thinkers considered among the most pre-eminent Marxists in the last twenty years developed their theories in a way that is often very far from Marx's ideas. The Analytical Marxists and Jacques Derrida in the past or Antonio Negri and Slavoj Žižek today represent some examples of this phenomenon, in my view. Now, the question is not whether it is a mistake or a sacrilege to go beyond Marx, to correct his mistakes, or to try to update his conception to the huge changes that have occurred to the world since his death (we should always keep in mind that Marx himself not only decided not to publish the fruit of the more than twenty years of elaboration contained in the manuscripts of volumes II and III of *Capital*, but also spent a lot of time and energy, during the last agitated part of his life, rewriting and updating many parts of the first volume of *Capital*).

The point is that today, in the small (compared to few decades ago) political parties and social movements that still display interest in an alternative to capitalism, theories like those of Negri are considered the "authentic" (if I can use this word) Marxian alternative to the problems of capitalist society. And, too often, these theories have much more to do with other thinkers and cultures (like Lacan and psychoanalysis in the case of Žižek) than with Marx and the history of the workers' movement.

But there is another issue, maybe even worse, which is linked with this problem. For more than two decades, Marx has almost disappeared. Except the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, his writings have no longer been available in the bookstores, and I do not believe it is an exaggeration to affirm that Marx is almost unknown among the new generation of political activists and students (not talking of factory workers or the activists and leaders of the Trade Unions). And this not only in the distressing political scene of the North American continent, but also in Asia and in Europe. He is even unknown among the youth of the last influential European Communist parties in France, Italy and Germany, which in the last few years changed their names into a more acceptable and generic term: Left Party[iv]. If we were to ask all these subjects "Who is Marx?" – and what they know of his critical theory –, we might sadly discover that, with the exeption of

small circles, the position of his ideas in the workers' movement is not even the same as at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the theories of other Socialist thinkers (Lassalle, Proudhon, etc.) were also influential, but Marx was a *primus inter pares*. Maybe our situation today is more similar to a pre-1848 context, a scenario marked by eclecticism and enormous confusion on the meaning of Socialism itself. After all, what does it mean, the vague formula – very *à la mode* nowadays – "Socialism of the XXI century"? The fact that one has to use an ambiguous and empty demarcation of the calendar seems to me an example of weakness in defining a political project.

To come back to your original question, the risk is that, after being spread through the Marxist-Leninist or Maoist textbooks, Marx's ideas might be misinterpretated today via authors like Negri. And it is more than a risk. It has already happened, if we consider that, sometimes, in the last few years, Marx's ideas have even been put together with generic concepts like "fair trade", or with other kinds of neo-Proudhonian theories like microcredit and microfinance, completely subaltern to capitalism, which he fought his whole life. Or if we consider that, of course also because of the propaganda system, the biggest Leftist social movement of the last two decades has been called the "antiglobalization" movement, something that could make Marx turn in his grave (the point is not being against the "globalization" in principle, but criticizing the kind of globalisation produced by capitalism today). It is evident that the confusion is enormous and that, after the rubble of the defeat inflicted in the last few decades, we have to start once again from the foundation.

This is why, among the priorities that we have today, there is the necessity to republish Marx's writings and to use them, in a critical way and without inviolacy, in order to better understand the contradictions and the issues of our times.

5. The tradition of Italian Marxism stresses, following Gramsci, Marx's importance above all as a historian, as the creator of a historical materialism. Which are, to your mind, the main new insights of Marx as a historian?

Marx was a great historian. During his life, in some of the historical pamphlets he wrote or as a journalist for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* and the *New York Tribune*, he described many of the most important political events of his century: the revolutions of 1848, the outcomes of the British empire in India, the Crimean War, the diplomatic relations among European countries, the financial crisis of 1857, the civil war in the United States of America, the Paris Commune, etc. And he did it by writing some of the most brilliant pages of political polemic of the Nineteenth century, like, for instance, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *Lord Palmerston*, or *The Civil War in France*. Some of his historical texts really deserve greater attention than they have had so far. I am thinking, in particular, of the articles he wrote for the *New York Tribune*, at the time the most widely read newspaper in the United States.

Then, there is the theory of history: Marx's materialistic conception of history, perhaps one of his biggest contribution to social sciences. This has been enormously influential, and not only in Italian culture, of course. This theory has been criticized many times. But, once again, if we look at these critiques carefully, we should observe that, far more than to Marx, they were directed towards the "Historical materialism" (an expression Marx never used) of his followers, if not even more clearly to the vulgar "Dialectical materialism" of Stalin (I am thinking of the widely distributed and much read pamphlet *On Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism* of 1938), which had absolutely nothing to do with Marx. These ascribed to Marx what is not at all Marxian: the belief in a rigid and inevitable procession of the stages of social formations toward socialism. Maybe, also from this point of view, the MEGA2 might be helpful, since in the latest edition of the first part of the *The German ideology* (the so-called "Chapter I. On Feuerbach"[v]) the fragmentary character of these uncompleted manuscripts has been restored, giving evidence of the 'Marxist-Leninist' interpretative falsification that had turned these manuscripts, written by a young

scholar just at the beginning of his studies of political economy, into the exhaustive exposition of "historical materialism".

