Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution?
A Belated Response to Eric Hobsbawm

Kevin J. Murphy
University of Massachusetts Boston
kevinj.murphy.umb.edu

Abstract
Ten years ago, Eric Hobsbawm presented his Deutscher Lecture on ‘Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution?’ This essay argues that Hobsbawm articulated a perspective on the Russian Revolution that was shared by a much wider audience on the Left after the fall of the Soviet Union and that many of these arguments continue to resonate today. Placing the contours of the historiographical discussion of the Russian Revolution within a broader political context, I argue that Hobsbawm has underestimated the extent to which the standard academic accounts intentionally have marginalised Marxist interpretations. Hobsbawm’s own ambivalence toward the October Revolution and his lack of clarity on the origins of Stalinism are not supported by the latest empirical research and concede much ground to strident anti-Marxists. Rather than refuting the Marxist classics, new evidence from the archives of the former Soviet Union actually offers substantial support. The renewed academic attacks on the Russian Revolution, including the deliberate omission of evidence that support the Marxist interpretation, should be challenged rather than embraced by socialists.

Keywords
Russian Revolution, workers, historiography, Trotsky, Deutscher

Ten years ago, Eric Hobsbawm presented his Deutscher Lecture on ‘Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution?’ A lifelong Marxist and author of the groundbreaking series on capitalist development in the nineteenth century, Hobsbawm’s credentials as the pre-eminent Marxist historian of our time are unrivalled. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a
balance-sheet appraisal on the definitive social movement of twentieth
century by Hobsbawm was quite appropriate.

As I will argue tonight, however, some of opinions that Hobsbawm articulated
are less than convincing. The point here is not to concentrate on Hobsbawm
the historian, but, rather, to re-examine a set of propositions that I believe
reflected the somewhat inconsistent perspective on the Russian Revolution by
a much wider audience on the Left after the fall of the Soviet Union. Indeed,
many of these arguments still resonate today. Given that the archives of the
former Soviet Union have now been open for some sixteen years, I would like
to address some of issues raised by Hobsbawm, to place this discussion within
the much wider historiographical trends on the Russian Revolution, and also to
engage in some unabashed self-promotion of my own work.

In framing his discussion on the Russian Revolution, Hobsbawm makes
several points that I believe we can all agree on. First, his tribute to Isaac
Deutscher’s trilogy of Trotsky immediately answers the question: yes, it is
possible to write the history of the Russian Revolution, although any definitive
history on such a politically-charged subject is, as Hobsbawm suggests,
problematic.4 I would add that other classic Marxist accounts of the Russian
Revolution cannot go unmentioned. As a synthesis of the class forces involved
in 1917, Trotsky’s epic masterpiece *The History of the Russian Revolution*
remains unsurpassed.5 Victor Serge’s *Year One of the Russian Revolution* is still
the definitive work on the immediate counterrevolutionary attack on Soviet
power.6 If we are to understand the Russian Revolution in its broader European
context, then we must include Pierre Broué’s masterful study of the German
Revolution.7 Ernest Mandel’s writings on Trotsky and Stalinism; and Tony
Cliff’s works on Lenin, Trotsky, and the class character of the Stalinist system
remain essential reading for any student of the Revolution.8 The list of classic
Marxist accounts on the Russian revolutionary era is obviously much longer
than this, but the point here is that we are not starting from scratch. We stand
on the shoulders of very rich tradition that, in my opinion, despite sixteen
years of archival access, has yet to be equalled by the academy. With all due
respect to Eric Hobsbawm, I would also suggest that, were he more familiar
with this tradition, he would have made fewer concessions to the renewed
hostility to the Russian Revolution that again pervades the historiography.

5. Trotsky 1932.
Second, Hobsbawm argued that the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union, should recast our understanding of Soviet society. ‘Much of what actually happened can now be known,’ because information ‘previously hidden behind locked archive doors and barricades of official lies and half truths’ is finally available. He logically asserts that when ‘better or more complete data are available, they must take the place of poor or incomplete ones’. Fortunately, the issue is much more complicated with the Russian Revolution. As I will argue tonight, if it were simply a question of sources, the standard textbook interpretation of the Russian Revolution would be moving to the left, towards the classical-Marxist account, but, instead, we see just the opposite – a historiography shifting to the right and the repackaging of old arguments that often contradict the sources that they are based on.

The defects in the dominant academic interpretation of the Russian Revolution at any given time over the past half century or so have never been primarily due to a lack of access to sources; more important by far has been the question of political perspective. Revolutions inevitably invoke partisanship. Trotsky famously ridiculed historians who feigned neutrality by ‘climbing out on the wall dividing two camps’. Hobsbawn, on the other hand, argues that, ‘It is of course patent that it will take a long time before the passions of those who write the history of the USSR will have cooled down to the tepid temperature of those who nowadays write the history of the Protestant Reformation.’ This analogy with the Reformation, it seems to me, is quite faulty. Here, Hobsbawn has underestimated the driving forces behind the standard academic interpretations of the Russian Revolution and the extent to which the Marxist interpretation, quite deliberately, has been marginalised.

Russian studies first emerged in the United States as a stepchild of the Cold War, and shared much in common with its Soviet state-sponsored counterpart. The Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA) helped set up the main academic research institutions. To construct a usable past, scholars simply redeployed the totalitarian paradigm, which had been popularised in the confrontation with the Nazi régime, against their former ally and new adversary – the Soviet Union. Cold-War Western scholarship was dominated by what Stephen Cohen has aptly termed the ‘continuity thesis’, which posited an uncomplicated, natural evolution from early Bolshevik organisational practice to the Gulags. These accounts typically began by holding up Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* as an embryonic dictatorial blueprint, fully developed well

---

before the Revolution. From here, it was but a short step to the assertion that a conspiratorial minority of Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 through a military coup, monopolised the state for its own purposes, and, through brute force and terror, created the totalitarian party-state.\textsuperscript{13}

Now, of course, the Cold-War textbook version of the ‘continuity thesis’, that Lenin led to Stalin, did not go unchallenged. The social movements of the 1960s inspired a generation of historians to study history ‘from below’, in which they attempted to reconstruct the actions and aspirations of those previously written out of history. In no area did this new social history produce a more thorough revision than in the contested field of Russian studies. Over the course of decade, a talented group of historians proved beyond doubt what many Marxists had long argued – that the transfer of power to the Soviets in 1917 was the culmination of a massive popular rebellion. The audacious scholarship of social historians of the Russian Revolution, such as Alexander Rabinowitch and Steve Smith, not only challenged, but ultimately dislodged the totalitarian school.\textsuperscript{14}

Western scholarship that challenged the Cold-War interpretation on early Soviet society, however, was, for two reasons, much more speculative and problematic. First, primary-source materials that were available for the revolutionary period remained largely inaccessible for the Soviet period. Second, the ideological outlook of some scholars accepted the dualistic framework imposed by the Cold War. Partially influenced by Stalinism in its various incarnations, but also as a simplistic response to the Western propaganda history, these scholars bent too far in the other direction, making absurd and unsubstantiated claims about the popular roots of Stalinism. Whatever shortcomings these academics might have exhibited as historians, however, they were quite skilled at marketing their scholarship. The notion that Stalinism was able to draw on considerable working-class support became, as one industrial expert asserted a decade ago, ‘an increasingly accepted view’.\textsuperscript{15}

Several factors have shaped the academic study of the Russian Revolution since the fall of the Soviet Union and offset the advantages of unprecedented archival access. First, the emergence of the United States as the preeminent world power after the Cold War inevitably encouraged a shift to the right in the historiography as part of a broader political trend. For many Western scholars, the collapse of the Soviet Union acted as a catalyst for misplaced confidence and renewed strident anti-communism. If the political climate of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Cohen 1985.
\item \textsuperscript{14} See Rabinowitch 1976 and Smith 1983.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Shearer 1996, p. 14.
\end{itemize}
the times influences the assessment of the most politically charged event of the twentieth century, as I believe it must, then the rightward shift of American politics also influenced the historiography. It was not that conservatives in the field managed to re-assert themselves, but, rather, the political and moral collapse of American liberalism blurred the line between conservative and liberal experts on the Russian Revolution. When Richard Pipes published his magnum opus on the Revolution just as the Soviet Union was collapsing, the American historian Peter Kenez spoke for a still very lively liberal tradition within the field when he ridiculed Pipes for ‘prosecuting’ the Russian Revolution. A generation ago, some of these liberal historians even toyed with Marxism, but they now lead the charge for the re-emergence of the continuity thesis.

The other negative impact on the historiography can be attributed to the pervasive influence of postmodernism, which has served to provide a veneer of sophistication for the work of some extremely confused historians. As I detail in the introduction to Revolution and Counterrevolution, postmodernism has also encouraged a short-cut, smoke-and-mirrors approach to research over a systematic, comprehensive analysis of the sources. In short, what should be an exciting time for scholarly advancement of the study of the Russian Revolution largely has been squandered. Condemnation and prosecution of the Russian Revolution as an ill-fated endeavour has reasserted itself in the field over the last sixteen years. Yet what is striking in such studies as Orlando Figes's The Russian Tragedy, a book applauded by Hobsbawm as an excellent study, is the paucity of new evidence marshalled in support of such arguments.

Perhaps no book pinpoints the fundamental flaws in Western studies of the revolutionary era better than Lars Lih's recent Lenin Rediscovered: ‘What Is to Be Done?’ in Context. As Lih argues, the standard textbook rendering of What Is to Be Done? presents it as the supposed first link in the repressive Bolshevik chain that eventually led to Stalinism. So widespread is this myth that even George Bush added it to his repertoire a few months ago when he argued,

In the early 1900s, an exiled lawyer in Europe published a pamphlet called ‘What Is to Be Done,’ in which he laid out his plan to launch a communist revolution in Russia. The world did not heed Lenin's words, and paid a terrible price.

Lih systematically debunks the standard textbook account of *What Is to Be Done?* and proves that the most steadfast champion of political liberty in the Russian revolutionary movement was none other than V.I. Lenin. Lih comments on the historiography, ‘One sometimes gets the impression that the real split within the Party was between the faction of Decent and Attractive Individuals vs. the faction of Amoral and Fanatical Thugs.’

For those with the perseverance to read through this groundbreaking book, there is only one explanation for the ubiquitous hatchet job on Lenin – the academic experts, a veritable who's who of heavyweights in the field, never even bothered to read Lenin systematically in their haste to demonise him.

Both the social historians of the 1970s and the Marxist tradition have rightfully focused their attention on the mass revolts of 1905 and 1917: workers learning through conflict with their employers, the strike movements, the formation of soviets, factory committees, and so on. Where Marxists have differed with social historians is on the question of agency. As John Marot convincingly has argued, liberal social historians have tended to underestimate the role of revolutionaries, particularly the Bolsheviks, as an integral part of this radicalisation. In fact, we now know that, during the most prolonged political strike movement in world history from 1912 to 1916, all of the contemporary protagonists recognised the role of revolutionaries in the thirty actions over such issues as the murder of Lena goldfield workers and the proroguing of the Duma. What I found is that the catalytic role of revolutionaries determined not just whether specific factories but even whether particular shops participated in these strikes. The argument for political industrial action had to be won on the shop floor. As one report to the Okhrana demanded, ‘find the ones in the factory who are the worst scoundrels and set the tone for the others’. The worst scoundrels turned out to be worker Bolsheviks and, after their arrest, the Socialist Revolutionaries.

But we should not just view militant workers as mere victims in this inspiring movement. The revolutionary ranks were constantly refreshed, despite regular rounds of Okhrana arrests and sending militant workers to the war front. The harsh measures enacted by management and the Okhrana actually fostered better labour organisation – workers elected representatives and put forward demands in unison to avoid victimisation. What I also found interesting in the Moscow Metalworks is that the various divisions in the workplace based on skill, gender, and age were overcome in this process, even

---

23. Murphy 2005, Chapter 1.
before the 1917 revolt. Indeed, the issue that led to the ultimate confrontation with the factory owner, Iulii Guzhon, was the workers’ demand to raise the minimum wage-rates of the less skilled apprentices and female workers. This prompted the war-profitteering Guzhon to threaten to close the plant, as the demand for minimum pay in his view was ‘anti-state and anti-democratic because it creates a privileged class of people that is guaranteed its means of existence at the expense of other classes of the population’.24

Now, aside from a small and shrinking milieu of Cold Warriors, few historians today would attempt to turn the clock back and completely ignore the important contributions of the social historians. As Hobsbawm argues, ‘We can say, beyond serious doubt, that in the autumn of 1917 an enormous popular radicalization, of which the Bolsheviks were the main beneficiaries, swept the provisional government aside’ and he goes on to say, ‘The idea that October was nothing more than some sort of conspiratorial coup simply won’t stand up.’25

Yet Hobsbawm’s own ambivalence over October is expressed in a series of ‘counterfactuals’ or ‘what if?’ questions. In this sense, he is very much in line with the prevailing historiography today when he asks: ‘Could the October Revolution been avoided? What might have happened if the Bolsheviks had not decided to take over, or had been willing to take over at the head of a broad coalition with the other socialist and socialist-revolutionary parties?’. Hobsbawm argues, ‘That it would have been better if a democratic Russia had emerged from the revolution is something about which most people would agree.’26

This ambivalence about October continues to dominate the field – for many historians, October does not measure up to what they believe a genuine proletarian revolution should have looked like. That stridently anti-Marxist historians would have such a keen understanding of what a genuine revolution should look like might sound a bit odd; but let us suppose that this is the case. If you read Philip Foner’s fascinating account of the immediate impact of the Russian Revolution on American politics, you find that, for anyone even slightly to the left of centre, the Russian Revolution was a fantastic beacon of hope and inspiration. For example, at a mass rally at Parkview Palace in New York City, five hundred workers volunteered to join a Red Guard to defend the Soviet Union against the German invasion, while hundreds of workingwomen threw their jewelry on the stage to give their support to the Revolution.27 But perhaps these workers had been deceived. When Lloyd

27. Foner 1967, p. 82.
George lamented that ‘the whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of Revolution’ maybe the European workers who were joining the Communist Parties in the hundreds of thousands should also have been better informed about the impure nature of the Russian Revolution.28 Perhaps the academic experts are correct, that they have a better understanding about what a genuine revolution should look like and why the Russian Revolution does not meet these standards. But, surely, if that were the case, they could enlighten us with some previously unknown details about October.

Actually, nothing new has been discovered to challenge what we know, or should know about October. We do know that 507 of 670 delegates who arrived at the Second Congress of Soviets favored a transfer of power to soviets and that almost all of those who walked out were among the 163 minority delegates who were against soviet power in the first place.29 The argument about the use of force is a red herring today as it was in 1917. Nothing in the record of Right SRs and Mensheviks before, during, or after the Second Congress indicates that they were in any way inclined to support soviet power had only the Bolsheviks avoided the use of force – something the moderate socialists themselves were not averse to in their efforts to overthrow the Soviet regime. Obviously, a double-standard is invoked here – the same historians who are so upset that the Bolsheviks used their dominant position in the Petrograd Soviet’s Military Revolutionary Committee to overthrow the Provisional Government and hand political power to the Congress of Soviets are also conspicuously silent on the military machinations of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.

Given the liberal parties’ strident anti-revolutionary record throughout 1917, Hobsbawm rightly dismisses the Kadets as champions of democracy, noting that even liberal historians cannot argue with much conviction that a democratic-parliamentary Russia was much of a possibility.30 That was undoubtedly true ten years ago, but Mark Steinberg, the current editor of Slavic Review, recently made an incredible attempt to resuscitate the long-dead Kadets, arguing that the liberals, inspired ‘noble political dreams and practical political courage’, attempted ‘to construct a new democratic polity’. Ultimately, these democratic efforts were thwarted by the authoritarianism of the Leninists, which ‘was little known or understood outside a small circle of activists’.31

Hobsbawm’s notion of the possibility of ‘a broad coalition with other socialists’ is a more serious but ultimately flawed proposition. Lenin and the

Bolsheviks were not averse to conciliation with the Mensheviks and SRs, but on what basis? So disgraced were the Kadets by their compliance in the attempted Kornilov coup that Lenin proposed a peaceful transfer of power to the soviets – if the moderate socialists were willing to draw the lessons of the previous six months and break with the discredited ruling-class parties. In fact, the Second Congress of Soviets unanimously voted to form such a coalition government of parties represented in the soviets, but the minority socialists then immediately chose to ignore the resolution that they had just voted for, denounced the Bolsheviks for overthrowing the Provisional Government, and stormed out of the Congress. Alexander Rabinowitch argues that, during the November discussions, the Mensheviks and Right SRs displayed little interest in coming to terms with the Bolshevik régime, or, as Victor Serge argues, they demanded total capitulation on the part of the victors.32

In short, the class divide of 1917 emphasised in the Marxist classics by Trotsky, Serge and others is simply ignored by Hobsbawm and by liberal historians today. In the United States, a veritable academic cottage industry continues to perpetuate the myth of Mensheviks and SRs as advocates of socialist democracy. Here, new archival sources are not necessary, but, rather, a simple reminder of the actions of the Mensheviks and SRs. Victor Serge recounts how, after walking out of the Second Congress of Soviets, the Right SRs and Mensheviks immediately united with the Kadets and industrial magnates to form the Committee of Public Safety which openly appealed to troops to overthrow soviet power; but not one regiment headed their call. The Right SRs, headed by Abraham Gotz and supported by the Mensheviks, then attempted to organise the failed Junker mutiny in an unseemly alliance of monarchists, military officers, and anti-soviet socialists. A few weeks later, the Right SRs offered military assistance to the Cossack warlord and future Nazi collaborator Petr Krasnov who was marching on Petrograd. The Menshevik Dan later admitted that they had hoped that the Bolsheviks could be ‘liquidated by force of arms’. Serge comments: ‘Nothing is more tragic at this juncture than the moral collapse of the two great parties of democratic socialism.’33 So no new sources will change the fact that, at one the most decisive moments in working-class history, the Mensheviks and Right SRs walked out of the democratically elected assembly that represented the Russian masses and joined the forces of reaction.

Indeed, the unprincipled tactics of the Right SRs and Mensheviks ultimately did lead to a socialist coalition government with the Bolsheviks and the Left

SRs. The myth of the Right SR electoral victory could by now be put to rest, were it not for the role it plays in anti-Bolshevik propaganda. As Oliver Radkey, the historian of the Constituent Assembly election, shows, the election ballots unduly favoured the Right SRs, who were neither socialist nor revolutionary but had become ‘Kadets without admitting it’.34 Additionally, we now know that, in the three areas that distinguished between Left and Right SRs, the Left SRs won overwhelmingly, by a margin of more than two to one in the Baltic Fleet, by nine to one in Kazan and by thirty-two to one in Petrograd.35 A recent study of Saratov province has shown that peasants there complained that they had voted for the SRs under duress and wanted to have their votes changed to the Bolsheviks because of the party’s land decree.36 Now, unless one wants to believe that the peasantry, in mass rebellion against the landlords, were actually simultaneously voting to hand power back to the Kadets in SR clothing, the conclusion, it seems to me, is inescapable: the Bolshevik 25% and Left SR majority of the SR 40% vote, combined to win the popular vote.

But, for Eric Hobsbawm, the October Revolution was mistake. He asks, ‘what made the Bolsheviks decide to take power with an obviously unrealistic programme of socialist revolution?’ Why was the Bolshevik programme unrealistic? He alludes to what he calls the ‘myth’ of the German Revolution that failed to come to the aid of the Russian Revolution as the Bolsheviks had hoped. Hobsbawm recalls that ‘my generation was brought up on the story of the betrayal of the German Revolution of 1918’, but, according to Hobsbawm,

Germany did not belong to the revolutionary sector of Europe…. A German October Revolution, or anything like it, was not seriously on and therefore didn’t have to be betrayed.37

I believe that Pierre Broué’s magnificent study of the German Revolution more than adequately refutes this notion of the German Revolution as ‘myth.’

On the Civil War, Hobsbawm agrees with Orlando Figes’s claim that the Bolsheviks won because they fought under the red flag, however misleading, in the name of the soviets.38 Unfortunately, Hobsbawm does not address the issue of the origins of the Civil War. For Marxists, the Civil War was a

34. Radkey 1963, pp. 469, 301.
continuation of the class war that had started in February. Throughout 1917, the far Right and liberals repeatedly made clear that brute force was their class solution to the rebellion. Yet the usual textbook version accuses the Bolsheviks of fighting dirty and asserts that the Civil War started with the soviet seizure of power or the closing of the Constituent Assembly in January.

In my opinion, the most important revelation from the archives was found not in the former Soviet Union but, rather, in the archives of President Wilson and his staff. David Foglesong’s book, *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism*, shows that, just a few weeks after the October Revolution, the US started funnelling massive amounts of cash to White forces hostile to soviet power. While publicly claiming that the US was attempting to promote democracy in Russia, privately Secretary of State Robert Lansing had convinced President Wilson that continuing the war efforts on the Eastern front necessitated establishing a stable Russian government through a ‘military dictatorship’. Over the course of the next several years, the US would funnel tens of millions of dollars to anti-Semitic Cossack warlords in an attempt to install such a military dictatorship amenable to US interests.39 What has to be underscored here is that Russian experts know about all this – but I have yet to find a single reference in any academic study of the Russian Revolution that mentions it, even in a study that focuses exclusively on the Don Cossacks.40

Marxists must insist that the massive US, British and French military aid to the White armies is the starting point for any honest discussion about the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Without such support, right from the beginning, the White armies would never have gotten off the ground. We now know that Trotsky’s claim that the White armies were largely mercenary armies created by Western imperialism was quite accurate. Of course, we know that the US, Britain, France, and their allies also sent tens of thousands of soldiers into Soviet territory. Winston Churchill described these troops as the ‘linch-pin’ that held the anti-Bolshevik forces together. We also know that, once Western aid to the Whites came to end in late 1919, the Civil War also quickly came to an end. 41

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Hobsbawm claims that, ‘The Russian Revolution was destined to build socialism in one backward and soon utterly ruined country.’42 It is indisputable that the economy was indeed ruined, but building socialism in such a context was problematic to say the least. For the

---

39. Foglesong 1995, pp. 87, 104. From May to December 1919 alone, the US supplied $16,000,000 in arms and other materials to the White armies.
Marxist tradition, this social and economic catastrophe, rather than ideologically-driven policies, provided the material basis for Stalinism to emerge.

There is no doubt that the New Economic Policy era, from 1921 to 1928, saw the demise of both soviet and party democracy. Yet this demise was not pre-ordained or linear. Even after the SR trial in 1922, members of this organisation which had tried to organise a military coup and assassinate Lenin spoke freely in the Hammer and Sickle Factory and ran candidates for the Moscow Soviet. In the 1923 faction fight, Bolshevik Central Committee members from both the majority and minority argued their respective positions in front of the factory cell. By 1926, party democracy, however, was a sham. The Hammer and Sickle vote was typical, with over four hundred votes for the expulsion and only two votes against. Yet the hounding of oppositionists and anonymous notes to the speaker show that this was a stage-managed affair. Sixteen of seventeen anonymous notes at the expulsion meeting were either hostile to the Politburo line or wanted a hearing for the oppositionist.43

The silencing of the Opposition coincided with the attempt to convert the factory party organisation into an institution that would impose economic concessions and attempt to discipline the workforce. Yet, open dissent within the trade unions outlived that in the Party. At a union conference in 1926, a Hammer and Sickle worker complained ‘The trust administration drive around in automobiles, while cutting costs is done on the backs of workers. They trick and screw the peasants and this is what is called the smychka [the union between workers and peasants].’ Even in September 1927, the Party could not silence dissent outside its own ranks. One report complained that the cell was in complete shambles. ‘The ideological situation in our cell is bad. There are incidents of drunken communists. Workers torment communists and their activity, but they remain silent. We have no group or individual agitation.’

For historians intent on connecting the dots between 1917 and Stalinism, the NEP presents a major problem. What I tried to illustrate in my study of the Hammer and Sickle Factory is that the ideals of 1917 eventually clashed with ascending Stalinism on the shop floor. Yet there was also a very vibrant, active, and relatively tolerant life in the factories that was very different from the coercion of the First Five-Year Plan. During the NEP, dissident voices outside the party ranks could be heard; workers could and did practice religion in the shops. The majority of workingwomen regularly attended women’s meetings because these sessions provided a forum in which their grievances could be heard and acted upon. Most workers were active participants in the metalworkers’ union and rightfully expected their representatives to respond

43. Murphy 2005, Chapter 5.
favourably to their concerns, submitting more than 13,000 grievances in 1924 and 1925, the majority resolved in favour of the workers. Far from being a state institution deployed against the working class, as it would later become, workers themselves viewed the union organisation as an effective source of power. So strong was the union organisation in 1925 that the factory director later wrote that trade-union deputies – rather than managers – held real power in the shops.44 Despite the economic catastrophe of seven years of war, workers received real wage increases that approximated their prewar levels by 1926. In short, evidence from the archives now proves that, for much of the NEP, political considerations – a pro-working-class policy in industry – took precedence over economic expediency. Diane Koenker found similar evidence of strong union organisation in her recent study of print workers. According to Koenker, print workers during the mid NEP held control ‘in four key areas: in relations with supervisors, issues of discipline, methods of pay, and consultation over the work process’.45 I would suggest that this is a description of a system very different from capitalism.

This is also a very different assessment of industrial relations during the NEP than what Koenker claimed a decade ago when she argued that the socialism that emerged from the Civil War ‘relied on the power of the state agencies – the Cheka and the concentration camp – to ensure adherence to its centrally defined goals and policies’.46 As a litmus test for judging a society, incarceration rates, along with mass terror, might be useful barometers, but American scholars might want to think through the logic of using such a yardstick on a consistent basis. In point of fact, we know that the early Soviet state incarcerated very few workers and a relatively small number of its citizens. Recently published GPU summaries, from 1922 to 1928, report over 3,000 strikes but mention only six incidents in which authorities arrested striking workers. The entire Soviet prison population only exceeded 100,000 in 1925, with a tiny minority imprisoned for political offenses.47 In her Pulitzer Prize-winning study of the Gulags, Anne Applebaum reluctantly acknowledges that, by the end of 1927, only 300,000 Soviet citizens were incarcerated and political prisoners received special privileged status until 1925. Only in the

44. Murphy 2005, Chapter 3.
47. Rogovin 1993, p. 10. These figures are consistent with Ohuhcestwo Memorial, Sistema ispravitel’noj trudovykh lagerie v SSSR, Spravochnik 1998, p. 17, which states there were 200,000 prisoners in the middle of 1927. Getty and Naumov 1999, p. 588, found records that prove that the annual number of GPU, OGPU, and NKVD convictions from 1922 to 1926 were low: 6,003; 4,794; 12,425; 15,995; 17,804.
1930s was their status reduced to one inferior to that of common criminals.48

Oleg Khlevniuk’s more systematic study of the Gulags begins in 1929, because, he notes, “The Stalinist penal system was formed and entrenched during the 1930s – more precisely between 1929 and 1941.”49

The most exciting area of scholarly research today on early Soviet society is the study of national minorities. Terry Martin makes the following bold comment:

The Soviet Union was the world’s first Affirmative Action Empire. Russia’s new revolutionary government was the first of the old European multietnic states to confront the rising tide of nationalism and respond by systematically promoting the national consciousness of ethnic minorities.50

Unfortunately, Martin fails to adequately delineate between the early Soviet support for non-Russian nationalities and Stalin’s more ruthless national policies.

We know that the relative tolerance of the NEP was reversed during the First Five-Year Plan. In the factories, real wages were cut in half while workers were forced to labour much longer hours, factory committees that had previously defended their constituents were transformed into management productivity organs, and open dissent was ruthlessly silenced. While state agents did arrest workers, Stalinism’s weapon of choice against the working class was, as the leading historian on Soviet labour, Donald Filtzer, argued long ago, the strategic use of food as a weapon to coerce workers into joining various productivity campaigns.51 Thanks to Jeffery Rossman’s study of Ivanovo textile workers, we also know that there were areas of stiff resistance to the state offensive against the working class, but this was the exception rather than the norm.52 Recently published top secret GPU reports show that smoldering but unorganised hatred against the draconian Stalinist labour policies reverberated throughout the Soviet Union. Lynne Viola’s study of collectivisation shows that the situation was even more volatile in the countryside. In 1930 alone, there were 13,754 mass disturbances of armed resistance in which two and half million peasants fought pitched battles with state agents sent to organise collective farms.53

So, if we look at evidence from what has emerged from the archives and from sources that were available long ago, we see a vast discrepancy between the data and the direction of the historiography. *What Is to Be Done?* was not an anti-democratic declaration for a hierarchal organisation but a document that advocated political freedom and a practical way of attaining it. The Bolsheviks did not usurp power but provided leadership for a massive popular revolt that supported soviet power. The Civil War was not manufactured by the Bolsheviks but was a continuation of the class conflict of 1917 and only escalated because of the active intervention of the Western powers. Despite the utter devastation of seven years of war and civil war, Soviet citizens could openly criticise the régime; they had the right to practice their religion; workers continued to have considerable control in the factories; seven hundred thousand women participated in proletarian women’s movement; the régime enacted favorable policies for national minorities, and the peasantry for the most part, was left alone. All of this of changed, of course, during the First Five-Year Plan, when coercion and repression supplanted tolerance and persuasion in every aspect of Soviet society.

Many historians might acknowledge some of the details on these issues, yet there persists, for ideological reasons, a profound resistance against drawing the conclusion that early Soviet society was fundamentally different from later Stalinism. The new *A History of Russia* textbook by Georgetown University scholars, for example argues,

In terms of cultural flowering there was a notable divergence between the NEP and the following two and a half decades of blood-soaked Stalinism . . . yet, some of the horrors to come — show trials, camps, and executions of innocent people — were already in place. The structure of the Soviet system with its rule by party and ideology was well established before Stalin achieved full power, and that ideology looked forward to collectivization and the full realization of socialism and communism.54

It should not shock us that Western historians are once again trying to connect the dots between 1917 and Stalinism. The ideologically selective recounting of the revolutionary era is no accident. But the rightward shift in the historiography could not have happened without the relative weakness of the Left that failed to meet the challenge. I would suggest that our isolation from the mainstream arguments is, in part, our own fault. The number of Marxist historians of the Russian Revolution is tiny — many of us are in this room tonight. I would propose that we take the initial steps to organise a Marxist historians’ group on

the Russian Revolution, to promote discussion on the problematic areas of the Revolution but also to engage and challenge the prevailing trends in the field. A new generation of activists inevitably will start to ask questions about the Russian Revolution. We cannot concede this history to the anti-communists. But, again; we are not starting from scratch. We stand on the shoulders of very rich tradition that, despite sixteen years of archival access, has yet to be equalled by the academy.

References

Murphy, Kevin 2005, Revolution and Counterrevolution, Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory, Oxford: Berghahn.
Rogovin Rogovin 1992, Vlast’ i oppozitsii, Moscow: Terra.
The Multitude and the Kangaroo:  
A Critique of Hardt and Negri’s  
Theory of Immaterial Labour

David Camfield
Labour Studies, University of Manitoba  
camfield@ms.umanitoba.ca

Abstract
Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour provides a socio-economic foundation in the contemporary world for the philosophical and political elements of their thought. Although there has been considerable engagement with Hardt and Negri’s work, the socio-economic dimension of their thought has received little sustained attention. This is certainly true of their theory of immaterial labour. This article aims to remedy this oversight. It presents and scrutinises Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labour and its putative hegemony. It then examines the depiction of the world of paid work in advanced capitalist societies with which the theory is associated and looks at three alleged consequences of the rise of immaterial labour. It concludes that this dimension of Hardt and Negri’s thought is profoundly flawed, that immaterial labour cannot play the role they wish to assign it in their theory, and that this failure suggests the importance of a different method of developing theory from that employed by Hardt and Negri, along with so many other contemporary writers.

Keywords
Hardt, Negri, immaterial labour, Marxism, capitalism

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire was the most celebrated theoretical work associated with the global-justice movement, although it was neither a product of the movement nor read by many of its activists, at least in North America. Empire’s sequel, Multitude is, like its predecessor, a work of great ambition and scope that contains many themes and cites a wide range of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. One theme which is significant in Empire and more central in Multitude is that of immaterial labour. Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour plays a key role in providing a socio-economic foundation in the contemporary world for the philosophical and political elements of their thought. This adds to the
credibility of their work in the minds of some readers, since much philosophical and theoretical writing today lacks any such grounding. Although there has been considerable engagement with Hardt and Negri’s work, the socio-economic dimension of their thought has received little sustained attention. This is certainly true of their theory of immaterial labour. The aim of this paper is to remedy this oversight. Beginning with an explication of this theory, it scrutinises Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labour and its putative hegemony. It then examines the depiction of the world of paid work in advanced capitalist societies with which the theory is associated and three alleged consequences of the rise of immaterial labour. I conclude that this dimension of Hardt and Negri’s thought is profoundly flawed, and that immaterial labour cannot play the role they wish to assign it in their theory. In addition to demonstrating that the theoretical edifice of this pair of prominent leftist thinkers rests on a flimsy socio-economic foundation, this critique reminds us of the need for a different method of developing theory from that employed by Hardt and Negri, along with so many other contemporary writers.

Immaterial labour and the multitude

The concept of immaterial labour originates within the current of autonomist Marxism sometimes referred to as postoperaismo, specifically in the circle around the journal Futur Antérieur (1990–8). This grouping included Negri, Paolo Virno and other Italian survivors of autonomia, but also Jean-Marie Vincent (a French Marxist of Trotskyist heritage) and the US academic Michael Hardt. In the text on immaterial labour to which Empire refers readers, Maurizio Lazzarato defines the concept as ‘the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’. Here, immaterial

1. Recent exceptions are Thompson 2005 on Empire, and Wright 2005 on immaterial labour.
2. Although the notion of immaterial labour is not original to Hardt and Negri, and there are significant differences among theorists who employ it in some form, the scale of the international and multilingual circulation of their recent work has made it the most important conduit for the diffusion of the notion of immaterial labour; consequently, this article is devoted to immaterial labour in their most recent publications.
3. Issues of Futur Antérieur can be found online at: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=117>. There is a useful discussion of some of the ideas of Futur Antérieur in Dyer-Witheford 1999, pp. 221–33. On the Italian currents of operaismo and autonomia, to which the ideas of Futur Antérieur and Hardt and Negri’s recent work are related as one line of descent (but not the only one), see Wright 2002. On the contours of postoperaismo, see Wright 2006. Bowring 2004 looks at Empire in relation to the tradition out of which it emerges.
labour is linked to a ‘great transformation’ resulting from the emergence of mass intellectuality in the early 1970s. In the postindustrial economy of ‘post-Taylorist production’, ‘founded on the manipulation of information’, immaterial labour is anchored in ‘a social labor power that is independent and able to organize both its own work and its relations with business entities’.6

This form of labour is not ‘merely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism’ but rather part of a radical change:

Waged labor and direct subjugation (to organization) no longer constitute the principal form of the contractual relationship between capitalist and worker. A polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of ‘intellectual worker’ who is him- or herself an entrepreneur.7

While Lazzarato’s ideas here are not identical to the concept of immaterial labour in Multitude, there are certainly elements of continuity, as we shall see. In presenting Hardt and Negri’s theory, I will draw mainly on Multitude, referring to Empire only to note points where the more recent work departs from Empire or where the earlier work clarifies Multitude.

In Multitude, immaterial labour is defined as labour which ‘creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response’.8 Hardt and Negri note that there are two kinds of immaterial labour, although most jobs characterised by immaterial labour involve both. One is ‘primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions’. The other is affective, involving both body and mind, ‘labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion’.9 Jobs with a significant affective dimension, they point out, are predominantly filled by low-paid, low-status women workers who, unlike factory workers, are appropriately described as alienated.10 This twofold notion of immaterial labour represents an unacknowledged shift from Empire, which identifies three forms of immaterial labour: the two mentioned in Multitude and also the kind

involved in an industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself.

---

7. Lazzarato 1996, 139.
10. Hardt and Negri (2004, p. 111) write that ‘alienation was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers’.
Here,

manufacturing is regarded as a service, and the material labor of the production of durable goods mixes with and tends towards immaterial labor. . . . These are the three types of labor that drive the postmodernization of the global economy.11

The authors make it clear that immaterial labour itself is material; it is the products of this labour that are immaterial. Acknowledging the ambiguity of the term, they suggest ‘biopolitical labor’ as an alternative way of naming the reality with which they are concerned, while observing that the concept of biopolitics brings with it other complications that make the term immaterial labor both ‘easier to grasp initially and better at indicating the general tendency of economic transformation’.12 However, when Hardt and Negri describe biopolitical labour as ‘labor that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself’,13 a conceptual slippage occurs. This definition expands the concept to encompass labour that produces material as well as immaterial products.14 While Hardt and Negri note that immaterial and material forms of labour are ‘almost always’15 mixed together, citing the example of health-care workers who both clean bedpans and generate affective and intellectual products, their description of immaterial labour as biopolitical labour that is both materially and immaterially productive, creating ‘ultimately social life itself’, in fact dissolves the distinction between immaterial and material labour. This all-encompassing notion contradicts their definition of immaterial labour as labour that produces immaterial products.

Hardt and Negri do not suggest that most workers in the world perform immaterial labour. On a world scale, agricultural labour remains the largest category, and the absolute number of what they call industrial workers has not shrunk. Nor does immaterial labour reduce workplace hierarchy or labour-market polarisation, or improve everyone’s work experience.16 Their contention is that, in every era, there is ‘one figure of labor’17 that slowly causes the others to adopt its main qualities, and that, in the current era of ‘economic

13. Ibid. (emphasis added).
14. This broader definition is also present elsewhere (Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 94).
postmodernization\textsuperscript{18} or ‘informatization’,\textsuperscript{19} immaterial labour ‘has become hegemonic in qualitative terms and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself’. These must now ‘informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective’.\textsuperscript{20} Immaterial labour’s dominance replaces that of industrial labour, which in the middle of the 1800s became hegemonic and began to put its stamp on work and society, even though it was still the basis for only a minor share of total production in a limited geographical space.\textsuperscript{21}

To support this argument, they write that immaterial labour characterises the ‘fastest-growing occupations’ in ‘dominant countries’, citing as examples ‘food servers, salespersons, computer engineers, teachers, and health workers’.\textsuperscript{22} The hegemony of immaterial labour is also demonstrated by the adoption of its features by other kinds of labour: more and more jobs are being changed by ‘communication mechanisms, information, knowledges, and affect’,\textsuperscript{23} as well as the spread of computers. Immaterial labour’s increasing importance underpins the growth of ‘immaterial forms of property’, while its distinctive form, the distributed network, is now ‘the way to understand everything from neural functions to terrorist organizations’.\textsuperscript{24} In post-Fordist production, the linear form of the assembly-lines of industrial labour is giving way to the distributed network form.\textsuperscript{25} Ultimately, the tendency of immaterial labour is shown by ‘the becoming biopolitical of production’.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{flushright}
19. Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 280. Empire offers a conventional view of economic history since the medieval era as involving three paradigms: agricultural and extractive (primary), industry (secondary) and services (tertiary). Modernisation is the shift from the first to the second, and postmodernisation or informatisation is the transition from the second to the third (p. 280). Both Empire and Multitude are organised by a model of economic historical sociology centred on agricultural, industrial and immaterial work, each defined by the nature of its products. This model is close to the eighteenth-century liberal-materialist schema of hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial societies (Comninel 1987, pp. 64–74) than it is to any Marxist theory of modes of production characterised by distinctive relations of production (see, for instance, Banaji 1977).
21. Ibid.
24. Ibid. The rise of the distributed network form, which has no centre and which erodes boundaries from within and without, is a prominent theme in Multitude’s discussions of the evolution of war (pp. 54–62) and the character of the global-justice movement or movement of movements and the multitude (pp. 86–7, 217).
\end{flushright}
The rise of immaterial labour has profound consequences. One is the breaking down of the division of time between work and non-work or leisure. This split was clear-cut in the age of the factory, but, under the hegemony of immaterial labour, ‘an idea or an image comes to you not only in the office but also in the shower or in your dreams’. To grasp this change, Hardt and Negri suggest, we would do well to remember that the work/leisure split had no meaning for women traditionally engaged full-time in unpaid domestic labour, and that agricultural labourers may work all the day long. They also give the examples of companies like Microsoft, which attempt to keep their employees in the office for as much time as possible by offering free food and exercise, and the phenomenon of multiple job-holding by low-waged workers in precarious employment. They conclude that ‘at both the high and low ends of the labor market the new paradigm undermines the division between work time and the time of life’.

The hegemony of immaterial labour also has the effect of creating a higher degree of commonality among disparate groups of people. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri emphasise that post-Fordism or economic postmodernisation is not homogenising labour processes around the world, making them identical. Rather, the diverse forms of the organisation and experience of work ‘coexist with a “becoming common”, at a different level of abstraction, of the forms of labor and the general relations of production and exchange’. This is an unacknowledged repudiation of their earlier claim in *Empire* that ‘one consequence of the informatization of production and the emergence of immaterial labor has been a real homogenization of laboring processes’, with computerisation seen as the key. Some of the commonality noted in *Multitude* is a new development, flowing from the shared nature of what immaterial labour produces and from the ‘performativity, communication and collaboration’ characteristic of such labour itself. In contrast to the production of material goods, the products of immaterial labour are ‘in many respects, immediately social and common’. Another portion of commonality is not new, but is only now being recognised as common, as illustrated by the science and knowledge that have always been a part of farming. According to Hardt

---

and Negri, immaterial labour has the performative features of language, being rooted in, creating and conducted in common,\textsuperscript{34} and ‘becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor, is the biopolitical condition of the multitude’.\textsuperscript{35} As we shall see, this has important political implications.

Immaterial labour does not simply create a new commonality. Hardt and Negri also argue that immaterial labour is increasingly outside the control of capital. In Marx’s time, capital created cooperation by bringing together workers in factories. But immaterial labour is inherently social. It directly produces communication and cooperation. This view is even more clearly stated in \textit{Empire}:

\begin{quote}
The cooperative aspect of immaterial labor is not imposed or organized from the outside, as it was in previous forms of labor, but rather, cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Co-operative and communicative qualities are ‘internal to labor and thus external to capital’.\textsuperscript{37} For this reason, immaterial labour has a great potential for self-management.\textsuperscript{38} In fact, its social cooperation outside of capital ‘seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’.\textsuperscript{39}

As we have seen, Hardt and Negri understand immaterial labour as biopolitical.\textsuperscript{40} It dissolves the separation between work and life, and it produces ‘not the means of life but \textit{social life itself}. All of social life becomes productive: ‘war, politics, economics, and culture in Empire become finally a mode of producing social life in its entirety and hence a form of biopower’.

Just as social production takes place today equally inside and outside the factory walls, so too it takes place equally inside and outside the wage relationship.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{34.} Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{35.} Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{36.} Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 294.
\textsuperscript{37.} Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{38.} Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 336.
\textsuperscript{39.} Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 294.
\textsuperscript{40.} As the authors discuss in \textit{Empire}, this notion draws on the poststructuralist ideas of Foucault and, especially, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Italian thinkers associated with \textit{Futur Antérieur} (2000, pp. 22–30).
\textsuperscript{41.} Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 146, 334, 135.
As immaterial labour defines social production, even the unemployed poor become participants in biopolitical production.\textsuperscript{42} Empire needs the biopolitical production of the entire population of the world: "no group is "disposable".\textsuperscript{43} Biopolitical production is obviously not confined to a working day with a clear beginning and end. Thus it cannot be measured, and it produces more value than capital can ever capture.\textsuperscript{44} Here is another way in which immaterial labour is subversive with respect to capital. Social life is a productive machine, but society is not seen as the social factory of autonomist Marxism.\textsuperscript{45} This is because, even though "the real subsumption of society under capital"\textsuperscript{46} has taken place, capital is unable to fully harness biopolitical productivity to value production, although it tries.

As a consequence of the rise of immaterial labour, the authors argue that it is necessary to reconceptualise labour and value. The relationship between them has, they claim, changed since Marx's day. Marx saw social labour as 'the source of all wealth' in capitalism and abstract labour, 'labor in general, labor without respect to its specific form', as 'the source of value in general'.\textsuperscript{47} However, capitalism's law of value, which measures value in units of labour-time, no longer holds because of the tendency for the division between work and non-work time to disappear. 'This law . . . cannot be maintained today in the form that Smith, Ricardo, and Marx himself conceived it', even if labour is still 'the fundamental source of value in capitalist production'. Immaterial labour produces knowledge, communicative capacities, and social relationships, and these fall into the category of 'positive externalities'. 'Such externalities, which are common to all of us, increasingly define economic production as a whole'. Positive externalities are outside of capital, which tries to control them but can never succeed completely. Immaterial labour is still exploited by capital, but the nature of exploitation has changed along with the relationship between labour and value. No longer can value and surplus-value be conceptualised on the basis of temporal units of labour-time. Exploitation becomes 'the private appropriation of part or all of the value that has been produced as common'.\textsuperscript{48}

Significant though this is, the importance of immaterial labour for Hardt and Negri's project in \textit{Multitude} goes far beyond the manner in which it leads

\textsuperscript{42}Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 130–1.
\textsuperscript{43}Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{44}Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{45}Thoburn (2001, p. 87) also recognises this. On the concept of the social factory, see Dyer-Witheford 1999, pp. 67–8 and Wright 2002, pp. 37–8.
\textsuperscript{46}Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 365; see also pp. 271–2.
\textsuperscript{47}Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 144, 145.
\textsuperscript{48}Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 145, 147, 148, 150.
to a reconceptualisation of the critique of political economy. Immaterial labour is the basis for the new global class formation they call the multitude. They argue that ‘a class is and can only be a collectivity that struggles in common’, and that class formation can take place along any social axis, not just through production relations. Unlike other popular collectivities, such as crowds and masses, the multitude is not a passive aggregate awaiting leadership from above; it is an ‘irreducible multiplicity’, ‘singularities that act in common’. It is ‘all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially … the class of those who refuse the rule of capital’.49 This is not a class that actually exists today, but one that is a real possibility grounded in shared conditions of existence. It is immaterial labour which creates these conditions. Immaterial labour underpins the ‘becoming common’ that coexists with singularities on a world scale and makes the multitude possible: ‘the becoming common of labor is a central condition necessary for the construction of the multitude’.50 Waged and unwaged, rural and urban – all biopolitically productive people are the basis for the multitude.

The political significance of this is enormous, for the multitude is ‘the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone’.51 It organises in the form of distributed networks. These are more effective than earlier forms of resistance at dealing with today’s prevailing form of power, Empire. These networks also correspond to the form of the hegemonic figure of production, immaterial labour, and are more democratic and decentralised than previous forms of organisation such as people’s armies and guerrilla forces. The network form emerged in the 1980s in South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle and the first Palestinian intifada, but, in both cases, networks of resistance did not disentangle themselves from more centralised and hierarchical forms of organisation. The Zapatistas in Mexico represent a more advanced example of transition towards the network form. Recent feminist, queer and anti-racist organising, particularly in the US, and the revival of anarchism, have network characteristics. The global-justice and antiwar movements since the Seattle protests of 1999 most clearly take the form of distributed networks.52 That said, Hardt and Negri hasten to repudiate the charge that they are suggesting ‘that forms of resistance evolve through

49. Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 104, 105, 106. Hardt and Negri contrast the multitude with the working class, which, they claim, is an exclusionary concept because even in the broadest sense it excludes the unwaged (pp. 106–7).
some natural evolution or in some preordained march toward absolute democracy’.\textsuperscript{53} There is, they contend, no teleology involved in the contradictory processes of popular struggle and social change, underpinned by the spread of immaterial labour, that have resulted in the conditions of possibility of the multitude.

As this demonstrates, Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour is central to their theoretical and political project. Immaterial labour is said to be dissolving the division of time between work and non-work, creating a new commonality, undermining qualitative divisions among working people, producing life outside the sway of capital and making possible the popular unity of singularities that can achieve absolute democracy. If one follows Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour is of world-historic importance. But should we follow them?

\textbf{The concept of immaterial labour}

I will begin with the concept itself. As I have shown, there is a conceptual slippage in \textit{Multitude} between two different – in fact, contradictory – senses of immaterial labour, one delimited by immaterial products and the other a capacious notion of biopolitical labour that yields both material and immaterial products. Let us first consider this latter sense of immaterial labour as biopolitical labour. This has been praised by some sympathetic readers of Hardt and Negri. For example, Jason Read has written that ‘what is perhaps most interesting’ is how the work of Hardt and Negri ‘reinvigorates and expands the “turn to production” drawing on its critical force, while, at the same time, expanding production beyond a narrowly economic sense’. As Read notes, Hardt and Negri relate their concept of biopolitical production to a historical shift in capitalism and to an ontological shift, ‘a reconsideration of production not simply as the production of things but as the production of relations and subjects, as the constitution of the world’.\textsuperscript{54}

In \textit{Multitude}, Hardt and Negri do not explain the social processes involved in the historical shift that gives rise to biopolitical labour. However, they do provide something of an explanation in \textit{Empire}. This locates biopolitical labour’s emergence in the flourishing of immaterial production in US social movements of the 1960s, whose struggles destroyed the prevailing productive order and ‘regime of the production of subjectivity’ and created a new one of

\textsuperscript{53} Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{54} Read 2001, pp. 25–6. Read’s comments are a reflection on \textit{Empire}, but are equally pertinent to Hardt and Negri’s latest work.
'autonomous production'. This eventually became dominant, in line with the autonomist insistence that capital is always reactive to proletarian power and subjectivity, and that the working class ‘actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future’. Hardt and Negri are not wrong to pay heed to capital’s appropriation of cultural phenomena of the rebellious mid-1960s to mid-1970s era. But this should not obscure the fact that they do not really explain how counter-cultural immaterial labour is supposed to have achieved a generalised hegemony. Instead, they rely on a theoretical claim that capital always reacts to barriers posed by insurgent self-activity by usurping the latter’s creative dimensions for its own purposes. This may satisfy readers who are already autonomists, but many others will find it unconvincing.

The concept of biopolitical labour and production may have an appeal for some readers because of its broad social dimensions, very different from ‘narrowly economic’ notions of the production of widgets, to use the generic example beloved of introductions to neoclassical economics. Yet Hardt and Negri’s concept of biopolitical labour is not just expansive. It also fails to make distinctions between the different forms of production involved in the production of all that falls within the scope of ‘social life itself’. In a highly abstract sense, it is possible to talk of labour producing goods, services, social relations, and human subjectivities. Yet it is essential to be able to distinguish the production of ourselves as human subjects through our relationships with nature and each other in determinate socio-material conditions and particular historical moments from the production by humans of, say, microprocessors. Very different kinds of production processes and products are involved. Labour is at the heart of them all, but at different levels of abstraction and in different social forms. The all-encompassing concept of biopolitically-productive immaterial labour does not allow us to make such distinctions. This conception of immaterial labour is strongly influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, who ‘espouse a material vitalism’ in which desire/life ‘opposes itself to the organic unities of bodies, states, societies’. This variety of poststructuralism lends itself well to exuberant celebrations of anarchic resistance; it is of little use for the careful analysis of the social forms of labour in capitalist societies, let alone strategic emancipatory thought.

It is also worth pointing out that the idea that labour produces social relations and human subjects as well as goods and services is neither novel nor

---

56. Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 268; see also p. 269.
57. See Frank and Weiland 1997 on how this relates to the US context.
the special contribution of poststructuralism in the vein of Deleuze, Guattari, Hardt and Negri. Marx’s concepts of labour and production are far removed from the narrow notions of many Marxists and non-Marxists: humans ‘have history because they must produce their life’.59 Terry Eagleton contends that

Marx may have overrated production, but he certainly did not narrow the term to its economic sense.…. ‘Production’ for him is a richly capacious concept, equivalent to ‘self-actualization’; and to this extent savouring a peach or enjoying a string quartet are aspects of our self-actualization as much as building dams or churning out coat-hangers.60

‘Marx’s basic position’, as Raymond Williams puts it, is that

fundamentally, in this human historical process, we produce ourselves and our societies, and it is within these developing and variable forms that ‘material production’, then itself variable, both in mode and scope, is itself carried on.61

This suggests that it is quite possible to appreciate and, more importantly, investigate how labour – always in a determinate social form – constitutes the (social) world, without adopting Hardt and Negri’s vitalist biopolitical concept of immaterial labour.

The other sense in which Hardt and Negri use the term immaterial labour refers to that labour which produces immaterial products. Such labour and such products indisputably do exist in contemporary capitalist society. What is curious is that Hardt and Negri – theorists who are still influenced in certain ways by operaismo, even if they have moved a very long way from it – define immaterial labour in terms of its products rather than in relation to the labour process, social relations and class antagonism. A hallmark of autonomist Marxism is its theorisation of class in terms of class composition, as

a disaggregated picture of the structure of class power existing within the division of labour associated with a particular organisation of constant and variable capital.62

Traces of this kind of analysis are visible in Hardt and Negri’s effort to identify the basis of the multitude. However, neither the mass worker of operaismo,

61. Williams 1977, p. 91.
originally conceived as a deskilled toiler in mass production deprived of control in the labour process, nor the socialised worker of autonomia, ‘the whole proletariat, subject qua abstract labour, constituted throughout the arc of the valorization process’, were identified by their labour’s products in the way that Hardt and Negri link immaterial labour (in this definition) and the multitude. There were problems with how Italian autonomist Marxism theorised the mass worker as a stylised figure of labour. Nevertheless, its analyses were more grounded in attempts to understand the working-class formation of its time than Hardt and Negri’s writing on the multitude. Moreover, Multitude’s suggestion that a certain type of labour has distinctive qualitative features by virtue of its products, rather than because of a characteristic labour process or place in working-class formation, seems a fetishistic methodological error.

Equally serious is the problem of Hardt and Negri’s depiction of the characteristics of immaterial labour. Recall that its intellectual, linguistic and affective qualities are said to be putting their stamp on the rest of labour and society and driving a becoming-common. Yet it seems quite a stretch to argue, as Hardt and Negri do, that the work of food-servers and salespeople as well as that of computer engineers and teachers is fuelling a drive to ‘informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective’. The extensive use of microcomputers in paid workplaces in advanced capitalist societies is indisputable, but employment in workplaces in which such technology is used is not by itself a convincing basis for claiming that all who are so employed are part of Hardt and Negri’s immaterial labour. I will return to the issue of computer technology in the workplace below. For the moment, we should ask how it is that Hardt and Negri are able to claim that such very different kinds of concrete labour as that of retail salespeople and computer engineers are all part of their intellectually-, linguistically- and affectively-rich immaterial labour.

An answer is suggested by a look at the development of their concept. Nick Dyer-Witheford argues that the ideas about immaterial labour developed in the Futur Antérieur milieu, influenced by a reading of Marx’s concept of ‘general intellect’ in the Grundrisse, implicitly gave a privileged place to highly-qualified knowledge workers, mostly white men in advanced capitalist

---

64. Wright 2002, p. 164.
65. On the shift in the analysis of the mass worker, see Wright 2002, pp. 137–8; see also pp. 176–96, and on the criticism of Negri’s early analysis of the socialised worker by some of his comrades, pp. 170–2.
countries.67 This was one of George Caffentzis’s lines of criticism of Negri.68 In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri signal their distance from the *Futur Antérieur* conception – it ‘marks a step forward, but its conceptual framework remains too pure, almost angelic’ and its ‘new conceptions too only scratch the surface of the productive dynamic of the new theoretical framework of biopower’69 – and expand immaterial labour to include affective as well as intellectual/linguistic work. As a result,

Immaterial labor release 0.2 thus appears to answer or disarm accusations of technological avant-gardism, Cartesian dualism, or masculine bias; both sex workers and software developers can now be included.

However, despite the inclusion of affective as well as intellectual-linguistic work within the category of immaterial labour, the intellectual-linguistic is privileged: immaterial labour’s ‘defining features continue to be attributes of the “cyborg” worker’.70 This remains the case with the latest incarnation of immaterial labour (release 0.3) in *Multitude*.

In addition to bearing characteristics that have been generically assigned to it in a questionable manner, Hardt and Negri’s category of immaterial labour is itself problematic. Dyer-Witheford, who, as we shall see, attempts to save the concept by revising it, raises a pertinent warning:

analysis that puts under one roof multimedia designers, primary-school teachers … and strippers … may reveal valuable commonalities, but can also cover up chasmic differences, fault lines of segmentation, veritable continental rifts that present the most formidable barrier for the organization of counterpower.71

For *Multitude*’s understanding of immaterial labour to be a credible and coherent theoretical concept, Hardt and Negri would have to argue persuasively that there really are significant degrees of qualitative commonality across the huge range of concrete labours that they would have us believe are all examples of immaterial labour. Instead, they simply assert that all labours whose products are immaterial, whether primarily intellectual-linguistic or affective, are part of the category of immaterial labour. This is unconvincing.

The claim that immaterial labour is increasingly outside the control of capital is no more persuasive. As Nicholas Thoburn notes, immaterial labour

---

is seen as moving towards increasing autonomy. Hardt and Negri’s claim amounts to a contention that the real subsumption of labour to capital is retreating, making capital parasitically exploitative of autonomous production. They do not attempt to reconcile this with their contention that the real subsumption of society as a whole to capital has taken place. One reason for their failure to address this contradiction is their ‘neglect [of] the forms in and through which labour exists in capitalism’. Hardt and Negri see immaterial labour as increasingly outside-and-against capital, rather than in-and-against it. Be that as it may, research on labour processes gives no credence to Hardt and Negri’s view. For example, Peter Meiksins’s argument that employers’ concerns about control lead them to restrict how information technology (IT) is used, cramping the communicative and co-operative potential that Hardt and Negri believe is inherently internal to immaterial labour, external to capital, and currently being realised, undermines their position. So too do studies of the labour process of software developers. It is true that one group of immaterial labourers may, in certain circumstances, pose special problems for capital: those whom Ursula Huws calls ‘creative’ or ‘originating’ workers who produce ideas, music, computer programs and the like, in cases where they are legally freelancers or independent contractors. Such workers’ attempts to assert control over their immaterial products do lead to clashes with capital’s efforts to impose its property claims. Recognition of this does not, however, justify the inflated claim Hardt and Negri make about the escape from capital of immaterial labour in their very broad conception of it.

In light of these problems with immaterial labour in both of Hardt and Negri’s senses of the concept, I believe that the concept is deeply flawed and ought to be abandoned altogether. Even the term itself is confusing, since the words used convey an initial impression that the labour being referred to lacks materiality. Dyer-Witheford has attempted to salvage the concept with a major revision. He suggests, with good reason, that ‘analysis that started with, say, day-care workers, nurses’ aides, and dancers as its paradigmatic cases, rather than adding them later’ might not end up conferring the attributes of labour that is mainly intellectual-linguistic to other kinds of labour, as Hardt and Negri do. With this in mind, in his essay on Empire, he suggests a friendly amendment to the concept which remains relevant to Hardt and Negri’s

72. Thoburn 2001, p. 86
75. See Beirne, Ramsay and Panteli 1998; Barrett 2004; also Dyer-Witheford and Sharman 2005.
most recent usage: abandon the attempt to stretch the category of immaterial labour too far, and instead think of ‘the diversity of planetary labourers’ as composed of material, immiserated and immaterial workers, with tendencies towards all three ‘latent . . . throughout the entire postindustrial work force’. 77

Although this is a substantial improvement on Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labour, in my view, it perpetuates two of the latter’s defects: using the products of labour to conceptualise a distinct form of labour, and the conceptualisation of stylised workers or forms of labour inherited from operaismo. For this reason, I conclude that Dyer-Witheford’s salvage effort fails, and there is no reason to mount another. This does not exhaust the matter, however. If the concept of immaterial labour itself is fatally flawed, what of the associated account of contemporary capitalism presented in Multitude?

The hegemony of immaterial labour

According to Hardt and Negri, in the late twentieth century, the hegemony of industrial labour, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, was replaced by that of immaterial labour. 78 This raises two conceptual questions they do not confront directly: what does it mean for a figure of labour to be hegemonic, and what is the labour that exercises this qualitative dominance?

In a response to commentators on Empire, Hardt and Negri cite a passage from Marx’s Grundrisse to explain their notion of immaterial labour’s hegemonic position:

> In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it. 79

They note, correctly, that Marx is writing about the dominance of capital, adding ‘but the notion is equally applicable to our case’. 80 This assertion is questionable. The basis for the view that capital has the character to which Marx refers appears a few lines below the sentences quoted by Hardt and

Negri: ‘Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society’.81 This dominance of capital over various branches of production is an issue at a higher level of abstraction than the dominance of a particular socio-technical variety of labour over others during a particular capitalist era. Capital’s sway over social production and the hegemony of a figure of labour are issues at different levels of analysis. Thus Hardt and Negri’s substitution of a quotation from Marx for an argument is a gesture with little intellectual weight.

There are both historical and theoretical problems with Hardt and Negri’s position. The claim that, from the middle of the nineteenth century, industrial labour was globally hegemonic, in the sense of being in the process of imposing its qualities on all labour, is dubious. By the 1870s, capitalism was only well-established in Europe and North America.82 In Britain, at the time, the proliferation of handicraft production employing wage-labour alongside the growth of steam-powered industry casts doubt on the notion of industrial labour’s hegemony even in the country where industrial capitalism was most highly developed. It is true that British wage-earners encountered new kinds of discipline on the job wherever they toiled, but handicraft and industrial workers were not affected in the same way.83

On a theoretical level, it is problematic to posit the existence of a globally hegemonic socio-technical figure of labour in any era in the history of capitalism. The development and global expansion of capitalism makes wage-labour a tendentially world-historical social form of labour.84 But no single socio-technical configuration of wage-labour (no ‘figure’ of labour in Hardt and Negri’s parlance) is ever globally dominant. There are many socio-technical arrangements for the commodification of labour-power, unfree as well as ‘free’,85 and so the social form of wage-labour is a ‘unity of the diverse’.86 Because Hardt and Negri do not distinguish between the social form of wage-labour and the many possible socio-technical varieties thereof, they end up proposing hegemonic singular socio-technical figures of labour that occlude both the genuine diversity of labour and what really has become dominant, the social form of wage-labour.

Furthermore, if we accept that labour that has been subsumed to capital exists in and against capital, then we should conclude that wage-labour does not configure itself globally, as Hardt and Negri claim. Rather, labour subsumed

82. Beaud 2001, p. 130.
84. Thanks to David McNally for this formulation (personal communication).
85. Van der Linden 2003.
to capital is organised by capital, through class struggle, in determinate historically- and geographically-specific and variable shapes. Hardt and Negri’s hegemonic figure of labour cannot grasp this because it theoretically extracts labour from capital within capitalist society. In addition, their hegemonic figure of labour can be seen as a further example of the common practice in the autonomist tradition of thinking in terms of a stylised worker (craft, mass, socialised).87 This kind of theorising is an enormous obstacle to understanding classes as complex and heterogeneous formations,88 and to recognising the diverse forms of ‘free’ and unfree labour that capital, hierarchically-structured through combined and uneven development, exploits on a world scale.89

Paid work in contemporary capitalism

If the notion of a hegemonic figure of immaterial labour is untenable, what about Hardt and Negri’s picture of the kind of labour that is allegedly dominant today? Let us set aside the specific theoretical concept of immaterial labour scrutinised earlier. Instead, we can look at what Hardt and Negri offer in a more general sense with respect to paid work in contemporary capitalism. Immaterial labour amounts to work outside of manufacturing and resource-extraction, where products are material. Immaterial labour is, in effect, ‘service-sector’ labour. In identifying the new dominant form of labour with the service sector, Hardt and Negri tacitly accept what Ursula Huws calls ‘an article of faith in most of the literature’ since Daniel Bell’s work of the early 1970s on

87. Wright 2002 has the great merit of appreciating both the potential and deep flaws in this tradition’s efforts to theorise class formation.
89. In the shadow of Hardt and Negri’s hegemonic figures of labour lurks a potentially more credible notion (one that they do not propose), that of globally-dominant forms of capitalist accumulation. If, instead, Hardt and Negri were to take a more Marxist or at least marxian approach, they could argue that every era of the capitalist world economy is organised by a dominant type of accumulation, a kind of globally-pre-eminent social structure or régime of accumulation. To theorise capitalism in this manner would be to elevate to the global scale concepts which regulation-school and social-structure-of-accumulation-style political economy have usually applied at the level of nation-states. This would be an improvement on the putative hegemony of figures of labour. Yet it would probably reproduce the weaknesses of regulationist and social-structure-of-accumulation political economy, including a focus on institutional arrangements at the expense of the contradictory dynamics of capitalism itself. It would likely also fail to capture the articulation of different forms of accumulation that exists in every phase of capitalist development. Alnasser et al. 2001 discuss international regulation from a regulation approach. Kots, McDonough and Reich 1994 offer a social-structuralist perspective on the global economy. For critiques of such approaches, see Brenner and Glick 1991, Callinicos 2001, Clarke 1988 and Husson 2005.
postindustrial society, namely the belief ‘that a major, if not the major trend of the twentieth century has been the rise of services at the expense of agriculture and manufacturing’.90

In the same vein, Hardt and Negri write that ‘industrial labor’ has lost its hegemony, which has passed to immaterial labour.91 By ‘industrial’, they, like most writers, mean the manufacturing of material goods. This use of the term is common. It is also regrettable, since it suggests that work which is neither agricultural nor extractive nor manufacturing does not have industrial features. The issue here is what is meant by industry. Is it simply the production of material goods, manufacturing in the everyday early twenty-first-century sense of the word? For Marx, industry referred to commodity production organised around a ‘machine system’ operated by ‘associated labour’ and geared to the extraction of relative surplus-value.92 In this sense, industry need not be limited to the production of material commodities; it is also applicable to the production of commodified services, from health care to fast food to finance. The provision of services in contemporary capitalism is often industrial in the sense that workers are organised through a detail division of labour in a labour process to which not just machines but technological systems are central.93

Hardt and Negri’s thesis regarding the rise to hegemony of immaterial labour can be considered a variant of the widely-accepted economic narrative of the rise of the service sector and knowledge work. Their lack of critical distance from conventional depictions of paid work is perhaps most starkly visible in Empire, which, at one point, states that in the service sector in advanced capitalist countries ‘jobs for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills’.94 Human-resource-management practitioners would not disagree.95 However, Hardt and Negri at the very least pass over what many studies have shown: that this much-vaunted mobility usually amounts to little or no job security, and skill (or functional) flexibility to the requirement to perform several deskillled tasks (multi-tasking).96

90. Huws 2003, p. 130.
95. Thompson writes that, in Empire’s treatment of contemporary capitalism and work, ‘what we read is barely different from what can be found in business literature’ (2005, p. 81). His article identifies a number of points on which the critique of the latter is relevant to Hardt and Negri’s account.
96. See Peck 1996; Burchell, Ladipo and Wilkinson 2002; Stanford and Vosko 2004; Armstrong and Armstrong 2003, p. 130. As Smith and Thompson have written, there is a ‘continuing need to look behind official claims for up-skilling or fundamental shifts in the
Although the rise of services narrative is part of contemporary social-science ‘common sense’, there are good reasons not to swallow this story uncritically. Not least of these is that

the dangers of developing a stylised account of the changing world of work by appealing to simple dualisms, such as the old (industrial) and new (knowledge-intensive) economies, are transparent. Complexity, unevenness, and the enduring features in the structure and relations of employment are crowded out by visions of universal paradigm shifts.97

Of course, it is indisputable that, in advanced capitalist countries, the percentage of the paid labour-force working outside of what are conventionally categorised as agriculture, resource extraction and manufacturing is growing. Nevertheless, conventional conceptualisations of the ‘service sector’ are fraught with problems. Pietro Basso argues that it ‘is a category totally devoid of scientific value’.98 What counts as a service? The classification involved in the assembling of conventional occupational sector statistics can be misleading. For example, building cleaners employed by a manufacturing firm are taken to be manufacturing workers, but if the firm hires cleaners from a janitorial firm they are service-sector employees.99 Similarly, the widely-held assumption that few people still work in agriculture in advanced capitalist countries would be recast if workers employed in producing agricultural equipment and chemicals and in packing, preparing and distributing agricultural produce to points of sale were included in the category of agricultural employment. Integrating the decline in domestic service employment in such countries over the twentieth century would also force a revision of the dominant narrative about services. So too would serious consideration of the fact that specialised ‘knowledge work’ is an outgrowth of the division of labour in manufacturing.100 None of these issues is addressed by Hardt and Negri.

In her work on services, Huws argues that studies of the subject that use data calculated from sources such as standard economic measurements of employment or output blur together what are actually different kinds of activities, ‘involving contrasting and contradictory tendencies’. She splits the unitary category of services into three fields. The first involves paid work identical or similar in kind to work done on an unpaid basis in households

quality of work’ in order to demystify ‘the almost daily claims of paradigmatic changes to the nature of work within contemporary capitalism’ (1999, pp. 228–9).

98. Basso 2003, p. 120.
100. Huws 2003, pp. 130, 135.
and communities, such as child care, health care and cleaning, along with what she calls ‘public housekeeping’, such as garbage collection, and even live entertainment and the sex trade. The second is ‘the reproduction of the knowledge workforce itself’: education, training and some research and development. The third kind is the ‘knowledge work’ involved in producing material or immaterial products.  

This analysis illuminates why lumping services into a single category on the grounds that they generate immaterial products is a very forced abstraction. Hardt and Negri’s addition of affective qualities to their definition of immaterial labour may have helped deflect some criticism, but it also adds to the extreme looseness of the category. As Huws implies, and other studies of service-sector work have demonstrated, interactive service work that involves what Hardt and Negri call affective labour, but which is better theorised as body work, is qualitatively different from highly intellectual-linguistic ‘knowledge work’. Placing both kinds of work within immaterial labour licenses the inclusion within this category of anyone whose job involves considerable interaction with other humans (and other animals?). This underscores how Hardt and Negri’s category is a barrier to developing a better understanding of labour processes and workers’ actions and consciousness in the areas of work identified by Huws.

Recognising that it is unhelpful to think in terms of a unitary service sector undermines the vision of the nature of work conveyed by Hardt and Negri. Nevertheless, one should still pay attention to their cursory attempt to provide empirical support for their argument that immaterial labour is hegemonic. One of the pieces of evidence they cite is the claim that immaterial labour is central to the fastest-growing occupations in advanced capitalist countries. Their reference, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics’s study of which jobs in the US are projected to grow most quickly, identifies the ten fastest-growing occupations as:

- Medical assistants
- Network systems and data communications analysts
- Physician assistants
- Social and human service assistants
- Home health aides

103. See Walkowitz 2002
104. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004a. My reference is to the current version of the online source cited in Multitude, a slightly revised version of that available to its authors.
Medical records and health information technicians
Physical therapist aides
Computer software engineers, applications
Computer software engineers, systems software
Physical therapist assistants

This obviously confirms Hardt and Negri’s unexceptional recognition that the fastest-growing jobs are in ‘the service sector’. What is more interesting about the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ projection – and it must be remembered that it is a projection over the years 2002–12 – is that most of its fastest-growing job classifications do not fall within Huws’s category of ‘knowledge work’ (where work is most likely to have the intellectual-linguistic content that continue to be definitional for Hardt and Negri’s immaterial labour concept, as Dyer-Witheford argues) but, instead, into her other two categories.

Using conventional statistical data to understand the core issue here is difficult for two reasons: in general, ‘official classifications of the occupational structure focus upon the form of jobs rather than the content of labour’ and job classification systems are not consistent across national states. But the picture that emerges from studies of actual job growth suggests that many fast-growing occupations do not have a high degree of intellectual-linguistic content. For example, in Canada between 1995 and 2004, the three fastest-growing occupational categories were Sales and Service Supervisors (whose numbers grew by 105.9 per cent), Clerical Supervisors (73.5 per cent) and Assisting Occupations in Support of Health Services (71.1 per cent), none of which feature a high level of intellectual-linguistic content. In Australia, although the category of ‘professionals’ grew fastest (30.3 per cent) between 1986 and 2000, closer examination reveals that jobs in the fastest-growing sub-categories – Computing Professionals, Accountants and Technical Sales Representatives – were all associated with ‘knowledge handling and servicing provision… with low levels of discretion and analytical skill’ rather than the production of knowledge and considerable autonomy.

Hardt and Negri also cite the qualitative influence that is causing all work to ‘informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective’. The spread of information technology is indisputable. It underlies the trend to ‘become communicative’, through the diffusion of means of

communication such as email, cell phones, and text-messaging. But is information technology causing work to 'become intelligent'? Many jobs that involve computer use involve either what the above-mentioned Australian study calls 'knowledge handling and service provision' or merely the routinised and repetitive input of information.\textsuperscript{109} Much is made about the impact of computers in manufacturing, but a major study on a leading-edge lean-production automobile assembly plant in Canada casts doubt on the notion that the intellectual content of jobs there is increasing. Most of the work, its authors write,

\begin{quote}
... is not characterized by substantive complexity... requires little conceptual acumen, and the emphasis is on physical dexterity and performing at line speed.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

In his assessment of the issue, D.W. Livingstone concludes that skill requirements in North America have increased since the 1940s, but that the most significant changes took place before 1960.\textsuperscript{111} The thesis of a trend towards work 'becoming intelligent' is also called into question by Livingstone's research on the performance gap, the difference between the skills and knowledge workers have and those they actually use on the job. Looking at data from the US and the Canadian province of Ontario, he concludes that the gap 'is extensive and increasing on all available measures'.\textsuperscript{112} Such evidence casts doubt on the linkage between information technology and work 'becoming intelligent'. As for the alleged demand that all work and society 'become affective', this seems an unhelpful implication to draw from the growth in advanced capitalist countries of paid body work and other service jobs that demand 'social and aesthetic skills and competencies',\textsuperscript{113} including emotional self-modulation, all of which are distinctly gendered. In sum, Hardt and Negri’s claims of qualitative changes mix together unenlightening observation, the imprecise inflation of real changes in the world of paid work, and egregious misinterpretation.

The other two pieces of evidence cited by Hardt and Negri are immaterial property forms and the diffusion of distributed networks in society. The former is testimony to an important phenomenon of our times that Hardt and Negri neglect – the extension of the scope and depth of commodification. Some conflicts over immaterial property are, as Huws points out, clashes

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Fleming, Harvey and Sewell 2004, p. 738.
\item Rinehart, Huxley and Robertson 1997, p. 64.
\item Livingstone 1999, p. 147.
\item Livingstone 1999, p. 85.
\item Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan 2001, p. 937.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
between capital and creative or originating workers whose legal status is not that of employee and who therefore are able to attempt to assert control of the immaterial products of their labour; regrettably, Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour does not illuminate such cases because its treatment of the wage-relation is so general. My claim is not that Hardt and Negri ignore commodification altogether; Multitude discusses the private ownership of immaterial products in such cases as the online music file-sharing site Napster, ‘bio-property’ (life-forms), and the privatisation of public transport and utilities. However, even though the message that ‘Our World is Not For Sale!’ has been expressed in many different languages by movements of protest and resistance from Bolivia to France to India, and has had great popular resonance because it connects with people’s experiences, global commodification is not a central theme in their thought. Perhaps this is because acknowledgment of its importance is theoretically incompatible with Hardt and Negri’s commitment to the belief that immaterial labour and its products are increasingly autonomous of capital?

Hardt and Negri’s final example, distributed networks, is a further case of inflating and misreading a trend. The network concept may well be useful for some purposes, but, for example, egalitarian distributed networks are nowhere to be found in the franchised firms in which so many service workers are employed. Franchising has always been about ‘decentralizing risk and centralizing control’, as Meiksins points out. In such firms, ‘legal arrangements and new technologies are used to eliminate local autonomy and to maximize the degree of control from the center’. A similar combination of centralisation and decentralisation can be seen at play in the restructuring of state agencies. The contemporary world of paid work shows no sign of being reshaped into non-hierarchical network patterns.

Three alleged consequences of immaterial labour

If Hardt and Negri’s attempt to provide empirical backing for their theory only adds to doubts about their understanding of contemporary society, their claims about the effects of the rise of immaterial labour do the same. I will examine three alleged consequences. One is their claim about the breaking

115. See, for example, Laxer and Soron 2006. I take the term ‘global commodification’ from McNally 2002.
down of ‘the division between work time and the time of life’. Unfortunately for Hardt and Negri, even the examples they mention, Microsoft workers enticed into spending long hours in the office and workers forced to hold more than one low-paid precarious job, suggest that, far from the division disintegrating, the time of paid work is expanding, pushing deeper into the time of life. This is confirmed by recent statistics. For example, one out of every three male workers and one in ten women in the UK now performs over 50 hours of paid work per week; in Canada, one in four men and one in ten women do 50 or more hours of paid work; in the US, one in four men and one in ten women work 49 hours or more. The fact that some workers may come up with ideas related to their paid employment while they are in the shower or dreaming rather than in the office does not signal the erasure of a temporal division which remains extremely important in the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of people. Rather, it demonstrates how today ‘work time’ casts its shadow over the rest of life for researchers, designers and other such workers, whose employers, like other employers, are demanding higher levels of productivity (more courses taught, more publications, shorter project deadlines . . .). Little wonder, then, that many such workers have difficulty preserving ‘time of life’ away from the concerns of their jobs, sometimes to the detriment of their health. Basso’s assessment that lean-work re-organisation and neoliberal state policies are making paid work hours ‘more intense, longer . . . freer from legal obligations, and more desynchronized with respect to other “social times”’ is a much more plausible interpretation than Hardt and Negri’s view.

Another consequence of immaterial labour is the undermining of qualitative divisions among working people as a result of its ‘becoming-common’ tendency. Despite the importance of this claim for their theory of the multitude, their only empirical gesture in its direction is to point to struggles in defence of housing, water and electricity provision in South Africa. A footnote in Multitude encourages readers to consider the rise of the hegemony of immaterial labour as the basis of possibility for the global cycle of struggles that began in the late 1990s. It is in no way impugns the significance of these

---

120. As this pertains to university teachers and researchers, see De Angelis and Harvie 2006 and Winefield et al. 2002.
struggles to point out that Hardt and Negri never actually explain in detail how qualitative divisions are being undermined as they allege.

Hardt and Negri also argue that the tendency they see for the line between work time and non-work time to dissolve has undermined the law of value as Marx understood it, and it is therefore necessary to reconceptualise value.\footnote{Negri has maintained since the 1970s that the law of value no longer holds, except as the violent power of capitalist command (Negri 1991, pp. 147–8, 172)} The logical conclusion of this, which they do not draw out, is that social production today is not (or is decreasingly) regulated by the self-expansion of value and the standard of the socially necessary labour-time required to produce goods and services, and therefore the social form of production is (or is becoming) non-capitalist; to the extent that capital relates to this emerging autonomous production, it is an external relationship of the parasitical appropriation of its products.

Even if their premise regarding time is faulty, and production is not escaping from capital, it is worth scrutinising their argument about value, which is shot-through with confusions. First, Hardt and Negri are simply wrong to, in effect, equate Marx’s theory of value with the theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, as they do.\footnote{Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 145.} Marx’s theory is fundamentally different from theirs, concerned as it is with the social form of production and featuring the novel concepts of socially necessary labour-time (never mentioned in Multitude’s discussion of value theory) and the distinction between labour and labour-power.\footnote{See Clarke 1991, pp. 96–103.} Second, they attribute to Marx ‘the maxim that in capitalist society labour is the source of all value and wealth’,\footnote{Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 144.} when, in fact, Marx is perfectly clear that

> labour is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power.\footnote{Marx 1970, p. 13.}

Related to this, they persistently confuse the concepts of value and wealth.\footnote{On which see Postone 1993, pp. 193–200.}

Furthermore, the blurring of the line between work time and non-work time as this is experienced by workers is not relevant to the production of value. Value is not produced by concrete labour, in its temporality. As Moishe Postone clarifies, value is
an objectification of abstract labor. As that which constitutes a general, ‘objective’
social mediation, abstract labor is neither expressed in terms of the objectifications
of particular concrete labors nor measured by their quantity.

The value magnitudes of commodities are determined by the socially necessary
labour-time necessary to produce them. This

expresses a quasi-objective social necessity with which the producers are
confronted. It is the temporal dimension of the abstract domination that
characterizes the structures of alienated social relations in capitalism.\(^\text{129}\)

Thus Hardt and Negri’s argument depends on both a faulty premise and
theoretical confusion about the relationship between concrete labour, abstract
labour and value. It does not offer any compelling reason to question the
belief that value continues to regulate the global economy. Unfortunately for
humanity and nature, the alienated structure of social mediation that Marx
theorised as value does still dominate the world (though not in some pure and
perfect form, since the tyranny of value is subject to partial negations arising
from state activity, the concentration and centralisation of capital, and class
struggle). Hardt and Negri’s contention that it does not is, like their other
alleged consequences of the hegemony of immaterial labour, an indictment of
their theory of contemporary society.

**In conclusion: a kangaroo and the multitude**

It is clear, then, that Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour is deeply
flawed. In its vitalist biopolitical sense, immaterial labour is an all-encompassing
concept whose alleged historical ascendancy is poorly explained and which
leaves no room for making important distinctions between production at
different levels of abstraction and in different social forms. In its more delimited
sense of labour producing a certain kind of products – a problematic way of
identifying a qualitatively-distinct mode of labour – immaterial labour’s
essential characteristics continue to be traits associated with workers whose
labour is highly intellectual or linguistic in nature, yet these are only a small
fraction of the people who are lumped together in Hardt and Negri’s category.
The claim that immaterial production is increasingly outside of capital is, with
the partial exception of creative/originating workers with non-employee legal
status, little more than an example of wishful thinking. Furthermore, the

---

\(^{129}\) Postone 1993, pp. 188–9, 191.
autonomist habit of theorising in terms of a stylised singular worker or figure of labour (craft, mass, socialised, immaterial) homogenises the complex heterogeneity of working-class formations. Rather than theorising wage-labour as a tendentially world-historical social form of labour and exploring the diverse unfree and ‘free’ concrete arrangements in which it always exists, Hardt and Negri erroneously posit the hegemony of a self-configuring socio-technical figure of labour in each historical era of capitalism. The account of contemporary capitalism in which the concept of immaterial labour is embedded reproduces a series of commonly-held but misleading notions about the ‘service economy’ and offers very little insight about the different kinds of paid work that happen under that label. The real-world consequences of immaterial labour that they discuss are fanciful, and their revision of value theory is misguided and confused. As a whole, what Hardt and Negri write on work and society brings to mind E.P. Thompson’s charge that Althusser’s theory suffered from ‘The Kangaroo Factor’:

this kind of idealism, since it prohibits any actual empirical engagements with social reality, is delivered, bound and gagged, into the hands of the most vulgar empiricism…[and so] the theoretical practitioner proceeds in gigantic bounds through the conceptual elements, with the most gracious curvatures of thought; and while he is bounding he performs the most elegant acrobatic twirls and he paws the air with sublime gestures. But every so often (since the law of gravity cannot be disregarded for ever) he comes down: bump! But he does not linger on this assumption, sniff it, taste the grass. Hop! He is off into the air again.130

Regrettably, Hardt and Negri are far from the only contemporary scholars who eschew the method of developing theory through a careful process of abstracting from studies of concrete social realities, using concepts that are themselves socio-historically grounded, in favour of the method of the kangaroo.

This critique of Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour also has a clear implication for their theory of the multitude. For Hardt and Negri, it is immaterial labour that through

the becoming common of singular forms of labor, the singularity of local human contexts in a common global anthropology, and the common condition of poverty and productivity

establishes ‘the conditions of possibility for the formation of the multitude’,131 which, for them, is the real self-identical subject-object of universal history.132

132. I owe this observation to Bryan Smyth (personal correspondence).
Even if this belief grounded in the hegemony of immaterial labour as they conceive it could be sustained, Hardt and Negri could with justice be accused of mistakenly looking to socio-economic developments to create a new political subject of social emancipation, in a manner which neglects the immense labour of unification through self-organisation in paid workplaces, communities and households and the specifically political challenge of winning mass support for a liberatory project, both of which are arguably required to forge such a subject. But, these problems aside, it is evident on the basis of the critique developed in this article that immaterial labour cannot perform the function assigned to it by Hardt and Negri. This leaves the philosophical and political theory of the multitude, whose defects have been cogently specified by Daniel Bensaïd, without the socio-economic foundation that they wish to give it.

References


McNally, David 2002, Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring.


Editorial Introduction

Peter Thomas
Department of Political Science, Universiteit van Amsterdam
thomas_p_au@yahoo.com.au

Abstract
Historical Materialism has previously published a significant number of studies from the contemporary ‘Marx Renaissance’. Roberto Finelli’s intervention into the debate over Chris Arthur’s The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital provides an opportunity to consider the international reverberations of this movement and its political presuppositions and consequences. Working in a very different tradition of Marxism, Finelli’s interpretation of Marx has decisive similarities with Arthur’s reading of the importance of Hegel’s Logic for the conceptual structure of Capital. Yet whereas Arthur argues for a ‘direct homology’, Finelli proposes a heuristic ‘analogy’. The different conclusions reached by the two theorists reflect different orientations, both theoretical and political. Comparison to theses of the Italian workerist tradition and other contemporary readings of Marx suggest that these differences are best comprehended in a political rather than solely intellectual register. Despite their differences, these various research projects are in agreement regarding the necessity of deriving concrete strategies for the contemporary socialist movement from theoretical debate.

Keywords
Marx Renaissance, interpretations of ‘Capital’, Della Volpeanism, the ‘new Hegel’, living labour

One hundred and fifty years after the compilation of the notebooks that were only much later published as the Grundrisse, and one hundred and forty years after the appearance of the first edition of Capital, Volume I, the study of Marx’s incomplete theoretical project still arouses vigorous and productive debates. The continuing publication of the German critical edition of the works of Marx and Engels (MEGA) – including many previously unpublished texts, the vast majority of which still remain unavailable in English – has provided new material for re-opening old debates and initiating new ones. Above all, however, it has been the development of the post-1989 political conjuncture – intersected by the experiences of the Zapatistas, Seattle, 9/11, the largest international antiwar mobilisation in world history and continuing resistance to neoliberalism – that has prompted a return to Marx’s texts, as
resources of renewal for a revolutionary Marxist theory freed from compromises with the experience of Stalinism. The last decade has seen the appearance of a number of significant contributions to the elaboration and/or reconstruction of the critique of political economy, in various national-linguistic Marxist cultures: the studies of Enrique Dussel in Latin America, Jacques Bidet in France, Wolfgang-Fritz Haug and Michael Heinrich in Germany, Geert Reuten in the Netherlands and Riccardo Bellofiore in Italy (to cite only a few prominent examples) can be regarded as among the first offerings of a contemporary renaissance of studies of Marx and, in particular, of the critique of political economy.

Over the last decade, *Historical Materialism* has published studies of different aspects of the work of Marx’s ‘maturity’ from a wide range of theoretical and political perspectives. These studies have ranged from the strictly philological and interpretative to the more exploratory and reconstructive. All have been united in the conviction that it is only by attempting to inherit the research programme bequeathed to us by Marx, even with its uncertainties and problems, that we will be able to elaborate a systematic and totalising critique adequate for an anticapitalist and, above all, socialist politics today. Alongside these ongoing debates in the pages of the journal, a parallel publication programme in the *Historical Materialism* book series (published by Brill) has presented translations of important works previously unavailable in English (e.g. Maksakovsky’s *The Capitalist Cycle*, or more recently, Bidet’s *Exploring Marx’s ‘Capital’*). Both the journal and book series will continue to promote actively the diffusion of work originating outside the Anglophone world, in accordance with *Historical Materialism’s* declared intention to promote a return to Marxism’s traditions of cosmopolitan debate. We believe that a more regular exchange between theorists working in different national traditions and linguistic zones will prevent some of the needless duplication or repetition that has arguably characterised theoretical debates in different Marxist cultures in the past, while the cross-fertilisation of perspectives from distinct intellectual and political traditions constitutes one of the most powerful resources for the revitalisation of Marxism as a consciously internationalist and integral conception of the world.

HM 13.2 carried a symposium debating Chris Arthur’s *The New Dialectic and Marx’s ‘Capital’* (*HM* Book Series, 2002). Building upon work in value theory previously published in the journal, this symposium included responses from such renowned value theorists and Marx scholars as Albritton, Bidet, Callinicos, Hunt, Kincaid, and Murray. As one might have expected, many of these contributions took issue with the foundational thesis of the research project presented in Arthur’s book: namely, that there exists an homology
between the structure of the categories in Hegel’s *Logic* and the structure of categories deployed by Marx in *Capital*. According to Arthur, it was precisely by attending to such a purportedly ‘idealist’ thinker – and not by peremptorily ‘settling accounts’ with his erstwhile ‘philosophical conscience’ or by means of an ‘epistemological break’ – that Marx was able to unravel the mystery of the mode of being of capitalism as a “spiritualisation” of material interchange and practical activity. While post-Althusserian debates have grown accustomed to the notion that Marx continued to draw upon Hegel more than the prior vulgate had allowed, it was the extent of Arthur’s proposal – namely, that Marx not only ‘flirted’ with the categories developed by the theorist of Absolute Spirit, but that there existed a ‘direct homology’ between these categories and those used by Marx in his critique of capitalist political economy, in its dual sense as ideology and mode of production – that prompted disagreements from a variety of perspectives.

In this issue, we continue the debate with a contribution by Roberto Finelli. Currently full professor at the University of Bari and regular contributor to some of the leading Italian Marxist journals (such as *Critica Marxista*), Finelli is one of the most well known Marxist scholars and philosophers in contemporary Italy. Staunch critic of the Della Volpean initiative in Italian Marxism, with significant references also to Labriola, Gramsci and, further afield, Althusser, Finelli’s thought has developed through engagement with a number of intellectual traditions. He has previously published major studies on German idealism and in particular the development of the dialectic in the Hegel’s thought, culminating in 1996 in the book-length study *Mito e critica delle forme. La giovinezza di Hegel (1770–1801)*. Alongside the work of his fellow Italian Domenico Losurdo, Finelli has made an important contribution to the ‘new Hegel’ that has been emerging over the last decades. This research has emphasised the necessity of situating Hegel’s thought in its historical context and a close attention to the letter of his text, rather than received preconceptions derived from overdetermined interpretative traditions. The result, in Losurdo’s case, has been an image of a Hegel radically at odds with the – lamentably – still influential caricature of a reactionary pantheist or even ‘totalitarian’ thinker, according to the Popperian-Arendtian slander. In Finelli’s work, it has led to an emphasis upon the Hegelian notion of *Geist* as a dynamism of alterity that is not easily reconciled with either idealism or materialism as traditionally conceived. Another field of research is represented by the numerous studies Finelli has dedicated to psychoanalysis, in particular

---

to Freud. Here, Finelli has aimed to elaborate of a theory of the unconscious in terms irreducible to those of identity and contradiction characteristic of discursive-logical thought and, building upon the emphasis on relationality of his Hegel studies, incompatible with the essentialism of traditional philosophical anthropology.

All of these concerns are integrated into Finelli’s own distinctive conception of the philosophical presuppositions and political consequences of Marx’s thought, signalled by Cristina Corradi in her recent *Storia dei marxismi italiani* as among the most original readings of Marx to have emerged in Italy in the post-WWII period. *Astrazione e dialettica dal romanticismo al capitalismo. Saggio su Marx [Abstraction and Dialectics from Romanticism to Capitalism. Essay on Marx]* (1987) developed a novel conceptual and interpretative matrix that in many respects can be read as a detailed critique of the aporiai of Della Volpeanism, particularly as it developed into the impasse of Colletti’s ‘return to Kant’ and subsequent exit from Marxism. Conceptually, this matrix was defined by the concepts of ‘real abstraction’ and the ‘circle of presupposed/posted [il circolo del presupposto-posto]’ as the essential terms of Marx’s critique of political economy. In terms of interpretation, Finelli opposed a long tradition, both Marxist and otherwise, by positing the process of abstraction-emptying out [svuotamento] of the concrete as the central tension of the Marxist dialectic, rather than that of opposition-contradiction. The result was a presentation of Marx’s *magnum opus* as an analysis of capital as the total subject of modernity, capable of absorbing and redefining all social relations on the basis of its own expansive logic.

More recently, Finelli has published *Un parricidio mancato. Hegel e il giovane Marx* [*A Failed Parricide: Hegel and the Young Marx*] (2004). This is first in a planned two-volume research project that aims to offer a more concrete and conceptually precise presentation of theses sketched out in the earlier volume. The fundamental thesis of this study is that the young Marx’s attempt to ‘kill’ his ‘philosophical father’ Hegel failed. Marx’s own claims and those of the materialist conception of history notwithstanding, Finelli argues that Marx’s thought remained determined by an idealist problematic, structurally subaltern to that of Hegel, until at least the period of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. The young Marx, according to this reading, remained a theorist of the unfolding via labour of the human species, a theorist of ‘substance becoming subject’ whose turn to Feuerbach, in order to escape the ‘anxiety of influence’ of his relationship to Hegel, produced an anthropology *more and not less* organicist and spiritualist than the Hegelian notion of the subject as that which becomes itself by means of its relations to the other. In effect, Finelli argues that the young Marx’s efforts resulted in an unwitting affirmation of the most
metaphysical elements of Hegel’s thought, while failing to comprehend the
critical dimensions hidden behind Hegel’s adoption of the only seemingly
theologically inspired category of \textit{Geist}.

Even when the Marx of \textit{Capital} finally succeeded in carrying out the
parricide desired in his youth, Finelli argues, it was not due to his arrival on
the continent of ‘materialism’ (as traditionally understood within Marxism),
whether dialectical or otherwise. On the contrary – and herein lies the novelty
of Finelli’s thesis, distinguishing it from other readings of a ‘break’ in Marx’s
intellectual development – Marx was able to overcome his youthful anxiety of
influence only by returning to it and transforming it into the foundation of
his ‘mature’ writings. Finelli’s analysis of Marx’s doctoral dissertation is decisive
for sketching out the presupposition of this hypothesis. While many
interpretations of this work have been content to focus upon selected passages
from the preparatory notebooks and their apparent ‘humanist’ valorisation of
a Promethean freedom, Finelli takes seriously Marx’s substantive theses
regarding the qualitative distinction between the thought of Democritus and
the later Epicurus and, in particular, Marx’s use of the eminently Hegelian
category of \textit{Formbestimmung} [determination of form] in order to understand
the fundamental coherence of Epicurus’s only apparently self-contradictory
positions. The theoretical matrix of this category, according to Finelli, was
subsequently repressed in the rush to construct a materialist conception of
history and communist politics that was all too anthropological; but, with the
‘return’ of the concept of \textit{Formbestimmung} from the \textit{Grundrisse} onwards, Marx
was able to produce a theory adequate for the comprehension of modern
society, according to a ‘dualism of two worlds: ‘‘World I’’, that sphere of
appearance and \textit{visibility}, animated by concrete things and individuals, and
‘‘World II’’, that sphere of essence and invisibility, animated only by the
abstraction of a wealth merely quantitative which, precisely because it is mere
quantity, is not able to have any other goal for its becoming than that of its
own quantitative accumulation’.

As the reader will have discerned, and as Finelli succinctly summarises in his
intervention, there are thus important similarities between Arthur’s and
Finelli’s reading of the structure of \textit{Capital}. Both stress Marx’s continuing
indebtedness to Hegel; both emphasise the conceptual rather than historicist-
teleological method of Marx’s presentation of simple commodity production;
both stress the importance for Marx of the notion and procedure of ‘formal
determination’; and both insist that capital and the capitalist society that
derives from it must be analysed in systematic terms, as a tendentially self-
affirming totality. Nevertheless, there are also profound differences between
their readings. Whereas Arthur posits an \textit{homology} between Hegel’s \textit{Logic} and
Capital (arguably running the risk of turning the latter into an applied version of the former). Finelli argues that there exists only an analogy. According to this proposition, Marx did make decisive conceptual advances over Hegel after all (and not merely those conceded by a change in the object of research); but these advances were made, in a certain sense, by turning Hegel against Hegel, or by taking Hegel's method seriously at precisely those moments when Hegel 'relapsed' into categories derived from the metaphysical tradition. From this perspective, the real problem (for Marx and Marxism) in Hegel's thought is not its supposed quasi-neo-Platonism (Spirit or Idea begetting the world). Rather, it is the problematic of 'speculation', from which Hegel was never able to escape, presupposing and producing a subject transparent to itself and thus tending towards a humanist anthropology unable to grasp the constitution of the subject of capital as a social relation. Whereas Hegel's speculative method proceeds with the annulment of the other as an 'absolute non-Being' that in turn annihilates its antagonist (a dialectic of opposition-contradiction), Marx’s two-world analysis, according to Finelli, acknowledges the full reality of both the concrete and abstract, but conceives of their constitution and antagonism in terms of the subsumption of the former by the latter, followed by a dissimulation in which the abstract presents itself within the concrete, as that which it is not (a dialectic of abstraction-emptying out).

Similarly, whereas many of Arthur’s other interlocutors have expressed concern about the extent to which he offers a ‘spiritualist’ reading of Capital, Finelli argues that Arthur does not go far enough in thinking through the conceptual consequences of a systematic account of the capitalist mode of production. As Callinicos noted in the first series of critiques, Arthur accepts a notion (also to be found in Dussel’s work, among many others) of ‘living labour’ that regards it as irreducible, fundamentally radically other and, ultimately, unable to be subsumed completely by capital: the 'Kantian moment' that Arthur admitted in his ‘Reply to Critics’ continues to inform his otherwise Hegelian orientation. Finelli objects that this position contradicts the commitment to think capital in formal terms, betraying a lingering suspicion that the ‘formal’ can never be accorded completely the ‘reality’ other traditions of thought have assigned to the ‘material’. For Finelli, instead,

The logic of totalisation… does not tolerate any presupposed [Vorgesetztes] element if it is not posited [Gesetztes], that is, produced and re-signified by the

---

2. Callinicos 2005, p. 53. For Arthur’s response, see Arthur 2005, the following in particular: ‘we cannot allow that capital’s dynamic creates the very substance of material production. There remains in it a “Kantian” moment, in that the things themselves are, in the last analysis, inaccessible to capital, hence its blind destruction of the environment’, p. 200.
The notion of a ‘Kantian’ moment that resists capital’s subsumption, in this perspective, would be merely one of the ruses or dissimulations of capital itself, one of the forms in which it presents its own subjectivity as the only possible objectivity.

Finally, Finelli’s suggestion that Arthur may here be ‘in some way’ still ‘influenced by’ the tradition of English empiricism, read in a certain fashion, allows us to highlight some of the political consequences of this debate, of the extent to which theoretical assumptions are shaped by and in turn shape concrete political strategies. For the fact that such a ‘substantialist’ reading of Capital has in reality emerged from a wide variety of intellectual traditions at a much greater distance from Hume suggests that something more is at stake here than merely the influence of the history of philosophy on contemporary Marxist theory. Apart from Dussel’s work (strongly influenced by a reading of Schelling, on the one hand, and, above all, the experience of Latin-American liberation theology, on the other) and Della Volpeanism’s anti-historicism, one could also refer to another Italian tradition whose presuppositions have found a wide echo in the alterglobalisation movement – namely, operaismo. Negri’s valorisation of the creativity of ‘living labour’ against the morbid parasitism of capital, in particular, posits an irreducible ontological priority of labour over capital (in this, he continues the focus of early operaisti such as Panzieri or Tronti, whatever their other disagreements). The political consequences of this reading run from an earlier ‘refusal of labour’ through to contemporary calls for ‘Exodus’ – a strategy of ‘delinking’ within the ‘metropolis’.

Arthur’s and Finelli’s attempts to analyse the expansive dimensions of capitalist subsumption provide some reasons why such a strategy may underestimate capital’s capacity to repropose itself, as a principle of modern socialisation and subjectification whose idealist logic is yet to be negated in practical terms. At the same time, both insist upon the necessity of working to define what Finelli describes . . . as a ‘social subject . . . with a different economic and life project’, or what Arthur’s terms a ‘counter-subject’, currently ‘virtually present, if empirically negated’.3 The difference between their proposals – Arthur focusing upon capital’s ideality as supplementary to labour, whose primacy provides a permanent basis for working-class political organisation, Finelli insisting that it is only within what he terms the ‘postmodern’ that social relations of force adequate for a new mode of social organisation will

emerge – is overdetermined by a more fundamental agreement: namely, that the attempt to register the contemporary dominance of capital in theoretical terms, far from leading to a Frankfurtian pathos or sterile academicism, can and should contribute to determining the realistic bases for a socialist politics today.

References

Abstraction versus Contradiction: Observations on Chris Arthur's The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'

Roberto Finelli
Dipartimento di Scienze Filosofiche, Università degli Studi di Bari
r.finelli@filosofia.uniba.it

Abstract
This intervention concerns the different statute of abstraction in Marx's work. By means of a critical confrontation with Chris Arthur's work, Finelli presents his thesis of the presence of a double theory and function of abstraction in Marx's work. In the early Marx, until the German Ideology, abstraction is, in accordance with the traditional meaning of this term, a product of the mind, an unreal spectre. More exactly, it consists in negating the common essence belonging to labouring humanity and projecting it, as alienated universal, into the idea of philosophy, into the state of politics and into the money of the market. In the later Marx, the nature of abstraction is, rather than mental, practical. It is directly related to the quantity without quality of capitalist labour, and it is the product of the systemic connection of machines to labour-power. In contrast to Arthur, Finelli maintains that practical abstraction in the Marx of Capital is not located in the zone of exchange and the market, where there is the mediation of money. On the contrary, it is located in the zone of production, which, for Marx, is a social ensemble not mediated by money but by relations of technological domination.

Keywords
abstraction, formal determination, presupposed-posed, opposition-contradiction, abstraction-emptying out, dissimulation.

1. Die Formbestimmung: a new category of a new Marxism

'From the simple to the complex': this motto synthesises the evolutionism with which Engels conceived his vision of history and the method of knowledge that follows from it. Chris Arthur correctly defines this as a 'linear' typology, because history, for Engels, is constituted on the basis of something elementary which, in the course of different social epochs, is progressively modified and rendered more complex, but without ever being annulled and negated, despite development occurring through dialectical contradictions. It is easy to hear the echo of the evolution dear to positivism and of an empiricist epistemology linked to the natural sciences in this historicist continuity. For Engels, one of
its clearest examples is to be found, as we know, in the law of value. In his opinion, its validity as measure of exchange reigns from the natural peasant economies of primitive communities until the fifteenth century. It is valid, that is, for that entire great historical period during which – since the worker was proprietor of the means of production, and given the very minor scale of production and commerce – anyone had direct experience of the time of necessary labour, often while making a product, as a (single and simple) element, themselves. This historical period of ‘simple commodity production’ in which the measure of value is visibly the time of labour – since ‘[L]abour and labour alone: to replace tools, to produce raw material, and to process it’ is seen and perceived as a factor of production¹ – progressively gives way, with the establishment of the capitalist economy, to money as the decisive measure and calculus of the value of commodities.² Thus we know that, for Engels, commodity→value→labour→money→capital is an historical progression which is mirrored in the logical progression, of the same order with which Marx supposedly constructed Capital by employing a simplistically materialist gnoseology, based on the reflection of the real in the logical-mental. Thus the expository structure of Marx’s Capital, its logical method, is ‘nothing else but the historical method, only stripped from disturbing fortuities’.³

Fortunately, Arthur is very acute on this point. In order to understand Marx and his mature work, it is necessary to dismiss all of this from the outset. It is necessary to break the coupling of Marx and Engels inherited from the official iconography and give them back all of the theoretical autonomy that is due to them. That is, we need to go beyond those interpretations (which are, in my opinion at any rate, very naive) that have claimed that the doctrine of historical materialism was a joint production. In fact, the system of exposition of Capital – this is the crucial point – is not diachronic, as Engels claims, but, rather, synchronic; in the words of Arthur, it is not ‘linear’, but ‘systematic’. In my words, I would say that the time of Marx’s Capital, the time of exposition and of the succession of its chapters, is not expressed – in terms of spatial

2. ‘The most important and most incisive advance was the transition to metallic money, the consequence of which, however, was that the determination of value by labour-time was no longer visible upon the surface of commodity exchange. From the practical point of view, money became the decisive measure of value…. In a word: the Marxian law of value holds generally… for the whole period of simple commodity production – that is, up to the time when the latter suffers a modification through the appearance of the capitalist form of production…. Thus, the Marxian law of value has general economic validity for a period lasting from the beginning of exchange, which transforms products into commodities, down to the 15th century of the present era’ (Engels 1998, pp. 881–2).
representation – by means of the symbol of a chain and the succession of its links, the one after the other, but, rather, by means of the figure of a sphere and of its double movement, centripetal and centrifugal; the first which leads from the superficial to the internal and the second which goes from the internal back to the superficial, re-read and re-signified on the basis of the order and the arrangement of the internal.

Arthur has understood well that Marx’s *Capital* defines a socio-historical reality conceived as a totality, because, in capitalism, there is a single dominant factor, a single Subject that pervades, organises and orients all of reality, articulating and connecting it according to its needs. And, as Lukács taught us in *History and Class Consciousness* (when he wrote and thought before his capitulation *oborto collo* to the Marxism of the State), a scientific practice that begins with the category of totality must necessarily refer to Hegel. Arthur thus correctly argues that Marx’s model in *Capital* is Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (it is also the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in my opinion). In particular, he argues that:

i) The transition in the first chapters of *Capital* is not that historical transition from simple commodity production to capitalist production; rather, it is that of the transition, in the actuality of contemporary society, from the most evident sphere of exchange and of the commerce of goods to the more hidden sphere of the production of capital;

ii) Capital as ‘self-valorising value’ is the total subject of modernity, which has as its goal only its own infinite growth.

iii) Since a totality cannot be given and exhausted in a material and particular content, it follows that what is valid in the system of capital as a totality is *form* or the *determination of form*. Formal determination, for Marx, expresses the functions that come from the self-reproductive logic of the capitalist totality, that is, the totality of social relations necessary for the production and reproduction of capital. These, precisely because they are relations, cannot ever be expressed by something material and finite, but organise and give sense to every material and finite content. It is, therefore, fundamental, in order to comprehend Marx’s critique of political economy, to distinguish the ‘formal determination’ from the ‘material determination’.

iv) Capital is a complex of formal determinations abstracted from the heterogeneity of commodities and the concreteness of the different labour processes. It produces a single homogenous product, constituted by its own self-valorisation. Due to the fact that it is constituted by abstractions, it is homologous to the Idea of Hegel and articulates its development exactly like Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. 
v) Just as in Hegel’s *Logic*, the initial categories are not sufficiently determined and cannot explain themselves, thus the categories or initial determinations of form of Marx’s *Capital* must be explained by introducing subsequent and successive categories. After all, a totality cannot ever exhaust itself in the determinations of form with which it initially appears and is presented to the most immediate human experience. The initial categories become those successive categories by means of their internal dialectic, that is by means of the dialectic of their contradiction, because they do not succeed in coinciding with themselves and reproducing themselves. Thus the value-form and labour-value, as a quantity of abstract and socially-necessary labour, can be adequately comprehended only with the transition from circulation to production, in the confrontation with and in the relation between capital and labour-power, when capital itself penetrates, with real subsumption, the whole process of production and living labour counts only as a supply of *working time*.

The fundamental reason why I am in agreement with Chris Arthur is that he has understood the extent to which *Capital* is not a *materialist* text, as it has generally always been interpreted (except for the structuralist exaggeration of Althusser), and how much it is instead a ‘spiritualist [spiritualistico]’ text: in the sense that *die Formbestimmung* is, for Marx, the true subject of modern history and capitalist society.4 *Formal determination*, in as much as it concerns a form, is ‘invisible’, something not directly perceptible, unlike ‘material determination’. Among other things, it should be added that the concept of *formal determination* appears only at the beginning of Marx’s work, in his doctoral dissertation (*The Difference between the Philosophy of Nature of Democritus and Epicurus*), and later disappears, cancelled by the weight of historical materialism and by the claim of Marx and Engels to explain everything on the basis of matter and material production. The concept of *Formbestimmung* re-appears in Marx’s writings only with the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, when the object of research obliges Marx, in spite of himself, to eclipse historical materialism and to confront a system organised by a principle of totality and of totalisation, which has very little to do with matter.

And yet, in my opinion, Chris Arthur does not truly tackle the fundamental questions. He does not completely understand how much, for Marx, precisely according to the Hegelian lesson, the formal principle which is the subject of *Capital* is really capable of being a principle of totalisation, and therefore of

---

4. [Translator’s note: the adjective ‘spiritualistico’ in this context derives from the established Italian translation of Hegel’s *Geist* with *Spirito*, both of which are only inaccurately rendered into English with *spirit*.]
pervading and organising effectively, fundamentally, all of reality with its need for production and reproduction. Arthur affirms that, in some respects, matter, the concrete, is nevertheless irreducible to the abstract. That is the case with abstract labour, the substance of value, which, being precisely a Formbestimmung, a social determination, cannot ever be incarnated in a concrete labour, in a particular physical labour.

Arthur affirms that, in some respects, matter, the concrete, is nevertheless irreducible to the abstract. That is the case with abstract labour, the substance of value, which, being precisely a Formbestimmung, a social determination, cannot ever be incarnated in a concrete labour, in a particular physical labour.

It is a mistake is to identify the abstract labour that is the substance of value with the supposedly ‘abstract’ character of the modern labour process in its physical form.5

The different concrete labours can come closer, in the simplification and in the standardisation of their performances to the ‘content’ of the concept of ‘abstract labour’…. But even the simplest motion still has some quality, it can never be abstraction as such.6

It seems to me, that is, that Arthur’s reasoning on the abstract – on the abstract as formal determination – continues to be in some way influenced by the tradition of English empiricism, according to which an abstraction cannot ever be completely real. For this position, it is a case forever, in capitalism, of a struggle and of a contradiction between subjects and the world of the concrete, on the one side, and the Subject and the world of the abstract, on the other.

I believe, instead, that, in Marx’s Capital, the relationship of abstract-concrete is not to be read in the manner of opposition-contradiction. According to this perspective, the abstract would be an hypostasis which dominates the concrete and particular subjects from the exterior and from on high, violating them and forcing them to follow its logic. Such a way of conceiving that nexus returns us to a Marxism of contradiction whose horizon of meaning is humanist and anthropocentric. The Marxism of contradiction (which is the Marxism of historical materialism) is founded upon the presupposition in historical and social activity of a subject very different from the subjectivity of Capital. It begins with the humanistic subject, proletariat or working class, presupposed in history as collective human subject, which constantly reproduces such a collectivity by means of labour, and is able to re-appropriate such collectivity for itself, subtracting it from the alienation to which it is submitted by the private relations of property and of distribution of wealth. In short, the

---

Marxism of contradiction is based on the ontological primacy of the labouring subject as concrete collective agent, and on the irreducible opposition between the (taken-for-granted) communitarianism of the productive forces and the private restriction of the relations of production.

2. The circle of presupposed-posed and the dialectic of emptying-out

The systematic logic that Chris Arthur himself valorises, however, does not tolerate the existence of presupposed elements. If they persist in some measure also in a theoretical systematic plan, they refer to merely dogmatic assumptions, of a metaphysical or moralistic nature (like precisely that of the communitarian nature of *homo faber*, or, in the words of the young Marx, of the ‘menschliches Gemeinwesen’). Systemic logic is instead a logic of the presupposed-posed, in which *Capital* is the totalising subject that progressively rewrites in its accumulative logic the entire pre-existing external world on both the historical and the natural levels. The logic of totalisation, in fact, does not tolerate any presupposed [Vorgesetztes] element if it is not posited [Gesetztes], that is, produced and re-signified by the totalising subject.

For these reasons, I believe that the nexus ‘abstract-concrete’ in the Marx of *Capital* – but certainly more so in the Marx of the *Grundrisse* – must not be read through the category of opposition-contradiction, but rather, through that of abstraction-emptying out [svuotamento]: in the specific sense that the abstract occupies and itself invades the concrete, filling it according to the exigencies of its expansive-reproductive logic. At the same time, however, it leaves it a semblance, an exterior surface of concreteness. This new interpretative paradigm needs to be drawn out from Marx’s texts. It posits the abstract and the concrete in connection not through contradiction but through abstraction – emptying-out. Among other things, it makes Marxism very relevant for interpreting postmodernity, because it allows us to understand clearly how, under the superficialisation-externalisation of the world that characterises so-called postmodernity, there is fundamentally a deepening, at the more interior level of reality and of society, of abstract wealth and its accumulation.

I believe that postmodern society should be interpreted, not as rupture and discontinuity, but, rather, as the deepening and the more complete realisation of modern society. It is completed by means of the extension and the unfolding on the part of the subject constituted by impersonal and abstract wealth into all of the collective and private environments of life: a colonisation which is dissimulated and negated through an hysterical over-determination of the surface which, coloured and embellished, always has to display the contrary of
that which it is. It is precisely in this nexus of emptying-out–concealment–dissimulation (and not in contradiction, which always refers to a presupposed subject) that the true function of dialectical negation must be identified. This occurs in the case of postmodern mental-informational labour, in which, given that it is essentially information which is worked on, the active and creative participation of subjectivity is valorised and emphasised to the maximum, with all of the individuality of its psychic resources; while the elaboration of information refers in reality to the function of choosing between alternatives already preconstituted and predetermined, obeying programmes and work plans already conceived and signified by others, and placed in that great artificial brain external to our mind that is the informational machine.

Expressed in other terms, this is the way real abstraction presents itself, as mental labour that is merely discursive-calculative and devoid of intentionality or personal appropriation, appearing as dissimulated in its superficial appearance, turned upside down into its opposite of creative and personalised labour.

Properly seen, the intensification of the production of capital, in an ever-greater production of real abstraction, is therefore accompanied by an effect of invisibility: more exactly, a game of overturning of opposites, a dialectic of essence and appearance, for which real abstraction, even though it becomes ever more real and present, does not appear, paradoxically, as the subject of the economic process. Instead, machines, labour and human knowledge appear as its protagonists, liberated from and less constrained by effort than has ever occurred in the history of humanity. It is a dissimulation of the abstract in the concrete that occurs through an overdetermination of the concrete; that is, through the taking up by the concrete of a dynamic, a value, an energy which does not derive from the concrete but which, nevertheless, coincides with its appearance and its activity. This is the fetishism of the concrete in as much as it is the invisibility of mediation, of the relations which establish the concrete, which give expression to it and which make it move in determinate ways. And such a process of the emptying-out of the interior and the intensification of visibility of the exterior is, as has been said, completely ascribable to the nature of abstraction and to its intrinsic extra-sensoriality and invisibility. It is necessary, in short, to force Marx, but not in the sense of placing words and theoretical categories in his mouth which are not his own; rather, in the sense of producing conflict in the system of social science which he constructs by means of real abstraction and the circle of the presupposed-posed, as well as the reflexive, methodological and epistemological conscience which Marx himself possesses. It is also necessary to affirm resolutely that the historical subject posited by Marx is a non-material subject, or, rather, an invisible subject. Nor is it perceptible except through its effects, how it distorts and manipulates
the concrete world. We cannot fail, that is, to refute the materialist conception of history of the same Marx, as an all-too-general theory of history, which moves from a presupposed subject \(\textit{homo faber}\) and which claims to affirm, with the simplicity of the colic-constructivist metaphor of structure and superstructure, the predominance of economic relations in all societies hitherto. But we also need to argue, inversely, that the primacy of economic relations in the determination of all these aspects of social life is valid only in modern society – and maximally in postmodern society – inasmuch as only capital is a totalitarianistic subject of socialisation.

Furthermore, the emptying-out of the concrete on the part of the abstract and the simulacrum-effect\(^7\) which follows from it belongs not only to the sphere of production but, ever more, to that of consumption too. Leaving behind an anthropology of precarious survival, the quantitative multiplication of commodities and an ever-more widespread accessibility to them has been accompanied, in the capitalist intensification of postmodernity, by their progressive, qualitative drying-up. Food commodities, for example – realising on the level of orality (in the Freudian sense) that which the theoreticians of the Frankfurt school had already perceived and comprehended fifty years ago regarding the loss of the ‘aura’ – are becoming ever more tasteless and lacking in quality: like the chickens sold in supermarkets that taste like rubber, like the different species of fish reduced to uniformity more by the chemical food with which they are fed than by Linnaean taxonomy, or like the fruit and vegetables, removed from the alternation of the seasons and assigned to the time-without-time of cultivation in greenhouses; in short, like all the commodities destined for mass consumption, whose use is – without taste and sensuous intensity – merely repetitive, essentially replaceable, designed not to secure satisfaction and identity for the people who consume them, but to secure the capitalist wealth which is incorporated in them and is accumulated by means of them. The sphere of consumption, of that zone which once was still defined as private, thus experiences ever more the decline of feeling, of taste, of sensual emotion, giving way to boredom, to insignificance and quantitative indifference. The consumption of those fictions or soap-operas that make up almost all television broadcasts, in their ever-more marked contempt for any principle of reality and of every verisimilar connection of cause and effect – even in their superficial brilliance and their apparent production of meaning – testify well enough to the appearance without content of the world of commodities. For the commodities of mass consumption, goods of quantity

\(^7\). Regarding the culture of the simulacrum, it is impossible not to consider Jameson’s \textit{Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}. See Jameson 1991.
without quality nevertheless need to have a colour, a superficial appearance in order to strike and seduce that ideological and deceitful organ par excellence which is our eye, in as much as we are forced to be mass consumers. The frivolous colouring of the form of commodities is accompanied therefore by a human subject ever more emptied of affectivity and emotion; even more so the more mass consumption seems finally to realise the egalitarian and progressive principles of democracy.