6. Relating to the previous question, we would mention Marx's letter to Weydemeyer of 5 March 1852, where Marx wrote: "And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic economy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*". Do you think these ideas of Marx are still appropriate in the situation of the present day?

To come back for a moment to the previous question, I believe that one of the reasons for the misunderstanding of Marx's ideas is the fact that his writings have been read too often – *when* they have been read – outside their historical context. Let's take the case of this letter to Weydemeyer. It was written in 1852, when Marx was 33 years old, i.e., very young and still in the process of elaborating his theories. Also, we should always keep in mind that this was just a letter written to a comrade, not the overview of his positions written in a book. Therefore it should not be taken as a scrupulous statement. For sure, in my opinion, it is not Marx's final thought on the issues that was exposed there. Nevertheless, the sentences of this letter you have just quoted have been widely reproduced. In the German Democratic Republic, for instance, they also appeared on numerous political posters, to stress the supposed importance of the concept of dictatorship of proletariat in Marx. But the truth is different. Just to give you a textual example, in one of his books dedicated to Marx's theory of revolution[vi], the scholar Hal Draper proved that Marx used very rarely the expression "dictatorship of proletariat". Actually only seven times, and that not only in his published writings, but also including his correspondence, like this letter to Weydemeyer. Against this, the expression was widely used by many Marxists: hundreds of times by Lenin, for instance. So, as you can see, there is a huge difference! The difference is not only quantitative; it led to misuse of the term both by anti-Marxists, who wanted to criticize Marx instrumentally, and by self-professed Marxists, who wanted to find a justification for their theoretical position or actions, which were very different from those of Marx himself.

In any case, I believe that – after the publication of *Capital* volume I, in 1867, or at the end of his life – Marx would have indicated different things to describe his discoveries, if he had had the chance to express his opinion about his own discoveries in social sciences. Certainly not the rigid link between class struggle and dictatorship of proletariat described in the letter of 1852 to Weydemeyer. Also, the formulation on the relation between dictatorship of proletariat and the final goal of a classless society would require a better explanation, and could be interpreted as a utopian or Hegelian statement (I'm thinking of the well known debate about the end of the history, etc.). The reality is much more complicated: the political revolution does not mean at all the authomatic realization of social change, the end of history, as we have also learned from the twentieth century, but should be considered just as the beginning of a permanent process of dealienation and emancipation. An endless process in which the alternative between a return to the unequal class relations of capitalism, or the "happy ending" of the realization of socialism, is not at all guaranteed.

7. You mentioned that at the end of his life Marx "had indicated different things to describe his discoveries". That sounds intriguing – could you say a little more on the subject?

Marx's contribution to social sciences is very rich, even though his discoveries were not the fruit of a sudden outpouring, but the result of a process, in which the sources he read sometimes played

an important role, too. I will focus only on two topics. The first is his famous theory of surplus value, the specific way in which exploitation takes place in the capitalist mode of production: value created in production by unpaid surplus labor, which also represents the basis for the accumulation of capital.

The second point that I would like to mention, and I have already done it a little bit by answering the question about historical materialism, is Marx's idea of the historical character of all social formations. One of the red threads in Marx's oeuvre, from his early economic writings to the *Grundrisse* at the end of the Fifties to *Capital* a decade later, has been to demonstrate the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production. He harshly criticized every time he could the way in which economists portrayed historical categories as "natural" realities, phenomena typical of the bourgeois era projected onto every other society that has existed since the earliest times, the isolated and egoistic individual of the Eighteenth century as the archetype of human nature. Most importantly, Marx's critique of the theories of the 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 for its elimination. For Marx the capitalist economy did not follow from some extra- and a-historical "human nature", as the classical political economists declared, but was the result of a long historical development. This proves that capitalism is not the only stage in human history, nor is it the final one.

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[i] The article was reprinted as introduction to the translation of the *Grundrisse* published by Penguin in 1973.

[ii] Enrique Dussel, *Towards an unknown Marx. A commentary on the manuscripts of 1861-63*, Routledge, 2001.

[iii] Takahisa Oishi, *The Unknown Marx*, Pluto, 2001.

[iv] This has happened in Germany where the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* became *Die Linke*; in France, where the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* dissolved itself into a new formation called *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste*, and where the *Parti communiste français* decided to build an electoral coalition called *Front de gauche*; and in Italy, where the *Partito della rifondazione comunista* joined the *Federazione della Sinistra*. We are not talking here of the parties that, while still using the word Communism, are theoretically linked to the Stalinism, like the KKE in Greece.

[v] Karl Marx - Friedrich Engels - Joseph Weydemeyer, *Die deutsche Ideologie. Artikel, Druckvorlagen, Entwürfe, Reinschriftenfragmente und Notizen zu, I. Feuerbach' und, II. Sankt Bruno'*, in *Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch* 2003, Akademie, 2004.

[vi] Hal Draper, *The dictatorship of the proletariat: from Marx to Lenin*, Monthly Review Press, 1987, pp. 385-6.