3. The non-superimposability of the *Science of Logic* and *Capital*

All of what has been said up to now leads therefore to a connection between Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and Marx’s *Capital* different from that proposed by Arthur. As we have seen, Arthur insists on the permanence and the efficacy of contradiction. My hypothesis is, instead, that the analogy between Hegel and Marx is to be found in the fact that both begin from an *ontological cleavage*, a *dualism* in reality, and that both seek progressively to find the place of mediation and unification of this dualism. For Hegel, the cleavage opens between *Being* and *Nothingness*; all the subsequent transitions aim to find the place of their synthesis. For Marx, the cleavage in the world of commodities is given between *usability* and *exchangeability*; he, too, seeks a progressive unification between the world of the concrete and the world of the abstract. The place of unification is in production where individual labour-power supplies only abstract labour and where only the composition of abstract labours under capitalist direction produces concrete use-values. It is only in production that the abstraction of exchange-value becomes ‘practically true’, as Marx says, because the abstract is the result of the real praxis of a multitude of individuals. But this signifies that, in the sphere of circulation, *pace* Arthur, exchange-value is only in the background, because what appears in the foreground are individuals and commodities as use-values to be exchanged.

---

8. Consider in this respect Marx’s well-known affirmation from the ‘Introduction’ to the *Grundrisse* (Notebook M): ‘Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general…. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour”, “labour as such”, labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society’ (Marx 1993, p. 106).
Exchange-value appears as a mere means which must serve the primary goal: individual consumption. It is for this reason that exchange-value is external to use-value: \textit{when there is one there is not the other}.

Thus, as occurs in the first book of Hegel’s \textit{Logic} (the sphere of \textit{Being}), for Marx too, the different determinations of reality in the sphere of circulation do not mediate one another and are not synthesised with one another but \textit{leap}, each passing into the other, because precisely where there is the one there is not the other.\footnote{See Léonard 1974, pp. 37–40.} Only with abstract production does there emerge a subject that is genuinely real, in as much as it is internalised in the activity of individuals. And there, through the abstract activity of the many, the concrete is produced (sphere of mediation or of the concept in Hegel). Further, we return, departing from this new subject which is capital, to read the sphere of the superficial, where the subjects seem to be things and individuals (sphere of essence in Hegel, where profundity is dissimulated in the superficial).

But, here, the analogy between Marx and Hegel stops. Hegel’s \textit{Logic}, in fact, operates by means of the power of negation-contradiction: beginning with \textit{Being} which, through its initial indeterminateness, \textit{negates} itself and turns into \textit{nothingness}, into \textit{absolute negation}; this then becomes the dynamic factor of every subsequent transition of categories. In my view, it is that initial transition that Hegel does not succeed in making, because he falls back on hypostasised categories of ancient metaphysics, like those, precisely, of \textit{Being} or of absolute non-\textit{Being}. Marx’s \textit{Capital}, on the other hand, moves from the co-presence of the two levels of \textit{usability} and \textit{exchangeability}, which do not have anything to do with absolute \textit{nothingness}. Their field of relation refers to a connection of the concrete to the abstract, which, in production, manages to realise itself as interpenetration through the colonisation and emptying-out of the concrete. Therefore, beyond the analogy of a process of totalisation which, from the initial fissure between two principles of reality needs to posit itself as a single principle-subject, the difference between the theoretical paradigms of Marx and Hegel is profound and substantial: the one is based on the power of generalisation and universalisation of the ‘negative’, the other on the power of universalisation of the ‘abstract’.

In opposition to Arthur, I believe that the form of value in Marx is social \textit{from the beginning} (but ‘social’ in a strong sense), because the substance of value is already \textit{social} that \textit{accumulation and deposit} of abstract labour, which is the allocation of a labour-power managed and signified in capitalist terms. I believe, that is, that to refute the historical existence of a simple mercantile society means to refute the possibility of the single individual ever being a
protagonist of choices and personal actions in capitalism. For this reason, it is
the relation of domination in production, where there is not mediation and
exchange, which founds and explains what further happens in the democratic
sphere of circulation, where there is mediation and exchange. It is surplus-value,
that is, which explains value and not vice versa. It is production that explains
circulation and not vice versa. Otherwise, we go back to making the market
the location of meaning and decisions. We fall back into an individualistic
contractualism and we do not see that, on the contrary, the sphere of circulation
is the appearance of democracy which, under the pressure of the activity of
individual subjects, distorts the violence of the connections of classes in the
production of capital.

In short, it seems to me that Chris Arthur's valuable and intelligent
exposition stops short at a certain point and is not carried through to its logical
conclusions. Defending systematic logic, he correctly overturns the relation
between circulation and production. However, he does not allow the abstract,
the subject-capital, to make itself fully and sufficiently real, and attributes to it
a formal dimension which is certainly social but which, at the same time,
maintains strong characteristics of ideality. This is due to the fact that Arthur
wants to uphold, not an analogy, but a homology between the Science of Logic
and Capital, according to which 'Capital' is supposed to proceed and develop
like the 'Idea' in Hegel. But the reality of capital and its abstract wealth is
labour, the supply of labour by labour-power, unintentional and imbued with
meaning by the other; while the reality of the Idea of Hegel is a thought which
makes itself ever more conscious and present to itself.

4. A new definition of wealth

In conclusion: I maintain that today the critical truth of Karl Marx – not the
Marx who is the theoretician of 'productive man' and of his Prometheanism,
but, rather, the Marx who is the theoretician of the abstract and its force of
universalisation – is becoming ever more the objective reality and principle of
our social being. Rather, only today is it becoming true, in the fullness of its
diffusion and penetration into all of the areas of our individual and collective,
public and private, life. In other words, the theory of abstract labour and the
theory of the accumulation of wealth connected to it – which many critics
from diverse tendencies have held against Marx as a merely subjective
hypothesis, as a merely mental abstraction and generalisation – is being
confirmed, in the diffuse and generalised reality of everyone's life-praxis, as an
abstraction completely real rather than merely mental, because it is precisely
produced and reproduced by the effective behaviour of us all. The presupposition
of Marx returns – or, rather, begins – to be true in the light of a something like a memory of the future, according to my way of seeing things, because it is posited by the daily life-praxis of millions of human beings.

This vision of social being founded on the movements of a real abstraction intentionally proposes a totalitaristic theory of capital: or a vision of capital, which takes its cue from its being essentially quantitative, as a productive factor which is tendentially universalising and, due to that, oriented towards the manipulation-assimilation, according to its logic, of the whole anthropological-natural context within which its production is contained.

Only a social subject can attempt to oppose the impersonal force of such a subject of socialisation with a different economic and life-project, or, rather, only a totality of groups and social subjects in whose labours the demand for concreteness and individualisation is more potent than the seduction of forms of identity that are only abstractly those of the group-collective. Here, too, starting with certain anthropological simplifications and dogmatisms of the young Marx, the ethical-political tradition of the Left has generally remained subaltern to the domination of abstraction, proposing a subjectivity whose positive value of unity and community was exposed to another degree of inarticulation and symbiotic indifferentiation. The class, the proletariat, communism have been values and locations, ideal and real, conceived on the basis of the principle of abstract equality alone, or of an equality not vivified and made concrete by differences. It therefore ended up reflecting, in itself, precisely that same abstraction which it wanted to combat and eliminate.

An abstractly materialist anthropology begins from the primacy of the body and of material needs in the life of the human being, and, consequently, from the labour necessary to satisfy them. It refuses to traverse and mediate the material need with that immaterial need for the recognition of the most proper and incomparable identity of every human being by another, which traces the frontier of the new continent of human experience brought to light by psychoanalysis and only in part anticipated by the anthropology of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This was done by Marx in his rush to commit his parricide of Hegel, relying upon Feuerbach’s much less rich and articulated humanism and delivering to the tradition of communism a simplified and abstract anthropology, an anthropology of poverty based on the satisfaction, in the first instance, of the physical neediness of the human being. This had

10. In a different context, this expression appeared in a work by W. R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*. See Bion 1990.
11. On this point, see Finelli 2004.
12. Such an anthropology of poverty that links the evolution of human societies and history
the consequence that the theoreticians and bureaucrats of real communism deduced from it, namely, that a primary and irrenounceable condition of communism should be material equality; it did not matter if it was furnished through an authoritarian discipline and institutions like the party-state, because the realisation of that objective was supposed to have primed the development and maturation of the new society.

For such an anthropology of penury, linked to the primordial fears of humanity, it was obvious that the development of the productive forces (in other words, the acceptance of the capitalist organisation of labour) and the extremely rigid equality and conformism in the distribution of produced goods were indispensable principles of the very concept of communism. Now all that is over, and the very idea of communism and even the legality of using this term has been placed in doubt. To rethink communism means to conceive a new anthropology which starts from the users of the abstract, from the new labour-power, and from the consumers consumed by abstraction and the barbarisation of their conditions of life. It needs to be a new anthropology that knows how to articulate difference together with equality, the right of everyone to see their own strictly unrepeatable singularity recognised, respected and developed. It means therefore to try to propose a new definition of wealth and of the development of the productive forces, founded not only on the development of the capacity of production of goods but also on the liberation of the differences of individual subjectivities. That is, a definition of future wealth, centred not only on the production and distribution of use-values but also, and maybe essentially, on the production and distribution of possible forms of self-relation, conditioned and mediated by the relation of non-recognition or recognition by the other.

Regarding all of this, however, it will obviously be necessary to discuss at length, particularly if the discussion is assisted and solicited by innovative and thorough texts like that of Chris Arthur.

Translated by Peter Thomas

solely to physical-material needs is the other face of that omnipotent absoluteness of praxis which characterises the thought of the young and mature Marx, before the science of Capital, and which is expressed — in an only apparently contradictory way and exactly in the same context in which the materialist conception of history was formulated — in an absolutely negative evaluation of labour, inasmuch as it is an activity which degrades the essence, universal and free, of the human being to a mere instrument of existence, or of the reproduction of the individual and animal body. There remain very explicit examples of this ‘gentlemanly’ perspective incidental to the materialism of the first Marx — for whom it is really only the human being who undertakes free ‘practical-sensible activity’, liberated by labour — in the 1844 Manuscripts and The German Ideology. The Italian theorist Franco Rodano clearly understood well this gentlemanly inflection of Marx’s anthropology in his Lezioni di storia possibile. See Rodano 1986.
References


Political Marxism and Value Theory: Bridging the Gap between Theory and History

Samuel Knafo
Department of International Relations,
School of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies,
University of Sussex
S.Knafo@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract
This article proposes a reading of value theory firmly entrenched in the historicist framework of political Marxism; one which gives precedence to social relations and historical development over abstract logic and formal models. It argues that Marx’s theory of value can be read as elucidating how social norms are being unwittingly created under capitalism by contrast with precapitalist societies. The article is divided into two sections. The first examines the two main ways in which value is considered within Marxism and highlights the problems that can emerge when taking into account the issue of the specificity of capitalism. The second section offers an alternative formulation of value theory grounded in the notion of alienation. This leads to the conclusion that the idea that value is shaped by labour refers to a political fact about decisions concerning the organisation of the labour process, rather than an economic fact about the expenditure of labour in the process of production. Value reflects the class struggles over the labour process and the norms that govern social life, rather than an embodied quantity of socially necessary labour-time expended within the labour process.

Keywords
political Marxism; value; social relations; labour; alienation

Introduction
One of the central criticisms addressed to political Marxists such as Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood has been the absence of the labour theory of value in their work. This has been taken to represent a weakness because the

1. I would like to thank Rob Albritton, Victor Alneng, Erienne Cantin, James Furner, Marc-André Gagnon, Matina Karvellas, Jim Kincaid, Martijn Konings, Jonathan Nitzan, Justin Rosenberg, Sean Saraka, Benno Teschke, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments and helpful suggestions at various stages of this article.
fundamental conflict between labour and capital only emerges, it is said, through an analysis of value theory. Echoing a pervasive sentiment among Marxists, Fine, Lapavitsas, and Milonakis argue that ‘without an appropriate value theory, the veiled nature of the capital/labour relation cannot be laid bare, and the basis for inter-capitalist competition – a factor so strongly emphasised by Brenner in his latest work – cannot be revealed’. For this reason, it has been fashionable to discard political Marxism, particularly Brenner’s work, for being ‘Smithian’ in its emphasis on surface dynamics that miss the internal workings of capitalism.

There is no doubt that political Marxists have been reluctant to refer to the labour theory of value. In many ways, the problem harks back to E.P. Thompson’s ambivalence towards *Capital*. An influential figure for political Marxists, Thompson argued that *Capital* represented a powerful critique of political economy, but one which was enmeshed within the framework it wished to criticise. Although useful to point to the limits of political economy, it could not therefore serve as a foundation for historical materialism:

*Capital* was not an exercise of a different order to that of mature bourgeois Political Economy, but a total confrontation within that order. As such it is both the highest achievement of ‘political economy’, and it signals the need for its supersession by historical materialism. To say the former is not to diminish Marx’s achievement, for it is only in the light of that achievement that we are able to make this judgement. But the achievement does not produce historical materialism, it provides the preconditions for its production.

While political Marxists might not necessarily share such a view, their relative silence on this question speaks of a malaise on their part regarding the place value theory should occupy in Marxism. In a way, their reluctance can be taken as a symptom of the difficulty there is in articulating a discussion of the logic of capital within a true historical-materialist approach. Discussions about value theory tend to be abstract and ahistorical in nature. They often present themselves under the guise of a formal theory, identifying the inherent dynamic that value imprints on social processes. Marxists who follow this formal strategy generally seek to determine, in abstraction from history, the tendencies of capitalist societies, even when admitting that these tendencies can be

---

3. This is a general theme that runs through the various critics of Brenner published in the two special issues of *Historical Materialism* devoted to Brenner’s argument on the long downturn of the postwar period. One can find clear formulations of this point in Lebowitz 1999 and Bonefeld 2000.
somewhat countered. In deriving a principle of causality which can be isolated from the making of history, I argue, they make it difficult to bring history back in. Hence, it is frequent to see such theorists fetishise value as the bearer of a logic, an intrinsic mechanism of structuration, which can never, therefore, truly account for social agency and class struggle.\(^5\)

Such an approach runs counter to the emphasis on history and social relations which is the main concern of political Marxists. As Thompson pointed out, the idea that there are laws of motion in capitalism that can be formalised as a logic of capital is antithetical to the attempt to historicise social developments within the framework of historical materialism. As I will point out, theories based on the logic of capital have two important limitations which conflict with the preoccupations of political Marxists. First, they fail to specify what are the distinctive features of capitalism and rely on aspects of the market that are not specific to capitalism in their discussion of value. Second, their depiction of the logic of value, as a single logic that applies to every capitalist society, makes them unable to truly account for social changes within capitalism.

The purpose of this article is to propose a reading of value theory firmly rooted in the historicist framework of political Marxism; one which gives precedence to social relations and historical development. Value theory is used here as a means for specifying the significance of historical developments, not as a principle of causality that would be said to operate in all capitalist societies. The article is divided into two sections. First, I address two questions central to value theory: i) ‘Is value a product of labour?’ and ii) ‘Can value be considered an abstract representation of labour?’ As I will point out, in both cases, Marxists have had difficulty in identifying a concrete historical mechanism whereby value is determined socially, thus making it difficult to relate labour theory to history. It is this problem, I point out, that explains the difficulty for political Marxists of incorporating current labour theories of value within their own analysis. Second, I offer an alternative formulation of value theory which is more attuned to the concerns of historical materialism. The concept of value proposed here is firmly rooted in a notion of alienation, which is, I argue, crucial for historicising capitalism. I conclude that the idea that value is shaped by labour refers to a ‘political’ fact about social struggles around the organisation of the labour process, rather than an ‘economic’ fact about the expenditure of labour within the process of production. It reflects the class struggles over the labour process and the norms that govern social life, rather than a quantity of socially necessary labour-time expended within the labour process.

---

\(^5\) Knafo 2002.
1. Marxist approaches to the labour theory of value

As an entry point to the question of value, it is worthwhile raising a fundamental ambiguity surrounding the concept of value, which exemplifies the challenge involved in thinking about value theory. It is, indeed, intriguing to observe how value has come to refer to two, supposedly opposite, things. In its sociological sense, the term is used to refer to the social principles that guide people's behaviour in a given society. Here, it constitutes a qualitative and normative notion that defines what a society deems acceptable or preferable. By contrast, value in its economic sense is likened to a quantitative and abstract measure that is attributable to commodities. Interestingly, both forms of value are often held to be incompatible, economic value being said to display its abstract feature only when it is disembedded from social norms. Economic value would thus only become central in societies where markets are no longer encumbered by social institutions. It is this assumption which has reinforced the idea that economic rationality, based on the pursuit of profit, can only fully operate if social values are dissolved; if, in other words, the market is disembedded.6

This distinction is central to the development of economics, whose purpose it is to deduce the abstract laws of motion of markets. As a formal endeavour, economics rests on two necessary assumptions. First, if economists wish to justify their objective of drawing out the abstract laws that govern markets in abstraction of history, they must posit that concrete social norms are secondary, or unimportant, for understanding how markets operate. Second, this formal perspective can only hold if economists imbue markets with a seemingly objective logic that transcends the agency of people involved in the economy. By separating the working of the economy from other social dynamics, economists thus reinforce the dualism between the economic and the social. Said to operate efficiently only in the absence of any other social considerations, markets often appear here as neutral environments because they seem to have no social foundations.

It was Marx's achievement to see a broader social question in the problematic of value. His intuition was that value formation concerns not only the mechanism of wealth creation, but the process by which social norms are defined and instituted in a market society that seems to function without them. Whereas economists presented the market as a non-normative arena with natural mechanisms of regulation, Marx insisted that market societies produce social norms just as any other society, but that they do so in a more

convoluted and indirect way. In precapitalist societies, social norms are mostly established through traditions or by decisions of social and political authorities. By contrast, norms in market societies are not directly or consciously instituted as such. They emerge indirectly with the generalisation of practices when market pressures compel people to adopt strategies developed by others in order to remain competitive. Under capitalism, norms thus often emerge as accepted or popular strategies for competing on markets, and more specifically for producing more 'efficiently'. Taylorism or 'just-in-time' production represent examples of such norms entrenching themselves within specific economic sectors, or societies, at different historical conjunctures. Marx's theory of value thus problematised the way in which markets enforce norms of social production and social life, without appearing to do so. More specifically, it showed why social norms around production became so important under capitalism and why they started to transform themselves more and more rapidly.

There is, however, an ambiguity in Capital stemming from the fact that it appears to examine value from an economic and social perspective at the same time. Marx never clearly positioned himself on the relation between the economic production of value (logic of capital) and the struggles around social norms (class struggle). When reading Capital, one can thus have the distinct impression that Marx presents, at the same time, a theory of the production of value and a theory of the social form of capitalist societies. He uses the first to illustrate how labour is exploited, and the second to specify the nature of alienation under capitalism. Marx never clarified, however, how these two issues could be articulated to one another.

Marxists often still hold on to both aspects of the theory, switching from one problematic to the other, depending on the argument they wish to make. Interestingly, it is arguable that this dualism has manifested itself in the growing divergence within Marxism between two readings of value theory that have moved away from one another since the late 1970s. This divergence was partly triggered by the critique levelled by neoclassical economists and post-Keynesians at the labour theory of value. At stake was the alleged inability of Marxists to point to a concrete and explicit link (i.e. value) between concrete labour and prices. In the absence of such connection, critics argued that the theory was nothing but an unnecessary detour. As Joan Robinson put it: ‘the whole argument is condemned to circularity from birth, because the values which were to be “transformed into prices” are arrived at in the first

instance by transforming prices into values'. To say that value represents something distinct from prices, she argued, is an arbitrary assumption which cannot be proven because value does not manifest itself outside of prices.

As Marxists were pushed to specify the nature of their position, they often started focusing on either the economic or the social aspects of value theory. The question of the ‘production of value’ became mainly associated with the work of Marxist economists, sometimes presented in the literature as ‘fundamentalists’, and with the attempt to develop an alternative economic framework based on value rather than prices. The social form of value was often linked to value-form approaches, sometimes labelled ‘orthodox’ theories, which emphasised the social effects of valuation on labour and considered value as a form that shapes social life. Each of these angles on the question of value suggested different responses to critics of value theory. Yet, in both cases, as I will argue, no satisfactory answer was offered to show how labour was concretely linked to value, thus making the relationship between theory and history ambiguous.

1(i) The economic problematic of value: value as the product of labour

The idea that value is a product of labour remains a central claim within Marxism. However, what this idea concretely means remains surprisingly ambiguous. Marxist scholars now generally agree that value is not a natural product of labour, labour that would be congealed in a commodity, but that it only emerges with capitalism as socially necessary labour-time. What remains to be clarified though is how a quantity of social labour-time can be attributed to a commodity, or, more concretely, through what process can socially necessary labour-time be measured. It is arguable that Marxists mostly avoided the question during the debates over the labour theory of value in the 1970s and 1980s. Their response to critics generally consisted in either solving the transformation problem or in denying altogether the need to prove the existence of value in the first place. While these responses demonstrated that the labour theory of value could be perfectly coherent, they never showed how this value was concretely and socially determined. As a result, they left the question of the relationship between concrete labour and value as something relatively vague.

To grasp the nature of the problem, we can start with one traditional explanation for why labour determines value. In an illustrative formulation, Murray Smith argues that:

it is precisely because exchange effects a process of equalization of products of labor on the market (that involves a real abstraction) that production oriented towards exchange must take account of the fact that 'physiological labor' is both utility-shaping and value-creating – that is, both concrete and abstract at one and the same time.12

This has been a classic argument among Marxists. The key here is the reliance of Smith, as many others, on characteristics of the commodity in order to explain the nature of labour under capitalism. In this case, the commodity, or commodity exchange, is seen as leading societies to value in terms of abstract labour. In short, the argument goes, when products are compared on the market through a single quantitative scale (prices), then labour is considered in abstract and quantitative terms, that is in terms of labour-time. However, the assumption that it is the production of commodities that leads to the emergence of abstract labour and value as a 'product' of labour raises important problems. While it is true that the product of labour presents itself under a single abstract form on the market (prices), it is by no means clear why and how labour would be equalised in its products. In other words, products can have prices that make them commensurable on a single quantitative scale, but this does not show that these prices reflect a single property common to these products, and even less so that this property is labour-time. While markets transform the way labour is socially considered, this is not sufficient to show why value is actually produced by labour.

The issue here becomes clear when time comes to identify a concrete process that can explain how products could be valued according to labour-time. Where do we find the proof that there is a concrete link between labour and prices? This cannot be taken for granted since, as Marx says, 'value . . . does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic'.13 This central problem is too often ignored by Marxists who simply assume that, in one way or another, capitalist societies compute and allocate value according to the labour that has been expended in a society. But one would be hard pressed to provide any concrete evidence for how this occurs. How do people account for the labour-time that goes into one labour process, or the total labour-time expended in a whole society?

Capitalists, for example, never establish prices for their commodities directly according to labour-time. Similarly, consumers do not judge the value of a product according to the labour-time they think is required for producing these commodities. Most of the time, people have little clue of the time that is involved. Hence, even if we assume that this is done unconsciously through the working of the system, it certainly has to be demonstrated how a society can account for labour-time. Without any institution responsible for such valuation, and without a deliberate choice on the part of consumers or capitalists to do so, what concrete mechanisms can value commodities according to labour-time without anyone being aware of it?

The absence of any discernable mechanism which could account for labour-time raises more fundamentally the issue of whether labour does actually produce value. Before directly addressing this question, it is helpful to follow a small thought experiment. Let us imagine a society where there is a high number of competitive capitalists producing the same commodity. Let us posit, furthermore, that they all possess exactly the same composition of capital and are equally productive. In other words, they have the same production costs for the same output. In such a context, capitalists would progressively lower the prices of their products to face the pressure of competition. Ultimately, prices would be lowered to the point at which they would simply cover costs of production, or even drop below them, as capitalists try to outbid their competition. The result would be that no capitalists would be able to make any profit. Now, let us add that labour resistance is almost nonexistent and that capitalists do not improve their productivity. We could then imagine that capitalists would tend to extend the working day, say from 10 to 14 hours, in order to face competition. If all capitalists do the same thing, costs of production would still be the same for every capitalist and prices would again be driven down by competition to the level of production costs. The counterintuitive result would again be an inability to make any profit despite the dramatic increase in the working day. Can we accept then that no surplus-value has been created despite the increase in the working day?

Although such a situation may be unsustainable, the important point this example suggests is that capitalists will restore profit margins only if they manage to do something that other capitalists cannot do (for example, reduce costs of production in a more efficient way than other capitalists). If costs remain equal for all and competition remains fierce, no one will be able to make profits. As I will argue later, it is this ability to differentiate themselves from other capitalists that matters here. For this reason, competition is crucial to the way capitalists fix prices, making it impossible to posit that value has
any existence before circulation. More importantly, this example suggests, in a
way, that labour in itself does not produce value. As I will argue, the notion that
value is produced is somewhat misleading since it conveys the image of value
as a product. Holding on to such a notion makes it almost impossible not to
conflate valuation (i.e. the way we come to value things) with production and
reduce the former to the latter. The conflation between value and the actual
commodity then becomes inevitable, leading us necessarily down the road of
an embodied conception of abstract labour.14

This partly explains why Marxists who treat value as a quantum of labour-
time are often led down an ahistorical path in theorising capitalism, which is
at odds with political Marxism. Indeed, when treating value as another scale
of economic value that exists behind prices, they must adopt a problematic
strategy in order to solve a problem they themselves have created. To derive a
new quantitative variable that is not observable (value), they need to isolate
value formation from the social processes they wish to explain (class struggle,
alienation, etc.), because these processes blur the attempt to measure value
according to labour-time.15 Subjectivity and agency, both involved in these
dynamics, are thus cast as external variable to the logic that is being studied
because they are necessarily incompatible with the formal procedures
employed. This partly explains why Marxists, working on this basis, can take
capitalist social relations as permissive conditions for the logic of value to
operate, but cannot include them in their analysis of valuation. These two
elements of the labour theory of value are indeed ultimately incompatible,

14. Anwar Shaikh’s work represents a good example of the confusion that lurks behind this
view of value as a labour product. As adamant as he is to mark the separation between value and
use-value, he still argues in the last paragraph of his critique of Ricardians and form theorists:
‘consider a crisis which so little of the social product is sold that profit is actually negative (this is
a recurrent real phenomenon in capitalism). Are we then to say that even though workers were
exploited and a surplus product produced, surplus-value is itself negative?’ (1981, p. 300) For
Shaikh, of course, the response is that we cannot, but the confusion here is clear. Surplus-value
has nothing to do with the quantity of goods produced or with the labour expanded. Arguing
that it does necessarily leads us down the path of a conception of embodied labour. Rather,
surplus-value, reflects a more complex fact about capitalist competition and the way capitalists
empower themselves within this competition, as it will become clear later on.

15. This subjective kernel in the process of value formation poses important challenges for all
economic theories of value. Indeed, in their search for an objective theory of value which can
transcend the specific actions of individuals, economists must circumvent this subjective
current. This leads to causal explanations which, when they do introduce subjectivity, can only
present subjectivity as a blurring filter that might limit the ability of someone to move in the
direction predicted by the theory. In this sense, subjectivity is always presented as an impediment
to the pure functioning of the process of valuation, rather than as something constitutive of it.
because it is impossible to derive both a quantitative content (prices) and a qualitative form (social relations) at the same time from the theory of value. If one wishes to derive value as a quantity of abstract labour, it is necessary to abstract from all aspects of social life that create uncertainty in the analysis. The construction and evolution of social relations must thus be discarded when determining this quantitative value, because of their qualitative nature. By contrast, when we bring these latter aspects in, we blur the quantitative argument, ultimately dissolving it. Each ‘issue’ thus remains somewhat at odds with the other, creating an effect of uncertainty: the more we try to concretise how value is produced, the less we seem to have to say about the social form that value imprints on society; the more we define the effects of value formation on labour and social life, the less we seem able to concretely address how value is determined. As a result, it is impossible to factor the qualitative aspects of class struggles into the equation when discussing the logic of capital, which then necessarily leads to an analysis conducted in abstraction from historical considerations.

1(ii) The social problematic of value: value as a form

If there is a link between labour and value, it must rest somewhere else than in the notion of value as a product of labour. A second way to address the question of value is to consider it as a social form that shapes the nature of society, particularly labour. Work on the value-form has gained in popularity in the last decades as scholars increasingly moved away from the more ‘economic’ readings of value which dominated Marxism before the 1970s. Concretely, this has meant turning away from more quantitative questions regarding the formation of value and prices in order to focus more directly on qualitative issues revolving around the formation of value itself and its consequences on capitalist societies. Work on the value-form has thus been interested in

17. This problem is particularly salient in Marxists economics. Indeed, having to work from quantitative variables, Marxists economists need to factor into their theorisation given quantities of labour-time otherwise they cannot put into motion the logic they wish to analyse. This is why Carchedi, for example, insists that ‘abstract labour must manifest itself as social value, as value quantitatively transformed, at the moment of exchange, but it already exists at the level of production’ (Carchedi 1993, p. 211). My emphasis. Without the assumption of an initial production of value by labour there could be no Marxist economics as we know it.
examining how abstract labour emerges and what the implications are that derive from the fact that labour is considered abstractly.

Let us examine the first aspect of this problematic. The issue that interests me here is not simply to determine whether we can observe such a process of abstraction concretely operating, something I argued is doubtful, but, more fundamentally, whether it could be possible in the first place. Can labour itself be considered in abstract terms, or more specifically in terms of labour-time, and is this really a specific feature that defines capitalism? I start here from a crucial point that Marx raises in Capital. As he points out, labour, under capitalism, acquires an unprecedented collective form, which makes it impossible to disaggregate its production into a series of individual contributions that would be made by workers:

Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of an infantry regiment, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive power of the individual soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workers differs from the social force that is developed when many hands co-operate in the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch or getting an obstacle out of the way. In such cases the effect of the combined labour could either not be produced at all by isolated individual labour, or it could be produced only by great expenditure of time, on a very dwarf like scale. Not only do we have here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operations, but the creation of a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one.20

This qualitative aspect of the labour process implies that there can be no determinate relationship between the individual inputs of workers, in terms of labour-time, and the value attributed to a commodity. In other words, the output of a collective process of labour represents a productive power that can never be traced back to concrete labour-time, that is the actual hours put in by workers. This problem of translating quality (i.e. the organisation of the labour process) into quantity (value/labour-time) is a sizable obstacle for people who wish to defend the notion that value is an abstract representation of the concrete labour accomplished in a society.21 Because the labour-time actually invested by individual workers will result in varying outputs depending on how they are organised, it thus becomes difficult to think of value as a

21. This view is particularly prevalent amongst Hegelian Marxists who emphasise the dehumanising aspect of capitalism. The problem with capitalism then becomes reification understood in terms of the reduction of labour to a mere object. See Lukács 1971.
representation of labour. On what basis then can we assert that it is actually labour that is represented by value?

What about socially necessary labour-time? This expression has been popular because it suggests, in a way, that the process of valuation under capitalism somehow transcends this diversity in labour processes by ultimately comparing them according to their output for a given amount of labour-time. Labour-time could thus be averaged out (and thus abstracted) according to the necessary time required for producing a commodity in a society at a given point in time. This type of conception can accompany, for example, the argument that abstract labour emerges at the point of junction between production and circulation and thus is not directly linked to concrete labour. In other words, the notion of socially necessary labour-time is often taken as a means to avoid the problem evoked above. However, it is more a convenient assertion than a demonstrated fact, and begs the question more than it solves it. One might acknowledge that capitalist competition does indeed arbitrate between labour processes, but what does this competition really mean in relation to value as a form (or to abstract labour)? To be more precise, how can capitalist competition average out labour-time in terms of labour productivity and thus determine socially necessary labour-time?

Again, it is crucial here to be concrete about this process. One can surmise that, if there is such an averaging out which balances out differences in labour productivity to arrive at a uniform scale of labour-time, then it has to refer to one of two things. Either this refers to a process that averages out value according to labour productivity, meaning that the value of a commodity would be determined in relation to the productivity of all capitalists who produce it; or, inversely, this can refer to a process that averages out labour productivity according to value. From this last perspective, we would assert that the divergence in productivity would tend to narrow down under the

22. Massimo de Angelis tries to circumvent this problem by inverting the chain of causality. He argues that it is because labour is abstract under capitalism that it must take the form of value (De Angelis 1995, p. 123). Citing Marx, he points out that abstract labour is ‘human labour that is expended without regard to the form of its expenditure’ (De Angelis 1995, p. 110). The idea of abstraction as something that pertains to the struggle around work, rather than the way in which this work is translated into value, offers an original take on the question, but one that is, in this case, fundamentally problematic. Indeed, de Angelis only further fetishises the idea of capitalism as a flattened society where difference and norms have no role to play. It is thus no coincidence if his discussion of class struggle is essentially limited to a ‘quantitative’ struggle over the length of the working day. By opposition, political Marxists focus on the qualitative dynamic of the class struggle under capitalism which revolves, much more importantly, around the transformation of the labour process.

pressure of competition, thus leading to increasingly standardised forms of production. Let us examine each in turn, because they highlight the importance of a proper historical approach.

In the first case, we are implying that the average labour-time to produce a commodity serves as a standard for defining the value of all similar commodities. From this angle, socially necessary labour-time plays a role in determining the value of a commodity. Obviously, one can conceive of calculating what is the socially necessary labour-time required in a society to produce a commodity. Yet, one would have difficulty in showing how this is accounted for. More importantly, one must remember that this average can only be experienced as a determinate social force through competition. In other words, this average only concerns products that are competing in a same market. This is where the notion quickly starts to crumble, because a whole set of new social processes enter the picture to qualify the nature of this competition. To begin with, this average will vary depending on where one would wish to calculate it. Indeed, each location will have different sets of commodities competing against one another, meaning that the average will differ in each place it is calculated. Not only that, the quality of this access will also play a role. Hence, depending on strategies of product placement, on networks for distribution, and more broadly on marketing strategies, capitalists will experience this competition over productivity differently. This makes the idea of such an average highly hypothetical, if not dubious, especially if we are going to assume that this average has concrete social consequences. Ultimately, there seems to be no means to transcend the diversity that characterises capitalist development, and this puts into question the idea that a common measure, or representation, of labour-time could be arrived at in the first place.

If we turn the problem around and posit that it is actually capitalists who adjust their methods of production in order to come closer to how other, more productive, capitalists produce, the notion is also hard to uphold. In this perspective, we assume, in one way or another, that there is a gradual convergence in techniques of production which would make differences among labour processes less and less significant. The problem here is that capitalists react differently to competitive pressures. Facing capitalist competition, for example, can either mean moving towards extensive strategies of production (for example, relocating to areas where a cheaper labour force can be exploited), or towards intensive ones, by improving productivity. Competition can thus generate a diversity in labour processes as much as it can contribute to convergence, making it difficult to posit that competition necessarily homogenises labour productivity. I will, in fact, argue that methods of production tend to become increasingly diverse under capitalism.
In highlighting these difficulties, I wish to stress how difficult it is to render concrete the notion of abstract labour. It is partly for this reason that work on abstract labour must remain highly abstract, formal and divorced from history. Yet, what interests me most here is the second aspect of the problematic of the value-form. Indeed, according to form theories, the use of the concept of abstract labour hinges on whether the concept is useful for specifying the consequences of valuation on capitalist societies. One of the arguments that are generally evoked here is that, under capitalism, consumers and capitalists consider labour only in abstract terms without taking into account the concrete conditions in which work is being done. In this way, market imperatives would push capitalists to constantly disregard the subjectivity of their workers, treating them as objects in the process of capital accumulation. Markets would thus subsume labour under a capitalist logic alien to its aspirations.

This is clearly an important contribution of Marx, but, just as the notion of labour producing value appears somewhat misleading, the same can be said about abstract labour. Indeed, we need to be careful not to equate the idea that labour is instrumentalised for the purpose of capitalist accumulation with the idea that labour is considered abstractly. Capitalists invest a great deal of energy into the hiring, the organisation, and the supervision of labour. Differences among workers, and in the way they work individually, clearly matter to them. While certain social, or moral, values are definitely cast out of consideration by the need to remain competitive, capitalists still continue using social norms both for discriminating among workers and for managing the labour process.

For this reason, the notion of abstract labour can appear inadequate to capture the consequences of valuation because it suggests that social reality becomes reified and hollow, empty of social norms and values. As I will argue, the considerations that shape capitalist activity are never reducible to an

---

26. Interestingly, Arthur himself is aware of this problem when he suggests that ‘it is a mistake to identify the abstract labour that is the substance of value with the supposedly “abstract” character of the modern labour process in its physical form’ (Arthur 1999, p. 21). The problem with Arthur’s claims, however, is that he can only reconstruct a notion of abstract labour on the basis that there is such a thing as Capital, a subject acting to self reproduce and, in the process, imposing its own logic against the will of labour. As soon as we break this fetishistic gaze which elevates Capital as some sort of inherent force at work in capitalism, the idea of the indiscriminate nature of capitalist exploitation falls apart. From the perspective of individual capitalists (the concrete form of labour, its organisation and management) is always of utmost importance, and in that sense, the concrete aspects of labour are a central component of what defines the capital-labour relation.
abstract and undifferentiated notion, such as the indiscriminate exploitation of labour for accumulation. In fact, the main argument of this article is that capitalist valuation, far from levelling the field of society and stripping social norms away in order to lay bare a universal capitalist logic, has, in fact, intensified the importance of social norms. This is particularly the case for norms of production. Indeed, as Marx argued, the main specificity of capitalism is its incessant transformation of the labour process which suggests a newfound importance for the qualitative features of labour under capitalism. In other words, the way people work now seems to matter more than in precapitalist societies.

It is a curious paradox for value-form approaches that the labour theory of value was developed precisely at a time when workers were assisted by means of production more than ever before in history and that their work became increasingly specialised. Why, in a country experiencing an agrarian and then an industrial revolution, did political economists begin to think of labour-time as the sole source of value? Should we not expect precisely the opposite? Indeed, if innovations became increasingly important to production, would labour not appear less and less as the crucial factor producing value?

A more plausible hypothesis would be that the idea that labour was the main determinant in the process of valorisation reflected the profound impression left on contemporaries by the newfound ability to systematically transform the labour process. This would have made ‘labour’ into something that increasingly needed to be conceptualised because it was becoming a growing concern. Moreover, it was precisely qualitative differences in the labour process that struck theorists, not its growing homogeneity. Adam Smith, for example, famously marvelled at the productive effects of the division of labour, which became a crucial notion buttressing his analysis of the market. This observation helps to explain why the notion of value introduced by British political economists represented such a breakthrough. Indeed, in dealing with the problem of diversity, or difference, the ingenuity of this

27. Murray Smith discusses the related paradox that capitalists who use more machinery often make more profit. Having recast the problem of transformation as an issue of distribution, Marxist economists can state that ‘the theory of value maintains that living labor is the sole source of new value, while empirical observation conclusively discloses that capital invested in dead labor (such as machinery and building structures) can establish the same rate of profit as capital invested in living labor’ (Smith 1994, p. 72). However, their formal solution poses important problems when the labour theory of value is set in context. How can we understand, for example, why political economists started talking about the centrality of labour at a time precisely when machines were becoming more important and made it more difficult to attribute value to its supposed ‘true’ source? If we agree with this argument, should it not be precisely at this time that people stop seeing labour as producing value?
solution was precisely to reduce quality into quantity by seeing the value of a commodity as ‘equal to the quantity of labour which it enables [someone] to purchase or command’. In this way, the concept of value represented a conceptual solution for apprehending an increasingly complex reality by positing a common denominator that could level this diversity. In other words, the development of value theory was precisely a means to abstract from important qualitative differences and to render commensurable the increasingly unequal development that accompanied the rise of capitalism. William Petty had initially introduced the concept of value in the late seventeenth century as a means for assessing lands with various degrees of improvement. Similarly, Ricardo later became the ‘true founder of abstract Political Economy’ by using the category of value in order to offer a measuring scale that ‘scientifically’ grounded discussions about distribution. His main contribution was precisely to level out the contributions (or inputs) of various social classes to the process of production by introducing a rigorous labour theory of value which made it possible to ground ‘scientifically’ his analysis of distribution.

In stressing the lineage of this concept in the tradition of British political economy, it becomes easier to clarify what was Marx’s contribution regarding value theory. As I will argue, it was the move away from this objectifying labour theory of value that distinguished Marx’s conception of value. This move is too often obscured or neglected in contemporary debates on value which often use value theory, just as British political economists did before them, in order to abstract from the complexity and diversity of social history. It is for this very reason that we need to be careful about the concept of abstract labour. Indeed, the assumption that valuation leads to abstract labour reinforces formal conceptions of value which hinder our ability to understand how markets can value differently depending on their social context. If the abstract and impersonal features of market transactions are singled out as the determinant features of capitalism, then one might presume that any market has an implicit capitalist logic. It is, then, impossible to define the specific nature of capitalism.

As I argued in the previous section, the problem comes down again to the fact that Marxists too often take the fact that the product of labour appears in quantitative terms as proof that labour itself is the object of valorisation. This, again, cannot be taken for granted. Even if people producing for markets are dependent on the realisation of their products to reproduce themselves, this does not imply that the process of valorisation will shape the nature of the

labour process. In precapitalist markets, for example, profits often depended on political and military capabilities of merchants, or on authorities that protected them, because the main objective was to control trade routes.\(^{30}\)

Hence, the restructuring of the labour process was not a central preoccupation because the influence of labour productivity was often secondary to price formation. In this context, the value of commodities had little impact on decisions regarding production, which were often regulated by corporate bodies, such as guilds, whose concerns were tied to ensuring certain standards of quality and to limiting competition, rather than focusing on increasing productivity.\(^{31}\)

Arguments that try to further specify this form of value by arguing that it is the commodification of labour which is the defining feature of capitalism also fail to make a convincing case.\(^{32}\) This notion is often introduced, somewhat arbitrarily, to distinguish capitalism from previous societies with markets. But it suffers from two flaws. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to see that it is one thing to argue that labour can be bought and sold, and another to show that this fact makes value dependent on labour. What is never established is how wage-labour can make a difference for the way people compete and suddenly make value dependent on labour. Why would labour-time suddenly become a direct determinant of value with the emergence of wage-labour? From a historical perspective, political Marxists have shown that the introduction of wages did not lead to the type of transformation that we associate with capitalism. George Comninel, in particular, has shown how the existence of wages in eighteenth-century France was not accompanied by the profound changes in the organisation of labour which so strikingly characterised England.\(^{33}\)

In this way, drawing the links between history and theory remains a fundamental challenge. As I will point out, differences between markets did not boil down to the existence of barriers such as customary regulations, guilds, or non-wage-labour, which would have stopped value from enforcing a capitalist logic. They refer, rather, to differences in the forms of power which opened different types of strategies for dealing with competitive market pressures. Capitalism, for example, required a complex institutionalisation of power, not a ‘liberalisation’ of the market per se. As E.P. Thompson and others


\(^{31}\) Clarke 1988, p. 89.

\(^{32}\) See, for example, Arthur 2002 for a discussion of the commodification of labour as the defining feature of capitalism.

\(^{33}\) Comninel 1987.
have shown, the construction of capitalist social relations required a protracted process of struggle through which all kinds of rules, regulations, and forms of discipline were established, slowly opening the way for the systematic transformation of the labour process that became the hallmark of capitalism. This institutionalisation of a distinctive form of social relation, what Brenner calls social-property relations, provided different avenues for responding to the market imperative. The crucial point then is that these social relations do not derive from the market imperative in themselves, nor from the commodity-form. It is, rather, the focus on the form of power which distinguishes Marx’s conception of value, and which enables us to take into consideration the specific form of value under capitalism and the way it evolves within capitalism.

2. The origin and nature of value

I have argued that theories of value too often rely on formal features to establish the link between concrete labour and value. This, ultimately, makes it difficult to relate value theories to history, because these theories offer no adequate means for differentiating markets from capitalism. As a result, markets appear to impose similar imperatives, the difference being only the extent to which social institutions (such as feudal constraints) allow these imperatives to operate. Here, capitalism seems to emerge, in the end, when it is finally freed from the constraints of feudalism which would be impeding its quasi-natural growth. As Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood have shown, many societies have production geared towards markets, and thus use prices, even wage-labour, without them being necessarily capitalist. More problematically, these formal theories of value reinforce the dualism between social norms and market imperatives, leading us to an ahistorical view of capitalism, as if it were a system which operated in abstraction of social norms.

In the following sections, I outline a different approach to the value-form in order to consider value as a socio-historical category that is constantly shaped by social relations. The distinction between value and price is justified here on the basis that value refers to the significance of social interactions around prices. In other words, it is not a theory about what value is, otherwise we would necessarily fall into a deterministic trap, but a discussion of how we should think about value in a given context. By this, I simply mean that a discussion of value pertains to the way we problematise market dynamics in

order to capture the specific, or socially constructed, features of market competition and the way the market entrenches certain practices, turning them into social norms. One could thus say, from this perspective, that examining value is to problematise how social norms are sanctioned by commodity-exchange. In making this point, I want to emphasise that value has nothing to do with a new quantitative measure that would be different from prices. To discuss value is to focus on qualitative features of society that are brought about by market competition. It should be further emphasised that the point here is not to identify social norms that characterise capitalism in itself, as if there was a logic that was common to all capitalist societies. On the contrary, I wish to highlight that, within capitalism, norms are still being constantly implemented and continue to evolve. Hence, if the historical test for any discussion of value rests on its ability to discern capitalist markets from non-capitalist ones, its usefulness should lay in its ability to further problematise the way norms are implemented within capitalism. The interest in Marx’s theory of value, as a tool for historicising capitalism, lies precisely in its ability to illuminate an aspect of social structuration under capitalism which is too often ignored because it occurs in a more informal way than in precapitalist societies.

This will lead me to reconsider how value is linked to labour in capitalism. As Brenner argues, the crucial point here is that social norms become increasingly oriented towards social production and the restructuration of the labour process. More specifically, transformations in the nature of power have profoundly changed the way social classes compete among and within themselves. While exploitation has long been a crucial aspect of social empowerment, it is only in capitalism that the systematic restructuration of production becomes its dominant feature. I thus argue that it is the class struggle around this process of restructuration that constitutes the key to the process of valuation under capitalism. As I will point out, labour has a central influence on the determination of the value of commodities because of its agency in the transformation of the labour process, not because it produces value in itself. Hence, whereas dominant views of value too often approach this question as an economic fact regarding production itself, it is argued here that this relationship can only be posited as a historical and political one. The centrality of labour in relation to value thus refers to the process of production and its political and conflicting nature, not to the expenditure of physical labour itself. It points to the specific form of social norms under capitalism and the way they are implemented through struggles around production.

Before addressing the question of labour under capitalism, it is useful to reconsider what is the purpose of theorising value. Marxist economists have traditionally justified the labour theory of value by referring to a social reality (value) which mainstream economists would be ignoring. The stumbling block with mainstream economic theories, from this perspective, is that they take the wrong variable to explain economic behaviour (prices instead of value), and thus miss the role of exploitation in the reproduction of capitalism. As I have argued, this type of critique contributes to reify capitalism in its own way by positing that values of commodities are produced by labour. By contrast, I contend that value theory should be seen as a means for addressing the question of alienation in capitalism. From this perspective, the real drawback with mainstream economics is its inability to account for the fact that the form through which people’s needs and desires are expressed in capitalism is alienating. While people choose and decide what is socially valuable, partly on the basis of their own individual preferences, they never do so under the conditions of their own making because they do not understand the implications of their decisions. It is, thus, the problem of alienation which raises the need for a theory of value. What mainstream economists cannot explain are the social ramifications of people’s economic decisions. In other words, they cannot grasp how people institute social norms without being aware of it.

As I have explained elsewhere, the Hegelian problematic of alienation adopted by Marx is often misunderstood, partly because of the tendency of Marxists to emphasise objectification over fetishisation. While the first pertains to the process by which subjects are reduced to objects, the second refers to the way people fetishise objects, such as capital, thinking that they have a will of their own. Starting from this second approach, I am thus interested in the ways in which people disempower themselves in thinking that they are victims of transcendent forces, such as ‘Capital’, rather than being the makers of their own history. This allows us to specify further the radical social bent given by Marx to Ricardo’s theory of value. From this perspective,

37. The notion of alienation used here derives from a Hegelian reading of Marx’s notion of alienation and relates to consciousness. The foundations for this perspective on alienation are developed in Knafo 2002.
39. Too often, Marxists suggest that people are objectified, in the sense of being reduced to acting like objects deprived of their own free will. Even if prices shape people’s decisions, this does not imply that people think in the same way. Indeed, people do different things when they think about value. Their rationality in thinking about value cannot be reduced to a single
reading, Marx rejected the notion that capitalist dynamics are the product of the market itself, a notion that was at the heart of political economy and which became the foundations for economics. It is easy to get the impression, when looking at market dynamics, that it is the market itself that imposes the values and norms that regulate society in the form of competitive imperatives. However, even if people experience these imperatives as external constraints,\textsuperscript{40} this does not imply that market imperatives actually are defined by the market itself. The market only mediates social relations, but it is people who take decisions regarding the way they adapt to market imperatives, and their actions contribute, in turn, to shaping these imperatives.\textsuperscript{41} Fordism, for example, was the product of social innovations that were not inevitable. Once implemented, however, these innovations produced great pressure on competitors, obliging them to adapt, often by themselves adopting these new norms of production.

It is thus impossible, as Marx makes clear, to focus on the market itself if one wishes to understand capitalism. The market, in itself, does not determine anything, it only translates social strategies into competitive imperatives, and thus contributes to normalising certain of these strategies. For this reason, one needs to shift the emphasis from the study of the market as a structure to the study of the ways in which people relate to each other through this structure. This is why Marx insists on the role of class struggle, and, more specifically, on social relations. Indeed, the mediation of social relations by the market, i.e. its structural condition, can only explain the particular form of class struggle in capitalism, but not its specific development or its results. Hence, moving beyond the fetishism of economics requires that we see discussions of value as a means for problematising how struggles around social norms evolve under capitalism, rather than attributing to capitalism an inherent logic that always reproduces similar norms or effects.

objectified form. Ultimately, the price they are ready to pay will always partially depend on their projects, desires, and tastes. In making this case for recognising the importance of subjectivity in capitalism, my aim is not to defend the idea that subjectivity is or is not richer in capitalism, nor do I want to deny the existence of constraints on people. Their subjectivity, of course, is partly shaped by capitalism, notably by cultural industries (information, cinema, etc.). Yet it is crucial to debunk theories that depend on the assumption that subjectivity does not play any role in capitalism. The challenge is precisely to understand how people create social imperatives even when they are not aware of it and act according to their ‘own’ subjectivity. Hence, the obvious point is that people do not all think in exactly the same way and this implies that value is not based on a common understanding of what is valuable. The notion that labour shapes value has thus nothing to do in itself with the Smithian argument regarding what someone is willing to pay for a commodity according to how it has been produced.

\textsuperscript{40} Marx 1975, pp. 322–34.
\textsuperscript{41} Konings 2005.
From this perspective, alienation no longer represents an explanation for why value exists (i.e. that labour is alienated in a way that only its labour-time would matter). Rather, alienation constitutes the problem that value theory tries to address. This is why Marx starts from the question of fetishism in *Capital*, since it sets out the terms of the problem. Valuation relates to the way people attribute meaning socially to things in quantitative terms (i.e. in the form of prices). The crucial point is that by doing so they also unconsciously validate social norms. Purchasing certain commodities can contribute, for example, to jeopardising environmental laws if these commodities are produced in areas where capitalists can afford to disregard such laws, or in validating a Fordist organisation of the labour process if it makes commodities cheaper. On this basis, I argue that it is not value itself, as a product, that matters, but the consequences of what people do while valuing commodities; the decisions they make about what social norms we should value as a society without being aware of it.42

Such a standpoint helps us to move away from the whole problematic of what prices represent. A price has little significance on its own. It is only meaningful in the way it differs from other prices and allows us to compare products. Hence, valuation should not be considered as a process by which we abstract socially from concrete labour some kind of quantitative value (labour-time). When people value commodities, they do not determine, for example, how much labour-time is contained in them. Rather, in comparing prices, they unwittingly choose among norms of production and circulation, comparing them through prices. In this way, social norms remain important under capitalism, but they are now validated through market dynamics, and are partly assessed according to the way these norms influence prices.

This leads us to a preliminary conclusion that, through valuation, subjective decisions unwittingly create imperatives because they tend to create a social pressure. Alienation thus refers here to the fact that people are not aware of the way in which they shape their own society through their actions on the market. Value theory sets out the framework for problematising market dynamics and bridging this gap between people’s conscious understanding of their actions and their social significance (i.e. the social and unintended implications of their individual pursuits). As people tend to discriminate among different commodities by favouring less expensive ones, consumers unwittingly create an imperative for merchants and producers to reduce their prices. The need to be competitive in terms of prices represents a social imperative and establishes

42. The magnitude of a price (its number) is quite arbitrary in itself. It becomes significant only in relation to other prices and how people devise strategies in relation to this.
the conditions that participants in the market must meet to be socially validated. However, this imperative in itself does not determine how it is met and thus cannot explain in itself the emphasis on production that characterises capitalism. What it tells us, however, is that market participants need to distinguish themselves from others in a way that is significant for the way people compare them to one another (i.e. through prices). This has historically been achieved in different ways, and only under capitalism is this link between valuation and production central. Indeed, it is in this context that the labour process turns into a central preoccupation for merchants and producers in their competition with one another.

2(ii) Value and the specific form of capitalist competition

The differential angle for theorising value, one which focuses on the ways in which people compete with one another by trying to demarcate themselves in a ‘significant’ ways for the market, suggests a second conclusion: it is not the process of production in itself that determines valuation, but the strategies of capitalists for competing against one another. This can be seen from the fact that competition has a direct impact on valuation, because it shapes how capitalists establish prices. While interested in charging the highest price they can, they must nonetheless take into consideration both market demand and the prices of their competitors. From this perspective, one can thus argue that the process of valuation is shaped by the ability of capitalists to increase their room for manoeuvre in order to mark up their prices. The greater the difference between a capitalist’s costs of production and the average price for the commodity produced, the greater is this margin. For this reason, competing under capitalism often involves lowering costs in relation to average costs in order to increase one’s ability to mark up prices above productive costs.

This idea of mark-up has been reviled by Marxists and associated with mainstream economics, partly because it seems to question the fact that labour

43. Many Marxists reject the idea of starting from competition to discuss phenomena related to capitalism. To do so, they argue, is to invert cause and effect in capitalism. Competition, they say, is only the outward manifestation of inward tendencies (see Lebowitz 1999, p. 117). This seems in line with Marx’s oft-cited quote that ‘competition executes the inner laws of capital; makes them into compulsory laws towards the individual capital, but it does not invent them, it realizes them’ (Marx 1973, p. 752). It would be problematic, however, to interpret this to mean that competition only ‘executes the inner laws of capital’ in the sense that it simply produces what is given elsewhere. The problem is not that competition cannot be a starting point, but that we cannot consider it a sufficient explanation, as liberals do. Competition does not explain much in itself. It requires an analysis of its social form to understand what shape it takes according to the social relations which define social interests. In other words, competition is crucial to the dynamic of capitalism, but it remains unspecified in liberal theories.
produces value. For these critics, the notion of mark-up focuses on individual capitalist strategies and neglects the social and collective nature of production. But we should be careful not to dismiss this notion too quickly, since, arguably, marking up is a practice that can clearly be observed: when capitalists set up their prices, their main concern is the profit they receive, not the amount of labour-time involved in the commodity. Hence, if there is a problem with this economistic notion, it has more to do with the absence of reflection on the specific social conditions which shape how individuals can mark up, not in the notion of mark-up itself.

What, then, distinguishes capitalism from other forms of market competition? The issue here is to determine how people try to differentiate themselves from their competitors in order to mark up their prices. In precapitalist markets, the capacity to mark up often depended on political limitations (for example, the control of trade routes, official prices) which opened the possibility for arbitrages between different markets. These opportunities, however, are reduced in capitalism through the liberalisation and consolidation of broader markets. More importantly, political Marxists have alluded to three important transformations in the nature of power in England which provided distinctive opportunities for people to face market imperatives. First, there was the constitution of a working class that could only appropriate its means of subsistence through the market instead of its own land.44 This created a compulsion to enter the labour market and work for owners of means of production. Secondly, the allocation of means of production evolved so that it was increasingly appropriated through the market instead of through tradition, hereditary lines, or political ties, as was the case in precapitalist societies.45 This obliged capitalists to compete on the market, most notably, by reducing their costs of production and prices in order to generate the money to pay for means of production. Finally, the breakdown of customary rights and other ‘social regulations’ – such as the ones enacted by guilds – and the institutionalisation of an absolute conception of property, proved a crucial development giving rise to a new form of power.46 This provided capitalist producers with the power to restructure the labour process as they saw fit, imbuing them with the right to define the ways in which their property would be used without regards for customary usages.47

These specific historical features set the conditions for production to move to the centre of social preoccupations and become the crucial means for creating a competitive margin for marking up. As capitalists began to exploit

46. See, for example, Thompson 1975.
these new social-property relations, prices became increasingly responsive to changes in production, pushing productivity to the heart of capitalist competition. Reducing production costs in relation to other producers thus became a central motive for capitalists to increase their margins of profit, while remaining competitive. This, in turn, intensified the imperatives for other capitalists to do the same.

This leads us to the question of labour, since the organisation of the labour process, in this context, becomes the dominant strategy to demarcate oneself from other capitalists. The crucial contribution of Marx here was to show how decisions over the restructuration of the labour process are not simply individual, that is dependant on the ideas of capitalists, but are social and political. Indeed, the decisions to extend and intensify the labour process have important effects on labour which are generally detrimental to workers. This is why the resistance of labour to the extension of the working day or to the reorganisation of the labour process constitutes a crucial factor in capitalism. It determines the differential capacity of capitalists to compete. The resistance of workers poses limits to the extension and intensification of the labour process and continually has an impact on the transformations of social life which are wrought by capitalist forms of competition. Hence, Marx is able to show, contrarily to classical political economists, that the formation of value does not simply depend on the ingenuity of capitalists, but much more importantly on the relation of power that opposes them to labour. If surplus-value emerges from the capacity of some capitalists to be more competitive than others, and mark up their prices, this depends on their ability to coerce labour, either in order to increase working hours or, more significantly, to change the organisation of the labour process. In sum, labour does not produce value in itself, but constitutes a central factor in determining the capacity of some capitalists to be more productive than others, and what strategies they pursue. This is why valuation ultimately becomes intricately linked to the question of labour, because it is the struggle over production which becomes the central determinant in the way capitalists fix prices.

One of the crucial implications of this discussion is that social transformations and the norms that govern social life became increasingly linked to the question of production with the rise of capitalism. As decisions around such norms thus grew in importance, they only intensified the conflict between capital and labour, which became a dominant axis across which social struggles were waged. Social struggles were then both experienced as an expression of this conflict and conducted along those lines as the nature of class struggle that we associate with capitalism took shape.48

48. See Thompson 1980 on this very process.
Conclusion

This article has proposed a historical-materialist approach to value theory which seeks to reconcile it with the framework of political Marxism. I have argued that value theory has long remained at odds with this form of historical materialism, because of its formal nature and its tendency to rely on an abstract logic that is derived before any historical analysis. This ultimately makes it inflexible for historical enquiry. By contrast, I proposed a reading of Marx’s theory of value as a tool for specifying the significance of social strategies in a market society. This reading is based on the idea that such a theory is required because of the nature of alienation in market societies, where people are unaware of the social consequences of their actions. In this sense, I see the labour theory of value as a means for problematising the social significance of market dynamics in capitalism, rather than taking it as a description for how they occur, because these strategies are not predetermined by an overarching logic. This has three important implications for thinking of value theory and determining what is Marx’s contribution to this question.

First, I insisted that value theory is not an economic method, as it is often assumed by Marxist economists. The point is not to develop an alternative accounting procedure on which to base our analysis of history. Rather, value theory provides a basic framework for problematising how social norms are shaped through market dynamics. Alienation in market economies creates the illusion that markets are determined by purely quantitative factors (such as labour-time or prices). For this reason, value theory has for its purpose to specify the process of valuation in capitalism that escapes people’s consciousness, and which relates to the social implications of their economic decisions. No doubt, many Marxists will be disappointed with this somewhat loose theory because it does not formulate a fully-fledged mechanism by which value is formed. But this depends on what one expects from theory. It is my belief that theory only represents a means for specifying in a richer way social reality, not a means to abstract from it. Theory provides clarity in specifying what needs to be explained, but it cannot serve as a substitute for historical research. This I take to be one of the central contributions of political Marxism and its comparative method geared towards contrasting and enriching our understanding of social trajectories, rather than abstracting ideal types or formal models from them.49

Second, I have put forth a differential conception of value aimed at examining how certain strategies shape the agency of actors within capitalism. The advantage of this approach is that it recognises the agency and subjectivity

of consumers, workers, and capitalists as an integral feature of valuation. More importantly it offers a way to explain how people can ‘value’ in terms of labour without being aware of it. As the ability to mark up depends increasingly on the productivity of one’s labour process in relation to others, capitalist social norms systematically gravitate towards new strategies of production. There is a crucial political aspect to this seemingly managerial and economic dynamic of capitalism, as Marx points out, because the struggle between capital and labour is a central aspect of social transformations in a way that is radically novel. Value is thus related to labour because the re-organisation of the labour process, which determines the capacity of capitalists to mark up, is at the heart of capitalist competition. In this way, political struggles between capitalists and workers have become pivotal in the development of new social norms under capitalism. The way this unfolds, however, remains a matter of historical enquiry.

Third, I argue that reading value theory in this way fundamentally changes our assessment of political Marxism and its supposed neglect of value theory. The importance of Marx’s discussion of value theory for historical materialism partly consisted in the way it highlighted a novel feature of capitalism, i.e. the emphasis on restructuring the labour process as a means to compete for power on markets. This in itself was a considerable achievement and has since been further developed by political Marxists into a more elaborate historical explanation. For critics of the approach, however, the way political Marxists have turned towards history represents a weakness because it leaves behind the theoretical categories developed by Marx, most notably value. However, this formal attachment to Marx’s demonstration in *Capital* perpetuates a certain reification of value, as if value was a thing that could be measured. Hence, I have argued that the real importance of Marx’s discussion of value lies in the way it points to the manner in which capitalism is socially constructed, that is the social norms that underpin it. For this reason, Marx’s demonstration in *Capital* should be lauded for having explained a fundamental feature of capitalist societies, not for having laid out a form of reasoning that one should re-enact every time one wishes to explain something about capitalism. Once this qualitative aspect is specified, further aspects of capitalism need to be addressed, and this requires that we move further in our comparative analysis in order to capture how changes under capitalism are themselves socially constructed in the full sense of the word. For this endeavour, the logic of value depicted in *Capital* will not suffice, even if it offers important clues as to where we need to look.

In advancing these propositions, my point is not simply that the labour theory of value can be rendered compatible with political Marxism, in the sense of being better attuned to the problematic of the transition to capitalism, which has loomed large in the writings of this approach. I believe it also offers
an interesting means to push political Marxism itself in order to better historicise capitalism. In that sense, an engagement with the problematic of value can also be beneficial for political Marxism, which has been less successful in historicising capitalism than precapitalist societies. Partly because the comparative work on the various capitalist trajectories remains to be done in this approach, there has been a tendency among political Marxists to rely on an overly structuralist notion of capitalism as a system with inherent dynamics. From Brenner’s attempt to construct an ideal type of capitalist rationality\(^\text{50}\) to Ellen Wood’s characterisation of American imperialism as a purer form of capitalist imperialism,\(^\text{51}\) capitalism is too often being presented, even within political Marxism, as being shaped by an overarching logic that is only becoming increasingly prominent with time.\(^\text{52}\) Political Marxism now needs to take a step further in applying its own comparative method to the study of capitalism itself in order to historicise it. This requires, above all, that we stop taking the imperative of the market as the defining feature of capitalism. Social imperatives clearly do matter because they compel social classes to find solutions to distinctive types of problems, and encourage the diffusion of successful innovations, thus normalising them. Yet these solutions are not predetermined. It was institutional adaptations to market imperatives in England that created the distinctive leverage used by capitalists to exploit the working class, not the market imperative itself. The institutions that shaped capitalist social relations continue to evolve, and thus capitalism cannot be reduced to its market imperatives, as if it only produced one type of social dynamic.\(^\text{53}\) Studying the trajectories of capitalism to grasp its own historicity and its qualitatively different forms is the next important task that awaits political Marxism. This is why reflecting on Marx’s argument about value can serve a useful purpose, because it brilliantly conceptualises how people can be the agents of their own history, while still producing unintended effects that become characteristic of capitalism.

References


---

\(^{50}\) Brenner 1997.

\(^{51}\) Wood 2003.

\(^{52}\) Wood 1996.

The Political and Symbolic Economy of State Feudalism: The Case of Late-Medieval Flanders

Jan Dumolyn

Foundation for Scientific Research-Flanders, Department of Medieval History, University of Ghent
Jan.Dumolyn@UGent.be

Abstract
The article examines social, economic, political and symbolic relations and exchanges within late-medieval state structure, with a specific focus on the fifteenth-century county of Flanders under Burgundian rule. The author applies and elaborates Jean-Philippe Genet's concept of 'state feudalism' as a more centralised, political articulation of the feudal mode of production, in which state taxes and the redistribution of surplus-product among the ruling classes play a key role. What historians have come to call the 'modern state' arose within a social and political system which influenced in its turn the further development of the state as a network of relationships. Making use of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital' and 'symbolic exchange', the article constructs a model representing the different relations between the prince, his officials and 'political society'.

Keywords
feudalism, Middle Ages, Flanders, modern state

The innovative international research programme The Origins of the Modern State problematised the role of late-medieval and early-modern officials in the state formation process.¹ Its contributors found that the administration of justice was controlled by a professionalised group of jurists by as early as the thirteenth century. This group grew in both numbers and importance as princes instituted systems of state taxation to finance professional armies and endemic warfare. These 'agents of the state', never a clearly defined social group, can be considered as 'part of the ruling classes of late medieval and early modern societies'.² Despite much comparative research on the 'rise of the modern state' and on state officials in the last decades, the structure of the

¹ I would like to thank Dr. John Watts (Corpus Christi College, Oxford) for his remarks.
² Genet 1990.
later-medieval state has not yet been thoroughly studied in relationship to its feudal origins. A key issue concerns the relationship between the prince and his agents. Was this still a personal tie, a sort of innovated vassal relationship? Or was it a new kind of depersonalised employment by the state? Furthermore, of crucial importance to Marxist historiography are the relations between this ‘modern state’ and the feudal mode of production. Marx claimed that the medieval state was ‘the organ of the nobility for keeping down the peasant serfs and villains’ but he and Engels also emphasised the relative autonomy of the feudal monarchy.3 Was the late-medieval Flemish state ‘a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination’ as Perry Anderson would have called it?4 Studying this specific case, I will argue for Genet’s concept of ‘state feudalism’ as a centralised set of political relations within a developed feudal society. Since Anderson’s classic, the study of Gintis and Bowles who treat the state under feudalism as an independent social force,5 and Haldon’s work on the state as appropriator of surplus in the ‘tributary mode of production’,6 very little has been written on the state in European feudalism. My approach is based on different theoretical foundations, elements of which I use that fit with the case of late-medieval Flanders. Firstly, I will show that Anderson was fundamentally right in considering this kind of state as a tool of feudal domination, but I also want to make use of Robert Brenner’s concept of ‘political accumulation’ as a model for late-medieval/early-modern state formation different from the approach of neo-Weberian war-driven state formation. Brenner considers these centralising feudal states as ‘tax-office states’.7 My account of the late-medieval ‘crisis of feudalism’ in Flanders, however, is largely derived from the work of Guy Bois and Erik Thoen.8 Finally, I will argue for an adaptation of Bourdieus concepts of ‘cultural’, ‘social’ and ‘symbolic’ capital to include symbolic relations and exchanges in my model of ‘state feudalism’ – relations which cannot be grasped through recourse to traditional Marxist concepts.

Taxes and the modern state

First of all, I agree with Susan Reynolds, in her 2003 debate with Rees Davies in the Journal of Historical Sociology, that there were indeed ‘states’ in medieval

3. Rigby 2004, p. 489, provides the relevant quotations from their work.
Europe. Reynolds amends Max Weber’s definition of a state as ‘an organization of human society within a more or less fixed area in which the ruler or governing body more or less successfully controls the legitimate use of force’. In this respect, late-medieval Flanders was indeed a state. Since the twelfth century, the counts were successful in centralising legitimate violence to the detriment of the local lords and their private feuds. A recent historiographical debate among medievalists and early-modern historians, however, centres on what has become known – perhaps in a somewhat confusing manner because of its Weberian ‘bureaucratic’ connotations – as the ‘modern state’, a political form that came into existence in Western Europe between about 1250 and 1350. In that period, princes and kings who faced continuous warfare started to appeal to all the inhabitants of their territories to contribute to the state’s defence with men and taxes. Genet and others define a modern state as a state which has taxation as its material base and which is accepted by political society (possibly by means of an institutionalised dialogue within a representative assembly such as the ‘estates’) in a territory larger than a city. The most successful modern states developed in those areas where feudal monarchies succeeded in making use of the social and economic dynamics of the feudal mode of production. The essence of the ‘modern state’ was dual. Its two main features were a fiscal monopoly built upon the centralisation of taxes which permitted princes to distribute money instead of land to their retainers, and the classical Weberian monopoly (or quasi-monopoly) of legitimate violence – be it material or ‘symbolic’. This included the construction of a more centralised administration of justice. This pure ideal-type state was in fact achieved nowhere between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries. The notion of ‘the modern state’ is therefore an empirical research model rather than a fully elaborated theoretical concept. It should be stressed, however, that this historian’s use of the term ‘modern state’ has nothing to do with Max Weber’s definition of the modern, bureaucratic and depersonalised state, but, because it is already widely used among medieval historians, I will maintain the use of this concept.

Alain Guerreau, for example, called the general dissemination of the new tax system the moment of the ‘birth of the modern state’. This phenomenon

10. Genet 1997, p. 6. Sometimes a more specific period of 1280–1340 is mentioned, but this makes very little difference for the arguments.
11. Though often used in different meanings, Pierre Bourdieu means by ‘symbolic violence’ the imposition of an arbitrary discourse – e.g. a state ideology – as a legitimate one.
gave rise to new types of social relationships which can neither be equated simply with the feudal forms of domination over land and people, nor with the previous systems of circulation of goods and division of labour. The economic crisis of the late Middle Ages incited princes to create a new tax system based on the partial centralisation of surplus extraction. Preparations for war triggered new taxes, which Charles Tilly considers the principal state-forming activities. In fact, according to him, taxes and war were one and the same factor. State fiscality was necessary to finance state violence, and state violence was necessary to crush resistance to taxation. Before the thirteenth century, princes had reinforced their position by strengthening their power as overlords, rather than by becoming stronger sovereigns. Direct income from the princely demesne then still exceeded taxes, tolls and other sovereign forms of extraction, as methods of extraction of social surplus-labour. In the age of ‘classical feudalism’ (eleventh and twelfth centuries) state power had been extremely fragmented over different lordships where lords ruled and exploited their subjects. Since the twelfth century, princes like the counts of Flanders started undermining the local lords’ power and centralising public force. Later, another important moment of change in state formation occurred with the transition from a still largely ‘patrimonial’ use of taxes in which a large part of public income was used to bribe possible competitors with gifts and pensions (thus legitimising taxes themselves), to a more impersonal or ‘bureaucratic’ use. In the meantime, fully-flanked state fiscality necessarily supposed the elimination or reduction of the fiscal aspirations of competing institutions, such as the church and the cities.

Supporters of the state

The support of at least a significant portion of most influential social groups was necessary for the rise of this ‘modern state’, which, for centuries, had to maintain a ‘balance’ between the military aristocracy and the urban bourgeoisie. The works of Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, and, to a certain extent, even Friedrich Engels in his famous phrase regarding the relative autonomy of the early-modern state, exhibit elements of

this necessary base of support. In his sketch of the arguments of these authors, Mann points out that the essence of absolutism implied that the monarch had enough means and people at his disposal to become completely independent of his most powerful subjects.21 However, an analysis of this ‘political society’ necessarily presupposes an analysis of the feudal mode of production in its transition phase, starting with the agrarian crisis that began in the thirteenth century, the same period that saw the beginning of the modern state.22 The later-medieval state formation process in Flanders, the object of my case study, must be considered within the context of the crisis of noble revenues and the simultaneous strengthening of the social and economic positions of the count and the urban bourgeoisie.23

However, in this article, I do not wish to engage in the classic debate over the mechanisms that brought about capitalism within feudal society.24 Instead, I want to focus on examining the specific relations within what Jean-Philippe Genet called ‘state feudalism’. Genet argues that Charles Tilly’s innovative analysis of the state formation process does not take into full consideration feudalism as a mode of production. Within this framework, Genet calls for the further elaboration of the concept of state feudalism, a social and political system functioning between roughly 1250 and 1700.25 Accounts of state formation that take as a starting point the social organisation of production and reproduction have indeed improved our understanding of the struggle for control over the state.26 As this perspective does not yet sufficiently explain the variety of state forms in regions with the same dominant mode of production, a further conceptualisation of political relations in feudal society seems necessary.27

Feudalism and féodalité

The classic definition of feudalism in the sense of féodalité, developed by Ganshof, is too legalistic. He considered the ‘feudo-vassalic’ system to be an institutional structure which regulated the retainer’s obligations, service and loyalty, to the lord and the lord’s obligations, protection and maintenance, to
the retainer.28 I use the term ‘feudalism’ in its Marxist sense; as a mode of production essentially characterised by a relation of exploitation between lords and subservient farmers – whether as serfs in a demesne structure or as free peasants. Land is the principal means of production and the surplus is expropriated from the direct producers, and this is fundamental, under extra-economic coercion.29 Dependent labour, domestic production units and even markets are other important features of the feudal mode of production.30 Perry Anderson adds some ‘superstructural’ elements, specific features of the feudal state and the Church, to the model of feudalism. He argues that political, juridical and ideological factors define the type of extra-economic coercion typical for variants of feudalism. In his view, precise forms of juridical dependence, property relations and sovereignty strongly characterised precapitalist societies.31 While utilising the ‘mode of production’ definition of feudalism, I will also focus on the ties of personal dependence between lord and retainer which are considered a crucial element in the non-Marxist definition of feudalism as féodalité.32 It follows that my use of the term ‘state feudalism’ does not denote an essentially new or different mode of production, nor a necessary transition phase on the road to capitalism. In this context, state feudalism will be defined as a specific variation in the set of social relations within the upper classes of feudal societies characterised by more centralised state structures.

Anderson thought that, during the growth phase of classic feudalism, from approximately 1000 to 1250, the expansion of production and circulation that took place within the framework of typically fragmented manorial class relations made serfdom untenable.33 In a later phase, to insure the dependence of the peasants and to defend the general interests of the landowning classes, a centralised monarchy was necessary. Anderson’s model of the ‘absolutist’ state thus bears a certain resemblance to the models outlined by theorists like Elias or Tilly, a similarity which derives from Engels’s concept of an autonomous state which attempted to mediate between nobles and bourgeois.34 Nevertheless, it was very clear to Anderson that the feudal nobility remained the true

28. Ganshof 1993, pp. 6–8. Ganshof’s views have been subjected to severe criticism by Reynolds 1994.
32. Brenner 1990, pp. 170–1 considers the different definitions of feudalism as complementary.
34. Teschke 2003, p. 157 calls this the ‘equilibrist-transitional’ perspective, referring to Engels’s statement that the absolutist monarchy ’held the balance between the nobility and the burghers’.
dominant class in this absolutist or 'modern' state. On the contrary, Robert Brenner, with Gintis and Bowles (see above), considered the centralised absolutist state (in France) as a relatively independent force and not as the mere expression of landowners' interests.35 This begs the question of the social and political relations within this centralised feudal state and with the rest of the dominant social groups in society, a problem I hope to solve with the elaboration of the concept of state feudalism.

The parcellisation of sovereignty typical for 'classical' feudalism was gradually overcome when later-medieval princes started consolidating their economic, political and military power internally and externally. The basic functions of the centralised feudal state were to maintain public order and to secure property rights, functions that also brought it the support of merchants. Larger states also brought about easier commerce and reduced transaction costs. The state, still not fully distinguished from the person of the prince himself, competed with the landed class in extracting surplus-product from the peasants. Landowners invested large parts of this surplus 'unproductively' in the construction of a more effective military and judicial apparatus, designed to increase the capacity for surplus-extraction. Brenner calls this 'political accumulation'.36 Princes invested parts of the surplus for building their state apparatus in salaries, pensions or gifts to officials. The economic, political, social and symbolic relations ultimately created with this 'state surplus' are the basis of this study. Though politically fundamental, these are relations on a micro-level rather than fundamental production relations representing a qualitative change in the social formation. My research shows that the period of Burgundian rule in late-medieval Flanders exemplifies these developments. I believe that the conclusions reached here apply also to other European areas in the late-medieval and early-modern period.

The crisis of feudalism in Flanders

Guy Bois has most clearly formulated the connection between the crisis of feudalism and the rise of medieval states.37 Bois argues that nobles who suffered losses of income caused by the agricultural crisis hoped to gain new fortune in princely service. This implies a more-or-less conscious class strategy of the landowners whose power vis-à-vis the peasants, organised in their village communities, had diminished, but the leading role of the 'state-building'

prince himself in this balance of forces cannot be underestimated either. The formation of state structures in Flanders can thus be analysed in the dynamic of the feudal mode of production. However, a class analysis of later-medieval Flanders should consider those features that differ from those of the dominant rural society in the Middle Ages; it is a feudal social formation with important commercial-capitalist elements and a considerable petty commodity production oriented toward the export of cloth. The most significant features are intensive agriculture with a very high productivity of the soil but a low productivity of labour, a high degree of urbanisation, a very important industrial sector and a high degree of personal and collective freedom. The later Middle Ages in Flanders, as in most parts of Europe, were furthermore characterised by mortality crises, demographic stagnation, a decreasing rate of feudal levy, widespread devastations from war and difficult economic reconversion movements in the export industries.

In his thorough analysis of the later-medieval crisis in Flanders, Erik Thoen argues that the ‘classic’ feudal period was characterised by low but increasing productivity, population growth, extension of arable land, a dominant exchange circulation, and forms of personal bondage or serfdom. By the fifteenth century, Flemish society had changed profoundly. Landowning classes could no longer increase or even maintain their income from feudal rents, clearly showing that the nobility suffered a decline during the late-medieval crisis. Lay lords saw their revenues diminishing as a result of both the devaluation of their income in fixed money rents, as the value of payment fixed by customs, dominant in Flanders, decreased, and the disintegration, fragmentation and decrease of family demesnes, the old reserves. The purchasing power of the noble class fell dramatically from the end of the thirteenth century onwards to approximately a fourth or fifth of its previous levels. Moreover, war, famines and epidemic diseases decimated the peasant population that tilled the nobles’ land. Such a demographic evolution naturally strengthened the class position of tenured peasants vis-à-vis the lords, whose income fell further due in part to diminishing agricultural prices, the decline

38. Thoen 2001; Nicholas 1992 and Blockmans and Prevenier 1999 give a detailed overview of social and economic conditions in the late-medieval county of Flanders. On the concept of merchant capitalism see Van Zanden 1993.
42. Boone and Prevenier 1993. However, Aerts and Van Cauwenbergh 1984 stress that the impact of the later-medieval crisis on urban trade and industry in Flanders was not as important as in some other regions.
of feudal services and seigniorial power; but, in the final analysis, the critical factor was the tendency of declining seigniorial profits. However, it is clear that this crisis did not have the same profound consequences in Flanders as it did in other parts of Europe where large areas of farmland were deserted, creating ‘lost villages’ [Wüstungen]. In Flanders, only individual farms were abandoned, but the thirteenth century did see a general contraction in agriculture.44 Farmland that had been brought into cultivation later and with less productive soils suffered from the ‘law of diminishing returns’. Peasants could not sufficiently manure fertile soils and progress in agricultural techniques stagnated. In the fourteenth century, inflation affecting fixed money rents became an even bigger problem for lords because of radical devaluations of coinage.45 In Flanders, however, as Thoen has shown,46 the biggest blow to the economic position of the lordly class was the decrease of seigniorial power. The prince and the large cities gradually broke the independent political and judicial power of the nobles, thus depriving them of important sources of income.

The strongest player in the game, however, was the prince. After 1165, the counts of Flanders belonging to the dynamic and centralising Alsatian dynasty expanded their prerogative to exercise higher justice beyond their own seigniorial holdings. During the later Middle Ages, they expanded their seigniorial power into more and more areas, thus dramatically weakening the position of the nobility.47 The comital dynasty also obtained the monopoly on warfare, insuring that Flemish nobles could no longer wage war in the service of foreign lords. In addition, from the fourteenth century, the growth of negotiated state taxation in the form of aides or beden, also increased comital power. From the eleventh century onwards, the Flemish counts steadily weakened the power of ecclesiastical advocati, nobles who protected churches and convents, and guaranteed protection of ecclesiastical institutions themselves, further increasing their sphere of influence.48 Moreover, during the thirteenth century, they managed to expand the comital demesne. Those nobles who possessed large seigneuries could cope with the economic crisis and absorbed the smaller manors of nobles with financial troubles. However, the burghers of the powerful Flemish cities dealt the final blow which eliminated the nobility once and for all as a real political force. It would never have a real representation in the estates of the county.

44. Thoen 1999.
45. Verhulst 1990.
48. For judicial and institutional aspects see Heirbaut 2001.
With the nobility drastically weakened as a class by 1300, the count had eliminated his original internal rivals and he now had to deal with the large towns, especially Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. Beginning in 1300, these cities systematically undermined further the judicial power of the nobility. The revenues which the lord did manage to preserve, such as fishing rights, rights on the use of water and the right to construct windmills or watermills, were important from a juridical or symbolic point of view but were not very profitable. Revenues from fines and tallia, seigniorial land taxes, were the principal judicial forms of income. Peasants paid these taxes in cash, which was useful for the lords who always needed a lot of money to bear the cost of a luxurious aristocratic lifestyle. Lacking a long term economic vision, many lords neglected, split up and often sold or gave away their demesnes. As Thoen has shown, in the rural districts of Aalst and Oudenaarde most noble families maintained only one self-supporting agricultural centre. Some successful nobles however managed to amalgamate newly acquired seigneuries with the older family possessions and granted other centres of exploitation in fief. Whatever was not directly necessary to provide for the vital needs of the lord was given out in fief or in fixed rent, a strategy which in the long run further weakened the economic position of the lords. This ‘crisis of the seigneurie’, as already observed by Marc Bloch for several parts of late-medieval Europe, was intensified in Flanders because the count and the cities had thoroughly undermined the judicial and policing functions of the lords who became a class of rentiers dependent on fixed revenues subject to inflationary pressure.

The rise of the state in Flanders

In feudal society, exploitation of peasants was based on a political and moral ‘extra-economic’ pressure, which meant that the weakening of the authority of lords also decreased their economic power. As the ideological position of the local lord as ‘protector of his peasants’ decayed, the power of the count as the guarantor of the public peace increased. Furthermore, declining rates of feudal levy and increasing urban wealth allowed the prince to raise the first state taxes, the aides, thus posing a serious competition to the taille or land tax paid to the local lords. In this way, the crisis of noble incomes again served to stimulate the judicial and administrative centralisation begun by the counts of

Flanders in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{52} During the later Middle Ages, the jurisdiction of local Flemish lords was reduced to minor criminal and civil cases. On the monetary level, princes had already gained the upper hand well before the later Middle Ages. In the field of political power, the greater vassals lost their automatic right of representation in the comital council, and henceforth the prince appointed all the members. In the Estates of Flanders, the nobility was barely represented, and the principal role was granted to the four ‘Members of Flanders’, who were the three major cities Ghent, Bruges and Ypres and the ‘Franc of Bruges’, the prosperous rural district around this city.\textsuperscript{53}

Burghers and princes survived the late-medieval crisis far better than the landed nobility did. Since the thirteenth century, the Flemish urban bourgeoisie succeeded in obtaining a large part of the land rent.\textsuperscript{54} The lesser nobility gradually sided increasingly with the count, who was more successful in preserving his revenues, largely because of urban commercial profits which the prince could partly siphon off in tolls. Thus, because re-subjugating the free Flemish peasants in a ‘feudal reaction’ seemed impossible, the fundamental class strategy of the weakened nobility was to associate themselves with the person of the prince in order to benefit from the rise of state income. At the same time, the age of petty warfare was over and the feudal class could no longer use it to drive up rent income. Wars between states replaced small-scale feudal warfare, and to cope with the almost continuous conflicts between states, armies grew larger and more professional.\textsuperscript{55} This, as we have seen, led to a more professional tax system. Fiscal income became ever more important during the later Middle Ages. By the fourteenth century, the counts of Flanders taxed all inhabitants directly, forbidding lesser lords to ask for \textit{aides}.\textsuperscript{56} Though the direct princely income from the Burgundian demesne remained important, the share of fiscal income in total ducal revenues grew significantly during the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{57} Smaller lords, having lost large parts of their revenues as a result of the crisis, could hope to regain some of their income by entering the service of the prince, but they had to vie for positions with bourgeois officials who were better skilled and more professional than the lords, who nevertheless still considered these bourgeois socially inferior. Commercial capitalists in the cities were also motivated to diversify their activities by holding princely office given the limited investment possibilities of the time. Flanders was not the only

\textsuperscript{52} De Gryse 1971, pp. 81–120.  
\textsuperscript{53} Blockmans 1978.  
\textsuperscript{54} Boone 1996.  
\textsuperscript{55} See Contamine 1984, for the social impact of war in the later Middle Ages.  
\textsuperscript{56} Zoete 1994, pp. 32–6; Heirbaut 2001, p. 32.  
\textsuperscript{57} Soens 2001, p. 25.
region to witness such evolution. Jean Kerhervé has established strikingly similar phenomena for the duchy of Brittany and other examples might be given.58

Moreover, since the thirteenth century, two apparently contradictory tendencies took place in the urbanised county of Flanders, the precise impact of which has not yet been fully established. Some nobles settled temporarily or permanently in the cities, while more and more burghers acquired landed property in the surrounding countryside. The bipolar paradigm that coming to the city equalled investment in trade and taking risks in a ‘capitalist spirit’, and that staying in the countryside was proof of a short-sighted conservatism is no longer viable. Urban capital penetrated the countryside gradually, beginning in the twelfth century with the development of the money economy which furthered the allotment of fiefs and broke the tie between feudal property and nobility. After the thirteenth century, Flemish roturiers, non-nobles, could possess fiefs. Clearly, burghers were not solely interested in landed property and revenues as such. For that, they could have held land in rent or lease, but fiefs brought along prestige, or the ‘symbolic capital’ described by Pierre Bourdieu. They also sought marriage alliances with noble families to acquire what Bourdieu calls ‘social capital’.59 More prosperous craftsmen also invested in land outside the city walls, to gain a supplementary food supply.60 Thoen argues that the expansion of the lease system, and especially of the short-term lease of individual plots in this same period, cannot be a coincidence. This more ‘rational’ type of leasing land would be a sign of ‘the infiltration of patrician capital in the countryside’.61 This meant that important parts of the urban upper classes acquired an objective class interest as large landowners and severed feudal ties with the prince.

By the twelfth century, the county of Flanders had a more dense administrative network, a growing money economy and a generalised system of commodity circulation, which were all the organisational and economic necessities for flexible tax collection.62 The military and political conflict with France and the reparatory damage that had to be paid resulted in a regular tax system of aides or beden, the ‘Transport of Flanders’. Negotiations over fiscal contributions by the large cities gave rise to the representative institution of the ‘Members of Flanders’, in which nobles and clergy were excluded, diverging from the dominant representation model of the Three Estates. Usually, the cities countered the fiscal demands of the count with political and economic

60. Dumolyn and Van Tricht 2000, Boone 1996.
62. Gintis and Bowles 1984, p. 34.
demands for monetary stability, peace, order and justice to ensure a stable economic climate, local autonomy and the safeguarding of their privileges. These institutions further promoted a specific ‘political culture’ of dialogue between the prince and his leading subjects, the ‘société politique’. Thus, late-medieval Flanders was an example of what historians have recently begun to call the ‘modern state’, with the distinctive features of the relatively strong power base of the urban classes (a patrician class of commercial capitalists and landowners and a contentious middle class of craftsmen) on the one hand and the weak economic and political position of the traditional landowning class, the nobility, on the other hand.

**An inflation of office-holders**

As they have done for most administrations in that century, historians have found an ‘inflation of officials’ in the administration of the Burgundian dukes who ruled Flanders as counts in the fifteenth century. Some historians have noted that this had begun in the fourteenth century under the counts of Flanders. However, few have posed the questions concerning the social origins of this phenomenon, while, in fact, this abundance of officials shows the social, economic and political importance of the formation of the modern state for the ruling class. Later-medieval and early-modern princes constantly promised or gave away offices ‘par inadvertance’ or ‘par importunité de requerans’ to unqualified persons, or to two or three persons at the same time. Even though a legalised office venality as in the case of classic French absolutism did not yet exist, they alienated parts of their demesne and further burdened their sources of income with all sorts of gifts and pensions. Of course, in those cases, the prince gave in ‘under pressure’ from his entourage. This kind of patronage is a fundamental feature of what Elias called the ‘court society’. Nevertheless, this fact has to be analysed from a broader social and economic perspective. With the development of the *aides* system, the financial management of the Burgundian state became in the words of Van Nieuwenhuysen, ‘un instrument de redistribution au bénéfice de la classe féodale d’une large fraction du prélèvement fiscal’. This is the basic social relation connected with early state formation: parts of collected taxes – and

---

64. Cockshaw 1982, p. 92.
other state revenues as well – were redistributed again. This mechanism shaped social groups that derived material advantages, power and prestige from this ‘state feudalism’, or a kind of ‘patrimonialism’ in Weberian terminology.69

Élite groups connected with the state had a vested interest in raising its extractive capacity. This implied the reinforcement of princely justice to protect property and to stimulate and secure commercial ties. This development created a certain community of interests between the officials, the commercial bourgeoisie and, to a certain extent, even the petty-commodity producers,70 expressed in terms of the medieval ideology of the ‘common weal’. Moreover, early state finance and state management had social and symbolic consequences as well. Within the upper layers of society, the mode of redistribution of government income determined the morphology of the new social groups who benefitted from the system. The redistribution of offices that were directly or indirectly profitable also reshuffled the accompanying sources of status and legitimacy. This, in turn, gave rise to patronage and factional struggle, and possibly conflicts between various local élites. These mechanisms of redistribution were essentially based on personal ties and therefore are considered ‘feudal’.71 The ruler built his power base on his personal relationship with different sectors of the ruling class, by means of the voluntary gift, a feudal donum which implied reciprocity.72 Once again, this means that this so-called ‘modern state’ had a structure of dominion that was not so ‘modern’ at all, in a Weberian sense of ‘impersonal’ or ‘bureaucratic’. This was, on the contrary, a ‘centralised feudal state’,73 the result of a concentration movement of power, people and means and quite different from the extreme fragmentation of state power in classical feudalism.74

State feudalism and political accumulation

The motor of the social and political system of state feudalism was essentially war waged with the fiscal levies of the state. In the feudal mode of production, wars should not be considered an external or even a ‘political’ element because they were a fundamental part of the internal logic of surplus extraction itself. Given the limited development of the forces of production, the struggle for

70. Gintis and Bowles 1984, p. 33.
73. Rucquoi 1990.
74. ‘Classical feudalism’ as described by Hilton 1983.
surplus product, often a direct military struggle, was frequently the most efficient income strategy for the ruling and landowning class. Benno Teschke calls this sociopolitical dynamic a ‘culture of war’, based on political accumulation.75 As Alex Callinicos argues, military struggle was the ‘rational response to the crisis of feudal production relations’.76 Taking a Brennerian viewpoint, we are thus less concerned with a class struggle between peasants and lords (be they princes, nobles, burghers or ecclesiastical institutions) than with competition within the different sectors of this ruling class. The exploiting class could only assure its own reproduction by appropriating the social surplus-product, the surplus above the level of subsistence of agrarian producers, under extra-economic pressure. Neither producers nor exploiters were fundamentally dependent on the market. Consequently, they were not under competitive pressure to raise productivity. This is, of course, from a Marxian point of view, the tendency to economic stagnation inherent in precapitalist modes of production.

Brenner argued, however, that this tendency did not mean that feudal societies did not or could not develop.77 He discerned the tendency to ‘political accumulation’, analogous to the process of capital accumulation that brings about ‘progress’ in ‘industrial society’. In this way, the military competition within the ruling class led to the rise of powerful states. The difficulties of raising agricultural income and productivity through investment stimulated lords and princes to expand their means of force in order to alienate income from subjects or lordly competitors. Callinicos has noticed a similarity between Brenner’s argument on political accumulation and Anderson’s suggestion that ‘war was possibly the most rational and rapid single mode of expansion of surplus extraction available for any given ruling class under feudalism’.78 From a contemporary liberal point of view, it was perfectly ‘rational’ to invest in a political and military apparatus, in an army and a bureaucracy. To compete with other lords and princes they had to maximise the volume and the efficiency of these investments. Hence, a qualitative difference between ‘classical’ feudalism and what Genet calls ‘state feudalism’ resulted from the structural changes in warfare and the stakes of that warfare. The only apparent difference between taxes (the new aides) and rents — in other words, whether the state or the lords appropriated surplus from the producers — was a difference within a certain mode of production. This is a political relation, a distinction in the mode of distribution of surplus. It makes no difference in the relationship

---

between producers and means of production. Society was still 'feudal', in the sense that surplus was expropriated from the producers by means of extraneous coercion, albeit now partly on the more centralised level of the state. The extremely fragmented state power typical of classical feudalism was now replaced by the centralised power of the prince, but this was still a form of feudal domination. Landlords, as well as office-holders, expropriated surplus-labour from peasants (and from the urban economy) in the form of rent and tax. Feudal state power on the level of the demesne had been undermined but this was compensated for by the strengthening of the princely state – the centralisation of feudal exploitation – which, in turn, redistributed wealth to its officials and to the important nobles. Teschke notes that the 'ebb and flow of feudal centralization and decentralization can be observed throughout the history of the European Middle Ages' based on this contradiction between lords and their retainers.

In other words, the institutional transformation from classical feudalism to state feudalism was not as much of a contrast as it may seem at first sight. The political and ideological framework conserved, in form and substance, many classical elements. State feudalism was just another, albeit more centralised, political articulation of the feudal mode of production, with 'political accumulation' providing surplus-product for a new class of princely officials and retainers. State feudalism shaped new types of social relationships among the officials and between them and the other broader layers of society. Wim Blockmans defined state feudalism as 'a continuation under a different form of the feudal hierarchy as integration system of the state'. In a similar fashion, Norbert Elias had interpreted the mutual and interdependent relationships between the early-modern prince and his courtiers, and his servants and officials in general, in terms of a continuation of feudal ties in a changed way. In the revised relationship between the prince and his officers, the classic symbolic reciprocity, which, Weber argued, was so distinctive for feudalism as compared to other patrimonial systems, still retained undeniable importance. Officials also swore classical feudal ties with the prince. In terms of Bourdieus theoretical model, these officials invested both economically and symbolically,
their ‘social capital’ (networks) and their ‘political capital’ (official state power and authority). Besides, the state benefited from such investments too, because they redefined the officials’ delegated state authority in the form of the ‘traditional and natural authority’ associated with the old nobility.

Robert Descimon called these transactions ‘the political economy of the office’, a system of social dominance and reproduction. 86 Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu gave a historical-genetic definition of the state as the culmination of a process of concentration of different types of ‘capital’, a broad category including different kinds of material and immaterial ‘resources’ such as ‘capital of coercion’, ‘economic capital’, ‘cultural’ or ‘information capital’, ‘social capital’ and ‘symbolic capital’. In his well-known relational sociological approach, he abandoned the economic/non-economic dichotomy for what he called an economy of ‘practices’ and ‘symbolic goods’ and presented the social world as a multi-dimensional space composed of power ‘fields’ in which actors and institutions hold a certain ‘position’ determined by their possession of capital. For instance, a diploma represents a certain amount of ‘cultural capital’ (knowledge, education, taste…) as well as a certain amount of ‘symbolic capital’ (the way, in this case, in which others perceive one’s cultural capital). To possess ‘social capital’ means having important social relations, being part of wider social networks. The statist concentration of capital forms, Bourdieu argues, was accompanied by the construction of corresponding fields and led to the rise of a specific ‘state capital’. This allowed the state to exercise power over the different fields and types of capital and particularly over the ‘exchange rate’ of these types. State-building, therefore, went hand in hand with the construction of a power-field within which actors and institutions struggle for state power, in other words for state capital, which, in its turn, gives them the power over the different other types of capital and their reproduction. 87 Following Bourdieu, I suggest integrating a ‘political economy’ of the office with its ‘symbolic economy’ into a model of state feudal relations. In my view, Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic exchange can enrich classical historical materialism if they are used within a model that gives primacy to what he would have called the ‘economic field’, i.e. the sphere of production. The attention for the ‘symbolic economy’ within the relations between the prince and his officials captures the features of this problematic which are overlooked by classical-Marxist approaches focusing mostly on socio-economic relations.

86. Descimon 1997, pp. 81 and 85.
A Bourdieusian model of state-feudal relations: the Flemish case

In my view, state feudalism maintained the principal features of the classic féodalité as a political system, and grafted itself onto the feudal mode of production when that system was in crisis. I have constructed a model of state feudal relationships. In this set of relationships, the most fundamental one is the relationship between prince and officials. It provides the ‘superstructure’ of a more centralised feudal state as the value of ‘rent’ diminished and the value of ‘taxes’ augmented. Fuelled by centralised surplus product from town and countryside, the prince accumulated political power and delegated it to his officials as ‘coercion capital’ to be invested by the latter in the other transactions depicted. The diagram can be read in different directions, because it integrates all the relationships between the prince, the official and the rest of society. In the life-cycle of a superior official, the social actor in the centre of all these exchanges and the original object of my study, the different transactions often changed in intensity. The thickness of the arrows could be varied dynamically to represent this. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these exchanges of capital does not mean that they necessarily had the same value in the context of the dominant social structures. These ‘exchange rates’ were subject to change as the relation between different social fields also changed. For instance, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a university degree, an example of cultural capital, grew in importance as a recruitment criterion at the expense of patronage for the career of officials. The value of each form of capital could differ depending on time and place.88

Clearly, the multi-causal character of this relational model does not imply a causal relativism as far as the genesis of objective structures that make up the background of these relations and transactions is concerned. In my view, the factor of ‘initial accumulation of capital’ in the process of state formation is the centralised appropriation of an increasing portion of surplus. For Marxists, what Bourdieu calls the ‘economic field’ had primacy over the ‘field of power’, even while the latter grew more and more autonomous. This means that the presence of a sufficient ‘state surplus’ was a necessary precondition for the establishment of an ‘officials’ state’, characterised by the relationships described above. The transfer of significant parts of the economic surplus from the prince to officials was the conditio sine qua non for the birth of these other relationships. Whether this was always a sufficient base as well will require further research. Given some contextual adaptations, I contend that this model is applicable to

88. I have shown that at least 43 per cent of fifteenth-century superior officials in Flanders went to university. Dumolyn 2003, pp. 190–1. See in general De Ridder-Symoens 1995.
**A MODEL OF CAPITAL EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS IN STATE FEUDALISM**

- **Prince**
  - Salaries, gifts, pensions (EC)
  - Loyalty (SC)
  - Credit (SC)
  - Hommage (SyC)
  - Protection (SyC)

- **Seigneurie**
  - Studies Knowledge Experience

- **Higher Official**
  - Studies Knowledge Experience
  - Salaries, gifts, pensions (EC)
  - Loyalty (SC)
  - Credit (SC)
  - Hommage (SyC)
  - Protection (SyC)

- **Patrimony**
  - (land, rents, fiefs, houses…)

- **Court Circles**
  - Nobility
  - Other upper officials

- **Colleagues**
  - Clients
  - Local institutions
  - Local networks

- **Lower Officials**
  - Clients
  - Local institutions
  - Local networks

- **Investments in art or the afterlife**

- **“Subjects”**

**Note:**
- EC = economic capital
- SyC = symbolic capital
- CC = cultural capital
- SC = social capital
many more late-medieval and early-modern states than to the Burgundian state and the county of Flanders alone. It shows how officials could use economic, social, political and symbolic capital mostly provided by the state to establish different sets of social relationships with other actors and institutions.

As both parts of the often ‘urbanised’ nobility and the often ‘ruralised’ urban patricians were integrated into the growing apparatus of the modern state, they formed a new ‘state-feudal’ class that took the cultural and symbolic forms of the traditional feudal ruling class. This creation of a new nobility, in its turn, would lead to the juridical phenomenon of the noblesse de robe. The redistribution of authority and surplus product shaped this new power elite – which, as I have shown in a prosopographical study on the fifteenth-century Flemish officers, was recruited from the lesser or newer nobility, the urban bourgeoisie, but also partially from established noble families. But this process also changed the structures of the broader ruling class. Traditional differences of estate became less important and a new kind of ‘state nobility’ or ‘service nobility’ developed, with a new kind of relation of reciprocity and dependence on the prince. As the model shows, the officials could offer their lord other capital forms besides feudal loyalty and service. They served to integrate local ruling classes to whom they were connected by their network relations, their ‘social capital’. They also provided service in finance, tax collecting, administration and dispensing of justice, their ‘administrative capital’; propaganda and legitimisation to assure the reproduction of the state, their ‘ideological capital’; and, last but not least, personal credit, parts of their ‘economic capital’. From the prince, they could expect direct financial benefits in the form of gifts in money or land, fixed salaries and pensions (‘economic capital’), and a part of delegated sovereignty, princely power and influence (‘state’ or ‘coercion capital’ with the accompanying symbolic capital), all of which they could again turn over into economic and social capital, thus reinforcing their own positions.

Analysing the political economy of the office clearly shows its relevance when analysing the riches of the officers. Prosopographical research on state officials in the later Middle Ages has in most cases hardly shown any interest for the composition of their personal fortunes or for the way they accumulated wealth. The relation between their delegated state power (their political or coercive capital) and its symbolic effects has seldom been explicitly explored. However, John Bartier’s classic historical study on the late-medieval officials of the dukes of Burgundy is an exception to this. Bartier argued that princely
service brought about enormous possibilities of enrichment, not primarily from salaries, but also because of the networking and foreknowledge their position afforded, which assured an advantageous position in the land market. In general, the important princely officers played all their trumps — money, state power, corruptibility, family and other social networks — to build up, extend and consolidate a landed patrimony. My study of the higher office holders of the Burgundian dukes in Flanders shows a similar pattern. Corruption, whether or not it was socially acceptable, played a key role in officials’ accumulation strategies. Others have often concluded that landed property was as important an investment for urban patricians as trade — and certainly a safer one. Officials, who often originated from the urban patriciate, naturally followed this strategy, and the investment in feudal land and seigniorial titles also brought about social mobility and ‘symbolic capital’ for the officials’ family. My study shows that Flemish officials usually possessed more than one important fief or seigneurie and that they were engaged in a family accumulation strategy based on landed property. Thus, the political and symbolic capital brought about by office-holding was transformed into private economic capital of the officer.

Officials cared not only for their own interests, but they were important ‘middlemen’ as well. Networks of patronage were crucial in holding together pre-bureaucratic states, and this was clearly the case in the Burgundian state. On all levels of society, people entered into a network of relationships within which material and symbolic goods and services were exchanged. An officials’ network extends both upwards and downwards. They acted as patrons for their own relatives, for lower-ranking officials, for persons committed to them through relationships of service, for the dominant élites of their own region or city of origin and for local institutions in general. In turn, the superior officials themselves were clients of the Burgundian aristocrats, the high nobility at the ducal court and the highest ranking officials, and in the last instance of the prince himself. One might even consider this type of ‘modern state’ as a series of power networks originating from the prince and his court, unifying élites in common interests.

Within this framework of power networks in the Burgundian state, patrons intervened in many ways to assist their clients. Patrons advanced clients’ careers, provided them with new offices, ecclesiastical prebends, ducal gifts, pensions or other material advantages and supported them in judicial and

93. For example, Boone 1996, p. 160.
administrative procedures. Sometimes they did so with their own means of power, and sometimes they 'opened doors' that led to the higher levels of power or even to the prince in person. Clients showed honour to their patrons, provided many services, and offered them bribes and material gifts. Above all, clients built a foundation for their patrons’ power, influence and prestige. In feudal society, the status of a man was still measured by the size of his retinue. Patronage was an important means for building, consolidating or making operational more or less durable networks, such as ‘family’, ‘local’, ‘ecclesiastical’ or ‘state’ networks, of which family networks usually were the most important. In every pre-industrial society kinship shaped the most enduring social relations. In late-medieval Flanders, significant larger ties of kinship extended around the nuclear family, which differed in form and function according to the social class of the family. The superior officials imitated the noble model of comprehensive and cohesive lignages. Within the context of their pursuit of upward social mobility and noble status, they developed a specific social mode of reproduction, marked by certain matrimonial strategies for themselves and their offspring. Marriages were also exchanges of different types of capital. Officials who had considerable political and economic capital at their disposal could offer this in return for the social and symbolic capital they would gain through a marriage to the daughter of an impoverished noble family. The duke himself supported social promotion of officials through alliances. In this strategy, women especially were largely reduced to passive objects of social transactions between families.

Conclusion

In his recent article on the place of the Netherlands in the transition to capitalism, Robert Brenner characterised the question of ‘exactly who constructed and who benefited from the rise of states’ in highly urbanised regions like Italy and the Netherlands as a ‘somewhat open question’. In his analysis, lords, princes and ‘collective lords’ like cities eliminated each other in a mutual competition marked by political accumulation. Lords invested in military, administrative and judicial means of power to drive up their revenues and to seize income from domestic and foreign competitors. Ultimately, only the strongest and most important lords remained in the game; those feudal princes or ‘states’ – which Brenner calls ‘absolutist tax-office states’ – that could generate the strongest extra-economic pressure to appropriate surplus from the direct producers in a centralised manner. I suggest situating these ‘tax-
office states’ in the context of the system of ‘state feudalism’ as a centralised political articulation of the feudal mode of production.

To build states, rulers and their agents used huge amounts of resources and particularly military resources such as people, arms, transport and food. However, these riches and this labour-power were mainly embedded in other social relations and institutions such as demesnes, ecclesiastical institutions, feudal relations, village communities, neighbourhoods and households. Thus, the state had to cope with the challenge of appropriating these resources and insuring their reproduction at the same time, so that they could be appropriated in the future as well. Moreover, the growing complexity of social and economic life as a result of increasing commercial-capitalist and petty-commodity production tendencies posed the objective necessity of structuring an improved state apparatus to secure commercial routes, more efficient administration, a justice system, the maintenance of public order and the repression of large-scale collective action. The essence of the so-called ‘modern state’ that arose in the later Middle Ages can thus be reduced to two central features which in fact are one and the same: the fiscal monopoly that centralised taxes and permitted the prince to distribute money instead of land, and the (quasi-)monopoly on legitimate material and symbolic violence. Thus, the ‘economic capital’ extracted on a centralised level could be transformed into social, cultural, administrative and symbolic types of capital. In this sense, we can integrate a Brennerian analysis of state formation into a Bourdieusian model of ‘capital’ exchanges.

In the final analysis, so-called modern states grew not from an external force like a ‘rationalisation process’ under the influence of Roman law but, rather, as a result of internal contradictions within feudalism. Brenner’s question can now be clearly answered: apart from the prince himself those who benefited materially and symbolically from state formation were the officials and their families, as important members of a renovated feudal ruling class. In this sense, Perry Anderson was correct to consider such a state as a redeployed apparatus of noble domination, though the nobility itself was changing in form and function and attracted many new families originating from the urban bourgeoisie and the officials of the princely state and, though this process, was largely initiated and controlled by the prince himself. What historians have come to call the ‘modern state’ arose within a social and political system which influenced, in its turn, the further development of the state as a network of

96. Tilly 1990, p. 131.
97. On the relationship between Bourdieu and Marxism, see the contributions in Bidet (ed.) 1996.
relationships. In my view, ‘state feudalism’ is the most appropriate concept for this ‘absolutism’ which was actually never ‘absolute’, in the sense that officials on all levels of the administration were always a force to be reckoned with. Political power, though more centralised, was still in the hands of the ruling dynasty and thus personalised. Historians such as Jean-Philippe Genet, Guy Bois or Wim Blockmans touched upon the notion of state feudalism, but, until now, there had been no systematic elaboration of this concept. It must be stressed, however, that state feudalism is not a new mode of production but only a specific set of political relations within a developed and centralised feudal society. The research of scholars such as Mattéoni and Kerhervé for other parts of the kingdom of France suggests similar processes of state formation in which the emerging social group of officials played a crucial role in the feudal mode of production. I suggest that the relational model discussed above can provide a tool for further empirical research on the shape feudal relations took in their developed centralised form.

References


Boone, Marc and Walter Prevenier 1993, *La Draperie ancienne des Pays-Bas: débouchés et stratégies de survie (14e–16e siècles)*, Leuven: Garant.


Abstract
As an accompaniment to the translation into English of Louis Althusser’s ‘Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, March 18th, 1966’, this note provides the historical and theoretical context necessary to understand Althusser’s ‘anti-humanist’ interventions into French Communist Party policy decisions during the mid-1960s. Because nowhere else in Althusser’s published writings do we see as clearly the political stakes involved in his philosophical project, nor the way in which this project evolved from a ‘theoreticist’ pursuit into a more practical one, the note also argues that the letter is of importance to Althusser scholars, to historians of Marxist thought, and to those interested in the relevance of Althusser’s work to contemporary Marxist philosophy.

Keywords
Aragon, Althusser, Garaudy, communism, humanism, Marxism, philosophy, politics

On 13 March 1966, after three days of deliberation, the Central Committee of the French Communist Party (PCF) unanimously adopted a ‘Resolution on Ideological and Cultural Problems’. Ostensibly taking as its subject the relations between the PCF, intellectuals, and culture, this resolution was viewed by many as the moment when the PCF officially abandoned its Stalinist legacy and sought to better integrate itself into French and Western-European political life. To those more interested in French Marxist philosophy than French Marxist politics, this document is also remembered as the text that delivered the Party’s statement on the ‘Humanist Controversy’. In this mode, it served not only as a resolution on the relationship among the PCF, intellectuals, and culture, but also as a resolution of the debates among Party intellectuals.
competing to have their revisions to Marxist-Leninist theory adopted as the PCF’s official philosophy.

As prominent intellectuals and PCF Central Committee members, Louis Aragon and Roger Garaudy both participated in preliminary talks about the merits of humanist versus anti-humanist philosophies and in the three days of discussion, writing, and revision that immediately preceded the resolution’s adoption. Records of these debates clearly indicate that these two intellectuals had their say, that they were heard, and that their voices informed the final document. However, because he was not, like Aragon and Garaudy, a Central Committee member, one of the controversy’s principal protagonists was never heard from directly, and this despite the fact that he had originated the anti-humanist position. This intellectual was Louis Althusser.

Though shut out from participating in the series of debates that preceded the resolution (except by proxy and this only during preliminary discussions), Louis Althusser followed each exchange quite closely. He did so because he believed that literally everything was at stake with the resolution. This feeling about the resolution’s importance was not limited to Althusser, or even to the intellectuals in competition with him for theoretical hegemony in the Party, but was widely shared among Central Committee members.3 Party members who were thoughtful and cared about the future of the PCF recognised this resolution as the culmination of the long period of introspection occasioned by Khrushchev’s 1956 ‘Secret Speech’ at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Long in coming, the resolution was intended to define the Party’s post-Stalinist direction.4 At stake, then, were not only the dynamics among intellectuals, the Party, and culture, but also the Party’s self-understanding. This was true in terms of its philosophy and with regard to its place in the domestic and international political landscape.

With no direct access to the Central Committee as it met for three days in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil to draft the resolution, Althusser was placed in a reactive position. When the document appeared in Party daily L’Humanité on 15 March and Althusser discovered that, in the main, it did not include his anti-humanist position, he had basically two options. Given his position at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), the first was to respond as an academic philosopher, authoring articles and books elucidating his anti-humanist Marxism and, thereby, indirectly demonstrating that the Party that claimed to be the instantiation of Marxist philosophy misunderstood this very philosophy.

---

Indeed, there is evidence that Althusser took this approach, seeking in work intended for publication to better support his arguments such that, eventually, everyone – including the Central Committee – would be won over to his understanding of Marxism. Most of this work went unpublished during Althusser’s lifetime.5

Given his status as public intellectual and party member, the second option open to Althusser was to respond to the Central Committee directly. No doubt, this alternative might have had a more immediate effect than the other option, and it was pursued by Althusser – albeit in an even more abortive fashion than his attempts at academic refutation. Having carefully read the resolution as well as seemingly every published intervention [position paper] delivered by committee members during the Argenteuil discussions,6 Althusser took great pains to draft a letter to the Central Committee registering his objections to the resolution. In this letter, he sought to reveal its primary contradiction and to make plain its numerous theoretical errors. In addition, he attempted to indicate how the theoretical mistakes made in the resolution would lead the Party to tactical errors. Unlike the work intended for academic audiences, which did, in part, see the light of day, and had some effect on academic Marxist theory, this letter was probably never sent and it never found its audience.7

Whether the excuse for not sending his missive was depression, cowardice, or Althusser’s habitual invocation of ‘the conjuncture’, this dispatch was and remains a document of some importance to Althusser scholars, to historians of Marxist thought, and to those interested in the relevance of Althusser’s work to Marxist philosophy today. In this letter, and in the course of ‘correcting’ the Party’s incorrect theses on the proper reading of Marx, Althusser states quite clearly his position on the way in which Marx must be read if one wishes to

5. The bulk of Althusser’s work in this regard has been translated and published posthumously as ‘The Humanist Controversy’ in Althusser 2003, pp. 221–307. A small part of this text was excerpted by Althusser for the essay titled ‘Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel’ that appeared in Althusser 1972. This was the only part of Althusser’s efforts to clarify his anti-humanist position to see publication during his lifetime.

6. These published interventions and Althusser’s marginal notes on them are preserved in his archive, see: ALT2.A43-04.04, Fonds Althusser, Institut Mémoire de l’Édition Contemporaine, Paris, France.

7. In writing this note, ten primary and eight secondary accounts of the humanist controversy were reviewed. Three of these secondary accounts consulted PCF archives. Not one mentions the Central Committee as having received this letter. All, however, remark on the centrality of Althusser’s position in the debates and it is relatively certain that, had such a letter been sent, it would have been discussed. In his correspondence from the time and in his recollections of the controversy afterwards, Althusser mentions writing the letter but does not mention having sent it or having received a response.
avoid a return to Stalinism or a politically hazardous detour into humanist Marxism. Of course, this hermeneutic strategy is developed elsewhere by Althusser and in a more sophisticated way. However, nowhere in his published writings do we see as clearly the political stakes involved in Althusser’s philosophical project, nor can we see the way in which this project evolved from a ‘theoreticist’ project into a more practical one. As G.M. Goshgarian notes in his introduction to *The Humanist Controversy*, Althusser’s dealings with the Party between 1966–7 were crucial to the development of his thought. Written in 1966, when Althusser was perhaps most involved with trying to re-direct the Party, this document represents a crucial link between the Althusser of *Reading ‘Capital’* and the Althusser of *Lenin and Philosophy*. Inasmuch as, with this text, we see an example of philosophy working to criticise and challenge ideological notions about the world and thereby to inform political practice, it can also be seen to perform that function which Althusser will claim, in the writings recently compiled as *Philosophy of the Encounter*, to be the proper role of materialist philosophy. To the extent that it does this, it allows us to see how such engaged theory might function today.

As it was written in response to a specific resolution, at a specific moment, and from a specific place, one cannot read this letter as pure political philosophy. Yes, Althusser does opine in it about the nature of the political world, about the ‘essence’ of man, and about the difference between truth and ideology. However, he also writes about how Marxist principles and concepts demand a specific course of action, at a particular historical moment, and in a particular place. While these concerns certainly make the letter of more than philosophical interest, they also make it harder to engage with its ideas. Especially as the moment that Althusser sought to intervene into is, today, rather remote, before we identify the specific theoretical positions that inform the resolution it is probably best to review what was at stake in its adoption. Having accomplished this, it should then be possible to consider Althusser’s reaction to the resolution and to demonstrate how this reaction is informed by the arguments he advanced in his work from the early 1960s. Finally, this note will show how this reaction represents an instance of philosophy informing political practice, a move that Althusser will later champion as the role for philosophy but that is undertaken here without a conscious understanding of its proper function.

If the debates at Argenteuil and the resolution that resulted from them were about how the PCF would de-Stalinise, then the Central Committee had much to consider in this regard. Not only did it have to articulate a new party

---
philosophy – one which could replace Stalinist ‘diamat’ – but it also had to think about how any new positions it took would inform and influence its political affiliations. Domestically, this meant worrying about its connection not only to the broader French Left but also to that group of which it had always considered itself to be the representative, the working class. Further complicating these considerations was the problem of its rapport with an increasingly important group with which it had historically enjoyed a troubled relationship, intellectuals. This group had recently been expanded by the PCF to include not only scientists, academics, artists, and students but also professionals such as teachers, architects, and engineers. Given that these sub-groups often identified (or failed to identify) with the PCF for quite different reasons, the range of domestic relationships that the PCF had to reconsider was dizzying. No less complex were its international affiliations. Though still following Moscow’s lead and desirous of maintaining a close relationship with the CPSU, Russia’s policy reversals, its squabbles with China, its treatment of artists and intellectuals, and its unpopular military and diplomatic actions made it difficult for the French Party to align itself with the Soviet Union in the way it had done for nearly half a century.

Along with domestic and international relations, also under review at Argenteuil was the Party’s automatic seconding of Stalin’s interpretation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. After 1956, it was no longer an easy task to defend a theory of history which insisted that the Soviet Union was the historical agent preordained to lead the world to communism. Nor was it easy to accept this theory’s corollary, that every national Communist party must unquestionably support the CPSU’s actions. Also difficult to swallow was the epistemology promulgated by Stalin and Zhdanov and justified by the aforementioned philosophy of history, which insisted on the ideological character of all proletarian thought and on the infallibility of proletarian knowledge. When the Soviet Union’s claims to be the ultimate exemplar of an enlightened, egalitarian, free, and prosperous nation were belied by Khrushchev’s speech and by the Soviet invasion of Hungary, each of these theories – as well as the distinctions and principles that undergirded them – became suspect.

If Stalinism had become increasingly unpalatable even to long-serving members of the French Communist Party, then one can only guess at its lack of appeal to new members and to potential sympathisers. Reform was needed. Though carried by Stalinist inertia for four years, the PCF did begin in the early 1960s to consider and debate substantive changes. Still very much tied

to the Soviets, this reflection was encouraged in 1961 by the Twenty-Second Congress of the CPSU, where the Party announced the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat and suggested that there were many possible routes to socialism. This reconsideration was also accelerated in the middle of the decade by the death of the long-serving French Communist Party General Secretary Maurice Thorez and by Waldeck Rochet’s assumption of the position in 1964.

In addition to both internal and external pressures to reform and to the domestic, international, and philosophical concerns detailed above, the PCF had a bevy of other issues to address with the Argenteuil resolution. Following some hesitant moves towards affiliation that it had begun in 1961, by mid-decade, the PCF leadership had judged that, in a union with the broader Left, it had a chance of obtaining a parliamentary majority and of instituting reforms. Further tilting the Party away from international issues, and therefore away from Moscow, was a change in its economic analysis. No longer did the PCF hew to a global theory of imperialism. Instead, it was moving to endorse the theory of ‘state monopoly capitalism’. Because this theory focused on the relationship between French industry and the French state as the nexus of wealth concentration and as the cause of class division, the importance of domestic issues in PCF politics was naturally foregrounded.

Though new political possibilities and new economic theses drove the resolution’s drafters to consider the PCF’s domestic situation in a new light, it was a queer kind of international relation – one mostly engaged in by dissident Party members – that drove the Central Committee to reflect on matters philosophical. Because PCF members and potential sympathisers were well aware of, and often sympathetic to, the possibilities for party constitution and theoretical reform evidenced by the Chinese and Italian Parties, the PCF’s long tradition of shadowing every Soviet thought and gesture was thrown into unflattering relief. In an era when the Italian Communist Party had successfully instituted democratic reforms and when China had embraced a policy of total cultural reform and renewal, the French Party’s long-standing practice of democratic centralism and of taking direction exclusively from Moscow appeared as anachronistic as its insistence that French workers were becoming increasingly impoverished.

Despite frequent statements concerning the ‘revisionism’ of the Italians and against the ‘dogmatism’ of the Chinese, the Party was well aware that these positions had attracted many of its most dynamic and visible members. Even

if they did not have a clear grasp of the theories supporting the accomplishments
of Togliatti and Mao, students at France’s *grandes écoles* evinced a particular
fascination with these alternative formulations of Marxism-Leninism. As
factions were forming within the PCF between those members who stuck to
the party line and those (mostly students and intellectuals) who looked to
Italian and Chinese models for theoretical inspiration, the French Communist
Party reflected dissensions within the international Communist movement.15

By mid-decade, foreign influences were not the only causes of a philosophical
crisis within the PCF. The discrediting of Stalinist *diamat* as well as the opening
of party theoretical journals and presses to multiple perspectives at the beginning
of the 1960s allowed a limited plurality of alternatives to Stalin’s interpretation
of Marxist-Leninist philosophy to be aired and debated. Sometimes, these
revisions lined up with foreign theories, sometimes they did not. For instance,
Garaudy’s humanism was occasionally labelled ‘Italian’ while Althusser’s anti-
humanism was often decried as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Maoist’. Even when they did not
follow foreign patterns, these alternatives were identified by the Party leadership
as either ‘dogmatist’ or ‘revisionist’ and criticised for their separation of theory
from practice.16 Despite the PCF’s initial reaction to these new interpretations
of Marxism, it was apparent by the early 1960s that the Party needed openly
to repudiate *diamat* and to endorse an alternative if it wanted to attract and
retain those members who thought philosophy to be important for the
Communist movement. For the most part, these were intellectuals.

Recognising this need for philosophical reform, the party press Éditions
Sociales released a new summary of Marxist philosophy in 1962.17 This official
statement, however, did not quell debate. Soon after its release, the party
leadership found itself faced with the need to make a choice between the
various ‘dogmatist’ and ‘revisionist’ philosophies being aired by prominent
intellectuals associated with the Party. After a period that included incredibly
well-attended public debates as well as more intimate discussions between
party philosophers, progressive theologians, and non-party left intellectuals,18
the Party settled on Garaudy’s socialist humanism as its official philosophy
and on Garaudy as its party philosopher.19 Militating against this settlement
of opinion, though, were two tensions within the Party. One was caused by
students and intellectuals desirous of revisions that were more radical and

---

17. Rochet 1962.
more philosophically substantive than Garaudy was prepared to offer. Another challenge to the official approbation of Garaudy’s humanism was the party leadership’s own workerist bias. This bias tended to reinforce the view that, despite being founded and led by intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the Party did not need these figures now because the Party was itself a type of ‘collective intellectual that brings socialism to the working class and to the people’. Being its own organic intellectual, the Party did not need bourgeois professors or poets to tell it what to think or what to do.

When, in May 1964, Waldeck Rochet formally resurrected the idea of a Union of the Left at the PCF’s Seventeenth Congress, the unsettled state of the Party’s philosophy became a practical problem. As the Socialists and other left parties had been burned many times before by a PCF whose allegiance to the Soviet Union and to international Communism came before any domestic union, they needed abundant reassurance that the Communists had changed. Garaudy’s ethic of dialogue and his philosophy of socialist humanism probably went a long way towards mending theoretical and political fences. Nevertheless, there was still the Party’s workerist bias to contend with, as well as the pressure on the Party by intellectuals for more radical and substantive revisions (as well as for ones more in keeping with its traditions). The force of these tensions was certainly felt at the series of discussions on culture and class that followed the Seventeenth Congress. Also, and perhaps more prominently, the tension among intellectuals was evidenced in the Party’s leading theoretical journal, La Nouvelle Critique, where thinkers espousing the humanist position debated those defending anti-humanism. Further disturbing the Party’s attempt to present a unified, predictable, and benign face to the broader Left was the publication in autumn 1965 of Louis Althusser’s books For Marx and Reading ‘Capital’. Though published by a ‘dissent’ press, these books were written by a somewhat prominent party member and they seemed to attack many of the ideals and principles held dear by socialists and other humanists.

Sensing the need for the PCF to resolve these issues if it wanted to move forward with a politics of unity, Waldeck Rochet organised a meeting of party philosophers to discuss the Party’s (theoretical) identity problem. Held at Choisy-le-Roi in January 1966, these discussions had the goal of ‘testing, through the exchange of many perspectives, theoretical questions currently being debated by communist philosophers and the setting out of the conditions

---

for the collective work in which each comrade can bring his particular contribution'.


25. Lucien Sève as quoted by François Matheron in Matheron 2000, p. 171.


27. This text appeared in English as ‘Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle’ in Althusser 1990, pp. 1–43.


30. Edited official transcripts of these interventions appeared in Cahiers du communisme, 5–6 (May–June 1966): 9–263. Unexpurgated tape recordings of these interventions are retained in the PCF archives and, in at least one case, the trouble has been taken to compare the original to its official version. For this comparison, see Léo Figuères, ‘Aragon and the resolution of the Comité central d’Argenteuil’, and Aragon 2000, pp. 135–52.

31. One of the chief sources for this note, Les Annales de la Société des amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, 2, includes a half-dozen such accounts.
In charge of the document’s drafting as well as a member of the Central Committee and the Political Bureau, Louis Aragon was perhaps in the best position to influence the resolution. That he was widely celebrated in France for his literary work and was a confidant of both Maurice Thorez and Waldeck Rochet could only have amplified his voice at Argenteuil.\(^ {32} \) As resolutely anti-Stalinist as anyone else on the Central Committee and as committed to the Party, Aragon desired a resolution expressive of a theory that supported a strong, united organisation but which would avoid the dogmatism, rigidity, and exclusivity that Stalin’s theory demanded.\(^ {33} \) Because he believed that culture is advanced by scientists and artists, he also wanted to see the document state that intellectuals are as essential to the revolution as the proletariat. Given the importance he attributed to ‘intellectual workers’, he was also particularly concerned about their status in the Party and their freedom to pursue research. Despite this concern, Aragon also maintained that the need for political expediency trumped every other demand, including that of freedom of research.\(^ {34} \) Each of these ideas shows up in the completed resolution, some implicitly, others explicitly. However, insofar as each of these opinions reveal themselves in the resolution’s repeated references to man as creator, none is quite so explicit as Aragon’s idea of the link between cultural achievement and revolution.

Having a rather low opinion of philosophical speculation, Aragon’s ‘philosophy’ was derived more from sentiment than from rational argument.\(^ {35} \) This view of philosophy as well as his beliefs about the role of the Party and the status of culture would obviously pitch Aragon against someone like Althusser, who thought that philosophy or ‘theory’ was the most important thing for the Party and who doubted that ‘culture’ could do anything more than reproduce itself.\(^ {36} \) Therefore, it is not surprising that Aragon attacked Althusser’s philosophy both during his intervention at Argenteuil and in a letter sent to Waldeck Rochet two months before the meeting.\(^ {37} \) The attacks bear more than a passing resemblance to the charges Meletus levelled at Socrates. Repeating the accusations of ‘corrupting the youth’ and of ‘impiety’, Aragon chastised Althusser for his encouragement of ‘Maoist’ students at the ENS and for insisting on the importance of philosophical ideals over against the demands of political facts\(^ {38} \) – not crimes against the city but against the Party. Aragon

\(^{32} \) Juquin 2000, p. 87.
\(^{33} \) Juquin, 2000, pp. 87–9.
\(^{34} \) Louis Aragon in a letter to Waldeck Rochet quoted by Juquin 2000, p. 100, (see also pp. 87, 98).
\(^{35} \) Bowd 1999, p. 64.
\(^{36} \) Aragon 2000, pp. 135–6.
\(^{37} \) Aragon 2000, pp. 131–4.
\(^{38} \) Juquin 2000, pp. 100–2.
believed that Althusser’s philosophy weakened the PCF politically and he argued that Althusser’s emphasis on the importance of theory would result in the Party’s domination by a ‘technocratic-theoretical’ elite. He alleged as well that the PCF’s politics – especially its politics of unity – would suffer from this domination.

While Aragon was perhaps at the peak of his influence in 1966, Garaudy’s was on the wane. Were it not for Althusser’s challenge to his socialist humanism, a Party that had grown less and less enthusiastic about his philosophical concessions to the Socialists and to the Christian Left might have already marginalised Garaudy. Althusser’s theoretical intervention, however, provided Garaudy with a new platform for his humanism. This renewed prominence permitted him to play a substantial role in the discussions at Argenteuil and Choisy. While never enamoured with his humanist philosophy, Aragon sought an alliance with Garaudy during the debates in order to create a block that would resist not only Althusser’s anti-humanist theory but also any retrenchment by the Party in Stalinist orthodoxy. Given the Party’s inertia, this retrenchment looked all too easy for it to carry out. By teaming up with Garaudy and other ‘humanists’, Aragon was able to argue more effectively for his vision of ‘socialism with a human face’ and to push de-Stalinisation to its limits.

Because Garaudy’s humanist philosophy fitted well with Aragon’s estimation of the vast creative powers of the human spirit, this alliance proved to be a strong one. Though Garaudy was by 1966 no longer the ‘party philosopher’, he still sat on the Central Committee and was director of the Centre d’Études et de Recherches Marxistes. While the former position gave him access to PCF leadership, the latter gave him oversight of the Party’s theoretical journals. As fervent an anti-Stalinist as he was once a Stalinist, Garaudy had for years been arguing for increased philosophical pluralism within the Party and for opening up the PCF theoretically and politically to outside influences. In contrast to Aragon’s positions, these ideas were philosophically supported. Having wholeheartedly embraced Marx’s early work as his true philosophy, Garaudy developed a humanist Marxism that made use of notions he found in works like the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’ (1843) and The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 such as ‘species being’, ‘alienation’, ‘disalienation’, and ‘whole man’. With these notions, Garaudy

---

40. Sève 2000, p. 64.
41. Sève 2000, pp. 69, 70.
43. For an example of Garaudy’s Stalinist phase see Garaudy 1948, p. 31. For an example of the about-face turn to anti-Stalinism, see Garaudy 1960.
44. See G.M. Goshgarian’s endnote to Althusser 2003, p. 219, n. 10.
constructed a philosophical anthropology in which man is described as being in the process of overcoming his alienation through acts of self-creation. To this philosophy of history, Garaudy added an epistemology which he intended to function as an alternative to Stalin's theory of knowledge. Thus, rather than maintaining with Stalin and Zhidanov that only the proletariat held true knowledge about the world, Garaudy argued that all classes and all peoples potentially possess knowledge that may be useful to humanity in its struggle to overcome alienation. In addition, he specified that the way to access this knowledge and to make use of it practically was through dialogue and collective action. Though Garaudy's philosophy does not come across in the document as explicitly as do Aragon's positions, it is quite visible in the resolution's endorsement of humanism, in its frequent mention of the 'whole man', and in its calls for the pursuit of socialist goals by diverse paths.

In contrast to his own humanism as well as to the Stalinist tradition of economism, Garaudy viewed Althusser's Marxism as an 'aberration'. Like Aragon, he believed that Althusser put far too much emphasis on the importance of theory. Garaudy was especially outraged by Althusser's hierarchisation of practices, a ranking that put philosophy on top as the 'theory of theoretical practices' and which subsumed politics beneath it. As for the gambit that followed from this hierarchisation, namely, to have theorists lead the Party, Garaudy saw it as a deliberate attempt on Althusser's part to reject the 'criterion of practice' and publicly chastised him for this mistake, reminding the wayward professor that 'the fundamental responsibility for every Communist is neither theoretical nor scientific, it is his responsibility with regard to the Party'.

Given Althusser's absence during the resolution's drafting and considering Garaudy's and Aragon's dominance of the meeting at Argenteuil, it is a bit of a surprise that Althusser's positions make any appearance at all in the completed document. The wide dissemination of his arguments, his status with young intellectuals, his wider prestige, and the fact that – in at least one respect – his goals for party reform were not incompatible with Aragon's were enough, however, to ensure that Althusser enjoyed some support on the Committee and that some of his ideas were present in the document. This influence is evident where the resolution seconds Althusser's understanding of historical and dialectical materialism with its statement that Marxism is founded on a

46. Matheron 2000, p. 171.
47. Goshgarian 2003, pp. xi–xii.
49. See especially the intervention of Michel Simon 1966, pp.109–35. Simon's comments on why he was not even more supportive of Althusser's position appear in Matonti 2005, p. 105.
‘rigorously scientific conception of the world’. It is also evident in its declaration that ‘incumbent on Marxist-Leninist parties is the responsibility for theory’. With Althusser being as hostile to Zhdanovism as Aragon, his understanding of historical materialism also comes through in the resolution’s calls for freedom of scientific research. Indeed, it is on this position where the sentiments of the maître à penser and the grand écrivain are most in accord (though for different reasons).

As with every other Althusserian position that found its way into the document, surrounding statements weaken the full impact of this call for freedom of research. For example, the resolution’s unwillingness to distinguish scientific from artistic pursuits blunts Althusser’s call for a social-scientific research agenda that might come to direct party action. Likewise, whereas Althusser would have insisted that those most capable of discharging the Party’s ‘responsibility for theory’ are professional theorists, the final document distorts this position (and evidences the Party’s workerist bias) with the specification that theory is the responsibility ‘of intellectuals just as much as it is of workers and peasants’.

Finally, in the most glaring instance of the erosion of Althusser’s platform, the resolution precedes its declaration that Marxism is an objective science by an affirmation that Marxism is a type of humanism. For Althusser the anti-humanist, Marxism’s scientific status means that it cannot make use of pre-scientific, ideological, or mystical notions like ‘human being’, ‘human essence’, and ‘humanity’s goal’. It is the repeated modification of his philosophical positions, such as the combination of scientific concepts with ideological ones, that appears to have really set Althusser off when he first read the resolution. As it contains in germ most of the arguments that he made in the finished letter to the Central Committee presented here, a note that he wrote to the Cercle Politzer (his Marxist study group at the ENS) probably best represents Althusser’s first reaction to the resolution. The analysis is very harsh in tone and pulls no punches in its criticism of the Central Committee for its ‘theoretical compromise’, for its endorsement of ‘spiritualism’, and for its failure to admonish Garaudy sufficiently. Though much lengthier and not nearly so devoid of politesse as the note to the Cercle Politzer, the first draft of Althusser’s letter to the Central Committee differs little in content and tone. However, now added to the memo’s criticisms of Garaudy and its charge of theoretical compromise are personal pleas for consideration, extended exegeses of the resolution’s main points, and references to canonical Marxist

52. Althusser 1966.
Also added is a healthy dose of sarcasm. Though, after three additional
drafts, it is much refined and augmented, this initial draft’s agreements,
exegeses, and earnestness also characterise the completed letter. Largely missing
from this fifth and final draft, however, are the personal pleas and the sarcastic
tone that mark the initial attempt. From a comparison of all the drafts, the
seriousness with which Althusser took his response is everywhere manifest.
From draft to draft, each emendation and change is designed to make his
arguments more clear and – by means of politesse – more palatable to members
of the Central Committee.53

Like an instructor in the Party school’s (and, maybe, like a scholastic
philosopher citing Holy Scripture), Althusser refers throughout the letter to
the founders of Marxism-Leninism as authority. In this mode, he repeatedly
appeals to accepted Marxist-Leninist laws and principles, recalling the Central
Committee to them and pointing out the contradictions with the laws that
the resolution contains. The bulk of his arguments start from the premise that
Marx, Engels, and Lenin have given the Communist Party revelations about
the nature of the world that need be preserved in their purity if the Party is to
achieve its goals. Appealing as it does to the Party’s traditions as well as to its
well-inculcated self-understanding, this is probably a wise rhetorical strategy
(and one that Althusser had great difficulty weaning himself away from). In
itself, however, it would never be sufficient to argue for and encourage the
departure from Stalinism that is ostensibly Althusser’s goal. This is especially
the case as so much of this understanding of Marx, Engels, and Lenin seems
indebted to Stalin’s Foundations of Leninism.54 So, like a good scholastic
philosopher (but not like most party philosophy instructors), Althusser
constructs out of these authoritative sources an original interpretation of Marx
that resists Stalinist tendencies and reveals the Garaudian and Aragonian
understandings of Marxism that dominate the resolution to be theoretically
and politically misguided.

53. Apparently added as well is a false dateline, 18 March. The letter may have been pre-dated
by Althusser so as to indicate to the Central Committee the seriousness with which he took the
resolution or it may simply indicate the day that he started to compose the letter. Given both the
number and extent of revisions as well as the existence of a note by Althusser to Franca Madonia
from 21 March indicating that the letter was still in preparation (Althusser 1998, p. 664), it is
probable that Althusser took at least a week to revise and amend the various drafts. For more on
the letter’s drafting see Matheron 2000, p. 176.

54. As Gregory Elliott makes clear in the chapter ‘Questions of Stalinism’ from Althusser: The
Detour of Theory, Althusser’s relationship to Stalin’s theory and to Stalinism is complex and often
contradictory. As late as 1969, and long after he had first publicly criticised Stalinism, Althusser
still sometimes referred favourably to Stalin’s theory. See Elliott 1987, pp. 268–70.
Of course, persuasively arguing that true Marxism is and always has been anti-humanist and that anti-humanism is not a Stalinist position is possible only if one ignores the many humanist elements present in Marx’s and Engels’s texts as well as in the PCF’s history.55 Aware of these traditions and perhaps anticipating this counter-argument, Althusser does not content himself with selectively citing Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Rather, he uses the arguments that he developed in For Marx and Reading ‘Capital’ in order to demonstrate that the resolution makes numerous theoretical errors. The most obvious example of this mobilisation of philosophy is Althusser’s juxtaposition of the resolution’s affirmation of the necessity of free research with the declaration that ‘there is a Marxist humanism’.56 As he points out to the Committee almost ad nauseam, this declaration prematurely resolves the controversy about whether ‘the human’ is a scientific or ideological concept. Subtler than the highlighting of this error are the ways in which Althusser deploys his theory of Marxist concepts in order to unmask the ideological notions endorsed by the resolution. Also less obvious, but no less a part of the letter’s argument is its use of the schema that Althusser developed in Reading ‘Capital’, which specified that philosophy is its own practice and that it must not be contaminated with ideology. Every reader of Althusser will also notice where the theory of the ‘break’ between the young Marx and the mature Marx serves to advance his contention that dialectical materialism is in no way a spiritualism and that historical materialism is a science.

The combined force of these contentions is intended to suggest to the Central Committee an alternative to Stalinism that – unlike the resolution’s alternative – is not revisionist. In lieu of embracing humanist values and celebrating ‘creators’, Althusser argues in the letter that the correct path can only be found by giving theory its due, by being scientific, and by paying attention to the words, actions, and even the silences of Marx. Therefore, in addition to insisting that the words Marxists use correspond to their theory and that the Party should maintain a specialised scientific vocabulary, he reminds the Central Committee of the importance that Lenin always gave to theory and the rights that Marx and Engels had already accorded it at the Gotha Unity Congress. As yet another antidote to revisionism, Althusser

55. The PCF’s humanist impulses were particularly evident immediately following World War II and during the Front National. They were also present at the party’s founding in the early 1920s by idealists such as Romain Rolland and Boris Souvarine. Though one does not have to make as strong a claim for Marx’s humanism as does John Roche in his recent article ‘Marx and Humanism’ (Roche 2005, pp. 335–48), few would dispute the claim that there are humanistic elements present throughout Marx’s and Engels’s œuvre.

warns that the resolution’s over-valuing of art and culture will fatally compromise its ability to understand the world and direct the revolution. That is because this embrace of art and culture stems from and leads to a vast overestimation of the role that ‘creators’ play in the revolutionary process.

In each draft of the letter to the Central Committee, Althusser states his belief that a compromise has been struck with Garaudy and Aragon and he warns that this theoretical concession will compromise the Party’s attempts at reformation. In this initial judgment of the resolution, Althusser was in agreement with many other concerned observers. Subsequently, most commentators on the resolution have affirmed this opinion and have added the retrospective judgment that, though the resolution may have allowed the Party to retain more intellectuals, its overall effect was to limit reforms, to reinforce the leadership’s clout, and to limit the influence of scientific research on party policy.57

While Althusser probably never mailed his letter of objection to the resolution, he did get a chance during the summer of 1966 to make its arguments to the person then most capable of registering it, Waldeck Rochet.58 The fact that this audience occurred demonstrates that Althusser did have a voice in the Party. However, if the meaning of words lies in their effects, then one can say that the Central Committee never ‘got’ the letter and that Rochet was not persuaded by his conversation with Althusser.59 Certainly, neither communication convinced the PCF to prioritise theory and respect scientific research.

Despite never having its intended effect on the French Communist Party, the writing of this letter and the formulation of its arguments did affect Althusser. While perhaps not conscious of how it would do so when he wrote the letter, the missive strives to offer a critique that may ‘assist in the transformation of the world’.60 Though, in March 1966, Althusser believed philosophy’s role to be much greater,61 he would later identify this function as philosophy’s actual role. Eventually, through the process of formulating

58. In his droll account of the interview with Rochet, Althusser almost cites verbatim the letter’s argument. See Althusser 2000, pp. 182–3.
59. An indication of Rochet’s attitude towards Althusser is to be found in his summary discourse at Argenteuil where the General Secretary indirectly reproaches Althusser for ‘separating Marxist theory from Marxist practice’ and for doing theoretical work that is ‘too abstract’ (Rochet as quoted in Vigreux 2000, p. 213).
60. Althusser 1971, p. 68.
materialist arguments about the nature of the world and observing these arguments’ effects, Althusser came to revise his original estimation of philosophy’s worth. He also began to assign to it the role just mentioned. Read as an instance of this type of criticism and not in the way Althusser originally intended it to be read (that is, as Marx’s true philosophy unmasking its would be revisionists), the letter clearly appears as a philosophical argument designed to push the Party away from Stalinism on the one hand and humanism on the other. As this and subsequent attempts by Althusser to encourage party reforms largely failed or remained uncompleted, it cannot be said that he learned of this function for philosophy solely from the Party’s positive reaction to his arguments. However, the Party’s lack of response to his efforts at theoretical reform certainly taught him not to overestimate philosophy’s power.

That this lesson stuck with him is not only evidenced by Althusser’s argument from the late 1970s and mid-1980s that philosophy works ‘by way of ideologies on real, concrete practices’ in order to change these practices; it is also demonstrated in the account of his philosophical development from his autobiography L’Avenir dure longtemps. Here, Althusser reiterates his argument against the resolution and recalls his failure to get Rochet to admit the importance for communist practice of theory and of clear scientific concepts. In this new telling of the events around the resolution, he also notes that any possible influence that this 1966 interview may have had was not due to the fact that he had presented strong philosophical arguments that the Party was unable to refute. Instead, the possibility of influencing the Party existed because the arguments he made in the early 1960s in theoretical journals had persuaded a number of students and other intellectuals that anti-humanism was a viable theoretical option for the Party. In 1966, the Central Committee and Rochet had to respond to Althusser, but not because of his arguments’ rigour and strength. Rather, they had to listen to him and partly to incorporate his views because his arguments had created a faction that the Party wished to retain.

This retrospective realisation by Althusser’s of the actual role that philosophy plays in the world does not vitiate the philosophical importance of the arguments contained in this letter to the Central Committee. Though this is not the only place these arguments were made and though he later abandoned

some of its claims (most notably those on the status of philosophy), he also
developed ideas from the letter on scientificity and on the role that ideology
plays in culture into constitutive parts of his philosophy. In addition to its
philosophical value, the manner in which the letter demonstrates that
Althusser’s work between 1960 and 1965 was no mere scholastic exercise
makes it into an important document of intellectual history. Contrary to
the caricature of Althusser’s work of the early to mid-1960s – which portrays
it as the hermetic exercises of an academic philosopher intent on developing
a Marxism incorporating fashinable psychoanalytic, anthropological, and
hermeneutic theories – this letter reveals the way in which the arguments
Althusser made during this period were intended to have a political effect.
Indeed, it demonstrates this even if Althusser himself was not then fully
conscious of how philosophy produces such effects.

References
Comintern to the Colours of France, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
ALT2.A43–04.04, held at the Fonds Althusser, Institut Mémoire de l’Édition Contemporaine,
Paris, France.
Struggle’, in Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientist and Other Essays, edited
—— 2003, The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, translated by G.M. Goshgarian,
London: Verso.
—— 2006, Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–1987, translated and introduced by
Elsa Triolet, 2: 135–43.
2: 35–47.
Bowd, Gavin 1999, L’Interminable enterrement. Le communisme et les intellectuels français depuis

—— 1960, Perspectives de l’homme, Paris: PUF.


Roche, Waldeck 1962, Qu’est-ce que la philosophie marxiste?, Paris: Editions Sociales.


Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF,
18 March 1966

Louis Althusser †

Louis Althusser
45, rue d’Ulm
Paris 5th

A Letter to Comrades on the PCF’s Central Committee

Dear Comrades,

I have taken very careful note of the resolution² passed at the last Central Committee meeting.

This resolution contains several theses of both theoretical and practical importance. To give only one example: the CC [Central Committee] had the merit to adopt theses on theoretical work, the development of Marxist theory and research, the conditions of this research (and the practical measures planned to further this research), as well as the role of intellectuals and their participation in the work of the Party, etc. These theses, which resume and

1. The translator gratefully thanks the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine for permitting this letter to be published and especially thanks José Ruiz-Funes for his research help and editorial suggestions. The original is held at the IMEC in Paris under the code ALT2. A42-04.02 under the heading ‘Lettre à Comité Central d’Argenteuil, 11–13 Mars 1966’. On both the translation and note, G.M. Goshgarian unsellishly provided excellent advice. Any errors that remain are the translator’s. [Editorial note: To maintain typographic consistency, we have changed Althusser’s underlined emphases to italics.]

2. The official title of the document has ‘resolution’ in the singular and most documents that refer to the resolution follow this pattern. Idiosyncratically, Althusser sometimes refers to the resolution in the plural, as a series of resolutions. He is not, however, consistent and, by the end of the letter, begins referring to the whole document in the singular. The translator has elected to retain Althusser’s references to Resolutions I, II, and III. However, these should be taken only as references to different sections of one resolution, not to separate resolutions. He has also changed all of Althusser references to ‘resolutions’ to the singular, ‘resolution’, so that the letter is internally consistent and in accord with standard usage.
develop the declarations of the PCF’s Seventeenth Congress, should give a certain ‘lift’ to our theoretical work, a boost whose importance is widely recognised today.

Nevertheless, alongside these theses and occasionally in the very act of stating them, the resolution contains a certain number of developments, declarations, and arguments that appear to me to be – I cannot hide the fact – doubtful, poorly grounded, or seriously off the mark when viewed from the standpoint of Marxist-Leninist principles.\(^3\)

I would like to explain my concerns to you very simply and frankly. I have in mind only the interests of the Party’s Marxist-Leninist theory and would ask that you consider the following remarks in the spirit in which they are intended. That is, I would ask that you take them as a critique inspired by the acknowledged principles of Marxism-Leninism and as a contribution to the definition of a certain number of difficult but very important questions.

I. The resolution contains a contradiction

I will begin by examining a contradiction that the resolution appears to me to contain.

Resolution III affirms that

the development of science requires argument and research. The Communist Party will neither impede such debates nor impose its own \textit{a priori} truths. Still less will it settle ongoing debates between specialists in an authoritarian fashion.

It is obvious that this theoretically and politically correct thesis bears not only on mathematics, the natural sciences, and the social sciences, but also on the Marxist science of history (historical materialism) and Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism).

Indeed, the CC insists forcefully on the necessity of stimulating research into Marxist theory. It does so in order to bring this theory up to the level at which it can handle the difficult tasks before us.

Thus it is only natural that, regarding still unresolved points of Marxist theory on which theoretical research is underway and absolutely certain and acknowledged results have not been attained, the CC should recall that the Party ‘will not impose its own \textit{a priori} truths and, still less, settle ongoing discussions between specialists in authoritarian fashion.’

\(^3\) All emphases are Althusser’s.
It is important to make this point very clear. In question here is not the substance of our theory as it stands today, the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the knowledge it has already definitely acquired. In the domain of established Marxist-Leninist theory, the Party cannot suspend judgement; on the contrary, it is its duty to intervene in order to recall the principles and knowledge acquired and developed by theory and class struggle, and to defend them against all the revisions and deviations that menace them. If the Party failed to do so, it would be renouncing its mission.

But what is in question here is something else entirely: namely, theoretical problems which remain open and upon which the great teachers of Marxism (beginning with Marx) did not or are said not to have taken a position. These are problems that have not been, or are said not to have been, posed or resolved and, for this reason, problems about which we still do not possess, or are said not to possess, reliable Marxist knowledge. This is, precisely, the case with theoretical research on problems that remain open, and on which the Party has good reason to suspend judgement. It must not 'settle matters in an authoritarian fashion' before research has produced demonstrable results, results that are incontestable and uncontested.

Now, this is where it seems to me that there is a contradiction: the same resolution that rightly invokes the principle of non-intervention on theoretical questions that remain open, does in fact intervene on several questions that, for the last few years, have been the object of theoretical research and discussion among specialists.

Allow me to explain myself. Sometimes in casual formulae and sometimes in more categorical ones, the resolution does in fact take sides, directly or indirectly, on several questions that one can, at the very least (with a reservation that I will come to in a moment), consider to be still open. These questions are those of the epistemological 'rupture' between science and ideology, between the Marxist science of history and philosophies of history, and between Marxist philosophy and pre-Marxist idealism. They also include questions about the meaning of the expression 'Marxist humanism' as well as others about the Marxist theory of art and culture, and so on. I shall show this in detail in my letter.

The fact is that, on these questions that are of immense importance for Marxist theory and practice, the resolution does not suspend judgement. Instead, it 'settles' a theoretical debate that is still in progress, and, in so doing, it takes a stand in favour of conceptions defended by certain comrades (Garaudy, Aragon), and against others defended by other comrades (one of whom is the author of this letter).

Formally, this partisanship brings the resolution into contradiction with itself; one cannot square the principle of non-intervention into ongoing
research and discussion with intervention into the very same research and discussion. Hence it is impossible not to ask: ‘Why this contradiction?’

Examining the questions on which the resolution takes a position and developing [where and how] these theses lead (or can lead) to theoretical errors should allow us to make this question more precise.

I will analyse three errors in turn: an error by omission (II); an error by suppression (III); and an error by ‘creation’ (IV).

II. An error by omission: the thesis on Marxist humanism

Resolution II approaches the question of ‘Marxist humanism’ by way of the affirmation that ‘there is a Marxist humanism’.

This affirmation of existence only makes sense if one situates it correctly, in the context of a polemic. It can only be understood as an affirmation opposed, word for word, to another, one of the ilk: There is no Marxist humanism.

If one tries to discover the above-mentioned thesis (‘there is not a Marxist humanism’), in our ‘ongoing research’, one will not find it in this form.

However, one will find in my essay ‘Marxism and Humanism’, as well as in [the journal] La Nouvelle Critique, a very precise and very different thesis, one that is the object of a long discussion in the collective work Reading ‘Capital’. This thesis affirms that the Marxist science of history and Marxist philosophy were only able to constitute themselves on the basis of a rupture with the humanist philosophies and anthropologies that preceded them. It maintains that Marxism is, theoretically speaking – that is to say, from the point of view of its philosophical and scientific concepts – an anti-humanism, or, more precisely, a theoretical a-humanism.

When we affirm this principle, we have something extremely precise in mind: namely, that, in Marx’s mature theory (science and philosophy) we do not find and will never find, among the scientific and philosophic principles comprising the base of this theory, any anthropological or humanist concepts. These concepts do figure in Marx’s early work (e.g., the concepts of humanism, alienation, disalienation, the ‘loss of human spirit’, etc.). At the time they were formulated, they were an organic part of the still ideological theory that Marx worked up out of existing philosophies, history, and even a critique of political economy (e.g., the 1844 Manuscripts). After the ‘rupture’ that began in 1845 and was only realised after years of work, Marx rejected the (theoretical) humanist/anthropological conceptions of his youth. These ideological concepts

---

4. Most probably a general reference to the anti-humanist arguments made in La Nouvelle Critique. See especially number 164 (May 1965).
disappeared and were replaced by other concepts. These are the well-known concepts of historical materialism: mode of production, juridical, political, and ideological superstructure, etc. The ‘humanist’ concept of ‘alienated labour’ disappeared as well, to be replaced by the scientific concept of ‘wage-labour’. Marx no longer needed these dated ‘humanist’ concepts. He had perceived that, far from yielding knowledge, these old concepts prevented him from producing knowledge of his object (the history of societies and the history of worldviews). That is why he rejected them clearly and decisively once he saw that he had to forge other, totally different concepts, in order to make good the claim to produce knowledge of his object. The declaration of this rupture may be found in black and white in The German Ideology, but it necessarily took many years before the rupture was totally ‘accomplished’.

To say that Marxism is, theoretically speaking, an anti-humanism or a-humanism, is quite simply to observe that, in Marx’s mature thought, theoretical-humanist concepts are absent and are replaced by new scientific concepts. This is a matter of fact. And we may add that neither Engels nor Lenin ever re-introduced into Marxism the concepts of theoretical humanism that Marx had rejected. One looks in vain in Engels or Lenin for even a single mention of concepts such as alienation, alienated labour, ‘the reappropriation of human nature’, etc.

It is quite remarkable that neither Marx, nor Engels, nor Lenin, nor Stalin ever declared that ‘Marxism is a humanism’. True, Gorky employed this formula; but we know that Lenin deemed Gorky to be a petty-bourgeois revolutionary because of his ideology.

We also know that the concepts of theoretical humanism, already present in Dühring, Bernstein, and the Russian populists, were put back on the communist agenda in the 1920s by the left revisionists (e.g., the young Lukács) and the right revisionist social democrats (e.g. Léon Blum).

Here is the thesis that I and many other comrades have defended: that the theoretical concepts of Marxist philosophy and science have nothing to do with the concepts of theoretical humanism. This thesis, I repeat, was the object of an extended demonstration in Reading ‘Capital’. It has yet to be seriously contested. That is to say, it has yet to be contested by a serious historical and philosophical argument. In fact, it would be an extremely difficult thesis to contest.

In the same texts in which this demonstration is made, I pointed out that, while the concept of humanism (along with its sub-concepts) is not a scientific concept, it is an ideological notion – and a moral ideological notion at that. The ideological validity of this concept is therefore not in question. In Marxism, when we speak of ideology, we are aware that ideology (e.g. moral ideology) is not a pure illusion, but a representation that, albeit skewed and illusory, nevertheless alludes to something real, whose existence it designates without,
however, providing (scientific) knowledge of it. Therefore, we can, to a certain extent, make use of, say, the expression 'socialist humanism' as an ideological expression, in order, preliminarily and roughly, to designate the existence of a number of practical effects expected to arise from the revolutionary activity of a Bolshevik party, such as the end of class exploitation, the improvement of the lot of the exploited, the disappearance of class exploitation, the end of political and ideological domination, etc.

We can, to a certain extent, utilise this 'humanist-socialist' or 'humanist-Marxist' formula, but only after making three very important reservations.

The first reservation is that we steep ourselves in the fundamental truth that this formula has no theoretical value, in other words, no value as scientific knowledge.

The second reservation is that we recognise that we should use much better formulae, ones that are closer to scientific knowledge than this humanist formula and its corollaries. For example, we say something much more precise when we speak of wage-labour rather than of 'alienated' labour (a humanist formula); we do the same when we speak of class exploitation rather than of 'economic alienation,' and so on.

This second reservation is extremely important. For we have learned from Marx and Lenin that one cannot use such ideological formulae with impunity. When, ignoring the scientific formulae at our disposal, we employ ideological formulae (such as humanist formulae), we risk being contaminated by them and relapsing from science into ideology (as did the revisionists Dühring, Bernstein, and Léon Blum, 'humanists' all). Ideology is not inactive, but acts on those who accept it: that is why the ideological struggle, the struggle against ideology, is one of the principal parts of Marxism.

Of course, in order to distinguish ourselves from the barbarians in the world, we can call ourselves 'humanists.' However, that which makes us communists is not just the fact that we are not barbarians. There is a deeper reason that both requires and enables us not to be barbarians: possession of scientific knowledge of the historical process. We do not content ourselves with moral principles and declarations but, rather, link these moral principles, these principles of moral ideology (for example, humanist principles) to the reality of the relations of production and the relations between social classes. What makes us communists is that we see clearly into moral ideology and that we call things by their proper names. Communists can really be human because they are not 'humanists,' because our actions do not rest upon moral (and therefore ideological) principles, but upon scientific ones.

We can therefore perfectly well do without the ideological concepts of humanism, even from a practical standpoint. Indeed, if we are not to expose our scientific theory to the contagion of their ideology and end up falling back on
pre-Marxist, pre-scientific positions, it is very much in our interest to do
without the ideological concepts of humanism even at the practical level.

Why, then, should we ever make use of the term ‘humanism,’ and of the
concepts derived from it? We should do so carefully, under well-defined
conditions, and only in order to make ourselves understood when first approaching
those people whom we need to address and who conceive their ideal in terms
of (petty-bourgeois or Christian) humanist ideologies. I repeat: carefully and
on a first approach, for our theory runs real risks if we systematically employ
these formulae and if we conceive our own theory in humanist terms. This is
naturally a temptation when one systematically employs such formulae.

It is here that my third reservation comes into play. If we ask why neither
Marx (in Capital and afterwards), nor Engels, nor Lenin, nor Stalin ever
declared that ‘Marxism is a humanism’, we will see that they did not do so for
crucial political reasons. As soon as words and expressions are used in the
political and ideological class struggle, they cease to be simple concepts and
become weapons, and will be for a long time yet, in a veritable fight unto
death, a veritable class struggle. To be precise: the term ‘humanism’ has always
been employed by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology – including petty-
bourgeois interpretations of Marxism – in mortal combat with another term,
one which is absolutely vital for revolutionaries: class struggle. It is this
reality, verified a thousand times over in the practice of class struggle, which explains
why Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin were never willing to proclaim that
‘Marxism is a humanism’.

To sum up:

1) The concepts of theoretical humanism (humanism, the human essence,
alienation, disalienation, loss of the human essence, reappropriation
of the human essence, the Whole Man, the generic essence of man, etc.)
are foreign to Marxist theory. Both in its historical-materialist and
dialectical-materialist aspects, Marxist theory comprises completely different
scientific concepts that bear no relationship at all to the ideological
concepts of humanism.

2) As ideological concepts, humanistic concepts can have a practical value.
Nevertheless, we have every interest in avoiding such concepts (and, in
any case, in carefully controlling them when it is indispensable that we use
them at the pragmatic level). For, inasmuch as they are ideological, these
concepts can contaminate our theory and expose this theory to serious
dangers, including that of theoretical revisionism. The ideological danger
represented by the pragmatic usage of these humanist concepts has in the
last analysis to do with the very deep (petty-bourgeois) class nature of
humanist ideologies.
3) We must recall the political, class reasons that have barred the classics of Marxism from declaring that ‘Marxism is a humanism’, and we must draw the appropriate consequences.

Now that this has been made clear, what do we find in Resolution II? We find a few phrases on ‘Marxist humanism,’ without a single allusion to the two fundamental problems that the concept of humanism (and its sub-concepts) poses for Marxism:

1) the problem of the bases for its claims (scientific or ideological);
2) the problem of the ideological struggle between humanism and class struggle.

Resolution II declares that ‘there is a Marxist humanism’, that it is not ‘abstract’ like bourgeois humanism (but this provides no response to the question of the bases for its claims – and the opposition of abstract and concrete is not, understood in this way, a Marxist distinction); that it ‘flows from the historical task of the working class’, that it ‘in no way signifies the rejection of an objective conception of reality for the sake of a vague impulse of the heart’, that, on the contrary, ‘it bases its approach on a rigorously scientific conception of the world’, etc.

1) The first problem, the question of the bases for humanism’s pretensions (which is precisely the object of ‘ongoing research’ and debate), is not posed.
2) The second question, which does not need to be made the object of research (for it summarises all the experience of the communist movement), is not evoked.

This double silence is regrettable and, as we shall see, its consequences are not long in coming. Simply omit these two problems, and a spiritualist ideology familiar to all of us will leap into Marxism through the breach of the omission – the spiritualist ideology which holds that Marxism is a ‘philosophy of man’, a ‘philosophy of the creation of man by man’, etc. It does not limit itself to one role or to one practical use, but lays claim to being the theoretical truth of Marxism itself.

Let us speak clearly. This ‘Marxist’-humanist ideology is today represented by the philosophy of our comrade Garaudy. By reminding us that Marxism is founded on a scientific conception of the world,’ and must not be confused with a ‘a vague impulse of the heart’, Resolution II proposes to limit the scope
and the effects of this ideology. However, it only limits this ideology’s effects (just as Resolution III limits its effects with respect to religion) without undermining its existence, since the decisive question of the non-validity, from a scientific standpoint, of ‘humanist’ concepts is passed over in silence.

I speak directly and frankly. Resolution II is stated in terms that reflect the theoretical compromise concluded with the humanist ideology of our comrade Garaudy. It reminds him that he must not go too far. However, in exchange, nothing is said about the philosophical question as to whether the grounds for the claims of humanist theory are ideological or scientific. In addition, nothing is said about the crucial problem of humanism versus class struggle. Thus, the floodgates are left open to this ideology. As we will soon see in connection with art and culture, this ideology loses no time turning all this to its advantage.

I do not say theoretical compromise by accident. Both Marx, in his ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, and Lenin have taught us that, in order to forge unity (with no trace of class collaboration), communists can make almost any sort of compromise, with one exception: theoretical compromise. This is because a theoretical compromise is always made between theory and an ideology. This type of compromise always ends up turning against theory, never against ideology. In a moment, we will see the proof of this proposition.

III. An error by suppression: the thesis of ‘the absence of a rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit’

It is Resolution I that proclaims this thesis. The thesis is stated in terms that have nothing at all to do with Marx, but that inevitably bring to mind the language of idealist philosophers of history (Hegel, Brunshvicg). To be more precise, they bring to mind the language of certain spiritualist philosophers of creation (V. Cousin, Bergson, etc.).

Every attentive reader will wonder why this sentence surges up here, altogether unexpectedly, at the end of a paragraph on art and culture (a paragraph I will soon discuss).

In order to begin to understand this sentence, one has to compare it with another from Resolution II, which states that: ‘Marxism is no more an alien body in the world of culture than the proletarians are barbarians camping in the city. Marxism is born from the development of culture and it gives meaning to all that humanity has achieved.’

Yet drawing a connection between these two passages does not make everything perfectly clear. In order to understand the implications of these sentences, we need to know something about the ‘ongoing research’ in which the resolution intervenes, and takes sides.
In fact, what the declarations condemn are specific theses advanced about the ‘break’ or ‘epistemological rupture’ that have been argued at length in *For Marx* and *Reading ‘Capital’*. The theses I defend are intended to shed light on a reality that Marx clearly recognised in his scientific work and that has to do, above all, with the ‘epistemological break’ that separates a science from the ideology which gave birth to it. These theses also bring out other ‘ruptural’ phenomena (‘qualitative leaps’, dialectical ‘threshold’, etc.) that have occurred in the history of the development of human knowledge. The most famous instance of these theses is provided by Marxist theory itself. On the basis of a detailed argument that has yet to be seriously contested, and by following Marx very carefully, I have shown that Marxist science [historical materialism] and Marxist philosophy [dialectical materialism] were only able to constitute themselves on the basis of an ‘epistemological rupture’ with previous ideological theories, namely, the philosophy of history and classical philosophy. This is, in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, a perfectly classical thesis.

When Marx declared that the conception of the essential principles of the science of history had only been made possible by a ‘settling of accounts with his former philosophical conscience’, he himself became the first to recognise the reality and necessity of this rupture. Here, too, I have done no more than to return to the terms and the contents of Marx’s work and to the classical-Marxist tradition in order to comment on them with some precision.

It is to this set of theses, theses organically bound up with Marxist-Leninist theory, theses that it is impossible to dissociate from Marxist-Leninist theory, theses indispensable to Marxist-Leninist theory, that Resolution II opposes the calm affirmation of ‘the absence of a rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit’.

Everyone knows that the concepts at work in the expressions ‘human spirit’, ‘movement of the human spirit’, and ‘creative movement’ have their place, not in Marxist theory, but in the idealist and spiritualist philosophies of Hegel, Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, etc. However, if we can, let’s leave the words aside and proceed to their contents. One wonders what becomes of the fundamental distinction between science and ideology (and all its consequences, especially those involving Marx) in this ‘vast creative movement without rupture’. One also wonders how to think, without rupture, the law of development by qualitative leaps.

6. Althusser may be referring here to Engels’ argument in *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)* (Engels 1939, p. 53); but he probably also means to refer to Stalin’s schematisation of dialectical law (Stalin 1972, pp. 304–5). Every Committee member would no
Some will doubtless object that it is necessary to speak the language of our interlocutors and that we must not frighten those who ‘believe’ in the ‘creative development of the human spirit’ (e.g., intellectuals, socialists and Teilhardien Catholics, or other ‘men of good will’) by showing them that the revolution presupposes – in theory as well as in politics – certain phenomena involving ruptures, and violent ruptures at that.

Nevertheless, I don’t believe that any Marxist sufficiently instructed in Marxist theory could consent under this pretext to such concessions without being alarmed at the theoretical and practical consequences that they would inevitably involve.

To consider only one of these consequences, let us examine how Marxism is presented to us in this ‘vast creative movement without rupture.’

The conjunction of the two sentences that follow one another in Resolution II: ‘Marxism is not an alien body in the world of culture’ and ‘there is a Marxist humanism’, reveals the full meaning of this concession. Far from being critical scientific knowledge of the achievements of human history (knowledge that is both discriminating and judgemental, retaining this but rejecting that), and far from providing both knowledge and critical judgement of history and ‘culture’, Marxism is dissolved into the ‘culture of humanity’, hence into ‘the vast creative movement of the human spirit’, that unbroken continuity where everything is put on the same level and Marxist humanism naturally and ‘without rupture’ extends the ‘abstract’ humanisms that preceded it. This watering down of Marxism evidently goes hand in hand with the suppression of the distinction between science and ideology and with the suppression of the radical theoretical distinction that separates Marxist science and philosophy (revolutionary theories), from previous philosophies.

We shall now observe this philosophy at work in the Resolution’s theory of art and culture.

IV. An error by ‘creation’: the theory of art and culture

I deeply regret having to point out that the theory of art and culture that operates in Resolution I lands us full-square in idealism and bourgeois ideology.

Let’s begin with art.

We are told that all the mystery of art resides within its ‘creator.’ But, ‘what is a creator,’ the resolution asks? It replies that ‘the creator is not a simple fabricator of products to whom all of the components are given; he is not a

\footnote{doubt have learned this schema by heart. This reference shows that Althusser was not beyond using accepted Stalinist principles for their rhetorical effect.}
mere arranger. There is, in every work of art, a part irreducible to its elements; this part is man himself.’

At first glance, this 'brilliant' formula seems to be saying something. However, in truth, it is hollow, as the falsely self-evident propositions of the prevailing ideology always are. Hollow and – as we shall see – dubious and dangerous.

What do the authors of the resolution mean by the affirmation that there is, in all art, a 'part irreducible to its elements' and that this part is 'man himself'? They express themselves quite clearly in the next sentence: 'only this writer was capable of creating this work'. If the fact that artists are not interchangeable is sufficient to constitute a theory of art, then we have not come very far. If it is this platitude that fills the immense void of 'man himself', let the reader judge the theoretical capacities of this concept of 'man', a concept that we here see directly employed for the first time at the theoretical level, alongside the concepts of creator, creation, etc.

I mean something very precise: the theory of art given to us by the resolution and immediately extrapolated into a theory of culture is, properly speaking, a 'humanist' theory of art and culture, a theory in which the concepts of humanism are consciously and systematically employed.

Using this specific example, we shall see what one may expect from the 'theoretical' utilisation of humanist concepts. From the perspective of knowledge, we can expect results that are empty, yet full of ideological errors. From the perspective of politics, we can expect positions fraught with danger.

When one tries to develop a theory of art that proclaims: 'the essence of art is man, that is, the part due to human creation,' and 'the creator is not an arranger, but adds to the given materials an irreducible element, man himself', one manipulates the concepts of man, creation, creator, given, etc. These concepts seem to have a meaning, they seem to teach us something. Despite appearances, however, they are impoverished and empty.

After centuries of idealist and spiritualist aesthetics and particularly after having just lived through 150 years of spiritualist philosophy – 150 years devoted to singing philosophical hymns in praise of art – we now know perfectly well what is to be expected of an aesthetic that is satisfied merely to manipulate concepts like man, creation, creator, creative freedom, etc. All that these concepts have begotten is the monuments of academic spiritualism represented by the works of V. Cousin, Ravaisson, Lachelier, Bergson, their various epigones and, today, Malraux. And this is no accident. We know perfectly well that it is impossible to construct a materialist aesthetic or a materialist history of art by manipulating, or by returning over and over again to these idealist and spiritualist concepts of man, creation, creator, creative freedom, etc.
For the humanist concepts that the resolution brings to bear are epistemologically empty; that is, they are empty from the standpoint of knowledge. However, because ideology abhors a vacuum, these concepts are, unfortunately, ideologically full. Full, that is to say, replete with idealistic values, the values of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. Ultimately, 'Man' in humanist ideology, is always something, the sign or bearer of certain 'values'.

For example: man is creative power, the 'creation of man by man', etc., that is, just so many petty-bourgeois notions. In the way petty-bourgeois ideology employs the term - Marx and Lenin never ceased to repeat this - 'Man' is a notion employed in order to mask the class struggle.

Devoid of knowledge, but full of idealist or spiritualist ideology: that is what humanist concepts are.

How does it happen that we are so easily tempted to employ concepts such as 'creative man' and other humanist concepts when talking about art, particularly when talking about art? To be sure, we realise that the same concepts are also employed in history and political economy. We know, for instance, that it has been claimed that the Marxist conception of history rests upon a philosophical conception of man as 'creator of himself,' that we have seen this act of 'self-creation' in the form of work, etc. However, when we hear such things said, we are immediately on our guard. We remember that, in the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', Marx told us that it was bourgeois ideology which developed the theme of the 'creative' power of work, and we recall that Marx criticised and rejected the concept of creation across the board.

Yet, when the subject is art, we tend to drop our guard. Why?

We do this for an important historical reason of which we should become aware. It is not by accident that, today, the domain par excellence in which humanist philosophy (i.e. moral and religious philosophy) takes refuge is the artistic one. This is because, for many reasons, art has become the secular religion of modern times. Properly speaking, it has become the 'sacred' in contemporary Western societies (at any rate, it has become so for petty-bourgeois intellectuals and the social classes who think of themselves as 'cultivated'). One day, we shall have to write a history of the substitution of the secular religion of art for religion properly so called. This substitution took place in France during the nineteenth century and was the effect of a counter-revolutionary reaction which sought, in art, something to put in the place of the religious values that the Revolution had undermined.

As Lucien Sève has lucidly observed, every great nineteenth-century French philosopher, from Cousin through Ravaissou and Lachelier to Bergson, has celebrated the secular religion of art in his spiritualist philosophy. These philosophies are but the lay echo of a religion that has been rendered partially
obsolete. That is why these philosophers borrow this sacred vocabulary from religion and speak of ‘blessed treasures’, ‘creators’, ‘creative freedom’, etc. Malraux, the new high priest of this secular religion of art has been speaking this ideological language for years. I find it deplorable that we should borrow this suspect language from such a reactionary tradition.

Does one really have to point out that these concepts of man, creator, creation, etc., far from clarifying matters, obscure and obstruct our thinking? In no way do they permit us to think their object (in this case, the production of aesthetic effects). Rather, if they speak to ‘the heart’ of people of a religious bent, they rule out the least positive thought about their object.

Without doubt, we do not have many texts by Marx, Engels, or Lenin on art. However, they have given us several precious leads and, above all, we do find in Marx rigorous theoretical principles. Initially, when ‘research is currently underway’, these permit us to properly pose the theoretical question of the nature of the aesthetic process.

Of course, these Marxist theoretical principles have nothing to do with humanist concepts (must I repeat myself?), even those deemed ‘aesthetic’.

There’s the rub: instead of indicating the existence of an unresolved problem, a problem calling for in-depth work and research, Resolution I has given us an idealist-spiritualist theory of art, a theory that comes to us directly from the writings and thoughts of our comrades Garaudy and Aragon.

We can see quite clearly one consequence for Marxism of this opening of the door to humanist ideology: while we have been able to ‘contain’ its influence in the field of religion, it has, on the other hand, taken control of art, and decked it out with a bourgeois idealist theory.

We shall be even more firmly persuaded of this when we turn to the theory of ‘culture’ that the resolution puts before us.

What is ‘culture’?

The concept of culture poses very difficult problems, problems that demand in-depth research and work. We have received this concept from the same bourgeois ideology that produced the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It has been reprimed by a long string of idealist philosophers, beginning with Kant and Hegel and on through the ‘cultural constructivists’ now found in the American academy. In its present state, ‘culture’ is one of the concepts most deeply contaminated by bourgeois ideology. As we shall see, perhaps more than any other concept, it invites a rigorous Marxist critique.

Yet Resolution I treats this concept as if it were unproblematic, as if its meaning were obvious and transparent.

‘Culture’, affirms the resolution, ‘is the accumulated treasure of human creation’ (with this distinction: ‘animals don’t create’).
To this general definition, the resolution adds certain clarifications. Culture is not only the works of the past that we are content to dust off from time to time in order to make them appealing to current tastes. For where else does the past begin? Our cultural heritage evolves every day. It has always been created in the present. It is the present which becomes the past, which becomes our heritage. That is why the right of creative persons to pursue their research must never be infringed...

The ‘that is why’ which begins the last sentence is particularly unclear. Truly, we do not see the link between the closing sentence on the freedom of research and the sentences that precede it. How might we explain this closing sentence? By acknowledging that precisely the same ‘creative freedom’ has been at work from the origins of culture down to the present day; or, to put it differently, that ‘there is no rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit’. No rupture. Let’s take a very close look at what this means in the realm of ‘culture’.

First of all, it means that there is no real ruptural difference, no discontinuity at the heart of culture itself. It is significant that Resolution I includes science, technology and the arts in culture, but does not insist on the difference that – at the heart of culture – distinguishes these different elements. Now, even assuming that culture comprises nothing beyond the sciences, technology, and the fine arts (we shall see in a moment that this assumption is false), it is essential that we clearly mark out that which distinguishes each of these elements from the others and that we also indicate clearly which of the three is fundamental and determinant of the others. The fundamental, determinant element is scientific knowledge.

Assuming, again, that ‘culture’ can be reduced to these three pursuits, we can arrive at a materialist conception of culture only if we stipulate that culture contains different levels of reality and that the fundamental level of ‘culture’ is constituted by the level of scientific knowledge, not that of technology or the fine arts.

Against this materialist thesis, Resolution I manifestly defends a different, idealist thesis according to which ‘culture’ (defined by these three elements) consists, above all, of works of art. We can see this quite clearly in the paragraph that begins: ‘What is a creator?’ Art alone, not science, is in question here. A little later, when science reappears, it is only in order to introduce a remark that reverses the hierarchy of the real: ‘artistic and literary creation is as valuable as scientific creation, for which it [science] often paves the way’. However, in the context of a ‘definition’ or ‘culture’, it would be much more precise to say the
contrary: namely, that it is [scientific] knowledge which 'paves the way for art,' and that the greatest artists, the most accomplished, are such because their work is nourished by existing knowledges, especially the most scientific, the most critical, the most revolutionary.

'No rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit', no rupture in the history of culture… Let us again take up this theme and follow it through to its consequences.

Behind this conception of the 'unbroken creative movement of the human spirit' there lies concealed an idealist and therefore bourgeois conception of 'culture'. It is idealist insofar as it has suppressed from culture all traces of the existence of social classes and the class struggle. Let's look more closely at this suppression by approaching the question by two different paths, both of which lead to the same result.

How do we introduce the reality of social classes and class struggle if the subject of culture is the 'human spirit?' At length and quite definitively, Marx explains to us in The German Ideology and elsewhere that the concept of the human spirit is an ideological, idealist, and even spiritualist concept fashioned by spiritualist-idealist philosophy in order to make the reality of social classes disappear. If, when we speak of culture, we refer to the human spirit and its 'unbroken' development, we are obliged to keep silent about the existence of social classes and social struggle. On the other hand, if we wish to speak of classes and class struggle, we have to renounce the concept of the human spirit.

We can arrive at the same conclusion by a different path. We noted earlier that the resolution defines culture with reference to three elements: science, technology, and the fine arts. Now, even if we provisionally admit this definition of culture, we must also note that it contains a very serious omission, that of a fourth element in which the existence of social classes is expressed both directly and indirectly. This element is that of ideologies.

Indeed, it is unthinkable to speak of 'culture' without including the various forms of ideology in this category: religious, moral, political, juridical, aesthetic, and philosophical. Each comprises an organic component of 'culture' and directly introduces, into the very heart of culture, the reality and the effects of class struggle. Marx, Engels, and Lenin warned us often enough of the deleterious role that the constant pressure of ideologies (and, through them, the class struggle) plays in the development of both science and philosophy. This reality is felt still more keenly in the case of works of art. Not only are they saturated with the ideologies from which they are born, and thus indissolubly

7. Subject should be understood here as agent, rather than subject-matter.
endowed with both an aesthetic and ideological meaning, but, they are also perceived and appreciated by readers, spectators, and listeners who are themselves caught in the web of the dominant ideology. Do we even need to mention religious, moral, political, or philosophical ideologies? To recognize the active presence of ideology in ‘culture’ is to recognize that culture is directly divided and haunted by the reality of social classes and the effects of class struggle.

It is precisely this reality that the resolution passes over in silence. In the conception put forward by the resolution, culture has to do only with the ‘human spirit,’ with ‘creations’ and ‘creators’. Between people (whether they be ‘creators’ or ‘consumers’ of culture) and works of culture (our ‘treasure’), the massive and opaque thickness of ideologies due to the presence of social classes in cultural life has disappeared. The difficult problems of the distinction, of the rupture by which science tears itself away from ideology, by which art detaches itself from ideology; the difficult problems of the scientific, theoretical, or aesthetic training by which individuals might liberate themselves from their ideological fetters in order to enter into contact with scientific knowledge on the one hand and with works of art on the other, the class positions that express themselves both directly and indirectly in religion, morality, philosophy, etc., all these problems have vanished, and with them the presence in culture of social classes and of class struggle.

Accordingly, culture appears as a pure and unsullied ‘treasure’, as the tranquil universe of knowledge and, above all, of the arts, in which man’s creative powers are exercised without restraint.

In regard to culture, do we really need to recall the repeated declarations of Lenin who – precisely because they are antagonistic and incompatible – opposed ‘bourgeois culture’ to ‘proletarian culture’? Is it necessary to recall that these propositions were not advanced lightly, but were destined to reveal the class nature of each and every ‘culture’? Did Lenin not speak of the necessity of a ‘cultural revolution’ for socialism? We need only take these classic theses seriously to question the ‘definition’ of ‘culture’ proposed by the resolution. For Marxism, the ‘heart’ of culture is not science, technology, or the fine arts, but the ideologies. If this thesis is correct, the conclusion must be that, in regard to culture, the resolution speaks of everything except that which is essential: namely, ideologies and the class struggles of which these ideologies are the expression.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that – in the conception of culture presented by the resolution, one which omits the presence and the class meaning of ideologies – certain problems become strangely ‘simple.’

One example of this simplification: the fate of art is entrusted by the resolution to artists, to the masters of a universe that is their own creation. The
difficult but very important problem of the Party’s cultural policy, of its political and ideological intervention in the inevitable ideological struggle that must be waged against the ideology that constitutes the heart of ‘culture’ and that endlessly besieges the sciences, philosophy, and the arts – this crucial problem is passed over in silence.

Another example: Resolution I speaks at length about the misdeeds of the political monopolies against the development of the sciences and the arts. However, these monopolies’ policies are described as external to the sciences, as if there were a simple screen between people on the one side and the ‘treasure of culture’ on the other. Resolution I does not define ideology as the form by which the political haunts the inmost soul of culture. It speaks of a politics external to culture, not of the politics internal to culture. Thus, in monopoly capitalism, only the ‘constraints of capitalism’ come between men and the ‘treasure of culture’; these ‘constraints’ are, in sum, an obstacle or screen exterior to ‘men’ and to ‘culture’. Once this obstacle is surmounted, ‘a humanity freed of the constraints and fetters that impose on it an “egoistic calculus” will be able to find this treasure and appropriate it in its totality’. No, things are not this simple, for the suppression of capitalism does not suppress political and ideological problems. This is to say that it does not suppress the problems of class, of culture. It does not do so because they form an organic part of it, in socialist society as well.

In the same extremely simple manner, the resolution settles the problem of intellectuals: ‘Intellectuals who seek to free themselves from the material and ideological constraints that the bourgeoisie imposes on their activity have no choice but to pursue an alliance with the working class’. However, we know very well that intellectuals, even those ‘who seek to free themselves…’ cannot pursue this alliance. They cannot do so for a class reason: as a group, intellectuals are petty-bourgeois. This is proven every day. In the vast majority of cases, the bourgeoisie has no trouble binding intellectuals to it, using a thousand different means, among them the themes of petty-bourgeois ideology that it maintains for the use of the petty-bourgeois ‘intellectuals’. These themes constitute an organic part of contemporary culture. They make it possible for the intellectuals to bear their enslavement, in the act, if need be, of protesting against it (this is the foundation of ‘humanism’).

Such is the theory of culture presented to us in the resolution. It is a bourgeois-idealist theory of culture, not a proletarian-Marxist one. It is not by chance that this idealist theory speaks the spiritualist language of the ‘creative movement of the human spirit’ and that it omits the reality of social classes in culture and the class struggles that take place therein. This spiritualist language is necessary in order to mask and consecrate this omission.
I do not claim that the questions I raise are easy ones. They cannot be settled with a few neat phrases. However, precisely for that reason, it is to be regretted that the resolution has risked an endeavour to which our comrades Garaudy and Aragon have seen fit to commit the whole Central Committee.

One more word. It seems to me that the concrete example of the theory of art and culture that Resolution I offers allows us to ascertain the price to be paid for a lack of theoretical vigilance and, particularly, for the effective theoretical compromise concluded between Marxist theory and the humanist ideology of our comrade Garaudy.

Because the fundamental question of the non-validity, from a scientific standpoint, of ‘humanist’ concepts has not been posed, we end up with this result: the door stands wide open to humanist ideology, which can now pose as Marxist theory. We don’t need to wait for the consequences; they are inscribed in the bourgeois-idealist theory of art and culture that we have just analysed.

V. In conclusion

I come to my conclusion. What reason can one give for accepting a ‘theoretical compromise?’ ‘Political reasons,’ it will be said.

It will be said that it is a matter of translating our Party’s politics of unity into reality, and of making ourselves understood to our socialist comrades, intellectuals, and Christian workers. The temptation will be strong to justify this or that presentation or formulation of our positions in a language that is not our own for the sake of ‘dialogue’, because of the need to broach frankly and courageously the problems that ‘put obstacles’ in the way of unity.

Once engaged in this process, it is both indispensable and, at the same time, very difficult to be vigilant. The ‘dynamic of unity’ is not a one-way street: it can contaminate our struggles as well as our conceptions.

In accord with the principles defended by our comrade Waldeck Rochet as to our relations with the Christian Left, I hold that the more deeply we are engaged in a politics of unity, the more we must stand firmly on our own principles, the more we must be vigilant about the state of our own theoretical conceptions. It is enough to re-read the documents published by Marx and Engels on the occasion of the Gotha Unity Congress in order to see that the defence of theoretical principles was, from their standpoint, the absolute precondition for any politics of unity. Communists have everything to gain by affirming and defending the purity of their theoretical conceptions, particularly at a time when the question of unity is the order of the day.
I hope that this letter, the remarks I make in it, and even the critical words that it contains will be read and understood as a contribution to the defence of the purity of Marxist-Leninist theory.

Louis Althusser
18 March 1966

Translated by William S. Lewis

References


Review Articles


Re-Reading Nietzsche with Domenico Losurdo's Intellectual Biography

Domenico Losurdo, Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Urbino and a well-known figure in Rifondazione Comunista, is one of the world's leading Hegel scholars and an expert on nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectual history. He also exemplifies the cultural gap that still persists between the theoretical cultures of continental Europe and the Anglo-American world. While strongly influencing Italian academia with over twenty monographs, only two of them have made it to an English translation so far: Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West and Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns.

And, whereas his book Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico has sparked off a heated debate in Italy stretching from L'Osservatore Romano to Il Manifesto, from La Repubblica to Il Corriere della Sera, from La Stampa to l'Unità, it has been received with few review articles so far in the Anglophone press. A German translation is on its way and will be published by Argument Verlag. An English edition should be prepared as soon as possible. It is especially the Anglo-Saxon humanities, with their strong underpinnings of postmodernist Nietzscheanism, that are in urgent need of a critical-historical reconstruction of the ideological processes underlying their own practice. Losurdo's voluminous book, about 1,150 pages in length, could become a landmark for the renewal of critical Nietzsche research. It is not only the most comprehensive study on the connections between Nietzsche's philosophy and his politics, but also the most thorough and analytical.

In the following pages, I will take his interpretation as both a starting point and guide for a re-reading of Nietzsche, on the basis of which I will, in turn, look back at the way that Losurdo reads him. Since there is no critical edition of Nietzsche in English (the planned Stanford edition based on the Colli and Montinari edition collapsed after three volumes), I have translated parts of the Unpublished Fragments myself. In what follows, I will give the respective number of the aphorism and add the volume and page of the German edition (KSA). See bibliography for abbreviations.

2. See the collection of articles available at: <http://www.filosofia.it/pagine/argomenti/Losurdo/Losurdo.htm>.
4. Since there is no critical edition of Nietzsche in English (the planned Stanford edition based on the Colli and Montinari edition collapsed after three volumes), I have translated parts of the Unpublished Fragments myself. In what follows, I will give the respective number of the aphorism and add the volume and page of the German edition (KSA). See bibliography for abbreviations.
Losurdo’s distance from Lukács

‘And He Was a Destroyer of Reason After All’ was the title of a review in a well-known German newspaper praising Losurdo’s book for countering the predominant softening-up of Nietzsche’s image with a critique ‘in the sense of Lukács.’ The review is certainly right in pointing out Losurdo’s opposition to a ‘hermeneutics of innocence’ that subjugates even Nietzsche’s bluntest statements – from the support of slavery to the annihilation of the weak and degenerate – to an allegorical pattern of interpretation, thereby diluting them into metaphor, for instance when Gianni Vattimo explains Nietzsche’s celebration of war as a ‘negation of the unity of being’ (pp. 653, 781ff, 798ff). But can it really be true that Losurdo wants to take up this battle once again in the conceptual framework provided by Lukács’s paradigm, including Nietzsche under the rubric of a philosophical ‘irrationalism from Schelling to Hitler’ and thus treating him as an immediate intellectual forerunner of the Nazi state? This interpretation has become as popular (far beyond the account provided by Lukács) as it is methodologically disputable, because it forces Nietzsche’s philosophy into a teleology directed towards fascism and skips over a considerable historical distance. As convincingly shown by Martha Zapata Galinda, among others, the relation between Nietzsche and Nazism is neither to be conceived of as an automatic consequence of his philosophy nor as an external manipulation, but rather as a process of ‘fascisation [Faschisierung]’, in terms of an ideological transformation consisting of determinate interventions into specific constellations of bourgeois hegemony.

Fortunately, the Lukács label is a result of the reviewer’s misunderstanding, caused most likely by a widespread image that makes Lukács the representative for any Marxist critique of Nietzsche (as well as the scapegoat for an anti-Marxist reaction). To defend Lukács, as Losurdo does, against the denunciation that he has adopted the Nazis’ interpretation of Nietzsche and merely added a negative value judgement (pp. 781, 798), or to recall Lukács’s project of a political deciphering of Nietzsche’s thinking – in contrast to Foucault’s coquettish presumption to be entitled to ‘deform’ it and make it ‘squeak’ and ‘cry’ without caring for textual accuracy (p. 791) – has nothing to do with a continuation of Lukács’s approach but testifies instead to Losurdo’s integrity as a scholar. When Losurdo describes hostility to the French Revolution and socialism as an ongoing trait that traverses the different periods of Nietzsche’s work, he does not convey anything specifically Lukácsian, but rather summarises a conclusion quite common among those scholars who take seriously the question of the political embeddedness of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Even the radically anti-Marxist historian Ernst Nolte comes to the conclusion that ‘Losurdo is right in pointing out that the hostility against socialism was the continuous fact in Nietzsche’s intellectual existence.’

7. ‘The only tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest’ (Foucault 1980, pp. 53–4).
8. Nolte remains faithful to his vehement anti-Marxism when he criticizes Losurdo for siding with Marx and overlooking the ‘excess’ of the latter’s idea of communism: ‘Is the image of the “blonde beast” really so much more absurd than the ideal of those classless and eschatological human beings no longer subject to any division of labour…?’ (Nolte 2003). Translations mine.
Losurdo’s approach is new and productive, not least in the fact that it takes its distance from Lukács’s *Destruction of Reason* in some decisive respects: according to Losurdo, to assume an immediate connection between Nietzsche and Nazism is a ‘historiographical distortion’ that is to be overcome by a ‘comparative analysis of ideological processes’ (pp. 657, 661). Like so many others, Lukács was caught in the paradigm of a German *Sonderweg* (special path) and did not take into account that the ideological constellation in late nineteenth-century Germany was not so different from those in other Western countries (p. 659). It is only after having carefully reconstructed Nietzsche’s discourse in the ideological network of his own time that one can approach the problem of how to investigate continuities and discontinuities with the Third Reich (pp. 654, 660). Finally, if one searches, as Lukács does, for examples of Nietzsche’s ‘irrationalism’, one runs into trouble when dealing with Nietzsche’s ‘enlightened’ texts, which come out against any irrational mythology and in favour of the progress of science (p. 898).

**The case of slavery**

Let us take an example. According to Losurdo, Nietzsche’s recurring justifications of slavery can neither be understood as innocent metaphors nor as an anticipation of the Nazi enslavement of Eastern Europe, but, rather, must be grasped in the context of contemporary struggles around the abolition of slavery in the US. When the young Nietzsche was writing on Theognis of Megara in 1864 and becoming excited about a Dorian-Aryan slaveholder aristocracy (against the infiltration of ‘communism’), the Civil War was still under way. Slavery was not abolished in North America before 1865, and in Brazil not before 1888. Whereas postmodernist interpretations read his concept of slavery as a fascinating metaphor, Losurdo sees Nietzsche as referring to a ‘quite material reality’ and a field of passionate intellectual struggles (p. 406). Those who opposed its abolition pointed out, like Nietzsche, the importance of slavery for the high culture of ancient times. Nietzsche’s assumption that slaves are in every respect more secure and better-off than modern workers belonged as much to the standard repertoire of anti-abolitionism as his remark that blacks are not so sensitive to pain as Europeans (pp. 407ff, 411). When the late Nietzsche considered Christianity, the French Revolution and socialism as three manifestations of an ongoing moralistic ‘slave revolt’, this was not simply a bizarre idea but, rather, expressed a specific hegemonic constellation: the opponents of slavery derived their abolitionist demands from Jacobin programmes; after Napoleon’s restoration of colonial slavery, the movement in France was mostly organised by early socialists, while, in England and the US, it was dominated by the churches (p. 405ff).

On closer inspection, we can thus say that Losurdo is fighting on two fronts. He criticises the imposition of a false alternative: either to hold Nietzsche’s philosophy ‘responsible’ for fascism and the Holocaust, which always has the side-effect of easing the burden of the non-Nietzschean components that had their share in the ideological preparation of fascism; or to exonerate him of this responsibility, as do the allegorical interpretations of a ‘hermeneutics of innocence’ from Kaufmann to Ottemann and Vattimo. As soon as this

---

9. See HH I, Nr. 457 (KSA 2/296); GM II, Nr. 5 (KSA 5/303).
10. ‘Whether we look at the main interpretations of Nietzsche or at those of Plato or of Hegel, whether at the debates on humanism, or at phenomenology, the philosophy of value, ontology or anthropology: the different strands…endeavoured, each in its own way, to articulate
false alternative is given up, an ideological network comes into sight which weaves Nietzsche into a wider European as well as Anglo-American current aimed at overcoming the French Revolution and the cycle of revolutions (1832–1848–1871) it engendered. Nietzsche's specificity lies in an uncompromising 'aristocratic radicalism', as he himself called it, combined with a peculiar capacity that connects him to his great antagonist Marx, namely to decipher every domain of history, morals, religion, science and art as a 'status and class struggle' — with the difference, however, of considering it ahistorically as an eternal struggle between masters and slaves (pp. 901ff).

The shockwaves of the Paris Commune

What was the driving force behind Nietzsche’s search for a pre-classical, virile-aristocratic, ‘tragic’ Greece opposed to Goethe’s and Winckelmann’s ‘soft’ image of Greek antiquity? Losurdo’s investigation starts with the European intelligentsia’s perception of the Paris Commune as an omen of the downfall of Western culture. When Nietzsche was told that the Communards had set fire to the Louvre, his entire philosophical and artistic existence up to that point struck him as an absurdity. Even in hindsight, when the rumour about the Louvre blaze had long been proved false and the Commune had been mowed down with atrocious cruelty, Nietzsche wrote melancholically: ‘Very similar to the supposed burning of the Louvre – a feeling of the autumn of culture. Never a deeper pain.’

Losurdo reads Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* as a coded exorcism of an imminent revolution. Its subtitle could have been: ‘The Cultural Crisis from Socrates to the Paris Commune’ (p. 16). Nietzsche attributes the decline of modern culture to Socrates’s optimism of reason and to his ‘belief in the earthly happiness of all’, which undermined the healthy institution of ancient slavery in the ‘Alexandrian culture’ of Hellenism: ‘There is nothing more terrible than a barbaric slave class [Sklavenstand], which has learned to regard its existence as an injustice, and now prepares to take vengeance, not only for itself but for all generations’. According to Losurdo, it is not the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but rather the one between the ‘German’ and the ‘Socratic’ that constitutes the deep structure of this text (p. 114). He compares it to Wagner’s *Judaism in Music* (1850) and observes that Nietzsche’s descriptions of Socratism – abstract, detached from a native soil, from popular instincts and myths – correspond with those employed by Wagner regarding modern Jews, especially educated ones (p. 117ff). The opposition German versus Jewish in Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung* is reproduced in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the antithesis between (Jewish) Socratism and the tragic Dionysian spirit, which Germany

Nazism and its leader as a philosophical fact, to supply them with the powers of their specific traditions, to offer their discourses as connecting and legitimising forces’ (Haug 1989, p. 7; translation mine).

11. See his letter to Georg Brandes from 2 December 1887, KSB 8, 206.
14. BT, Nr. 18 (KSA 1/117).
15. See BT, Nr. 13, Nr. 20, Nr. 23 (KSA 1/91, 132, 145ff, 148). When Nietzsche expects the awakening German spirit to ‘slay the dragons, destroy the malignant dwarfs, and waken
had inherited from pre-Socratic Greece (p. 124). In his publications, Nietzsche followed the advice of Cosima Wagner, to be careful ‘not to name the Jews… particularly not en passant’, but in his unpublished fragments, he identified Socratism with ‘today’s Jewish press’.

The term ‘optimism’, mostly used as the compound ‘superficial optimism’, stands for and connotes both the spirit of French Enlightenment and ‘Jewishness’ (p. 125ff).

Contender for hegemony or lonely rebel?

In general, Losurdo follows the traditional tripartition of Nietzsche’s works into an early period influenced by Schopenhauer and Wagner and centred on *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872); a middle, ‘enlightened’ period, in which he writes, among other texts, *Human, All Too Human* (1876); and a late period comprising *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and the *Antichrist* (1888–9). But Losurdo differentiates his periodisation by dividing the early period again in two parts, namely a populist period, influenced by Wagner, and a period of disappointed renunciation. At the time of the *Reichsgründung* of 1871 (the foundation of the German Reich), Nietzsche was contending for hegemony in the definition of the ‘German spirit’, which he claimed to derive and rejuvenate from its sources in pre-Socratic Greece. With reference to Wagner’s populism, he took part in the ideological competition among different original mythologies: purely Germanic, Germanic-Christian, Greek-German, German-Lutheran, Indo-European/Aryan. It soon turned out, however, that this Greek-German original myth, despite Nietzsche’s attempt to connect it to the Indo-European/Aryan myth, had no immediate chance to prevail, especially not against the dominant German-Protestant one (pp. 144ff, 232ff, 283). According to Losurdo, the second and third of the *Untimely Meditations* (both from 1874) mark a second period, in which Nietzsche turned away in disappointment from Bismarck’s politics, which he deemed incapable of containing the ‘modern ideas’ of democracy and above all the rise of the labour movement (p. 366). Nietzsche presented himself more and more as a ‘solitary rebel’, who had broken with the German ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ [people’s community], which Wagner and Treitschke insisted in celebrating (pp. 228ff, 232ff).

I would like to argue that the Nietzsche texts to which Losurdo is referring show not so much two consecutive periods but, rather, two poles in a contradictory moment: an important motivation for withdrawing his support from the dominant power bloc of the German Reich was its educational policy, but, already in 1871–2, Nietzsche condemned general education as a ‘preliminary stage of communism’. At the same time, he declared that the ‘German spirit’ is opposed to the current ‘state’s tendency’ and a ‘foreigner’ in the system of education. As Losurdo himself observes (p. 197), from its very beginnings the

---

16. Cosima Wagner’s letter from 5 February 1870 continues as follows: ‘Later, if you want to take up this awful battle, do it for heaven’s sake’ (KGB, III, 2, 140). As far as the ‘Jewishness’ of Socrates and Plato is concerned, see *Unpublished Fragments*, KSA 7/83, KSA 12/580, KSA 13/114, 264, 331.


German Reich represented for Nietzsche the Socratic ideal he opposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. On the other hand, Nietzsche's admiration for Wagner's 'populism' finds its clearest expression in the fourth *Untimely Meditation* from 1876: his art 'no longer speaks the cultivated language of a caste and in general no longer even recognises the distinction between cultivated or uncultivated. It thereby places itself in opposition to the entire culture of the Renaissance.'\(^{19}\) The abnegation of the Renaissance will be completely reversed in the middle and late periods. One could compare this with Gramsci's contrast between the popular-democratic Reformation and the Renaissance, which Gramsci described as distanced from popular culture, and conclude that Nietzsche's early approach contains something of a righthwing Gramscianism *avant la lettre* – an attitude that finds a precurious and brief concretion in his self-celebration as a 'solitary rebel'. We can also turn to Gramsci's reflections on 'passive revolution' by which the emerging European states of the nineteenth century react to the Jacobin Revolution while trying to 'overcome' it [*reazione-superamento-nazionale*].\(^{20}\) Nietzsche wanted to take part in the ideological superannuation of the French Revolution, but he was not ready to pay the price for the 'passive revolution', namely, the partial adoption of some of the revolutionary achievements. When he railed against the state – which many of his interpreters have misunderstood as a sort of anarchistic individualism – he mistook the elements that had been absorbed from Jacobinism, and bureaucratically domesticated, for Jacobinism itself.

Whereas Wagner 'resolves' the contradiction with his anti-Semitism – in the political attempt to retract the emancipation that guarantees civil and juridical equality of the Jews – Nietzsche breaks with the Wagnerian concept of a German *Volksgemeinschaft* (190ff, 195ff, 232ff): the 'solitary rebel' turns "enlightened" (p. 231).

**Nietzsche's construction of an anti-Jacobin Enlightenment**

One of the strongest points of Losurdo's book is the precision with which he depicts the ruptures and fissures between Nietzsche's different periods. In fact, we can see that Nietzsche's earlier 'frontlines' are almost completely reversed in his 'enlightened period': he breaks with romanticisation of the German spirit [*Deutschtümelei*] and, in this context, turns against the Lutheran Reformation and switches sides to the Renaissance (p. 239ff).\(^{21}\) In opposition to German nationalism, Nietzsche now supports a European cosmopolitanism underpinned by a 'cultural' concept of Europe that comprises also the 'daughter-country [*Tochterland*] America, but not Russia (p. 334ff).\(^{22}\) Within Europe, the main role is attributed to the French, who are 'by nature much more closely related to the Greeks than

---

20. Gramsci 1975, see Notebook 1, §150; and Notebook 10.II, §61.
21. Against the Italian Renaissance with its 'liberation of thought, disdain for authorities… enthusiasm for science… unfettering of the individual', the German Reformation rose up as 'an energetic protest of the spiritually backward' that arrested humanity and thus delayed for two or three centuries the 'dawn of the Enlightenment' (HH I, Nr. 237; KSA 2/199ff).
22. Cf. WS, Nr. 215 (KSA 2/650). Losurdo infers the exclusion of Russia from Nietzsche's claim that Europe only comprises 'those nations and divisions of nations which have their common past in Greece, Rome, Judaism and Christianity' (ibid.).
are the Germans’, and who have generated, with Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère and others, the really ‘European books’ (p. 248).23

The original myth of Greek antiquity is maintained, but its ideological function is altered in several respects: first, it no longer relates to Germany, but to ‘Europe’ (and, here, primarily to its ‘successors’, the Renaissance and the French Enlightenment); second, its exemplary character now lies in the very quality that the early Nietzsche had denounced as ‘Socratism’, namely, that of being the source of reason, of critical thinking, of the sense of science, of argumentation and communication (p. 250ff). Concerning Judaism, the ‘enlightened’ Nietzsche undertakes a transvaluation that subverts the prevailing Judeophobia: it is because of their nomadic ‘uprooting’ and polyglot existence that the Jews have to play a vanguard role in the emergence of Europe.24 They ‘defended Europe against Asia’, and, by opposing the ‘orientalising’ force of Christianity, Judaism has helped to ‘occidentalise’ Europe once again, that is to make its mission and history ‘into a continuation of the Greeks’.25

Not everything, however, has changed. The enemy-image of the repellent ‘stock-exchange Jew’ can be found in the ‘enlightened’ period as well.26 Nietzsche’s discourse was still founded on a dichotomy that could well be characterised by Edward Said’s concept of orientalism: European history is determined in its deep structure by the antagonism between ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’ (p. 251). Above all, Nietzsche’s turning to the Enlightenment tradition was an integral part of his attempt to sever Europe’s historical links to the French Revolution: true Enlightenment is essentially foreign to the revolution that became ‘flesh and spirit’ in Rousseau. Left to itself, it would have ‘pierced silently through the clouds like a shaft of light, long content to transfigure individuals alone’. This work is to be continued, in order to nip the revolution in the bud and nullify its effects.27 In that perspective, Nietzsche claimed to ally himself with Voltaire, whom he praised as ‘the last of those people who could combine in themselves the highest freedom of the spirit and an absolutely un-revolutionary disposition’, against the ‘moral tarantula’ Rousseau, whose myth of the ‘good man’ Nietzsche saw at the root of the ‘moral fanaticism’ of the Jacobins (p. 291).28

As Losurdo shows in a careful textual and contextual analysis, the ‘moral Enlightenment’ of the middle Nietzsche aims at deconstructing two complementary ethical attitudes, namely the popular sense of justice and the ‘religion of compassion’ as the respective response of the higher social strata (p. 285ff). Both are attacked in the name of a ‘spirit of science’, a ‘psychological dissecting table’, a ‘school of suspicion’ – the latter term is frequently attributed to Paul Ricoeur, but, in fact, originates in Nietzsche himself.29 The

23. HH I, Nr. 221 (KSA 2, 182); WS, Nr. 214 (KSA 2/646ff).
24. HH I, Nr. 267 (KSA 2/221ff), Nr. 475 (KSA 2/310); Dawn, Nr. 192 (KSA 3/166).
25. HH I, Nr. 475 (KSA 2/310ff).
26. Ibid.
27. WS, Nr. 221 (KSA 2/654).
28. On Voltaire, see HH I, Nr. 221 (KSA 2/182). Nietzsche supports his interpretation with a quote from Voltaire: ‘quand la populace se mêle de raisonner, tout est perdu’ (when the masses get involved in reasoning, everything is lost) (HH I, Nr. 438; KSA 2/285); on Rousseau, see Dawn, Preface, Nr. 3 (KSA 3/14).
29. ‘Schule des Verdachts’ (HH I, Preface, Nr. 1; KSA 2/13); ‘Geist der Wissenschaft’ (HH I, Nr. 55; KSA 2/59); ‘psychologischer Seziertisch’ (HH I, Nr. 36; KSA 2/59).
dissecting leads to the result that what the unenlightened spontaneously consider as justice, virtue, altruism and compassion, is nothing but the manifestation of self-love, egoism, vanity and ‘the will to possess’.

Nietzsche’s distance from his earlier period can clearly be seen also in his adherence to the enlightenment project of Socrates.

Nietzsche’s criticism of popular discourses of justice not only refers to Rousseau and the Jacobins, but also to socialism, which ‘pounds its word “justice” like a nail into the heads of the half-educated masses’. It stands to reason that Nietzsche has in mind the ‘League of the Just’ that preceded the ‘League of the Communists’. With respect to Weitling, Lamennais and other early socialists, Nietzsche’s polemic seems to overlap with Marx and Engels’s ridiculing of their sentimentality and mawkishness. But, whereas the latter were searching for a ‘more mature expression’ of social resistance, Nietzsche aims at destroying the social-political movement that finds its expression in such sentimental forms.

Determining Nietzsche’s late period

At what point and according to what criteria can we determine the transition to Nietzsche’s late period? Losurdo supports the periodisation proposed by Lou Andreas-Salomé, who considered the Gay Science of 1882 as the first work of the late period (p. 343). To this end, he quotes some passages in which Nietzsche ascribes to the book a ‘newly awakened belief in a tomorrow and after-tomorrow’ as well as ‘cheerfulness’ and ‘thawing-wind’, from the vantage point of which the middle period appears as a deserted time of ‘unbelief’, doubt, scepticism and crisis. If we take Nietzsche’s new faith as a criterion, we could add Nietzsche’s discovery of the eternal recurrence of the same in Sils Maria, which took place in August 1881, during the preparation of the Gay Science. A fragment from the same year describes scepticism as an indispensable phase that has already been overcome.

30. GS, Nr. 5 (KSA 3/377); about ‘self-love’ cf. (KSA 8/556), about the ‘willing to possess’ (KSA 9/450).
32. HH 1, Nr. 473 (KSA 2/307f).
36. ‘Are you prepared now? You have to have lived through every degree of scepticism and bathed with lust in ice-cold streams’ (Unpublished Fragments, Spring–Autumn 1881, 11 [339]; KSA 9/573). On Sils Maria, see EH, ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’, Nr. 1 (KSA 6/335) and Unpublished Fragments, Spring–Autumn 1881, 11 [141] (KSA 9/494).
If we look at the materials used by Losurdo, the periodisation is not as indisputable as it may seem. Nietzsche’s announcements of a hopeful new beginning are hardly a reliable source for a precise time-sequence, and it seems that their vacillations depend more on his cycles of illness and recovery than on anything else. According to an account in *Ecce Homo*, the ‘lowest point’ of his vitality was in 1879, whereas the 1880 winter in Genoa brought about the ‘yea-saying… clear and kindly’ book *Dawn*.37 On the other hand, Losurdo himself has already used the *Gay Science* several times as an example of the middle Nietzsche (e.g., pp. 241, 243, 289ff, 301, 309). Another problem is that several of the main references meant to back up his interpretation of the *Gay Science* as a part of the late period actually stem from its fifth book, which belongs to the second edition from 1887.38 When Losurdo argues, for example, that with the concept of the expectation of an ‘undiscovered country’ ahead, ‘over-rich in the beautiful… the frightful, and the divine’,39 the *Gay Science* indicates the transition to a new period (p. 343), he is making, contrary to his intention, an argument for a much later transition.

A narrow concept of the political?

Losurdo’s main argument, however, is political and related to his interpretation of Nietzsche as a ‘philosopher totus politicus’ (p. 897). The decisive turning point, he argues, was the famous speech of William I before the Reichstag on 17 November 1881 announcing new laws concerning accident and old-age insurance in the name of the ‘dignity’ of labour and the labourer (pp. 346ff). An aphorism in the *Gay Science* can indeed be read as a direct response to William I, interpreting the speech as a symptom of a lack of distance between the workers and ‘even the most leisurely of us’: ‘The royal courtesy in the words: “we are all workers”, would have been a cynicism and an indecency even under Louis XIV’.40 In Nietzsche’s view, the government’s socio-political concessions, presented as a requirement of ‘practical Christianity’ (Bismarck), went hand in hand with a further radicalisation of the Social-Democratic Party, instead of defusing the revolutionary fervour, and would add up to a menace no less dangerous than the Paris Commune of ten years earlier. Losurdo summarises Nietzsche’s response as follows: abolition of the parliamentary system; annulment of any right to vote and of the right of association; a radical aristocracy that does not aim, however, at a nostalgic return to feudal property and rural life, but is articulated on the level of a ‘reactionary modernism’, namely, to provide the industrial age with the breeding of a new élite defined by the ‘noble forms’ that make a ‘superior race’ (pp. 350ff, 367ff, 375ff).41 When the *Genealogy of Morals* proclaims an aristocratic ‘pathos of distance’,42 it is to be read as a signifier for Nietzsche’s political project of a ‘social apartheid’ (p. 378).

40. GS, Nr. 188 (KSA 3/503).
41. ‘It is probable that the manufacturers and great magnates of commerce have hitherto lacked too much all those forms and attributes of a superior race, which alone make persons interesting’ (GS, Nr. 40; KSA 3/407ff).
42. GM I, Nr. 2 (KSA 5/259).
Certainly, it was already the ‘enlightened’ Nietzsche who railed against the party system and questioned the legitimacy of the universal franchise, but it was clear to him at that point that the democratisation of Europe was not only ‘an unavoidable process’, but also a characteristic by which the modern era would overcome the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{43} It makes sense, therefore, that Losurdo considers antidemocratic radicalisation as an important feature of the late Nietzsche.

The question is, however, whether Nietzsche’s hostility to the Bismarckian welfare state is a sufficient motive for explaining the ideological turn that characterises the late Nietzsche’s philosophy. Let us tentatively consider some other angles: as David McNally has demonstrated, Nietzsche initially used Darwinism for a naturalist critique of Kant’s transcendental idealism and then operated a ‘hyper-voluntaristic’ and idealistic turn towards a new metaphysics of power that fended off the potentially democratic consequences of Darwin’s approach and replaced it with a radical-aristocratic perspective.\textsuperscript{44} If we take such an idealistic turn as a criterion, we would have to consider that the first edition of the \textit{Gay Science} still argued in the framework of the Darwinian (and Spinozist) notion of self-preservation, whereas the fifth book of the 1887 second edition replaced the term with the more expansive and aggressive ‘will to power’, and, from that new perspective, ridiculed the former as an expression of a ‘state of distress’ due to a plebeian class status and reflecting the ‘suffocating air . . . of humble people in need and in dire straits’.\textsuperscript{45} We could also take the \textit{Gay Science}’s programme of studying moral questions and compare it with the first paragraphs of the \textit{Genealogy of Morals}: the former outlines an everyday life history of various ‘human impulses’ and ‘moral climates’, e.g. a ‘history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of piety, of cruelty . . . different divisions of the day . . . moral effects of the alimentary substances’, which is not yet informed by the \textit{Genealogy}’s classism from above, which posits the mythological origin of an aristocratic ‘pathos of distance’ which was later opposed by a plebeian and primarily ‘Jewish’ dichotomy of ‘good versus evil’.\textsuperscript{46} Between the two books lies a turn that could be described as a movement of ideological ‘verticalisation’ propelled by the perspective of an unfettered aristocratic rule.\textsuperscript{47}

From a biographical angle, one might consider Nietzsche’s break-up with Lou Andreas-Salomé and Paul Rée as a decisive turning point, taking place as it did at the end of 1882 and during the preparation of \textit{Zarathustra} – a time of crisis in which Nietzsche desperately tried, as he wrote to Overbeck, ‘to transform these faeces into gold’, and ‘to lift myself up “vertically” from this lowness to my elevation’.\textsuperscript{48} It is this new and precarious ‘elevation’ that marks Nietzsche’s late period until his collapse. Also, the term ‘will to power’ makes its first appearance at the end of 1882,\textsuperscript{49} and, from then on, Nietzsche’s rhetoric takes up again the Judeophobic articulations of his earlier period, which had significantly receded during his friendship with this ‘brilliant Jewish intellectual’ Paul Rée, as Losurdo rightly observes

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{43} WS, Nr. 275 (KSA 2/671f); to the critique of the party system, see for example MMO, Nr. 318 (KSA 2/508); to the questioning of the franchise, cf. WS, Nr. 276 (KSA 2/672f).
\bibitem{44} McNally 2001, p. 22ff.
\bibitem{45} Cf. GS I, Nr. 1, Nr. 4 and GS V, Nr. 349.
\bibitem{46} Cf. GS I, Nr. 7 and GM I, Nr. 2, Nr. 4, Nr. 7.
\bibitem{47} Rehmann 2004, p. 131ff.
\bibitem{48} Letters from 25 December 1882 and from 1 February 1883 (KSB 6, 312, 324).
\end{thebibliography}
It was only after the split with Rée that Nietzsche also distanced himself from Spinoza, who had an important influence on his ‘middle’ period – one of the fundamental misunderstandings of Deleuze and other postmodernist interpreters can be seen in the way they overlook the late Nietzsche’s hostility towards Spinoza and the underlying opposition between his hierarchical concept of power, on the one hand, and Spinoza’s cooperative potentia agendi, on the other. In the fall of 1883, during the preparation of the third part of Zarathustra, Nietzsche talks about the problematic but unavoidable transition from the free spirit [Freigeist] to the obligation to rule [Herrschen-Müssen], which could be considered as another significant step towards a doctrine of domination.

Losurdo could (and might perhaps) argue that such transformations are to be considered as delayed philosophical effects of a political shift occurring in the Gay Science. However, this raises the methodological question of whether such an explanation would not be all too one-dimensional, as well as based on a narrow concept of the political, neatly separated from Nietzsche’s cycles of illness, depression, and ideological crises. This does not mean that Nietzsche’s hostile reaction to the Bismarckian welfare state would not be an important factor in the process. In any case, for an understanding of the transformation – in which the elements of a naturalistic critique of ideology prevailing in the ‘enlightened’ period were subjugated to and redefined by the perspective of an unmitigated aristocratic class rule – it seems useful to consider the transition to the late period not as a single event, but, rather, as a series of intermittent thrusts.

Nietzsche’s ‘party of life’

Losurdo sees the late Nietzsche acting like a ‘party leader’ who takes up the example of the Jesuits during the Counter-Reformation for founding a new ‘party of struggle [partito di lotta]’ (p. 377). However, in this respect too, the differences with the ‘enlightened’ Nietzsche are not always easy to define: from his middle period onwards, Nietzsche proclaims the necessity of a ‘new belligerent era’, whose wars, however, should not be nationalistic ones among Europeans, but colonial wars, ideally undertaken by a unified Europe. In the Dawn, he called on the workers not to indulge in the illusion ‘that merely by means of higher wages the essential part of their misery, i.e. their impersonal enslavement, might be removed’: only by taking part in the ‘heroism’ of vast colonisations can they overcome the shame of their slavery. Losurdo sees the specificity of the late period in the

52. ‘Our nature must remain concealed: like the nature of the Jesuits, who exercised a dictatorship in the midst of a general anarchy, but by introducing themselves as a mere tool and function’ (*Unpublished Fragments*, Spring–Autumn 1881, 11 [221]; KSA 9/527).
53. BGE, Nr. 209 (KSA 5/140).
54. Losurdo infers this from Nietzsche’s praise of Napoleon, ‘who, as one knows, wanted one Europe, which was to be mistress of the world’ (GS, Nr. 362; KSA 3/610). The ‘enlightened’ Nietzsche maintained already that European culture ‘requires not only wars, but the greatest and most terrible wars – and thus, temporary relapses into barbarism’ (HH I, Nr. 477; KSA 2/312).
55. *Dawn*, Nr. 206 (KSA 3/183ff): ‘Every one of you should on the contrary say to himself: “It would be better to emigrate and endeavour to become a master in new and savage countries,'
perspective of a ‘Caesarist’ solution that gets rid of any parliamentary impediments (p. 384ff): by analogy with the French Revolution, which generated its Napoleon, anarchy and socialist ‘fermentations’ were going to lead to new experiments in state domination with an increasing tendency to ‘military violence’. This is a constellation in which ‘tyrants’, the ‘forerunners’ and ‘firstlings’ of the individuals, make their appearance, and finally, there ‘arises the Caesar, the final tyrant, who puts an end to the exhausted struggle for sovereignty, by making the exhaustion work for him’.56

The late Nietzsche proclaims to found a new ‘party of life, strong enough for great politics’, that is for taking on the task of a ‘breeding of mankind, as well as the relentless destruction of all degenerate and parasitical elements’.57 Nietzsche was not only opposing socialism and democracy, but had broken with liberalism and conservatism alike, confronting them with a firm anti-conformism and the desecration of any dominant religious and political traditions. This shift compelled him, on the other hand, to work on maintaining the distance between his notion of a ‘free spirit’ and the ‘freethinkers’ who were more aligned with the Left – in Germany, the head of the ‘league of freethinkers [Freidenkerbund]’ at this time was Georg Büchner.58 According to Losurdo, Nietzsche deliberately and explicitly intends to ‘absorb’ the figure of the freethinker into his concept of free spirit and thereby to ‘neutralise’ it (p. 776; cf. p. 372).

‘We cannot be anything else than revolutionaries’

By challenging dominant ideological values, Nietzsche’s discourse intersects at times with Marxist rhetoric. For Habermas, this was reason enough to lump together Nietzsche, Adorno and Horkheimer as representatives of a ‘totalised, self-consuming critique of ideology’ that does not acknowledge the normative achievements of Western rationality (as indicated by Weber).59 Against the backdrop of such a superficial conjunction, Losurdo performs an indispensable work of clarification by confronting Nietzsche’s criticism with the young Marx’s critique of religion: whereas Marx claims to pluck the imaginary flowers from the chain, not so that people will wear the chain without consolation but so ‘that they will shake off the chain and pluck the living flower’, Nietzsche’s critique does the exact opposite, tearing up the imaginary flowers with the aim that the popular classes ‘wear the unadorned, bleak chain’, without comfort and chance of liberation (pp. 455ff, 460).60 Losurdo also refers to Gramsci’s distinction between a progressive and creative ‘sarcasm’

and especially to become master over myself, changing my place of abode whenever the least sign of slavery threatens me’” (ibid.; KSA 3/184).


58. ‘Up to the present nothing has been more strange and more foreign to my blood than the whole of that European and American species known as *libres penseurs’* (EH, ‘Unfashionable Observations’, 2; KSA 6/319).

59. Habermas 1987, pp. 97, 107, 120, 123, 420 FN 8.

that intends to help the living core of ideology to find a new and more adequate form, and a right-wing sarcasm, which is ‘always “negative”, sceptical and destructive, not only in respect to the contingent “form”, but also to the “human” content of these sentiments and beliefs’. Nietzsche’s ‘radical aristocratism’ takes on the rebellious rhetoric and gestures of ‘anarchism’, but in the perspective of ‘stripping the revolutionary movement it wants to oppose and to liquidate the flag of liberty and unscrupulousness of spirit’ (p. 373). As Nietzsche remarks in *Ecce Homo*, ‘we cannot be anything else than revolutionaries’.

The tensions between aristocratic reaction and authoritarian populism

But does this not come down, despite Losurdo’s dissociation from Lukács, to an interpretation that makes Nietzsche an immediate precursor of the Nazis? As Ernst Bloch has shown in his *Heritage of Our Times*, the ‘revolutionary’ outbidding and dispossession of the labour movement belongs to the very ideological weaponry of the fascist movement. Losurdo would object that Nietzsche’s adoption and absorption of a ‘freethinker’ type of critique of ideology is to be distinguished from a fascist takeover of the symbols of proletarian movements.

In fact, the argument that the two phenomena are separated by a social gap plays an important role in Losurdo’s theoretical evaluation: Nietzsche belongs to an aristocratic reaction that penetrated the higher strata of political institutions between 1890 and 1914. The confrontation of the feudal-bourgeois power bloc with democratic and socialist movements had generated a specific ‘mercilessness [spietatezza] of the élite’ that found an appropriate ideological expression in Nietzsche’s polemics against compassion and softness towards the lower classes (p. 785ff). At the same time, and competing with this élitism, we see the appearance of an ‘authoritarian populism’ that tries to integrate the popular classes into an organic *Volksgemeinschaft*, defined by its opposition to other peoples and races (p. 834). This project is clearly rejected not only by the middle but also by the late Nietzsche, because it would lead to a fatal confrontation between the ruling classes of Europe and generate patriotic blocs that blur the antagonism between masters and slaves (p. 835).

This distinction is also relevant for disentangling some of the deadlocked debates on Nietzsche’s anti-Semitism or anti-anti-Semitism, which tend to fizzle out by playing off anti-Jewish against pro-Jewish Nietzsche quotes. Losurdo differentiates between three Judeophobic ‘figures of the Jew’, namely the poor migrant worker from Eastern Europe; the ‘subversive’ Jewish intellectual, blamed by major parts of the European intelligentsia for the cycle of revolutions; and Jewish finance capital (p. 603ff). In a letter, published in 1890, titled ‘On Anti-Semitism’, Friedrich Engels not only praised the first two figures, but also the third: since he considers anti-Semitism (mistakenly) as being ‘merely the reaction of declining medieval social strata against a modern society’ and expects it to be overcome by a rapid economic development, the capitalist class – whether Semitic or Aryan, circumcised

---

63. ‘The most dreadful white terror against populace and socialism which history has ever seen camouflages itself as socialist. To this end its propaganda must develop sheer revolutionary appearance, garnished with thefts from the commune’ (Bloch 1990, p. 64).
or baptised – is seen as playing a progressive modernising role. Nietzsche, however, after his break with Réé, intensified his Judeophobic statements not only against the proletarian Eastern Jews, but also against the ‘subversive intellectuals’ whose prototype he considers to be Saint Paul. In this regard, his stance coincides with that of the leading anti-Semitic journal of this time, the Antisemitische Correspondenz, whose editors and supporters see Nietzsche, after the publication of Zaratustra, as their natural ally (pp. 605, 608ff).

It is different with the third figure, however. The late Nietzsche did not simply return to the Judeophobia of his early period, but, rather, maintained the ‘European’ perspective of the middle period: the higher strata of the Jews are to be integrated in the European élite. In Beyond Good and Evil, he proposes to marry the members of Prussian nobility with Jews, in order to combine the hereditary art of commanding and obeying with the genius for money, patience and intellectuality. For this, it would be fair ‘to banish the anti-Semitic bawlers out of the country’. The third figure of Jewishness is to be co-opted in the ‘rearing of a new ruling caste for Europe’, eugenically and therefore irreversibly. This re-alignment would make it possible to launch a unified assault against the ‘slave revolt’ as a whole, which comprises, in Nietzsche’s view, both the first and second enemy images of the Jewish and populist anti-Semites, the latter representing the protest of the ‘rabble’, which August Bebel dubbed the ‘socialism of the stupid’ (pp. 613ff, 617ff).

Horizontal and transversal racialisation

To allow for a better understanding of Nietzsche’s position, Losurdo introduces the analytical distinction between ‘horizontal’ and ‘transversal racialisation [razzizzazione orizzontale e trasversale]’. The terminology is not easy to grasp at first, since the normal semantic opposition would not be between ‘horizontal’ and ‘transversal’ (going crosswise), but rather between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’. The meaning becomes clearer, however, when Losurdo describes the late Nietzsche’s view of Judaism as part of a social conflict that tears

64. See Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 27, p. 50ff. About the first figure: ‘The anti-Semite… doesn’t even know the Jews he decries…. There are here in England and in America thousands upon thousands of Jewish proletarians; and it is precisely these Jewish workers who are the worst exploited and the most poverty-stricken. In England during the past twelve months we have had three strikes by Jewish workers. Are we then expected to engage in anti-Semitism in our struggle against capital?’ (p. 51). About the second figure of the ‘subversive’ Jewish intellectual, Engels expresses our indebtedness to Heine, Börne, Marx, Lassalle, Victor Adler, Eduard Bernstein, Paul Singer, and concludes: ‘After all, I myself was dubbed a Jew by the Gartenlaube and, indeed, if given the choice, I’d rather be a Jew than a “Herr von”!’ (p. 52).

65. ‘Let no more Jews come in! And shut the doors, especially towards the East…!’ (BGE, Nr. 251; 5/193); ‘We would no more choose the “first Christians” to associate with than Polish Jews – not that one even required any objection to them: they both do not smell good’ (AC, Nr. 46; KSA 6/223). About the ‘subversive’ Jewish intellectuals, see e.g. GS, Nr. 348, Nr. 361 (KSA 3/584ff, 609), Unpublished Fragments, June-July 1885, 36 [42-47] (KSA 11/568ff); about St. Paul, see e.g. AC, Nr. 58ff (KSA 6/246ff).

66. BGE, Nr. 251 (KSA 5/194ff).

67. See Nietzsche’s polemics against Eugen Dühring, ‘that apostle of revenge from Berlin… today’s biggest loud-mouth of morality, even among his kind, the anti-Semites’ (GM III, Nr. 14; KSA 5/3670). See also GM III, Nr. 26 (KSA 5/407ff).
up both the Greek-Roman world and the modern world ‘transversally’ (p. 519). The term refers directly to the social antagonism of ancient as well as modern class society. Whereas ‘horizontal’ racism racialises the differences between peoples and nations, Nietzsche’s ‘transversal’ approach consists in an immediate racialisation of the lower classes, corresponding to a theory of international civil war (pp. 823, 826, 828). I have come to a similar conclusion in the case of Nietzsche’s *Antichrist*, where the term ‘Jewish instinct’ directly describes a social position together with a correspondent plebeian social moralism – ‘it is a marker for an international subaltern class’.

As Losurdo convincingly shows, Nietzsche’s racialisation of the lower classes cannot be explained by a German *Sonderweg*, but is aligned with racist tendencies of an early liberalism (e.g. Locke, Mandeville, Constant), that regularly came to the fore during social crises (pp. 417ff, 824ff). Losurdo’s approach also helps, in part at least, to understand the paradox of a ‘Jewish Nietzscheanism’ that is often used as a trump to debunk any attempt to associate Nietzsche with anti-Semitism. In fact, Nietzsche also calls on the higher strata of Judaism to define themselves as ‘masters’ and to get rid of the ‘servile’ features of their tradition, i.e. of the first and second figures of the Jew (p. 874). On the other hand, Nietzsche’s ‘transversal’ fusion of racism and aristocratic classism had to come into conflict with the main anti-Semitic tendencies of late nineteenth century: ‘If racism consisted solely . . . in the naturalisation of nations and national differences, it would be difficult to find a philosopher further from racism than Nietzsche, at least in the case of Europe’ (p. 828).

Since this is not the case, the question of Nietzsche’s part in the ascendance of fascism is far from being off the agenda.

**Nietzsche and the ideological preparation of fascism**

Whereas it does not make sense to construe a direct line linking Nietzsche to the Third Reich, it is no less erroneous to conclude that there is no connection at all. Losurdo goes through different strategies for exonerating Nietzsche and demonstrates their inconsistencies and fallacies. Best-known is the story of the malicious sister Elisabeth who had, in both her biography and her edition of *Will to power* (1901), falsified Nietzsche’s philosophy in the direction of Nazism by smuggling in anti-Semitic passages. As Losurdo carefully demonstrates, this legend, which is still being presented as academically sound research, overlooks that Elisabeth’s manipulations consisted in exactly the opposite: Nietzsche’s break with Wagner’s anti-Semitism was not silenced at all in her biography, but clearly reported; what was silenced, however, were both the young Nietzsche’s violently anti-Semitic letters and his polemics against the ‘Jewish press’ (p. 768ff). Her compilation *Will to Power* is certainly an ‘interpretation’, but primarily one that takes the edge off the most pungent remarks, for instance on Christianity and the church (p. 771). Far from transforming

---

70. For example *Will to Power* includes Nietzsche’s note that a man’s rights are related to his duties and tasks, and that the great majority ‘have no right to existence, but are a misfortune to higher men’. But it omits what follows: ‘I do not yet grant the failures the right. There are also peoples that are failures’ (Cf. WP, §872 and *Unpublished Fragments*, Spring 1884, 24 (343], KSA 11/102).
Nietzsche into a Nazi, Elisabeth tried to clean up his image from as many anti-Semitic and social-Darwinistic brutalities as possible in order to present him as a good European – not so dissimilar from the softening up by ‘liberal’ interpretations that blame her for the Nazi use of Nietzsche.

To assume that Nietzsche could not have anything to do with Nazism because he was an unpolitical ‘man of art’ is a fallacy: Mussolini and Hitler themselves maintained an ‘anti-political pathos’ and claimed to lead the masses like ‘artists’. Nietzsche’s cult of the genius resonates well with what Walter Benjamin described as ‘aesthetisation of the political’ widely utilised by fascism (p. 795ff). His ‘European’ orientation is not an anti-fascist guarantee either, since it was the Nazis that defined themselves as a pan-European movement and appealed to ‘European man’ (p. 841ff). In Hitler’s ‘table talks’, various relevant topics of Nietzsche’s political philosophy were praised, including those of his ‘enlightened’ period (p. 882). What is striking is the immediacy with which Nietzsche’s polemics against revolution, against a Rousseauian ‘good nature of man’, and against Saint Paul as the leader of a ‘communist’ slave revolt, were taken up and applied to the current situation (pp. 875, 880ff).

But it would be fallacious to confuse such evidence with an analysis. As Losurdo reminds us, ‘the continuist approach is not more persuasive than the “allegorical” one’ (p. 861). In order to resist the appearance of an immediate link, one must reformulate the problem on another level: what are the socio-historical, political, and ideological processes by which ‘radical aristocracy’ was incorporated into the fascist movement and the Nazi state? One must not forget the catastrophic events of World War I and the October Revolution which lay between Nietzsche’s death and the rise of European fascism. A ‘heterogeneity’ of time separated the actual political movement from the complex ensemble of its ideological preparation (p. 836ff). Nietzsche’s relative distance from the Nazis can then be explained by the circumstance that both fascism’s rise to a hegemonic force and its mobilisation of the Volksgemeinschaft for World War II were in need of a ‘horizontal’ racism. ‘Transversal’ racism was already in crisis before World War I: why should soldiers risk their lives for their ‘fatherland’, when they were considered by its élites as Chandala (untouchables) (p. 848)? Correspondingly, a right-wing literature criticised Nietzsche for celebrating a power-ideal without a people and overlooking the German worker’s predisposition to becoming a master. Heidegger addressed the problem with another strategy by arguing that the ‘mass’ scorned by Nietzsche referred not to the workers and peasants but rather to the mediocre cultural philistines (pp. 847, 849). One can conclude from Losurdo’s account that the Nazification of Nietzsche consisted largely in transvaluating his ‘transversal’ fascism into a ‘horizontal’ one.

That the aristocratic dichotomy between élite and people did not simply vanish is well demonstrated by the example of Mussolini’s confidant Julius Evola, who referred to Nietzsche in order to criticise a fascist ‘degradation’ of the concept of race (p. 851ff). Ludendorff employs a similar pattern when he warns against socialist revolution and subversion, but he drops his elitism as soon as he tries to mobilise the people against foreign enemies (p. 851). These and other examples make clear that Losurdo’s opposition between ‘transversal’ and ‘horizontal’ racism is an analytical and ideal-typical one which is

---

71. From Tille 1895 to Böhm 1938.
hermeneutically fruitful for dissecting a complex reality where, in fact, both types overlap and permeate one other. In terms of a Marxist theory of ideology, one could even argue that the functioning of racism presupposes a certain oscillation between ‘transversal’ and ‘horizontal’ interpellations. Regarding the example of a Hitler speech, W.F. Haug has observed that, at a certain point, the discourse abruptly jumps from the semantics of an imminent socialist revolution to ‘Jewish world domination’. The social antagonism that is being displaced onto a racist discourse has not been dissolved but remains present, at least latently. Losurdo does not delve into such considerations, but some of the ideological material he investigates points in this direction, for instance when he shows that racialisation may start at first ‘transversally’ against the colonised and the domestic poor, and then be transposed onto neighbouring nations. Or that racialisation proceeds from the subversive Jewish intellectual to the ‘racial Jew’. In each of the decisive moments when the Jew was identified as ‘homo ideologicus’ and the ‘revolutionary virus’ was ethnicised, the reference to Nietzsche played a crucial role (p. 877ff).

An over-politicising interpretation?
The philological and theoretical soundness of Losurdo’s book becomes obvious as soon as one compares it to the mainstream of Nietzsche scholarship, which always knows beforehand, and eagerly assures us, that ‘aristocracy’, ‘rabble’, ‘war’, ‘annihilation’ and the like are never to be understood literally, because of Nietzsche’s concern for higher values or deeper truths or the joyful game of it all. Losurdo takes time to look closely at the material, to unfold patiently the connections between texts and political contexts, and to submit his empirical findings to a theoretical reflection.

To say that Losurdo’s methodological focus is selective and one-sided is not yet a critique, but rather points to a limitation that is true of any approach. It is worthwhile, however, to reflect for a moment on the specific limitations of Losurdo’s approach, which are due to the major ‘frontlines’ defined by his intervention. He rightly opposes an interpretation that, on the pretext of rescuing Nietzsche as a pure ‘philosopher’, actually degrades him to an apolitical ‘idiot’ (in the classical Greek sense of idiotés), as Nietzsche himself did with Jesus of Nazareth. But, while fighting against such a caricature, Losurdo seems at times to bend the stick too far in the other direction: in each period of his philosophy, Nietzsche appears to be completely consistent and to grasp fully the then current political constellation. One could object that already in his time, it had become evident that an anti-revolutionary strategy betting on an ancient model of social apartheid and opposing any kind of corporatist integration of the Social Democrats and the trade unions was, from the perspective of the political élite, an anachronism. Shortly afterwards, Max Weber and other social reformers were pleading for a class compromise with the ‘labour aristocracy’ (the term is here Weber’s not Lenin’s) that later constituted the predominant social axis during the Fordist stage of capitalist development.

73. See AC, §29 (KSA 6/200) – suppressed by Nietzsche’s sister in the first edition of the AC in 1895.
Losurdo's consideration of Nietzsche as a 'philosopher totus politicus' can certainly help to uncover significant determinants, but it sometimes risks moving towards an over-politicisation that short-circuits a wide range of ideological and psychological dynamics: for instance, it neglects the impact of Spinoza's critique of morality on the 'middle' period and therefore overlooks the importance of the late Nietzsche's sharp turn against the 'consumptive' and 'revengeful' Spinoza,75 which is clearly a symptom of Nietzsche's understanding that his own aggressive merging of power and domination is at odds with Spinoza's potentia agendi. And, while Losurdo is well aware of Darwinism's influence on the middle period (pp. 277ff, 300ff, 748, 778), he fails to evaluate Nietzsche's later polemics against its 'plebeian' character.76 Losurdo convincingly points out that neither Nietzsche's departure from Wagner nor his later concept of 'degeneration' can be explained by means of a 'psychological and biographical reductionism' (pp. 281ff, 981ff), but he seems to conclude that biographical turning-points – be it Nietzsche's failed romance with Lou Salomé or his cycles of illness and recovery – are not worthy of consideration at all. One could object that such an abstraction has a negative effect on the political analysis itself. For example, it misses the enormous tension between Nietzsche's existential articulations of pain – the intense transposition of his own sufferings into the discourse of philosophy, on the one hand, and the exterminating hatred against those who suffer and are weak, on the other. This tension could help to explain why Nietzsche's philosophy was not only attractive for sections of the reactionary elites, but also for quite a few coming from rebellious movements and 'plebeian' classes. Adorno visualises a piece of this alienated structure when he describes Nietzsche's passionate yes-saying to destiny [amor fati] as the attitude of a prisoner who 'cannot help but be in love with the prison cell in which he is incarcerated'.77 A Marxist critique of Nietzsche's philosophy is not bound, in my view, to keep its distance from psychological explanations, but could integrate them into its analysis of alienated ideological structures and dynamics.78

'Reactionary coherence' and 'theoretical surplus'

It would be equally one-sided, however, to pin an over-politicising interpretation on Losurdo. Especially in his concluding parts (6 and 7), he confronts us with an interesting strategy, which is aimed at catching some of the aspects he had earlier excluded from his political analysis: only by putting forward the 'coherently reactionary character [carattere coerentemente reazionario]', he claims, can critique do justice to the 'theoretical excess [eccedenza teorica] of Nietzsche's thinking (pp. 893, 935). This term, probably drawn from Ernst Bloch's concept of a 'utopian excess [utopischer Überbau]',79 serves Losurdo to bring

75. Compare, for instance, the famous postcard from 30 July 1881, in which Nietzsche declares to have finally found in Spinoza his 'predecessor' (KSB 6, 111), and the pungent remarks of the late Nietzsche in GS, Nr. 349, Nr. 372 (KSA 3/585, 624).
76. GS V, Nr. 349 (KSA 5/585).
77. Adorno, in Horkheimer 1985–96, Volume 13, p. 120. Translation mine.
78. See Rehmann 2004, pp. 49ff, 91, 93.
79. By this term, Ernst Bloch tried to grasp that bourgeois ideologies consist of utopian elements which go beyond their class function and are to be inherited as well as transformed by socialist movements (e.g. PH II, 539, 542, 547).
together different achievements that define the ‘radicality and greatness’ of Nietzsche's critique (p. 944). First, a ‘philology-philosophy’, propelled by a strong political passion that does not trifle with singular events at the level of governments and political parties, but challenges the entire historical cycle of modernity (p. 936). Here, ‘philology’ means an anti-sensualistic and anti-metaphysical epistemology that is opposed to the illusions of immediacy and evidence and looks at what turns into habit ‘from the outside’ (939ff). Second, a ‘meta-critical’ approach that skilfully dissects the different types of intellectuals: the ‘theoretical man’ and his will to truth, the metaphysician, the philosopher as a disguised priest (p. 947ff). Third, an extraordinary capacity to combine different disciplines, which Losurdo evaluates by using Gramsci’s idea of ‘translatability of languages’ (p. 952ff). Fourth, a historical sense that allows Nietzsche, for instance, to understand the early Christians’ ‘God on the cross’ as a tremendous scandal for antiquity’s value system. Finally, Nietzsche was dealing with real problems, which are also of interest to the Left, for example, with ‘resentment’ as an expression of narrow conditions of life. This is an attitude from which in fact no revolution can be developed, but which has itself to be overcome by a determined politics of broad alliances: Gramsci’s ‘cathartic moment’ as a starting point for any philosophy of praxis (p. 989ff).

It is clear that Losurdo is not only an expert on Hegel, but also knows the art of the dialectical analysis of contradictions. Even the most brutal and reactionary statements are something to be learned from: Nietzsche’s open support of slavery occurs at the same time as European colonialism brandishes the flag of universalism and disguises itself as a humanist endeavour against the barbarism of slavery. Nietzsche’s perspective of unmediated class domination can also be used for laying bare the hypocrisy of an ‘imperialism of human rights’ and its recent ‘humanitarian wars’ (pp. 1030ff, 1057). Compared to Locke, the ‘sacred space of culture [spazio sacro della civiltà]’ has diminished, but, at the same time, the freedom of individuals in such a space is conceived more radically, not only as freedom from tyranny, but also from narrow concepts of morality. But Nietzsche’s fascinating utopia is directly and explicitly built upon the appalling dystopia of an enslaved and despised multitude (p. 1075ff). Politically, Nietzsche is certainly more reactionary than Locke, Losurdo concludes, but, theoretically, he is head and shoulders above him: by the very indication of the exclusive character of liberal society, whose individualism presupposes the existence of a mass of labourers that are denied the status of individuality (p. 1076).

In a way, the world of academic Nietzsche interpretations is stood on its head. It was postmodernism that claimed to submit Nietzsche to a subversive reading and thereby reveal him to be a subtle prophet of counterculture who, as Gilles Deleuze put it, ‘decodifies’ the

80. ‘The known is the accustomed, and the accustomed is the most difficult of all to “understand”, that is to say, to perceive as a problem, to perceive as strange, distant, “outside of us”’ (GS, Nr. 355; KSA 3/594). Compare Nietzsche’s description of a philologist as a ‘teacher of slow reading’, who teaches to read ‘profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes’ (Dawn, ‘Author’s Preface’, Nr. 5; KSA 3/17).


82. ‘God on the cross – are the horrible secret thoughts behind this symbol not understood yet? All that suffers, all that is nailed to the cross, is divine. All of us are nailed to the cross, consequently we are divine.’ (AC, Nr. 51; KSA 6/232.)
institutions of modern society and creates, through his aphorisms, a nomadic ‘war machine’ against the state.\(^\text{83}\) However, in contrast to the hyper-radical rhetoric of their ‘leftist Nietzscheanism’, Deleuze, Foucault, Vattimo and others do no more than apply the well-known tradition of allegorical interpretation, which eliminates any social meaning and context.\(^\text{84}\) Paradoxically, it is Losurdo’s Marxist critique that actually puts into practice a subversive reading which wants to set free some of the critical and potentially emancipatory elements in Nietzsche. Ernst Bloch proposed such a transformative reading as part of a ‘multi-layered revolutionary dialectic’ against fascism.\(^\text{85}\) And, on this point, Losurdo is absolutely correct: a leftist ‘appropriation’ of Nietzsche cannot do without a thorough deciphering of his utterly reactionary position in the ideological configuration of the late nineteenth century. Skipping such a critical analysis, as postmodernist neo-Nietzscheanism has done, leads to a depoliticised transvaluation that is philologically dishonest and helps to stabilise the mainstream ‘hermeneutics of innocence’ (pp. 653, 781ff, 798ff).

Reviewed by Jan Rehmann
Union Theological Seminary, New York and Free University, Berlin

References


\(^\text{83}\) Deleuze 1973, pp. 142ff, 148ff.
\(^\text{84}\) For Deleuze’s allegorical misinterpretation of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, see Rehmann 2004, p. 26ff.
\(^\text{85}\) Bloch 1990, p. 113ff.
Nietzsche, Friedrich:
AC The Antichrist
BGE Beyond Good and Evil
BT Birth of Tragedy
Dawn
EH Ecce Homo
GM On the Genealogy of Morals
GS The Gay Science
HH Human, All Too Human
MMO Miscellaneous Maxims and Opinions
TI Twilight of Idols
UM I–IV Unpublished Meditations I–IV
UF Unpublished Fragments
WP The Will to Power
WS The Wanderer and his Shadow
Z Thus Spoke Zarathustra
La Révolution rêvée: Pour une histoire des intellectuels et des œuvres révolutionnaires 1944–1956, Michel Surya, Paris: Fayard, 2004

The years immediately following the Liberation of France in 1944 saw an intense ferment in the field of ideas. This was not simply a result of the ending of the controls and censorship imposed by the Nazi occupiers and their French allies. There was a much deeper recognition that there could be no simple return to the prewar situation, and that the Resistance had created the potential for a throughgoing transformation of French society. The mood was summed up in the slogan of the Resistance newspaper edited by Albert Camus, Combat: ‘From Resistance to Revolution’. To modern readers, it might seem that a time when intellectuals openly recognised their social responsibility, and the interconnections between literature and politics were widely discussed, was a golden age. As this book shows, things were not quite so simple.

Michel Surya—editor of the review Lignes and author of a major study of Georges Bataille—has attempted to recreate the intellectual climate of these years in his book La Révolution rêvée. The very title is ambiguous—the ‘longed for revolution’ or ‘the imaginary revolution’. Some of the ground has been well covered—from David Caute’s pioneering Communism and the French Intellectuals to the more recent study by Chebel d’Appollonia. Surya confines his attention almost exclusively to the literary milieu. In some ways, this is a pity, for he neglects entirely the field of historical studies. In particular, some reference to the debate about the French Revolution—Georges Lefebvre’s legitimation of the Resistance through the Revolution and Daniel Guérin’s challenge to popular frontism in his study of the embryonic working class of the 1790s—would have been valuable. For in few societies were the revolutionary origins of the existing order so visible; coins bore the slogan ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ (replaced for the duration of the Occupation by the Nazi triad ‘Work, Family, Homeland’). 1789 was the most obvious reference-point when the idea of Revolution was evoked.

But, on the areas he does cover, Surya is thorough and often illuminating. A good deal of the early part of the book is devoted to the idea of ‘commitment [engagement]’ in literature. Today, this is mainly associated with Sartre and his 1947 essay ‘What Is Literature?’ But, as Surya shows, the debate had its origins in the 1930s, and was confronted in the 1940s from a variety of viewpoints.

What becomes clear from the various texts cited by Surya is that all sides in the debate shared a view of ‘Literature’ as a Platonic ‘form’. Anything that did not fit a particular concept of what constituted ‘literature’ was rejected as not being literature at all. Thus Tristan Tsara, former Dadaist turned Communist, claimed that: ‘If poetry is not to serve man, if it is not to help him to free himself of internal constraints of a moral order and external constraints of a social order, then it is only an object of enjoyment, pure amusement’ (p. 114).

Surya quotes Leon-Pierre Quint’s claim that even poets ‘who seem to remain the furthest removed from social questions… contribute to the creation of a revolutionary climate’ (p. 104). Here, we are back with the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’. But maybe

2. See Bétourné & Hartig, 1989.
poets were overstating their own influence. The Resistance poetry of Aragon and Eluard had reached a certain popular audience. After the war the most popular poet was undoubtedly the ex-surrealist maverick Jacques Prévert. The lyrics of poet-singers Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré certainly helped to form the consciousness of the postwar generation. And, as Sartre noted, the only great revolutionary poetry of the age came from African and Caribbean poets such as Aimé Césaire and David Diop.

4. Apart from these, the impact of the poets cited was on a very small sector of the population.

Among the opponents of engagement Surya notes the sparkingly aggressive pamphlet by Benjamin Péret, Le Dés honneur des poètes, a savage polemic against the Resistance poets. It is certainly exhilarating to read his judgement that in an anthology of French Resistance poets 'not one of these "poems" rises above the lyrical level of pharmaceutical advertising material'.

Yet, while it is true that Louis Aragon turned out some pretentious claptrap, Péret went on to tie himself in intellectual knots. He argued that poetry must not serve any cause or be useful to anything. In reacting against Stalinism, Péret was arguing that any poetry worthy of the name must be totally independent of any set of values external to poetry (p. 97). Leaving aside the strengths and weaknesses of Aragon, the Second World War had seen conflicts of values for which many human beings had sacrificed their lives. If it was not a fit subject for poetry, then, presumably, Homer was not a poet either. When one considers that Péret’s own poetic output contained such immortal lines as:

Then Joan understood that she was in the presence of God
And swallowed the cow-dung like a relic
Immediately God crystallised in the form of haemorrhoids
And all the dogs of Domrémý licked her behind.

the argument becomes even more puzzling.

Péret justified the link between poetry and revolution as follows:

Any ‘poem’ which exalts a ‘freedom’ which is deliberately undefined, even if it is not decorated with religious or nationalist attributes, ceases immediately to be a poem and as a result constitutes an obstacle to the total liberation of man, for it deceives him by showing him a ‘freedom’ which conceals new chains. On the other hand, any authentic poem gives off a breath of freedom that is total and active, even if this freedom is not evoked in its political and social aspect, and hence it contributes to the effective liberation of mankind.

When I am confronted with such attempts to turn the concept of poetry of a particular school or tendency into the Platonic form of all poetry, I must admit to being tempted by

5. Péret 1945.
6. Surya notes the splendid polemics against Aragon from anti-Stalinist writers Georges Henein and Jean Malaquais.
the more practical definition attributed to Jeremy Bentham: ‘Prose is when all the lines except the last go on to the margin. Poetry is when some of them fall short of it.’ Benjamin Péret was a courageous revolutionary who fought fascism and Stalinism in Spain, but he was now painting himself into an ultra-left corner which would end with his absurd claim that trade unions were the main enemy of the working class.9

Surya also reports the arguments of Bataille (who opposed Sartre ferociously, claiming that literature was the enemy of the useful) (p. 128) and Breton. Breton had now abandoned the notion of revolutionary art that he had defended with Trotsky at the time of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art in 1938. Now he argued: ‘No military-political imperative can be accepted or promulgated in art without treachery. The sole duty of the poet, of the artist, is to respond with an uncompromising NO to all disciplinary formulae’ (p. 122). Surya tends to attribute rather too much importance to Breton. While he was certainly a figure of major importance in the 1920s and 30s, after his return to France in 1946, surrealism – having torn itself to pieces through its inability to decide if it was a poetic school or a revolutionary party – was of much less significance. While there were some interesting poems and articles, Breton was largely living on past glory.

Another perspective on the engagement debate came from Armand Salacrou, who argued that the writer could be committed, but not the work, which must preserve its purity from outside contamination (p. 113). Again, logic was twisted to breaking point. If writers commit themselves – for example, by giving their names to sponsoring a good cause – they are mobilising their reputation based on previous work. But, if that work has nothing to say about the condition of the world, why should we give any heed to their opinions? If art is autonomous of any social considerations, why is the artist’s opinion more valuable than that of any citizen? Does the fact that Mary of the 4th Form was a great record mean that we should adopt Bob Geldof’s views on Africa? Salacrou’s attempt to use the case of Zola is patently misconceived; Zola was first invited to participate in the Dreyfus defence because he had already combated anti-Semitism (almost universal in literary circles) in articles and novels long before the Affair began.10

Yet it has to be recognised that Sartre, too, shared a Platonic view of literature at this stage. The very title ‘What Is Literature?’ implies acceptance of the view that it is possible to say of some writing that it is ‘not literature’ – rather than that it is bad, badly written, incomprehensible or morally depraved literature. It was only in 1964 that Sartre broke with the idea that literature offered some sort of salvation and clearly stated that ‘beside a child dying of hunger, Nausea does not make the weight’.11 This set poets and critics squawking like chickens in a coop, for Sartre was now arguing that literature was a human activity among others, no more and no less, with no special privileges, and to be judged as such.

Surya is also illuminating on other literary debates of the period. A new genre which emerged at this time was that of concentration camp literature, with survivors of the German camps presenting their experience. But even the horrors of slave labour and the Holocaust did not transcend the political disputes of the time. David Rousset’s two books

---
10. See Birchall 1998.
on the concentration-camp experience were generally disparaged by the French Communist Party (PCF). This was partly because Rousset was known as a Trotskyist, but, more generally, because he argued that the camps had a certain rationality, that they embodied to the most intense degree features that were inherent in all class society (pp. 211–13). Hence, though Surya fails to make this explicit, his account undermined the logic of the Popular Front, namely that fascism was something distinct from capitalism and therefore something against which it was possible to unite with the ‘progressive’ bourgeoisie.

In 1946, the weekly Action, closely linked to the PCF, opened up a debate with the provocative title ‘Should Kafka Be Burnt’? Kafka’s work had been banned under the Occupation, and was now a subject of curiosity and debate. Surya speculates as to the reasons for PCF hostility to Kafka (pp. 247–60), suggesting that it was because his work implied a similarity between Nazi and Stalinist bureaucracy. But, as he also points out, the debate was not really about Kafka at all – it was about ‘gloomy literature [littérature noire]’ and, in particular, about Sartre. The many well-known writers and ordinary readers who contributed to the debate referred to Sartre almost as often as to Kafka, and were primarily concerned with any form of writing that presented a challenge to the drab optimistic conventions of socialist realism.

In fact, this is just one more indication of the centrality of Sartre to the literary and philosophical debates of the period. Surya deals at some length with the sharp polemics: innumerable articles and at least four books in which Communist intellectuals launched their attack on Sartrean existentialism. The attack was led by the established intellectual figure of Roger Garaudy and the rising star Jean Kanapa. Surya shows the crudity and virulence of the attack on Sartre. He contrasts the writings of Garaudy and Kanapa to what he sees as the more serious work of Henri Lefebvre and Lukács. He notes that, whereas Garaudy and Kanapa threw around the term ‘fascist’ in a quite irresponsible fashion, the more serious philosophers were somewhat more guarded (pp. 305–6). Admittedly, Lukács graciously conceded that Sartre was not a fascist, but hastened to add that his work could serve reactionary purposes. Lefebvre (expelled from the PCF after the 1956 crisis) was certainly more of a philosopher than Garaudy – but his book was used to promote the quite disgraceful fabricated accusations that Paul Nizan (who had left the PCF over the Hitler-Stalin Pact) had been a police informer.

12 The debate appeared in eight issues of Action between 24 May and 26 July 1946.
13 Kanapa was given major responsibility for the PCF’s work among intellectuals as editor of La Nouvelle Critique, although he had no Resistance record – he had spent most of the Occupation in a sanatorium (partly at Sartre’s expense!).
14 Often, the tone of these debates appears very remote to a modern reader. But the spiritual heritage of Garaudy and Kanapa is not quite dead. In a recent article, Ben Watson described Sartre as a ‘pompous centrist … wealthy well-connected chump’ and dismissed Sartrean ‘freedom of choice’ as being merely ‘clear to apologists for the market’. Most on the Left would believe that the ‘freedom’ offered by the market is inadequate if not illusory, and that we should demand a higher level of freedom; Watson apparently thinks the Left should abandon freedom and set out to reclaim the virtues of totalitarianism. See Watson 2005.
16 Lefebvre 1946. Surya does not list this book in his bibliography, and in the text refers only to a short newspaper article by Lefebvre.
In fact, Surya worries a little bit too much about tracing inconsistencies in the work of the PCF intellectuals. Garaudy and Kanapa had scant interest in the pour-soi and en-soi; this was essentially a turf war. Sartre threatened the hegemony of the PCF over left intellectuals and a new generation of students; he had to be isolated and discredited at all costs. Happily, the whole operation failed. The PCF never seems to have realised that torrents of abuse rarely win arguments; ironically, the pathetic Kanapa will only ever be remembered as a footnote to the work of the Sartre who called him a 'cretin'.

By 1947, things were going sour. With the onset of the Cold War, the PCF abandoned the few manifestations of intellectual openness it had permitted in the immediate postwar period, and almost all debates became polarised into pro- and anti-Communism. Surya's treatment of the later part of this period is much thinner than his coverage of the earlier part. Perhaps this is justified; the arguments now became much less interesting. Certainly, there is little new in his account.

Thus, he describes at some length the famous quarrel between Sartre and Camus in 1952, but adds nothing to our understanding, seeing it solely in terms of a Left-Right division (pp. 419–31). In fact, the incident is interesting precisely as much as it was something more than this. Camus never entirely broke his links with the revolutionary-syndicalist Left, something of which Surya seems to have no understanding. His anti-Communism diverged quite sharply from the standard model. Can readers guess who wrote 'In my opinion it is neither Kravchenko, who benefitted from the Stalinist regime, nor French ministers, responsible for a policy which is drowning Tunisia in blood, who can criticise Stalin's dictatorship, but only Rosmer' and those like him?

In the mid-1940s, much of the criticism of Stalinism came from positions which were in some sense to the left of it. By the early 1950s, the Right was regrouping, notably in the form of the US-sponsored Congress for Cultural Freedom and its French journal Preuves. Surya is quite right to note that some of those involved in Preuves were genuine leftists (p. 465) – and it would be wrong to condemn them retrospectively without a full appreciation of the complexities of the period and of their motivation.

While Surya notes the intellectual crisis produced by the events of 1956, he has little useful to say about it. Moreover, he takes at face value judgements by Sartre and Lefebvre claiming that there was no serious Marxist thinking in the pre-1956 period (pp. 449, 463). He thus makes no mention of the important work of Lucien Goldmann or of the early studies of the French Revolution by Soboul and Rudé, which, even if somewhat disfigured by Stalinism, were making an important contribution to the understanding of popular struggle in the years after 1789. Above all, he ignores the work of Socialisme ou Barbarie, a

17. Garaudy in particular, who was, in turn, Protestant, orthodox and then dissident Communist, Catholic, Muslim and finally Holocaust denier, was never a man for whom consistency seems to have ranked high on the scale of virtues.
18. For a full study of the complexities of the Sartre-Camus relationship, see Aronson 2004.
19. Alfred Rosmer (1877–1964) had played a leading role in the Communist International in its Leninist prime.
20. Answer at the end of the article.
21. He is, however, sloppy in citing among those who published in Preuves Orwell and Serge (p. 465). Preuves may well have published their writings, but, since Serge died in 1947 and Orwell in 1950, they cannot be held personally responsible for their collaboration.
small ex-Trotskyist grouping that was virtually unique in attempting to explore both the social nature of Stalinist societies and the changing forms of Western capitalism by applying Marxist methods.22

Compared with the writings of such as Tony Judt or Bernard-Henri Lévy,23 Surya’s tone is to be welcomed. There is no attempt to adopt a self-righteous retrospective Cold-War stance, blaming his subjects for every lapse into softness on Communism. Surya has no truck with the kind of account often produced nowadays which suggests the PCF exercised some kind of hegemony over French postwar intellectual life. He rightly questions claims that Aragon was a leading purger in the 1940s (pp. 140–1).24

After the departure of the PCF from government in 1947, the state machine remained firmly in the hands of the pro-American Right. In 1949, the police raided an art exhibition and removed paintings by Communist artists opposed to the war in Indochina. (Victor Leduc cited this as proof that figurative painting was more relevant than abstract art.) In 1951, the chief of the Paris police stated that ‘A Communist is a Russian soldier’, and that he would treat actions by Communists as ‘Russian acts of war’ (pp. 401–3).

Nonetheless, Surya’s account of the PCF and the politics of the period is plainly inadequate. To give an account of the interaction of literature and politics, we need a historian who is competent on both sides of the interaction. Surya quite patently is not. In his concluding section, he attempts some general judgements on the PCF. Following Raymond Aron, he develops at some length the comparison between Communism and religion – a metaphor which has become a cliché, and which explains precisely nothing (pp. 442–55). He quotes, with apparent approval, a surrealist leaflet describing Khrushchev as a ‘fascist’, though this marks a complete abandonment of analysis (p. 487). It in no way diminishes Khrushchev’s blatantly anti-working-class actions in 1956 to recognise that fascism is a quite different social phenomenon from Stalinism.

The fundamental point about the relation between the PCF and intellectuals in the 1940s is not that the latter suffered from some deep-seated attraction to totalitarianism. It is that the PCF had the effective leadership of the working class and that most intellectuals were well aware that a ‘revolution’ of any sort was impossible without the power and organisation of the working class. The PCF was perceived, with some justice, as being the only channel through which the working class could be reached. As Sartre put it, ‘only one way to get there, and a very narrow one, the PCF’.25 Surya notes this point, but totally fails to develop it. Other than in the chronological appendix, there is virtually no mention of the working-class movement.

Yet the crucial fact about the period, the reason for the failure of the longed-for revolution, is the PCF’s total betrayal of its stewardship of the working-class movement. At the Liberation, the main union federation, the CGT, had some five-and-a-half million

22. Surya makes just two passing references to Socialisme ou Barbarie. He incorrectly claims that Jean-François Lyotard was one of its founders (he joined in 1954), and more bizarrely claims the group took its name from a remark by Sartre about socialism and barbarism; he is apparently unaware of one of Rosa Luxemburg’s most famous utterances (p. 303).
24. In fact, Aragon protected Maurice Chevalier, who had collaborated with the Germans. Without Aragon we might never have had ‘Thank Heaven for Little Girls’.
members. For nearly three years, the CGT leadership refused to take even the most minimal action in defence of trade-union demands, for fear of embarrassing the Communist ministers in the government. Then, when the PCF ministers were bounced out, the CGT embarked on a series of ill-prepared and adventurist strikes. The CGT suffered a major split (in which American manipulation was facilitated by the federation’s disastrous policies). By the 1950s, the total number of unionised workers was less than two million.

Nor does Surya have any real grasp of the logic of PCF strategy, which was essentially inherited from the Popular Front of the 1930s. Thus he notes that the critiques of existentialism made by the PCF and the Catholic Church often seemed to merge (p. 374). True enough, but the underlying logic here is that of the Popular Front – the PCF was always willing to unite with forces to its right, but it could never tolerate rivals to its left.

Surya also seems to have little understanding of the forces to the left of the PCF. Though small, these were not without intellectual significance and could, on occasion, have a political impact. Thus he quotes on several occasions from the Revue internationale, but never gives any account of what the journal was – a grouping of Marxists, many former Trotskyists, around Pierre Naville, which attempted to provide a more explicitly Marxist alternative to Sartre’s Temps Modernes. Likewise, he mentions opposition to the Indochina war from before the PCF departure from government, but, while noting a surrealist leaflet which probably had few readers, he says nothing of the demonstration organised by Trotskyists in the Socialist Party Youth (pp. 238, 489).

And his account of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR) of 1948–9 is second-hand, seriously defective and contains several inaccuracies (pp. 329–40). This was the last chance to give expression to the independent leftism of the Liberation period before the Cold War polarised the whole debate for nearly a decade. Briefly, it looked as though it might have some success. Yet Surya sees it as primarily an affair of (literary) intellectuals (p. 329), while admitting elsewhere that it had working-class support (p. 336). Of its efforts to develop serious trade-union organisation he says nothing. And he fails to understand the basic distinction between a rassemblement [assembly] and a parti. The whole point about the RDR was that people could join it without breaking with their existing organisation. The French Left was given a unique opportunity to have its cake and eat it; for the most part it chose to choke and go hungry. The disastrous sectarianism of that period has important (negative) lessons for our own day.

In concluding, Surya argues that the working-class struggle was replaced by anti-colonialism (pp. 489–90). In a sense he is right; it was Algeria, not the 1956 crisis that terminates his book, which led to the rebirth of the French Left. But, yet, the two struggles were not as separate as he seems to think. As early as 1948, Sartre had declared to the people of Morocco (then under French rule) that ‘those who are oppressing you are oppressing us for the same reasons’.26 It was the generation which opposed the Algerian War that went on to make May 1968. But that is a different story, and a more cheerful one than the broken dreams of Surya’s narrative.

Surya has done us a service by collecting together a great deal of fascinating material, much of it largely unknown. His bibliography alone, which runs to fifty pages, is an invaluable contribution. But intellectuals, much as they like to believe in the autonomy of ideas, live

in a context, and it is that context which is so often missing in Surya’s account. For that reason, this book is no more than raw material for the full history of the achievements and failures of the postwar French Left, which still remains to be written.

**Quiz answer:** It was Camus, in his 1953 preface to Alfred Rosmer’s *Moscou sous Lénine.*27 Had Sartre said it, it would be constantly cited against him. Since it was Camus, the statement is simply ignored.

Reviewed by Ian Birchall

**References**


Until the late 1980s, Richard Rorty had been best known as the author of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), a book that urged readers to ‘change the subject’ from their Cartesian-Kantian preoccupations with the foundations of knowledge, in favour of ‘continuing the conversation of the West’ on any number of non-epistemological topics, from novels to public policy. Since then, he has spent less and less time writing articles about eliminative physicalism and theories of reference, and more time apologising (the term is his) for something he has called ‘bourgeois liberalism’.

The books under review are about America’s promise, and they all address an audience that is not limited to university humanities departments. Achieving Our Country was adapted from Rorty’s 1997 Massey Lectures at Harvard University. The book takes its title from a line in James Baldwin’s book, The Fire Next Time, and it takes as its subject the life and health of an alleged constituency that Rorty calls ‘the American left’. The second book, Philosophy and Social Hope, consists of previously published articles and lectures on a number of topics, including the public/private split, liberal education and citizenship, pragmatism and law, religious tolerance, and the politics of identity. One of the most interesting essays in the book, ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids’, is autobiographical. The third book, Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies consists of a wide-ranging interview with Rorty about politics and his life. At 78 pages, Against Bosses would count as a book by the Library of Congress definition, but it reads more like a pamphlet. Together, these three books – a series of lectures, a collection of essays, and an interview – give us an idea of Rorty’s political trajectory in the years between Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom.

As a good pragmatist following in the footsteps of his hero Irving Howe, Rorty provides not just retrospective redescriptions but also advice and forecasts. In the books under review, he addresses leftists in America who, he says, rightly feel shame for slavery, genocide and conquest. He wants to convince them, though, that their shame should be admixed with pride that they are citizens of a country that has produced people capable of feeling such shame in the first place. In addition to stealth bombers and Enron, America has also produced Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey – writers who embodied two principles that should inspire pride and hope: the inalienable right of every individual to the pursuit of happiness; and the imperative to ameliorate unnecessary suffering and humiliation. The Left, which Rorty interestingly defines as ‘the party of hope’, should once again set itself the task of achieving the America of this promise, the unachieved America of Emerson, Whitman and Dewey. But leftists have no chance of doing so if they continue to fritter their energies on ‘cultural studies’ rather than specific legislation and reform campaigns, and if they continue to dream of sweeping change rather than working for piecemeal reform.

For a while during the last century, Marxism had made it possible for intellectuals to dream of sweeping change while convincing themselves that they could play a role in helping to bring it about. Since then, however, Marxism and all putative sciences of society and history have proven ‘completely irrelevant to what eventually happened’.2 By the 1990s, it was unanimous: History had repudiated Marx. Opponents of Marxism – including many former Marxists – declared that if political power had ever come through the barrel of a gun, it no longer did. A new, multipolar world had emerged circa 1991, a bright world where information, technology and free trade were the keys to peace and prosperity, and America, the Hope of the Nations, no longer needed to bare its teeth because it had defeated that singularly Evil Empire, the Soviet Union. Class rule had given way to the rule of law; the rising tide of Free Trade would lift all boats, and conflicts among nations would henceforth be resolved ‘non-ideologically’, with the application of the right technology. A couple of months before the high-tech bubble burst, Newsweek announced that Communism was dead, replaced by ‘Dot-Com-ism’.

A funny thing happened, though, in the years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the construction of Sharon’s wall through the Holy Land: on point after point on which there had been a nearly unanimous consensus that Marxists had been wrong, it turns out that they were right after all. The gap between rich and poor has grown, both globally and within the United States, even as productivity has soared,3 and from Venezuela to Iraq, there is a rising suspicion that the magical invocations of Democracy and Freedom have served one overriding process: capital accumulation. The George W. Bush administration and the US Congress demonstrate daily that ‘the rule of law’ is but a scrim for class rule, and that the federal government is indeed little more than the executive committee of corporate America. After the meltdown in the Pacific Rim, a deep global recession, and the example of Argentina, the least one can say is that Marxism is not ‘completely irrelevant to what eventually happened’, after all. Meanwhile, the champions of ‘small government’, privatisation, swollen military budgets, and homeland security have brought America’s state institutions into ever closer conformity with Engels’s stark picture of a group of armed men.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, Rorty repeated advice that he had offered many times before: ‘I think we should abandon the leftist-versus-liberal distinction, along with the residues of Marxism that clutter up our vocabulary – overworked words like “commodification” and “ideology”, for example.’4 This sentence encapsulates several of the main themes of the books under review, including the leftist-versus-liberal distinction, and Rorty’s advice that we purge our vocabularies of Marxism.

3. Rising productivity and deeper poverty for the majority: This is one of the seeming paradoxes that Marx and Engels described so well. For documentation of the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States, see Mishel et al. 2003. By 1995, at the latest, Rorty was aware of this seeming paradox (Rorty 1999, p. 258).
4. Rorty 1998, p. 42. A note on ‘cluster’: Darwin, the historiciser of nature, and Marx, the naturaliser of history, made humans part of the same world that physicists, geologists and astronomers describe. Together, these two ‘obsolete nineteenth-century system-builders’ enable us to tell long, detailed and ever-changing stories about one particular species of animal on planet Earth. What is more, they have enabled us to tell these stories elegantly, without recourse
But who is this ‘we’? The organic intellectuals of corporate America have abstained from talk about commodification and bourgeois ideology for as long as they have been around. Fish must not speak of water. Rorty wants the ban to be total, however: no discussion of these topics at all, not even in the several scholarly journals where the words have heretofore appeared. As with commodification and ideology, so also with the words imperialism, capitalism, exploitation, and so on. (Apparently, Rorty himself has found it difficult to follow his own advice on this point: a few months after warning his readers of the danger of ‘Marxist scholasticism’, he could not resist observing that, by employing so many adjunct teachers, universities increasingly ‘commodify academic labor’.)

Rorty is allergic to Marxism, this much is clear. ‘For us Americans’, he writes, ‘it is important not to let Marxism influence the story we tell about our own left’. We should abandon Marxism, he says, because it is ‘covered with filth because of the marks of the governments that have called themselves Marxist’. Following standard practice, he ignores the marks of the governments that have called themselves democracies. But the self-described democracies have made their marks on the twentieth century too, and they continue to make their marks on the twenty-first century, from Abu Ghraib to Guantánamo, Serbia to Afghanistan, Grozny to Fallujah, Columbia to Palestine, and beyond. If one were to apply Rorty’s reasoning consistently, then one might condemn democracy in all its forms long before one condemns Marxism.

Rorty hopes that ‘movement politics’ has seen its day, replaced forever by campaigns for piecemeal reforms. ‘Membership in a movement required the ability to see particular campaigns for particular goals as parts of something much bigger, and as having little meaning in themselves’, he writes. Against this view, he urges his readers to see both cultural and political history as ‘a tissue of chances, mischances, and lost chances – a tissue from which, occasionally and briefly, beauty flashes forth, but to which sublimity is entirely irrelevant’. Admittedly, the Civil Rights movement and the New Left did achieve their to human essences, supernatural agencies, or special modes of ‘understanding’ that have been jerry-rigged for the purpose of separating Man from Nature and teleporting our species outside of time and space. 125 years after Darwin’s death, it is still profoundly un-commonsense to concede that Homo sapiens is a result of ongoing evolutionary change; and 124 years after Marx’s death, it is no less surprising to realise that patterns of social production, appropriation and consumption have also changed thoroughly, and that this change is ongoing. For this reason, Marxism most certainly will clutter up ‘our vocabulary’, if that vocabulary consists of the dominant ‘social sciences’ that Weber and Dewey helped to cobble together. Marxism will clutter up Rorty’s prescribed vocabulary just as assuredly as Darwinism will clutter up the vocabulary of intelligent design.

8. The problem of Rorty’s opposition to Marxism is further complicated by the fact that, evidently and by his own admission, he is not very familiar with the subject. Refer to the discussion in Melkonian 1999, pp. 164–5n.
goals of expanding life options for African-Americans and stopping the war in Vietnam. But the excesses of the New Left fed into a disastrous rightwing backlash that has yet to subside and that contributed to the self-exile of leftists from the public square. Today, leftists who really want to change things for the better ‘should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy’. Thanks to widespread recognition of this fact, ‘movement politics’ has seen its day.

Once again, though, events have outrun Rorty’s claims. The long, swift march from Seattle to Porto Alegre brought together a broad array of environmental, labour, student, and human-rights groups from dozens of countries. Then, in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, new and even broader coalitions formed – coalitions that mobilised hundreds of thousands of demonstrators not only in London, Madrid, and Seoul, but in New York, Washington DC, and San Francisco too. True, the antiwar coalitions have not merged with the antiglobalisation groups to form a sustainable institutional presence, and they might never do so. Nevertheless, none other than Henry Kissinger has provided the slogan for connecting their concerns: ‘Globalization’, Kissinger famously quipped, ‘is really another name for the dominant role of the United States’.

Meanwhile, liberal campaigns within the framework of a market economy have done little lately but provide Karl Rove with new recruiting slogans. George W. Bush did not win a second term in the White House because of the rhetorical excesses of leftwing radicals. Rather, it would appear that the one issue that won the most votes away from the Democratic candidate in 2004 was the issue of gay marriage – which is just the sort of liberal campaign for legislative reform that Rorty has prescribed.

One of the main themes of the books under review is that leftists who want to change things for the better should wave the Stars and Stripes: ‘unless the left wraps itself in the flag’, Rorty writes, ‘it hasn’t got a chance of practicing a majoritarian politics’. This advice might be useful enough as far as it goes, but Rorty’s anguish about the lack of patriotism on the left might strike some observers as unwarranted. The antiwar demonstrators who poured into Union Square, the Capitol Mall, San Francisco’s financial district, and the streets of a dozen other US cities in February 2003 wrapped themselves in Red, White, and Blue and hoisted high the slogan ‘Support Our Troops – Bring Them Home’. The protesters’ message was one that Rorty should recognise: America must live up to its promise. If Rorty wanted to, then, he could take solace in the fact that patriotism continues to reverberate among American left-wingers.

If Karl Rove & Co. have succeeded in portraying their opponents as dupes of Osama Bin Laden and enemies of holy matrimony, this probably has had less to do with the convictions and slogans of leftists in the United States than with the fact that the Executive Branch, the Republican Party, and the corporate-owned media have enormously greater resources with which to frame and control public discourse. At times, Rorty comes close to acknowledging that the mantle of patriotism is just one more stake of the class struggle: ‘Competition for political leadership’, he writes, ‘is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation’s self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness’. But

he never seriously considers the possibility that the image of the America-hating leftist might be more a result of the weakness of ‘the left’ than a cause of it. It might be just one instance among innumerable instances of leftists failing to get their message across to a large audience.

Still, Rorty might have a good point when he writes that:

‘Those who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation’s past – episodes and figures to which the country should remain true.’

The question, however, is not whether Americans should have heroes, but rather who those heroes should be. Workers and dissidents in the United States have always had their own heroes – their Daniel Shayses, John Browns and Frederick Douglasses, their Joe Hills, Mother Joneses, Tom Mooneys, Elizabeth Gurley Flynns, and Malcolm Xs.

Rorty, of course, has his own slate of favorite stories and symbols. To put the point too succinctly: he wants to combine Howard Zinn’s list of heroes, minus the most militant opponents of exploitation and genocide, together with Peter H. Gibbon’s pantheon (derived, perhaps, from his paean, A Call to Heroism), minus the John D. Rockefellers and the Norman Schwarzkopf types. Rorty explicitly wants to place Eugene Debs on the same pedestal with his jailer, Woodrow Wilson.

But Wilson and many of Rorty’s other heroes too, including Churchill, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, make their appearance as villains in A People’s History of the United States. Rorty’s ‘part-time liberal’, Woodrow Wilson, was a Klan-promoter who dispatched federal troops to club striking miners in Colorado after the Ludlow massacre and who joined the slaughter in the ‘War to End All Wars’. The twenty-eighth president of the United States was also the bombardier of Veracruz, the invader of Haiti and Santo Domingo, a backer of the Espionage Act (1917), the Sedition Act (1918) and the Palmer Raids (1919), and a signatory of the Treaty of Versailles. Debs detested Wilson and admired Lenin at least as much as he admired Whitman. The very fact that Rorty feels compelled to try to reconcile these two antithetical figures, Wilson and Debs, speaks volumes against his wish to smudge the leftist-versus-liberal distinction.

Rorty has occasionally come close to conceding that his favored liberal reforms are inadequate to the challenges that confront his country. To Rorty, America has been waylaid by ‘a global overclass which makes all the major economic decisions, and makes them in entire independence of the legislatures, and a fortiori of the will of the voters, of any given country’. It would be easy, of course, to custom-tailor a definition of ‘America’ that would make it a victim of globalisation. But it is difficult to imagine any definition of America that would make it both a victim of globalisation and at the same time a ‘community of communities’, in Dewey’s sense of the term. If America is a community of communities,

17. The picture of America as a victim of globalisation appears in Achieving Our Country and in such essays as ‘Looking Backwards from the Year 2096’ (Rorty 1999, pp. 243–51).
then its imperial or imperialist character must in some way be tied up with its common purposes, its shared interests, its *ethnos*.

At one point, Rorty acknowledges Christopher Lasch’s claim that ‘the United States of the mid-twentieth century might better be described as an empire than as a community’. Two sentences later, though, he dismisses that claim with something that sounds a lot like an *argumentum ad misericordiam*: ‘For if you turn out to be living in an evil empire (rather than, as you had been told, a democracy fighting an evil empire), then you have no responsibility to your country; you are accountable only to humanity’. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this is a hard sell, even – or especially – for some of the most vocal apologists for American power. From the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* to the podiums of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Project for a New American Century, the columnists and think-tankers extol ‘American imperial ambition’, ‘the United States as a full-fledged global empire’, America’s ‘full-spectrum dominance’, and ‘US military and economic domination of every region of the globe, unfettered by international treaties or consensus’. ‘The American Empire’, Michael Ignatieff announced in the title of his piece in the *New York Times Magazine* of January 2003: ‘Get Used to It’.

One wonders what Rorty would say if he were to ‘get used to’ this imperial or imperialist reality, at least to the extent of letting it register on his story of America. Perhaps he would repeat his advice: ‘You have to be loyal to a dream country, rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning’.

America is a highly stratified country, but the America of Rorty’s dreams is classless; America imposes tyranny outside its borders, but the America of his hopes is a beacon of freedom, and so on.

Rorty claims that his classless dream country is the same as that of his Marxist opponents, except that his dream country does not propose to ‘abolish private property’, as he imagines communists wish to do. But nowhere does he explain how one can have capitalism without capitalist exploitation and class domination. Like Rorty, communists also hope for a classless society in which labour is highly productive. As communists envision things, though, market relations will no longer dominate life, and the state, narrowly conceive as a group of armed men, will cease to exist. (Aside from these negative attributions, communists have typically baulked at ‘writing recipes for the cookshops of the future’, as Marx put it. For this reason, it might be misleading to describe their most distant goal as a *dream country*.) The communist vision, then, differs greatly from Rorty’s ideal of ‘a democratic world government’, and from his model for a global civilisation – ‘a bazaar surrounded by private clubs’. Communism and Rorty’s dream country are not the same destination.

Still, it is sad that Rorty’s utopia is evaporating like a mirage. ‘The whole point of America was that it was going to be the world’s first classless society’, Rorty wrote in 1996, with more than a hint of frustration. Addressing an audience in Brazil that same year, he could not conceal his faltering faith:

---

My native country has world-historical importance only because it cast itself in the role of vanguard of a global egalitarian utopia. It no longer casts itself in that role, and is therefore in danger of losing its soul. The spirit which animated the writing of Whitman and Dewey is no longer present.23

It would seem, then, that Rorty wants his readers to sustain a hope that he himself has trouble sustaining.

The penultimate essay in Philosophy and Social Hope is entitled ‘Back to Class Politics’.24 The tone of this short essay – the taut sentences, the emphatic parallel constructions, the repeated use of the imperative – are a sharp contrast to Rorty’s usual glib prose. ‘Back to Class Politics’ also contains atypical advice: ‘we should remember that the early history of labor unions in America, as in the rest of the world, is a history of the skulls of strikers being broken by truncheons, decade after decade. We should also realise that those truncheons have recently reappeared . . .’.25 Rorty’s class-conscious orientation is a recent development.

In an earlier unpublished draft of ‘Movements and Campaigns’, he likened nostalgia for the class struggle to nostalgia for les rois fainéants, the idle kings of pre-republican France; however, in the published version of the paper, the facetious reference to the class struggle has disappeared, and instead we read: ‘America, the country that was to have witnessed a new birth of freedom, will gradually be divided by class difference of a sort that would have been utterly inconceivable to Jefferson or to Lincoln or to Walt Whitman.’26

One need not share Rorty’s faith in the Democratic Party to agree with him that ‘the spectatorial left’, multiculturalism and the politics of difference are hopelessly inadequate responses to these enormous and growing class divisions.27 But, ultimately, Rorty’s change of heart about class politics is too little too late, and his allergy to Marxism enfeebles it.

After reading the books under review, one might well come away with the feeling that it is time to change the subject from Richard Rorty’s politics.

Reviewed by Markar Melkonian
Department of Philosophy, California State University, Northridge

References


The antiglobalisation, anticapitalist movement is frequently asked for its alternative, given the failure of the Soviet model and the alleged absence of anything else. Michael Albert’s latest book offers an answer. To critics who see the construction of visions of the future as dangerous utopianism, he correctly replies that models of a possible better world are needed to guide present action, and it therefore matters which model we subscribe to.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, three categories of well-developed models of postcapitalist economic organisation have been proposed: market socialism, in which private ownership is replaced by some form of state or co-operative ownership, but market forces are retained as the way in which the activities of the different enterprises are coordinated *ex post*; electronic socialism, in which modern information technology is used to co-ordinate all economic activity *ex ante*; and participatory planning, in which market forces are replaced by the *ex ante* co-ordination of major interdependent investment through negotiation, but market exchange is retained for all other economic transactions. Albert rejects central planning and market socialism and does not discuss participatory planning. Instead, he proposes a model of what he calls participatory economics, ‘Parecon’, which is a hybrid, a form of electronic socialism (although he does not use this term) based on a form of participation.1

*Parecon* is a welcome contribution to the debate over life after capitalism. It is founded on and seeks to institutionalise a set of values that most anticapitalists would broadly agree with, although not necessarily as Albert develops them – he proposes equity, self-management, diversity and solidarity, whereas Alex Callinicos, for example, prefers justice, efficiency, democracy and sustainability.2 The book is written with verve and passion. It offers an optimistic vision of a future in which people participate individually and, to some extent, collectively in running their own lives, free from the inequalities of wealth and power that are intrinsic to capitalism. *Parecon* has been widely promoted and discussed and deserves to be taken seriously, not only for its strengths, but also and perhaps mainly for its weaknesses.

The book starts by setting out the values Albert believes in and seeks to justify them. These are then used to evaluate four institutions (private ownership, hierarchical division of labour, central planning, and markets) and four economic systems (capitalism, market socialism, centrally planned socialism, and what Albert calls ‘green bioregionalism’). All are found wanting in terms of their ability to realise the desired values or, in the case of green bioregionalism, because, as he correctly argues, its economic institutions are insufficiently specified for a judgement to be possible.

Having cleared the ground, the central institutions of the model of participatory economics are then outlined: participatory self-management; balanced job complexes; remuneration for effort and sacrifice; nested worker and consumer councils; and an iterative allocative process. There then follows an attempt to convey what daily life in a participatory economy might be like in relation to working, consuming, and linking the two together.

---

1. In order to distinguish between reference to the book under review and general reference to Albert’s model, the former is highlighted in italics and the latter is not.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007

DOI: 10.1163/156920607X192156
through the allocative process. The book ends with the author's version of the principal criticisms that have been made of the model and his response to them.

How does the model of participatory economics work? The basic units are the individual, as worker or consumer, and the council – workers' councils and consumers' councils. Each enterprise has work teams of various sorts which come together in the enterprise's workers' council. Enterprise councils are members of higher-level councils culminating in industry councils. Through their households consumers belong to neighbourhood councils, which, in turn, are members of higher-level councils culminating in an economy-wide council. The nested structure of the councils is designed to enable the handling of production and consumption externalities, collective consumption, and public goods. There is face-to-face social interaction within the different levels of workers' and consumers' councils, but not between them.

Within each workplace, work is organised on the basis of balanced job complexes made up of different tasks. The tasks are combined in such proportions that the resulting job complexes of all workers are equally desirable or undesirable, equally empowering or routine. If the balance between desirable and undesirable, empowering and routine tasks differs between enterprises, this is compensated for by workers working partly outside their primary workplace. Since there is no difference between the desirable and empowering attributes of different job complexes, workers are paid according to the intensity with which they work, as judged by their peers, and the hours they work. This is what gives them their entitlement to consumption, to be divided between individual and collective consumption. Those unable to work receive the average entitlement.

At the start of the annual planning process, workers make proposals for what they would like to be involved in producing and for how long they would like to work, together with estimates of the inputs from outside the enterprise that would be required. These individual proposals are discussed and eventually combined into a limited number of alternative workplace plans for the workers' council to vote on in order to decide what it will offer to produce in the year ahead. The proposed annual plan is then forwarded to higher-level councils, presumably consisting of delegates from the workplace councils, which in some unspecified way deal with externalities and arrive at a consumption plan for the economy as a whole.

Consumers belong to neighbourhood councils, to which they submit their proposed consumption plan for the year, anonymously if they wish. Individual proposals may be queried by the council but cannot be rejected so long as they do not exceed the consumer's entitlement, with provision for inter-temporal borrowing and saving. Neighbourhood councils discuss proposals for collective neighbourhood consumption, bearing in mind that such consumption is paid for on a per capita basis out of the aggregate consumption entitlement for the neighbourhood and therefore reduces entitlements to individual consumption. An integrated consumption plan is then forwarded to higher level consumers' councils, again presumably consisting of delegates, which again in some unspecified way deal with externalities and arrive at a proposed plan for the industry as a whole.

Thus, proposals for production and consumption originate from individual workers and consumers and are then developed into proposals from workers' and consumers' councils at various levels. These collective proposals for production and consumption are then brought together to see if they are consistent, through a process Albert calls allocation. This is
mediated by an Iteration Facilitation Board (IFB) which has three principal functions. It first announces a set of indicative prices which workers and consumers use, individually and through their councils at each level, when deciding on their production and consumption proposals. When the proposals are all in, the IFB aggregates all the production and consumption proposals for the different categories of goods and services – inputs into all the production processes as well as consumer goods – to see if proposed supply and demand are equal. If they are not equal for every good and service the IFB revises the set of indicative prices and the process is repeated until a consistent set of production and consumption proposals is arrived at.

It is in relation to the stage of allocation that the first major problem with the model of 'Parecon' arises. The process outlined is a version of neoclassical Walrasian general-equilibrium analysis in which individual economic agents say what they would offer to produce and seek to consume, given a set of indicative prices announced by an auctioneer. The auctioneer then aggregates proposed supply and demand for each good and service and if they are not equal in each virtual market adjusts the announced price in a market-clearing direction. The process is then repeated and iterations continue until proposed supply and demand are equal in all markets – general equilibrium is achieved. Only then does economic activity begin. The proposed actions of all economic agents are co-ordinated \textit{ex ante} so that, in principle, when they are undertaken in practice they exactly mesh together, with each agent carrying out its bid-for role in an economy wide blueprint.

In 'Parecon', the economic agents are not just individual workers and consumers, but also workers' and consumers' councils, and the auctioneer is the IFB. Decisions at each level are made on the basis of the announced prices and are then communicated electronically to the next level, right up to the IFB, which then calculates a revised set of indicative prices using a computer (indeed the IFB might be nothing but an automated central computer) and the process is repeated until proposed supply and demand are equal for each and every good and service. The model is a form of neoclassical electronic socialism (although Albert rejects the term socialism on the grounds that it has been historically discredited). There is no reference in the book to the extensive Marxist and heterodox economics critique of neoclassical (general-equilibrium) theory, nor to the socialist calculation debate or the related Austrian school critique of the possibility of the \textit{ex ante} iterative process on which electronic socialism, and 'Parecon', are based.

Three key issues have been identified in the neoclassical literature on general equilibrium, defined as simultaneous equilibrium in the market for every good and service in the economy: whether such an equilibrium exists; whether, if it does, there will be a convergence towards it; and whether, if it is achieved, it will be stable. If out-of-equilibrium economic activity takes place, the conditions necessary for general equilibrium, if it exists, to be achieved through subsequent \textit{ex post} adjustment are impossibly restrictive. Neoclassical economists therefore came to rely on Walrasian-type thought experiments in which \textit{ex ante} adjustment occurs through iteration before economic activity takes place and therefore there is no out-of-equilibrium activity. However, in capitalist economies, there exists no institution analogous to the Walrasian auctioneer. Ironically, this role came to be filled by the central planning body in models of an electronic socialist economy. 'Parecon's Iteration Facilitation Board fulfills the same role.

It is here that the socialist calculation debate on the possibility of the efficient allocation of society's productive resources under socialism becomes relevant for an evaluation of
'Parecon's allocative mechanism. The first phase of the debate took place in the 1920s and 1930s, as the Austrian school economists Mises and Hayek claimed that efficient allocation was theoretically and/or practically impossible in a socialist economy, and neoclassical socialist economists sought to refute this claim. Mises argued that relative prices, reflecting the relative scarcity of the different inputs into the production process, were necessary in order to calculate the most efficient method of production for each product, and that these prices could only be generated on the basis of private ownership of the means of production and real markets. Efficient socialism was therefore theoretically impossible. It was then pointed out that Mises's critique had already been dealt with by Barone's earlier socialist model, in which the central planning body collects information about all the resources and methods of production available in the economy, feeds this into a system of simultaneous equations, and calculates the optimum production plan by solving them.

Hayek then responded by arguing that, although Barone's model might be theoretically possible, in practice it would be impossible to collect and process centrally all the relevant information. Lange then countered this practical impossibility argument by proposing a decentralised process which economised on the need to centralise and centrally process information. In this model, the central planning body announces a set of prices for producer goods which state-owned enterprises use, together with real market-determined wages and prices for consumer goods, to decide what to produce and what methods of production to use. By observing the movement of stocks of producer goods, the central planning body is then able to see whether too much or too little of any producer good is being produced and periodically changes the announced prices in a market-clearing direction. Adjustment towards general equilibrium occurs ex post, after economic activity has taken place. Economic calculation takes place at the level of the enterprise and the only information the centre needs to collect concerns the movement of stocks of producer goods.

The first phase of the socialist calculation debate died down at the end of the 1930s, with Lange's model generally considered to have carried the day. It was not until the 1980s that the second phase of the debate started. With the failure of the Soviet model and the rise of neoliberalism, models of market socialism began to proliferate, retaining ex post adjustment but differing from Lange's model in that now all prices, including those of producer goods, were determined in real markets. At the same time, the development of the electronic computer enabled the emergence of neoclassical models of electronic socialism, since it now seemed feasible to envisage the transmission of all the relevant data to a central body and the calculation of the set of market-clearing prices, either directly, as in Barone's model, or through an ex ante iterative process, as in the case of 'Parecon'. However, on the other side, the modern Austrian school's successors to Mises and Hayek also revisited the debate and renewed the attack on the possibility of socialism, whether market or electronic.

The central claim of the modern Austrian school is that the problem of deciding on the allocation of society's productive resources really only arises in the context of change, and therefore uncertainty – in a steady state, there are no decisions to be made. This parallels the classical-Marxist argument that, in a socialist society, economic planning, in the sense of the ex ante co-ordination of interdependent economic decisions, would replace what Marx called the anarchy of production, the ex post co-ordination that occurs through the operation of market forces in capitalism (and also market socialism). In the absence of change, the problem of co-ordination does not arise, which is why Dobb always insisted that the co-ordination ex ante of major interdependent investment is the hallmark of
socialist economic planning. However, although they agree on the centrality of change, the modern Austrian school rejects Dobb’s argument for planning, on the grounds of impossibility. It claims that the relevant information cannot in principle – not just in practice – be centralised, an argument that applies with equal force to neoclassical Walrasian general equilibrium theory and therefore also to all forms of electronic socialism, including ‘Parecon’.

The basis for this argument is the problem of tacit knowledge – knowledge that cannot be articulated and transmitted but can only be acquired through experience and drawn on and used through action. A distinction is drawn between explicit knowledge, which can be articulated, coded and transmitted, and tacit knowledge, which cannot. Tacit knowledge is usually characterised as ‘knowing how’, as opposed to ‘knowing that’. It is based on learning by doing and since it is acquired through action, through experience, it can only be used by those who have been through the experience. Thus, each person’s tacit knowledge is in some sense unique to them. The modern Austrian school’s argument for decentralisation, based on tacit knowledge, therefore goes deeper than the earlier Austrian argument for decentralisation, which held that local knowledge of time and place is necessary for efficient economic decision making.

Since a person’s experience is unique to them, it can only be drawn upon and made use of by them, as they engage in action. We make judgements, on the basis of our experience, about what we think we may be able to do, but if it is something new we can never be sure until we try to put it into action. We learn what can and cannot be done by trying to do it. The most that electronic socialism can expect is that the information fed into the iterative process reflects people’s best judgements of what they might be able to do, but these judgements are bound to be mistaken to a greater or lesser extent. The attempt to arrive at a blueprint that aggregates and meshes together in fine detail all production and consumption decisions before action (the activity of producing and consuming) takes place, is clearly vulnerable to the modern Austrian argument based on tacit knowledge.3

However, the methodological individualism of the Austrian school means that they have great difficulty in accommodating the concept of tacit social, as opposed to individual, knowledge. Tacit social knowledge arises through the experience of social groups acting together and becomes embedded in the norms and routines through which decisions are made and implemented. It is this social experience which also underlies the long-established socialist argument that the efficient operation of an enterprise requires the participation of the workforce, as they collectively know best how the labour process operates. This argument for participation can be generalised. Given that the activities of an enterprise have consequences for social groups outside the enterprise, not just for its workers, the best use of the enterprise’s productive capacity requires that such groups are involved, along with the workers, in the decision making of the enterprise. Such a requirement could be institutionalised through a definition of social ownership as ‘ownership by those affected by the use of the assets involved, in proportion to the extent to which they are affected’.

Unfortunately, although Albert refers in passing to social ownership, there is no discussion in Parecon of what this means. Indeed, in the chapter on ownership, the shortest in the book, he rather confusingly writes that ‘means of production are no longer owned

3. For a review of the debate, see Adaman and Devine 1996.
in a participatory economy’ (p. 90). This leads in to the second major problem with the model – the absence of politics or political processes. Despite a few scattered references to politics and citizens, people in ‘Parecon’ appear as either workers or consumers, but not as citizens. There are no political institutions or processes through which citizens discuss the values on which they want their society to be based, the universal rights and responsibilities of citizens, the choices of social priorities that have to be made. The nearest we get to this are the rather vague and unspecified processes and decisions of the economy-wide consumers' council. Yet such decisions involve people as workers, as well as consumers, and also of course as citizens with varying conceptions of the public good. The model is explicitly one aiming at self-management, not self-government.

The distinction is important. Enterprises and neighbourhoods should be autonomous with respect to matters that are of concern only to them; they should be self-managed. However, they are part of a wider society and their place and role in that society needs to be defined by the society. For example, the establishment or closure, the expansion or contraction, of an enterprise will have consequences for the neighbourhoods in which it is located and in which its workers live, as it will also for other interdependent enterprises and communities. These neighbourhoods and enterprises, therefore, need to be involved in decisions about investment or disinvestment, as, by extension, do other groups that will be affected by the decisions. Social ownership, defined as ownership by those affected by the use of the portion of society's productive assets involved, would include not only an enterprise's workers but all the groups with a legitimate interest in its activities. Decision making by the social owners at each level (enterprise, industry, locality, region, national economy, global) is what constitutes economic self-government.

Even in a non-exploitative society based on equal access to resources and equal empowerment, people will belong to many different groups representing the various aspects of their lives and concerns, and these groups will have different perspectives and interests. If we are to avoid coercion by the state or by the operation of market forces, then such differences need to be dealt with through a process of negotiation. In relation to economic activity, the central problem is the changing allocation of society's productive resources in a way that best meets society's changing needs. Where major interdependent decisions are involved, such as the pattern of major investment, this can best be achieved by a process of negotiated co-ordination involving the social owners at the relevant level. Such a process enables the different social owners to learn how to work together, to understand one another's legitimate concerns, and to deliberate on the course of action that best meets these concerns for everyone. It is not a process of aggregating pre-existing preferences but a deliberative democratic process with a built-in dynamic for developmental change. A process of negotiated co-ordination would give real meaning to the concept of participatory planning.

However, although once again there are scattered references in Parecon to negotiation and participatory planning, they are not followed up or developed. Workers and consumers put forward proposals. 'These are then voted on in workers' and consumers' councils at various levels. They are then communicated electronically to the IFB which links the two sides, worker and consumer, by revising the indicative prices for use in the next iteration. While there is social interaction in the form of discussion within councils, there is no social interaction, in the form of discussion and negotiation, between workers' councils and consumers' councils: '….we did not propose a model of democratic planning in which people or their elected representatives, meet face-to-face to endlessly discuss and negotiate
how to coordinate all their activities’ (pp. 259–60). Participatory planning, for Albert, turns out to be merely arms-length electronic interaction mediated by indicative prices. Despite some minor changes in the language, *Parecon* is, in fact, a restatement of the model first set out by Albert and Robin Hahnel in their two books published in 1991.4

It will be clear by now that *Parecon* ignores the theoretical issues and problems that have been identified in at least a century of discussion about the possible architecture of an economy in life after capitalism, issues and problems that have been given empirical weight by the only historical experience so far, the failure of the Soviet model of authoritarian central planning. It avoids serious discussion of how to co-ordinate investment, and also the related issues of entrepreneurial activity and innovation, both of which require real participation and social interaction if they are to be shaped in accordance with social need. It avoids the difficult problem of how to achieve self-government in a complex, diverse and multi-layered society, basing itself instead on the aggregation of individual preferences. In short, it is, in the end, ‘utopian’ in the ‘socialism-utopian-or-scientific’ sense, rather than in the desirable sense of the creative imagination of a possible future world based on historical experience and existing developments and possibilities.

The principal strengths of Albert’s vision are his emphasis on the centrality of participation, albeit not in the form he proposes, and his insistence that people should share equally the different categories of work that are socially necessary, although, again, not necessarily through his rather restrictive balanced job complexes. A further strength is the suggestion that the proposals made by workers and consumers as to what they would like to produce and consume should be accompanied by qualitative web-based accounts of what the proposed production would involve for workers and the environment, and what the benefits and disadvantages of the proposed consumption would be. However, the theoretical economic framework underlying ‘Parecon’ is wholly neoclassical, from the Walrasian general-equilibrium iterative process to the references to marginal revenue product and social cost and benefit. It is therefore fatally vulnerable to the devastating critique that has been developed of this dominant apologetic paradigm by Marxist, heterodox and ecological economists.

Furthermore, like neoclassical economic theory, ‘Parecon’ is essentially individualistic, perhaps not surprisingly given its acknowledged anarchist provenance. The distinction between self-management and self-government in relation to economic activity has already been discussed. However, self-governing economic activity is but part of a self-governing society. Participatory planning based on negotiated co-ordination between the social owners can only be real in the context of participatory political democracy firmly rooted in a vibrant civil society. On the one hand, pluralism and diversity are most effectively expressed through self-governing associations in civil society which then feed into the institutions where economic, social and cultural policy is made and implemented. On the other hand, the choice between competing values and visions of the good life, and their associated societal priorities, together with decisions over the legal and regulatory framework within which civil society and economic and social institutions operate, are the subject matter of democratic politics. These processes of social interaction are crucial and should not be abstracted from.

Why has *Parecon* attracted the attention it has? It may be because at the level of values, expressions of general principle and aspirations there is much in it that all those who are committed to working for a better future society will share. However, when analysing the underlying structure of *Parecon* as a model of postcapitalist economic organisation, problems arise, not least because it is not situated in the context of the rich historical and theoretical experience of past and present discussion. This review started by agreeing with Albert that visions and models of a better future are important as they may influence present action. It has concentrated on the problems with *Parecon*, while mentioning its strengths, because *Parecon* has received wide exposure and needs to be critically evaluated. What, in the end, is missing from the model is precisely what is the great strength of the antiglobalisation, anticapitalist, social-forum movement – its pluralism, multiple identities, alternative visions and priorities. Of course, the movement also needs to develop principles for thinking about global institutions and processes at a societal level in a way that enables universalism to be combined with diversity, but *Parecon* is of little help here. Its underlying methodological individualism directs attention away from thinking about these fundamental issues.

A possible set of concepts that captures these essential aspects of social and political reality has informed this review: social ownership, defined as ownership by the different groups affected by the use of the assets involved, in proportion to the extent to which they are affected; negotiated co-ordination, defined as a process through which social owners negotiate the production or investment plan for their enterprise or industry; and a democratic political process through which citizens deliberate on alternative values and visions, agree universal rights and responsibilities, and choose social priorities. A model based on these concepts, such as my own model of democratic planning through negotiated co-ordination, offers the prospect of giving real meaning to the concept of participatory planning and self-government.5

Reviewed by Pat Devine
Honorary Research Fellow
School of Social Science
University of Manchester

References


The present historical period poses two related challenges to all strains of critical scholarship and political intervention, both conditioned by defeats suffered by the working-class and socialist movements over the past three decades. The first relates to the distinctive economic features of contemporary capitalism, as it has arisen concretely from the successive waves of liberalisation of labour, financial and goods markets across the world since 1973. In its geography of production, its financial system, and its relationship between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ economies, today’s ‘globalised’ world economy differs significantly not only from the post-World-War-II boom, but also, in important regards, from its pre-1914 liberal predecessor.

The past thirty years have seen swathes of key advanced economies deindustrialised. The centre of gravity of industrial production has shifted, noticeably to the ‘middle-income’ countries of Latin America, East and South Asia, and Eastern Europe, where significant processes of relatively indigenous industrialisation took place at different points in the twentieth century. Particularly since the early 1990s, those countries have seen their economies opened and liberalised, leading to a dramatic inflow of first-world industrial, merchant and banking capitals, which have gained influence by both competing with and adapting to the more powerful domestic capitals.

More commonly commented upon in the developed world has been the dramatic increase in the relative size and international flexibility of the financial sector. The extraordinary profitability of large international banks – themselves important players in capital markets – regularly makes headlines. Credit to households and consumer debt have surged, not only causing concerns about overextension, fragility and real-estate bubbles, but also eroding the share of banking credit to the business sector across a range of countries.¹ And, in a world of liquid capital markets and liberalised interest and exchange-rates, financial derivatives have evolved from mere hedging and speculative tools in markets for agricultural and other primary commodities, to an industry whose outstanding contracts in June 2006 dwarfed the GDP of all advanced economies by an order of magnitude.²

These shifts pose a range of analytical and political challenges, relating to the imperatives of contemporary capitalist reproduction and the sources and character of social conflict. Tackling this is rendered more difficult by the second challenge facing critical scholarship and intervention: the receding influence of Marxist thought over this period, accelerated since the destruction of the USSR and the ‘death of communism’. Idealist approaches have gained currency in critical circles, seen in most extreme form in the ‘post-Marxist’ subjectivism of Empire and Multitude. Even within circles rejecting this idealism, analysis of the contemporary capitalist political economy has tended to two broad views antithetical to the Marxist method: that recent developments – in particular de-industrialisation and the advent of certain communication technologies – have rendered Marxist economic analysis obsolete, or that contemporary capitalism can be understood either by simply

¹. For instance, see Mohanty et al. 2006.
reading Lenin’s *Imperialism* or as a linear consequence of the post-World-War-II order without discernible contradictions.

Important contributions have been made by Marxist scholars to the analysis of political, military, social and cultural moments of the present period. Notable among them are the works of Ellen Wood and Peter Gowan on the political and strategic contradictions posed by the maintenance of a US-centred economic and military order. But, with the important exception of David Harvey’s ‘accumulation by dispossession’ hypothesis,3 there have been few attempts to tackle the formidable task of grounding analysis of contemporary capitalism on Marxist economic characterisations of the imperatives and contradictions of its process of accumulation.

It is in this context that the important contributions on Marxist economic theory made in *The Value of Marx* and the fourth edition of *Marx’s ‘Capital’* are best appreciated. Together, both books summarise in succinct and balanced fashion the central insights of Marxist economic theory and the important debates they triggered in the course of the twentieth century. In so doing, they help foster a Marxist worldview and method of economic and social analysis which are far removed from their economic-determinist and ‘post-Marxist’ caricatures, and instrumental for unveiling the essential class relations and contradictions of capitalism. As such, they provide an indispensable basis for further analysis of contemporary economic life.

Now in its fourth edition, *Marx’s ‘Capital’* is still probably the most comprehensive and accessible introduction to the three volumes of *Capital*. In fewer than 200 pages, it presents Marx’s thoughts together with summations of some of the discussions they spurred over a range of topics: from Marx’s method, the analysis of commodities, exploitation and the basic circuit of industrial capital, to the more involved discussions on capitalist crises, the composition of capital, the falling rate of profit, the transformation problem, banking and interest-bearing capital, and agricultural rent. It also presents a new concluding discussion on the current relevance of Marxism, covering the issues of class, socialism, the environment and the state.4

*The Value of Marx* is a more specialised offering. It presents a cogent and concise re-assertion of the fundamental analytical tenets of Marxist economics, from which the author

3. Founded on the observed increasing importance to capitalist reproduction of privatisation, financialisation, and the extension of the market mechanism to all spheres of human intercourse. See Harvey 2003; 2005. My concerns here centre chiefly on the second process and the particular social relations it changes and on which it relies.

4. On the environment, the book advances Marx’s theories of commodity fetishism, the decomposition of value into use-value and exchange-value, and the labour process as tools for understanding the relationship between the profit imperative and environmental degradation. Production for individual profit has been demonstrated to be ecologically destructive. This is one expression of the contradiction between capitalist social production and exchange, on the one hand, and its private ownership and appropriation, on the other. But, in advancing Marxist political economy as a framework over this terrain, it is, in my view, imperative to take up neo-Malthusian, anti-scientific and consumerist prejudices. The liberation of humanity is the liberation from material want, which requires the deployment of science to the improvement of all aspects of human existence. That, in turn, requires removing all technological and social obstacles to increasing human mastery over nature, and not regressive taxation, which hits the poorest the hardest.
levels measured critiques of a number of one-sided radical theoretical interpretations and extensions to Marxist political economy. The book ranges widely and covers the Marxist method, the labour theory of value and its relation to capital, exploitation, prices, the composition of capital, and money and credit. It also presents many results from the author's own work, offering powerful insights into a number of issues, including the composition of capital, 'new dialectics', and inflation theory.

Marxist method and applications to value analysis

Particularly valuable in the current political period is The Value of Marx's elucidation of the dialectical materialist method, which draws from the work of Soviet philosopher E.V. Ilyenkov. In this discussion, Saad-Filho comprehensively lays out the opposition between the economic mainstream's approach of 'mental generalisation' and the Marxist method of 'real abstraction'. 'Mental generalisation', or empiricist abstraction, is a method founded on the selection of arbitrary moments of phenomena as the departure point for study. While a necessary component of scientific inquiry, as it allows for the classification and organisation in thought of the different objects of inquiry according to any given moment, such categorisations are necessarily idealist because they are constructed with no reference to the processes of determination of the concrete. A case in point of such an approach is the choice by positivist mainstream economic analysis of individual optimisation – a transhistorical, cross-class aspect of economic life in a world of scarcity – as the departure point for its axiomatic-deductive approach to capitalist economic life.

In contrast, the method of 'real abstraction' of Marxist political economy is founded on the proposition that objective reality or the concrete behaves in accordance to definite laws governing its evolution, independent of our success in comprehending them. Scientific inquiry must start with the identification of the processes of determination of concrete reality that constitute its essence, or most general features. Essence stands in a dialectical relation of determination with the concrete appearance of phenomena. It is from essence that all particular moments of the concrete are determined, through myriad mediations and contingencies. At the same time, the particular moments of the concrete are the mode of existence or embodiment of essence. Scientific inquiry consists of the struggle to reconstruct in thought the essential processes of determination of the concrete, through examination of and practical struggle with the mediated, contingent manners in which concrete reality manifests that essence.

As the subsequent exposition of the book makes clear, many of the errors committed in one-sided works inspired by Marxist political economy are founded on confusion about, or omission of, this defining methodological approach of Marxism. Saad-Filho uses this

7. Its idealist disregard for empirical verification of the appropriateness of its axioms, and strict preoccupation with the logical necessity and deducibility of its propositions, limits the capacity of neoclassical analysis to offer much beyond maxims concerning the (Pareto) efficiency of idealised 'equilibria' arising when all 'obstacles' to market clearing are removed. In this context, market liberalisation is but the teleological fulfilment of the intrinsic purpose of economic life and policy.
discussion to advance a central point in understanding Marxist political economy: dialectical theories necessarily contain co-existing categories whose meaning and significance depend on the level of analysis. This observation is of particular use in gaining an appreciation for the different levels of abstraction at which Marx tackles the determination of commodity-values.8

From this foundation, Saad-Filho proceeds to an explication of value-relations in Marx's work as the essential process of social regulation of the economic intercourses of capitalism. Of particular interest in this exposition, and representative of the aim and tenor of the book, are the discussions on different interpretations of Marx's value theory and on their corollary views on the value of labour-power. The author addresses the main claims of the 'traditional' and Sraffian views of value as physically embodied in commodities during the process of production,9 as well as those of the value-form tradition founded on the work of early Soviet economist I.I. Rubin.10

Embodied-labour approaches are shown to be limited, as they tend to reduce capitalist social relations to mere technical processes, and incorrectly attempt to squeeze out price theories – through the imposition of general equilibrium constraints – from Marx's political economy. Conversely, the value-form approaches, despite their emphasis on the social division of labour, and the importance of money as the embodiment of value in exchange, tend to neglect the many ways in which a capitalist character, and value, is imparted on commodities during their production. Saad-Filho maintains instead that Marxist analysis of the substance of value must be founded on the totality of capitalist production and exchange and all mediations between these two spheres of the circuit of capital.

In the same spirit, the author critically examines the fixed-bundle and wage-share interpretations of the value of labour-power.11 In line with Marx's own argument, he shows how the fixed-bundle interpretation tends to reduce labour-power into the commodities composing the 'subsistence bundle', from which it is but a step to negate fundamentally the labour theory of value. Conversely, and also following Marx's argument, the wage-share interpretation is shown to turn the relationship between the share of the product obtained by workers and the value of labour-power on its head. The value of labour-power is a quantity of value, not a quantity of goods – whether those of a fixed subsistence bundle or those secured ex post by workers with their wage. It is the abstract labour-time workers

8. Something about which vulgar readers of Marx's work often despair, pointing to the 'contradiction' between the notion of value determination through reproduction socially necessary labour-time for commodities, and the establishment of prices of production through the tendency for profit equalisation.

9. Such as Hodgson 1981; Meek 1973; where value is physically embodied in commodities in the production process; and the Sraffian analyses put forward in Sraffa 1960 and Steedman 1977, among many others.

10. In broad terms, value-form theories maintain that value is defined in the process of exchange, where the private products of concrete labours are converted into values only in the act of sale for money.

11. The former maintains that the value of labour-power is nothing but the value of a fixed subsistence bundle of commodities consumed by the sellers of labour-power. In the latter interpretation, conversely, the value of labour-power is seen as 'the claim on abstract labor time workers receive for their labor power in the form of the money wage' (Foley, 1982, p. 43).
spend producing necessities, which is determined in the course of production, including through the struggles between workers and capitalists at the point of production.

An appropriate understanding of Marxist value analysis, the author argues, can only be obtained through an examination of the normalisation, synchronisation, and homogenisation of labour in production and exchange as the processes through which concrete labours become abstract, or more precisely translated into reproduction socially necessary labour-times. The comprehensively social character of capitalist production, both within and across sectors of the economy, normalises concrete labours performed for the extraction of surplus-value into average labour. The simultaneous sale for the same price of different units of the same commodity produced at different times testifies to the synchronisation of concrete labours performed across time, through which we can verify that value relationships are based on society’s contemporaneous social reproduction costs. Lastly, the universal exchangeability of commodities for money means that concrete labours are homogenised as commodities receive a price in circulation and their values became quantitatively comparable with those of the products of other normalised and synchronised labours.

This approach, while not conducive to the development of a ‘Marxist’ price theory or the quantification of commodity values independent from their often quantitatively incongruous expression as money prices, powerfully re-asserts a fundamental tenet of Marxist political economy: The law of value is the specifically capitalist process whereby concrete labours are transformed into reproduction socially necessary labour-times, the substance of value, through the mediations in production and exchange laid out above. At the heart of this process is the labour performed by the working class and the appropriation of surplus-value by competing capitals.

By deliberately and convincingly articulating this view, the entire book is a useful re-affirmation of the purpose of Marxist political economy – to unveil the social relations and inherent contradictions of capitalism. As such, it also stands as a useful departure point for Marxist approaches to relations of growing importance in contemporary capitalism not directly discussed in the book: international banking and financial relations, which have not only increased in relative size, but also play an active role in the re-alignment of ‘middle-income’ economies with the imperatives of First-World capital.12

**Approaches to interest-bearing capital**

Marx’s concept of interest-bearing capital – in the most general terms, money-capital loaned out in exchange for repayment with interest under capitalist conditions – is a fundamental component of any Marxist approach to contemporary capitalism. Appropriately developed,

---

12. With a particularly important part played by US and European banks like HSBC, Citibank, BBVA and BSCH. Between 1994 and 1999 the share of total banking system assets held by foreign-owned banks rose from 14 to 44 per cent in Eastern Europe, from 6.7 to 10.9 per cent in Korea, Malaysia and Thailand, and 15.5 to 39.5 per cent in Latin America (outside Brazil and Mexico). By 2002, more than 80 per cent of Mexico’s banking system by assets was controlled by foreign banks. These banks have been forming historically new credit linkages with host-country capitals, with potentially far-reaching implications for patterns of ownership, accumulation and appropriation in those countries. See Mathieson and Roldós 2001, Claessens and Jansen 2000, Schultz 2006, and dos Santos 2007, for instance.
it provides a fruitful foundation for analyses of the sophisticated banking and financial relations, institutions and practices that have been acquiring an increasing significance to capitalist reproduction in the current period.

Marx’s *Capital* offers an updated chapter exclusively dedicated to insights from Marx’s work on the nature of interest-bearing capital and of the form of its self-expansion – interest – as an economic category. Those include the foundation of the use-value of interest-bearing capital on money’s role as capital; the importance of access to interest-bearing capital in the process of competition between capitalists directly involved in production and circulation; and on how the extension of interest-bearing capital – as a fundamental part of the entire array of financial transactions through which currently non-existent surplus-value is traded – is capable of financing overproduction and generating speculative bubbles with their corollaries, destructive crashes.

More importantly from the standpoint of unveiling the intra-capitalist social relations associated with the motion of interest-bearing capital, the authors single out two important insights. The rate of interest is ‘accidental’ in that its determination through the interactions of supply and demand is unanchored by the law of value. 13 And, while understanding the motion of interest-bearing capital requires a structural separation between the fraction of capital involved in dealing in interest-bearing capital and the fraction involved in the control of productive capital, the mode of integration between those two fractions cannot be logically derived by abstract analysis alone. The manner in which the interaction of supply and demand for money-capital and institutional context shapes the relations between these two fractions hinges on the broader socio-political balance of power between them, requiring the historical and social contextualisation of theory.

In pursuing this issue, the authors follow Marx’s own approach to interest-bearing capital to a tee. As argued by Itoh and Lapavitsas, 14 Marx ambiguously pursued two different approaches to interest-bearing capital in *Capital*. On the one hand, it is assumed that interest-bearing capital is advanced by ‘moneyed’ capitalists, who simply own money, and borrowed by ‘functioning’ capitalists, who simply posses investment projects. On the other hand, Marx also pointed to the systematic creation of idle money capital in the process of reproduction of total social capital. 15 Such pools of idle money provide an objective basis in real accumulation for the creation of interest-bearing capital, as the credit system mobilises such funds and transforms them into loanable money capital and redirects it back into accumulation.

Following Itoh and Lapavitsas, I hold that the integration of capital engaged in dealing interest-bearing capital with directly circulating capital, and with broader layers of

13. ‘The balancing of demand and supply – assuming the average rate of profit to be a fact – does not signify anything here. Wherever else this formula serves as an excuse… it is used to find the fundamental rule, which is independent of competition and rather determines it, this rule indicating the regulating limits, or the limiting magnitudes of competition; this formula serves particularly as a help to those, who are bounded by the horizon of practical competition, its phenomena, and the conceptions arising from them… who try thereby to get a rather shallow grasp of the internal connections of economics conditions within the sphere of competition. This is not so in the case of the average rate of interest’ (Marx 1909, p. 426).
15. See Itoh and Lapavitsas 1999 for a discussion on the origins of such idle pools of money in the movement of industrial capital.
wage-earning savers and borrowers, is most usefully understood in the terms of the latter approach. Dealers in interest-bearing capital are best interpreted as a type of merchant capitalist, whose own capital is advanced to carry out all specialised tasks related to the mobilisation of idle pools of money capital, their transformation into interest-bearing capital, and their deployment back into real accumulation. Capitalists directly engaged in accumulation not only purchase money capital from banks when they borrow, but also sell their idle money capital when they make deposits in banks. Banking capital, in turn, both borrows from and lends to capitalists directly engaged in accumulation, increasing the turnover of capital by offering returns on otherwise idle money. Interest payments are typically secured from the profits of circulating capital. They amount to a redistribution of surplus-value to capital advanced for the performance of banking functions that make more money capital available for production and circulation.

The significance of the differences between the two approaches to interest-bearing capital can be appreciated, for instance, over the question of the relative profitability of different fractions of capital. Fine and Saad-Filho motivate tendencies for interest-bearing capital to be more profitable than capital advanced to industrial and merchant activities:

\[ \text{The rate of return on interest-bearing capital generally exceeds the normal rate of profit on industrial capital. For equality between them would require that competition within the fraction of interest-bearing capital be as intense as competition between the sectors of industrial capital. . . . The potential sources of money capital for further accumulation in the interest-bearing capital sector are not systematically available to all capitalists through the credit system, because the banks rarely make loans to finance potential rivals (including those intent on migrating from the industrial sector); rather, the banks would tend to use the available resources to increase their own profitability. Moreover, the unrestricted mobility between industrial capital and interest-bearing capital would result in the ineffectiveness of interest-bearing capital’s control of society’s idle money capital.} \]

This is a difficult claim to sustain at the highest level of abstraction, if banking capital is understood in the first instance as merely intermediating between savers and borrowers. As the ultimate source of idle money capital, industrial capitalists are capable of providing finance, to themselves through retained profits,17 and to other capitalists through commercial credit, loans, and through broader portfolio investments. These are just some of the possible alternatives to banking credit as channels back into circulation for idle money. Moreover, arbitrarily large volumes of interest-bearing capital may be dealt with any given level of capital advanced for the performance of banking functions.18 The consequent mobility of

17. This type of finance has accounted for 91.3, 97.3 per cent of all corporate finance in the US and Britain between 1970 and 1989. See Corbett and Jenkinson 1996.
18. The limits here have been historically set by ‘best practice’ conventions and regulations to minimise the risk of facing insolvency. More recent discussions organised by the Bank for International Settlements around the so-called Basle I and II capital adequacy frameworks represent attempts to regulate precisely this quantitative relationship, in line with profitability
money capital at this level of abstraction ensures that the rate of return on banking capital tends to be equated with the rate of return on all capitals. For its part, the rate of interest is not only ‘irrational’ as laid out above, but typically below the rate of profit, as notably identified by Hilferding.

At a lower level of abstraction

Hilferding’s work also suggests that systematic inequalities of power or profitability in the relationship between banking and directly circulating capitals may be identified at more concrete levels of analysis than considerations about their basic structural differences. To appreciate this, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between banking capital and the interest-bearing capital it deals, and to consider the fundamental malleability of credit relations.

The mobilisation and extension of interest-bearing capital is a relation between capitalists, who are a priori socially equals. In this, the motion of interest-bearing capital differs significantly from that of industrial capital, which rests on and defines the fundamental social relation of capitalism: the exploitation of the working class by capitalists. If industrial capital is to be successful in its expansion and surplus-value is to be extracted, capitalist control over the process of production, including all aspects of workers’ exertion of the labour-power they have sold, is required. There can be no ambiguity as to whose reproduction constitutes the organising principle for the circuit.

In contrast, relations between lending and borrowing capitalists mediate the ultimate dependence of interest-bearing capital expansion on exploitation. It is not evident at this level of abstraction whether the reproduction requirements of either party in a banking credit relation are to provide the organising principle for the motion of interest-bearing capital at the expense of the other. All that is required is that repayment with interest be made by the borrowing capitalist in the mutually agreed upon terms. And this is compatible in general with a whole range of contractual arrangements and broader socio-political relations of power between the capitalists involved. Borrowing capitalists do not even have to make a profit to meet debt repayments, which may exceptionally even be made from deductions of existing capital.

Compounding this malleability is the fact that credit relations are not directly mediated by the law of value. It is impossible even to conceive of an exchange-value for interest-bearing capital. Nobody sets out to produce the idle funds from which interest-bearing capital is formed in the credit system. At the broadest level, they are not a product of labour. They are by-products of the employment of labour-power in competitive capitalist conditions. Thus, the amount of the interest-bearing capital commodity available to society at any given time can in no way be measured in terms of reproduction socially necessary labour-time. Further, as interest-bearing capital does not directly arise from an investment decision, its price cannot be pinned down by the more concrete regulating force of profit-equalisation across all capitals.

and microeconomic stability for the large international banks. See Bank for International Settlements 2006b, for instance.

These features make the social relations spanned by the motion of interest-bearing capital particularly susceptible to the particularities of concrete paths of accumulation open to capitalists in an economy during a concrete historical period, and to the impact of broader, historically concrete socio-political power relations. Inequalities in the relationship between banking and directly circulating capital – such as superior profitability – must be sought in these particulars existing at more concrete levels of reality.

It is here that Hilferding’s elaborations on Marx’s work prove particularly useful, despite the limitations that can be identified with the benefit of hindsight. His analysis starts precisely from the identification of hoards of idle money developing during the turnover of capital as the ultimate source of funds advanced by the credit system to fund new or expanding real undertakings.

The rise of ‘finance capital’ and the dominance of banking over productive capital are put forward as secular tendencies of capitalist development in general, linked to the processes of concentration and centralisation of capital identified by Marx. To Hilferding, the process of competition increased the credit needs of capitalist enterprises; from simple ‘circulation credit’ to fund expenditures in variable capital, to ‘investment credit’ to fund the acquisition of fixed capital. The latter form of credit is beyond the means of any single capitalist, and banks mobilise money from many idle pools across the economy to provide it. Borrowers can only repay with interest after repeated turnovers of the capital they operate, tying the fates of the borrowing enterprise and lending bank.

In this long-term relationship, Hilferding saw a tendency for banks to move from being mere intermediaries to a position of increasing power in relation to the borrowing industrial capitalists. This followed from the heightened flexibility of money capital in the relation between banking and industrial capital. Its aloofness from objective material realities of production and exchange mean that it can be moved across allocations very

20. ‘The battle of competition is fought by cheapening commodities. The cheapness of commodities depends, ceteris paribus, on the productiveness of labour, and this again on the scale of production… with the development of the capitalist mode of production, there is an increase in the minimum amount of individual capital necessary to carry on a business under its normal conditions. The smaller capitals, therefore, crowd into spheres of production which Modern Industry has only sporadically or incompletely got hold of. Here competition rages in direct proportion to the number, and in inverse proportion to the magnitudes, of the antagonistic capitals…. Apart from this, with capitalist production an altogether new force comes into play – the credit system. In its beginnings, the credit system sneaks in as a modest helper of accumulation and draws by invisible threads the money resources scattered all over the surface of society into the hands of individual or associated capitalists. But soon it becomes a new and formidable weapon in the competitive struggle, and finally it transforms itself into an immense social mechanism for the centralisation of capitals’ (Marx 1909, pp. 686–7).

21. ‘The relationship of banks with industry, ‘changes when the bank begins to provide the industrialist with capital for production. When it does this, it can no longer limit its interest to the condition of the enterprise and the market at a specific time, but must necessarily concern itself with the long-range prospects of the enterprise and the future state of the market. What had once been a momentary interest becomes an enduring one; and the larger the amount of credit supplied and… larger the proportion of the loan capital turned into fixed capital, the stronger and more abiding will that interest be’ (Hilferding 1981, p. 91).
easily. Glasberg illustrates the power of this flexibility in times of financial distress, when co-ordinated creditors wield considerable coercive powers over borrowers through their control of the allocation of new credit that can make or break an enterprise (or a country's finances).

Hilferding also pointed to the dominance by banks of the capital-market operations of industrial enterprises. Such operations played a key part in the centralisation of capital for Hilferding, not least because joint-stock corporations allow for control over capitalist enterprises to be effected with considerably less than a 100 per cent stake. In this process, Hilferding saw the involvement of banks in underwriting issuances of new stock as a foundation for their appropriation of ‘promoter’s profit’. The final product of these processes was to be an amalgamation of banks with joint-stock capital, which Hilferding termed ‘finance capital’, in which banks dominate and control industrial capital.

The experience since the early twentieth century has demonstrated that the particular theses raised by Hilferding did not correspond to broad, secular tendencies in capitalist development. Sweezy, for instance, argues that the US experience shows how concentration in real accumulation can give rise to oligopolistic structures with enterprises large enough to be able to rely significantly on their own stagnant funds for investment. This, he argued, may counter the balance of power back in favour of capitalists directly involved in accumulation. A different aspect of such counterrendencies is emphasised in the empirical studies of financial distress offered by Glasberg, where ‘bank power’ is shown to hinge on the ability of creditors to act in a co-ordinated fashion as they face a single borrower in distress. Lastly, the particular susceptibility of banking relations to broader political factors meant that the policies of ‘financial repression’ were effective in curbing the power of financial capital during much of the immediate postwar period.

In this sense, hindsight has shown Hilferding’s study to have elevated particular features of German, Austrian, and to a lesser extent US, belated development into general tendencies of capitalism. That notwithstanding, Hilferding’s approach is to date the most robust and consistent Marxist attempt to grapple with capitalist credit and financial relations whose

---

22. ‘In this relationship the bank is the more powerful party. The bank always disposes over capital in its liquid, readily available, form: money capital. The enterprise, on the other hand, has to depend upon reconverting commodities into money’ (ibid.).

23. Glasberg 1989. Lenin also casually pointed to banks’ operation of the payments mechanism as a powerful source of information and thus leverage in relation to borrowers, almost seventy years before analysis of ‘informational asymmetries’ became the height of modern sophistication in mainstream economic analysis of ‘corporate governance’. See Lenin 1966.


27. This is a limitation not shared, in my view, by Lenin, who made heavy use of Hilferding’s analysis, among others. Lenin was not writing a comprehensive work on political economy, but a ‘popular outline’, under a ‘shortage of French and English literature’, ‘with an eye to the Tsarist censorship’ and explicitly to deal with the concrete features of capitalism at the time. His main aim was to expose the political expressions of uneven capitalist development – namely inter-imperialist rivalries and war – in order to advance the political and programmatic insights that
importance was only embryonic in Marx’s time. Hilferding’s emphasis on the evolution of the credit needs of circulating capitals in the process of accumulation, on the sources of idle money within capitalist reproduction, and on the social and power relationships that arise and develop as banking capital intermediates between them, constitutes a useful elaboration on the analysis offered in Marx’s own work.

Towards an understanding of contemporary finance

Many important features of contemporary capitalism are best understood through such an approach to the social relations spanned by banking and finance. These include both economic and socio-political aspects of financial life in today’s ‘globalised’ economy.

The first one relates to the growing role of foreign banks in ‘middle-income’ countries. These banks are typically capitalised in their home, ‘First-World’, countries, but mobilise and allocate funds in host countries. As mentioned above, they have been aggressively gaining market-share. How such banks may affect the patterns of accumulation and appropriation of host countries will be best analysed through a clear conceptual distinction between banks’ own capital, mobilised and allocated interest-bearing capital, and the economic and socio-political relations they define.

The same is true of the social relations between financial intermediaries and broad layers of wage-earners. On both sides of intermediaries’ balance sheets, these have become increasingly important. Idle money capital is mobilised from working-class and petty-bourgeois layers in the form of savings, mutual funds, pensions and other instruments. And interest-bearing capital is increasingly advanced in the form of consumer and credit-card loans, as well as mortgages. The character of the social relations developing on these bases can best be approached as distinctive extensions of the historically defining functions of the banking system sketched out above. This includes the possible systematic appropriation of a share of secured wages by banking capital through growing consumer and mortgage debt.

Lastly, the resulting views on the profitability of banking and circulating capital, and on the malleability of credit relations, allow for useful emphases in analysing the current relative performance of banking and financial capital. Its high profitability is not very fruitfully understood as an expression of inherent tendencies in capitalism. Its determinants paved the way for the 1917 Russian Revolution and the establishment of the USSR. To argue that Lenin’s political insights in Imperialism and other works written during World War I are ‘one-sided’ or ‘overpoliticised’ because of the post-World-War-II subordination of inter-imperialist rivalries to the US-led Cold War against the USSR is, in my view, to misunderstand the dialectical relationship between theory, political action and objective social reality.


29. A revealing recent development on this front has taken place in the Brazilian banking system, where consumer credit secured by future wage earnings (endorsed by the employer) has grown significantly in the past two years. This crédito consignado is no marginal practice, as shown by its promotion by the world’s second largest bank, HSBC, which advertises such loans online for employees of state and private enterprises. See <www.hsbc.com.br/para-voce emprestimos-financiamentos/credito-pessoal>.
should be located in concretely emerging patterns in the credit needs of different class fractions and in the characteristics of emerging pools of idle money. Significantly, they should also be located in the political sphere, emphasising how the current importance of financial capital is in great part the result of a political project. Consequently, analysis of contemporary capitalism requires analysis of the political processes through which it has been constructed, notably through inquiry into the role of states in articulating, debating and thrashing out policies affecting different social layers.

In this connection, a parenthesis is necessary on the view expressed in Marx’s ‘Capital’ that ‘the theory of the state as the instrument of one class against another… only sheds limited light on the complexity and diversity of the state’s role and actions’.\(^{30}\) In a limited sense, this is literally true, in that the insights on the capitalist state articulated, for instance, by Lenin,\(^ {31}\) cannot fully explain a whole range of concrete political experiences. But they were never meant to do so, certainly not by themselves. They are attempted reproductions in thought of the class essence of the state’s role in capitalist society.

It seems to me that the question posed here is whether the concrete experiences of state actions negate this postulated essence, or provide mediated or even counterintuitive embodiments for it. Establishing this may be difficult question, particularly given the separation between economic and political spheres in advanced capitalism.\(^{32}\) Sophisticated polities present myriad real appearances, such as the widespread view that the simple democratic form under universal suffrage may yield to government reflecting the popular will. Yet, in my view, through all concrete social-democratic experiences in the capitalist world, states have shown a consistent inflexibility in their unwavering commitment to maintaining key, sine qua non requirements of capitalist reproduction: wage-labour, broader conditions for the private appropriation of surplus-value by domestic capitalists, and the defence of familial inheritance rights in property. This is in contrast to the flexibility of the social relations that directly concern this review, involving a state’s ability to intervene and effect changes in the relations between capitalists.

Here, the work of Helleiner is particularly useful in documenting the processes through which states in the industrialised world moved away from the post-World-War-II policies of ‘financial repression’ to today’s world of liberalised finance.\(^ {33}\) Less widely addressed, though equally important, are the more recent processes through which ‘Third-World’ polities have been won to the idea of financial liberalisation. These have included point-blank blackmailing during liquidity crises, stuffing the higher echelons of government bureaucracies with increasing numbers of US, IMF and World Bank-trained ‘technocrats’, as well as the more subtle formation of alliances between top sections of local elites and polities with foreign capital.\(^ {34}\) Interestingly, and emphasising the sociopolitical malleability of banking and financial relations, the particular impact of banking-sector liberalisation across these

\(^{30}\) Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, p. 171.

\(^{31}\) Lenin 1981.

\(^{32}\) Discussed in detail, for instance, in Wood 2003.

\(^{33}\) Helleiner 1994.

\(^{34}\) See Mathieson and Roldós 2001 for a firmly mainstream econometric study statistically establishing the tendency of financial crises in ‘middle-income’ countries to be followed by significant increases in the presence of ‘First-World’ financial capital.
countries appears to depend significantly on the particular characteristics of the political-economic processes leading to liberalisation.\footnote{Illustrative in this regard is the contrast between Mexican and Philippine experiences with foreign-bank liberalisation. Mexico, a significantly industrialised ‘middle-income’ country, has seen its banking system all but completely taken over by foreign capital. This resulted from a singular confluence of factors. The complete liberalisation of foreign-bank entry was implemented in 1998, when the Banco de México was led by a former IMF Director, Ortiz Martínez. At that time, the private domestic banking system represented a drag on accumulation, as it had not yet recovered from the 1994 crisis, despite considerable government expenditures. Moreover, private domestic banking was not an established avenue of accumulation for domestic capital, as it had only been privatised in the early 1990s. Domestic capitalist groups had access to other, better-established avenues for accumulation. As documented in Camacho 1998, those avenues were themselves increasingly dependent on a structural integration with foreign – typically US – capital. The liberalisation of foreign-bank entry in the Philippines in 1995 also took place under the stewardship of a strongly pro-liberalisation and pro-Washington administration. But it did not take place against the backdrop of a financial crisis. Also, banking enterprises have been central holdings of familial conglomerates in Philippine capitalist development. In this context, domestic opposition to unrestricted foreign entry emerged in the Philippine polity, resulting in liberalisation legislation that has helped limit foreign control to about 15 per cent of the domestic banking system.}

These economic and political features are just some of the moments of contemporary capitalism requiring new analyses founded on Marxist political economy. Others include the functions and contradictions of capital markets and the increasingly exotic financial instruments in capitalist accumulation. These are clearly difficult analytical tasks, necessary as part of the development of an appropriate characterisation of contemporary capitalism. Whatever important advantages may be identified in a hindsight distillation of the works of Hilferding, it is their foundation on the political economy of Marx that renders them useful for the analysis of today’s political economy. In *The Value of Marx* and *Marx’s *Capital* we have sophisticated and balanced presentations of Marx’s central economic contributions. The contribution these books make is an important part of the necessary process of intellectual re-armament facing critical thought and political intervention. They should be read widely.

Reviewed by Paulo L. dos Santos
Department of Economics, SOAS

References


A meaningful discussion of statism in relation to the Marxist tradition must distinguish between word and concept. For, although the word ‘statism’ itself rarely occurs, the phenomena it connotes have certainly been widely recognised and discussed. The expression ‘statism’ first emerged as such in France around 1880 to describe political doctrines that called for an expansion of the role and responsibilities of the state in all areas of the economy and civil society. The word was also used in Switzerland in the 1890s in the struggle to resist a proposed expansion of federal powers at the expense of the cantons, especially in the economic and financial domains. Nowadays, a usage of ‘statism’ prevails that denotes the dominant position of the state vis-à-vis society, its individual domains, and the individual. This is also how ‘statism’ has come to be largely used in the Marxist tradition – albeit with an historical-materialist grounding that relates the state’s dominant position to the dynamic of capitalism, to national economies’ place in the international system, and/or to the changing balance of class forces.

1. Although Marx and Engels themselves did not use the word in their work, it is nonetheless implicit as a concept in Marx’s early work on the alienation represented by the modern state. It is then elaborated in his work on nineteenth-century France, especially in relation to Bonapartism; and it is presented more clearly still, at the end of his life, in his analysis of the Paris Commune. In trying to define the Marxian concept of statism, one finds two apparently contrasting approaches: sometimes Marx regarded statism as an exceptional and unstable phenomenon that emerges only in particular conjunctures of class forces or in less-developed capitalist economies; and sometimes he saw it as a generic and inevitable feature of all capitalist states that was grounded in the alienated form of politics. His writings on ‘Oriental despotism’ would also suggest the possibility that the state could become autonomous in other types of social formation.

1.1 Given these necessary cautions, one can say that ‘statism’ appears in three main guises in Marxist theory and political practice in relation to capitalist societies. Theoretically, statism has been seen, first, as a major feature of exceptional forms of the capitalist state; and, second, as an inherent trait of each and every capitalist state which tends to become more prominent as capitalism develops. Both views can be found in the work of Marx and Engels – most notably in their analyses of the French state. Third, statism also has a strategic meaning in socialist practice. Here it refers to strengthening the role of the state in promoting a ‘revolution from above’ during the transition to socialism. This strategy was initially justified by historical analogy with Bonapartism or with the Prussian state’s role in promoting bourgeois development under Bismarck. It then was reinforced by the subsequent appearance of Bismarckian Staatssozialismus (state socialism in forms such as accident insurance, tobacco monopoly, state ownership of railways, etc.). And it has been intermittently strengthened in periods when the state (whether or not democratic in form) appears to be able to manage the contradictions and crisis-tendencies of capitalism – most recently in the period of the Keynesian welfare national state in Fordism or the developmental state in East Asia.
this separation is a necessary feature of capitalist social formations. Capital accumulation is said to depend on a range of extra-economic conditions that cannot be secured through market exchange and economic competition so that some of these must or can be secured through the state. How much state intervention beyond the prevailing socially necessary minimum will actually prove compatible with continued accumulation will vary with different stages and forms of capitalism and different conjunctures.

Statism involves an enhanced importance of the state apparatus in securing the conditions for the valorisation of capital at the expense of exchange relations and/or bourgeois political domination and at the expense of (always indirect) democratic forms of political representation. However, this institutional separation also permits a radical autonomisation of the state apparatus which could culminate (at least in the short term) in the state’s dominance over the social formation, i.e., the dominance of the interests of the state and state managers over those of all economic classes and members of civil society. Such an extreme form of statism would mean, in particular, that the state expands its power and increases its autonomy in relation not only to subordinate classes but also, and crucially, to the dominant classes. This same institutional separation of the state from the rest of the social formation also provides the material and ideological bases for the statist strategy of ‘revolution from above’. The legitimacy of the capitalist state depends on the constitutive absence of class from its formal organisation (i.e., on the juridico-political construction of state sovereignty, the formal appearance of class neutrality, and the appeal to national-popular rather than class interests) and can thereby encourage an illusion in the capacity to use state power to transform the economy or civil society from above. This is the basis for the belief in a possible state-led road to socialism based on the centralised planning and administration of the economy. And this belief characterises not only social-democratic reformism but also the Stalinist revolution from above to be imposed by an autonomous state ‘of the whole people’.

1.3 This problematic has a pre-history dating back at least to Machiavelli and his interest in Staatsraison [reasons of state]. But Marxist accounts of statist phenomena owe most to Hegelian state theory. According to Hegel, a fully developed, rational state ideally functions as the representative of the interest of the whole (Philosophy of Right, see especially §270, §273). For Marx, however, the state really comprises an alienated form of politics. In this sense, Marx might well have argued that statism existed to the extent that the state is an alienated form of political life. This interpretation differs from the more class-theoretical account of the state that is often attributed to Marx and Engels. It departs from an abstract analysis of the state as form [Staat als Form] rather than from a concrete emphasis on the social origins or links of the ruling or governing class and/or the class interests typically served by the policies they pursue. Indeed, an adequate account of statism is incompatible with any simple class-theoretical analysis of the state as a political apparatus or instrument of class forces. For statist tendencies are primarily rooted in the necessary form of political organisation in capitalist formations rather than in contingencies of class rule or specific policies in particular conjunctures.

2. Normal and Exceptional State Forms – The view that statism is a generic feature of the state was first implied in Marx’s early writings. These developed a critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, introduced the idea of alienated politics, and argued that political emancipation can only be fully realised through the abolition of the state. Philosophical critique apart, this interpretation was subsequently developed in his writings on the French state and on the revolutionary significance of the Paris Commune. His comments on ‘Oriental despotism’, even though they concerned a pre-capitalist economic formation, also lent support to the suspicion that the state could become radically autonomous. In discussing
France, Marx first noted Napoleon’s role in perfecting the power of the French state, breaking independent powers (local, municipal, and provincial) to create a unified, unitary bourgeois nation. Political power was centralised in the state apparatus and its power was extended at the expense of intermediary organisations. Marx also argued that all subsequent political revolutions in France served to perfect this state apparatus rather than to overthrow it. This was especially clear in the refinement and autonomisation of the French state under Louis Bonaparte.

2.1 There are several recent examples of this ‘normalising’ interpretation in both advanced capitalist societies and in peripheral capitalist formations. We could refer to the ideas of first generation Frankfurt-school theorists on trends towards a strong, bureaucratic state – whether authoritarian or totalitarian in form – in the context of economic crisis and the emergence of state capitalism (see the essays in Dubiel and Stillner 1973; Scheuerman 1996; and the discussion in Scheuerman 1994). This state form corresponded to the rise of organised or state capitalism, which relied increasingly on the mass media for its ideological power, and either integrated the trade-union movement as a political support or else smashed it as part of the consolidation of totalitarian rule. Max Horkheimer regarded statism as a variety of the authoritarian state: ‘Integral statism or state socialism is the most consistent form of the authoritarian state, which has freed itself from any dependence on private capital’ (1940, 101). He saw the Soviet Union as an example of that. ‘In integral statism, socialisation is simply decreed. Private capitalists are eliminated. Henceforth, dividends are only collected from government bonds. As a result of the revolutionary past of the régime, the petty struggles between officials and departments is not, as with fascism, complicated by the differences in the social origin and connections inside the bureaucratic staff. Integral statism is not a retreat but an advance in power. It can exist without racism’ (1940, 102). Among postwar theorists, one might mention the arguments of Joachim Hirsch about the rise of the Sicherheitsstaat [security state] in the context of the postwar Fordism; various arguments about the tendency towards the ‘strong state [starker Staat]’; the ‘garrison state’, ‘friendly fascism’, and so forth. Such arguments typically concern states in advanced European and North-American capitalist societies. Peripheral capitalism poses the issue of statism in more extreme form insofar as statism is assimilated to the developmental state (e.g., Atatürk’s Turkey, Lee Kwan-Yiu’s Singapore). In addition to these ostensibly ‘normal’ forms of developmental statism, there are also exceptional ‘developmental’ states (e.g., the South-Korean and Taiwanese developmental states with their national-security régimes).

2.2 A representative example of such arguments occurs in Nicos Poulantzas’s work. In his widely-read Political Power and Social Classes (1973), Poulantzas seized on Marx’s many analyses of Bonapartism together with Engels’s particular claim that Bonapartism was the ‘religion of the bourgeoisie’ (Letter to Marx, 13 April 1866) and linked it to the necessity of a relatively autonomous state that could act against the interests of particular capitals as well as against the organised working class. In later work, however, Poulantzas did distinguish between democratic and exceptional forms of the state and noted the greater autonomy of the latter. He further analysed them in terms of which part of the state apparatus was dominant – legislative or executive in representative systems, bureaucracy, political police, military, or single party in exceptional systems (for example, Fascism and Dictatorship, 1974). In his last book, on State, Power, Socialism, however, he reverted to the view that authoritarianism was a generic feature of the state (1978). In particular, he suggested that a new form of state was emerging, which he termed ‘authoritarian statism’. The basic developmental tendency in this new state form is ‘intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life combined with radical decline of the institutions of
political democracy and with draconian and multi-form curtailment of so-called “formal” liberties (1978, 203–4). More precisely, authoritarian statism involves enhanced roles for the executive branch, its dominant ‘state party’ (which serves as a transmission belt from the state to the people rather than from the people to the state), and a new, anti-democratic ideology. Poulantzas says this further undermines the already limited involvement of the masses in political decision-making, severely weakens the organic functioning of the party system (even where a plurality of parties survives intact), and saps the vitality of democratic forms of political discourse. Accordingly, there are fewer obstacles to the continuing penetration of authoritarian-statist forms into all areas of social life. Indeed Poulantzas actually claims that ‘all contemporary power is functional to authoritarian statism’ (1978, 239).

2.3 According to the ‘exceptionalist’ interpretation, statism typically emerges when pressure from subordinate classes and/or internal conflicts in the dominant classes lead the capitalist state to assume more authoritarian and despotic forms of political discourse. Accordingly, there are fewer obstacles to the continuing penetration of authoritarian-statist forms into all areas of social life. Indeed Poulantzas actually claims that ‘all contemporary power is functional to authoritarian statism’ (1978, 239).

2.4 According to both Marx and Engels, the nature, extent, and duration of this autonomisation depends on the changing balance of class forces in specific régimes. Thus tendencies towards autonomisation, relative independence, or statism occurred in the absolutist monarchies, in the dictatorships established by the two Bonapartes, in Bismarckism, and in other exceptional régimes. In each case these régimes correspond to different types of class equilibrium with their common feature being that they are periods when warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state apparatus or state managers, as ostensible mediators, can acquire a certain independence. In all cases, however, certain types of conjunctures (with a given range of class forces on a given terrain) enable state managers to win an abnormal or exceptional measure of independence. Indeed Marx’s earliest accounts of the state often treated it as a parasite without any effective function for an emerging capitalism. Although this argument is best seen as pre-Marxist, even the later Marx sometimes suggested that the state in ‘Oriental despotism’ was parasitic. And, whether or not this view can really be reconciled with historical materialism, subsequent generations of Marxists have certainly taken Marx’s analyses of Oriental
despotism and the praetorian pretensions of Bonapartism to justify the view that the state can become wholly autonomous.

2.5 There are innumerable examples of such analyses in subsequent Marxist works on the absolutist state, Bonapartism, and Bismarckism. They are full of references to specific conjunctures that enable state managers to win an abnormal or exceptional measure of independence. Rosa Luxemburg referred to Marx’s analyses of Bonapartism in her own writings on the tendential autonomisation of the French state (1898, 265–6; 1900–1, 19); but she also noted a new contradiction that derived from the contrast between the bourgeois republic and large imperial armed forces. Similar arguments are developed by Lenin regarding the Kerensky régime after the February 1917 Russian Revolution (1917b, 219–20). Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks extend such analyses to distinguish between cases of an equilibrium of compromise (relative balance) and catastrophic equilibrium (threatening to lead to the ‘mutual ruin’ of the contending classes). The latter could lead to Caesarism, a conjuncture when ‘a great “heroic” personality’ (1971, 219; Q 13, §27) dominates with the support of the state apparatus. ‘Caesarism can be said to express a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction’ (1971, 219; Q 13, §27). Before the age of mass politics, military force plays a key role in Caesarism. After 1848, however, ‘modern political technique became totally transformed’ and a key role is played by bureaucratic organisations (including unions and parties) (1971, 219; Q 13, §27). Caesarism could be progressive (e.g., Julius Caesar, Napoleon) or reactionary (Louis Bonaparte or Bismarck) (1971, 219, 223; Q 13, §27; Q 14, §23). Gramsci adds that ‘a Caesarist solution can even exist without a Caesar, without any great, “heroic”, representative personality’ (1971, 219; Q 13, §27; see also Q 9, §133, §136). In this context, ‘modern Caesarism is more a police than a military system’ (1971, 219; Q 13, §27; see also Q 9, §136). This brings his analysis closer to the more general phenomenon of statism.

2.6 There are also examples of statism being explained in terms of the overall weakness of class forces (whether or not they are in equilibrium). Two different examples, emphasising economic and political weaknesses respectively, are found in Trotsky’s account of Tsarist Russia before the 1905 and 1917 revolutions (Trotsky 1973; 1965 respectively) and in Mason’s analysis of the primacy of politics in Nazi Germany (Mason 1965). Trotsky described the historical situation in Russia before 1905 as follows: ‘In its endeavour to create a centralized state apparatus, Tsarism was obliged not so much to oppose the claims of the privileged estates as to fight the barbarity, poverty, and general disjointedness of a country whose separate parts led wholly independent economic lives. It was not the equilibrium of the economically dominant classes, as in the West, but their weakness which made Russian bureaucratic autocracy a self-contained organization’ (Trotsky 1973, 26). In this respect, he suggested, Tsarism was ‘an intermediate form between European absolutism and Asian despotism, being, possibly, closer to the latter of these two’ (ibid.: cf. 1965, 332). Conversely, Mason argued that the Nazi state became relatively independent because the political organs of capital, labour, and other classes had been weakened or destroyed during its first three years of domination. In the sort of circumstances described by Trotsky and Mason, then, the state can stand outside and above the class struggle for some considerable time. Contrary to the ‘normal’ case (as defined by Marxist theory), the state no longer performs any direct class functions and, indeed, it could even precipitate ‘the mutual ruin of the contending classes’ (cf. Marx and Engels 1848).

2.7 One way to reconcile these two contrasting interpretations of statism would be to regard the autonomisation of the state as involving cyclical fluctuations around a long-term upward trend. Thus there would be a
ratchet-like alternation between more democratic and more authoritarian periods around a rising trend towards more authoritarian rule: following periods of authoritarian rule, there would never be a complete return to the democratic status quo ante so that the starting point for the next turn would be more authoritarian than before. This, in turn, could be explained in terms of the logic of capital (requiring more state intervention) and/or the logic of class struggle (requiring more state repression and legitimation measures). Peripheral capitalism poses these problems in more extreme form with statism being assimilated to developmental state capitalism (e.g., Atatürk’s Turkey).

2.8 In Revolution Betrayed, Trotsky tried to conceptually distinguish statism from ‘state capitalism’ as a term ‘to designate all the phenomena which arise when a bourgeois state takes direct charge of the means of transport or of industrial enterprises’ (1937, 245). He reserved the term statism for another phenomenon: ‘[d]uring the war, and especially during the experiments in fascist economy, the term “state capitalism” has oftenest been understood to mean a system of state interference and regulation. The French employ a much more suitable term for this étatism. “There are undoubtedly points of contact between state capitalism and “state-ism”, but taken as systems they are opposite rather than identical. State capitalism means the substitution of state property for private property, and for that very reason remains partial in character. State-ism, no matter where in Italy, Mussolini, in Germany, Hitler, in America, Roosevelt, or in France, Leon Blum – means state intervention on the basis of private property, and with the goal of preserving it’ (1937, 246). Admittedly, ‘it “rescues” the small proprietor from complete ruin only to the extent that his existence is necessary for the preservation of big property. [Its] planned measures . . . are dictated not by the demands of a development of the productive forces, but by a concern for the preservation of private property at the expense of the productive forces, which are in revolt against it. State-ism means applying brakes to the development of technique, supporting unviable enterprises, perpetuating parasitic social strata. In a word, state-ism is completely reactionary in character’ (1937, 246).

3. Statism as Revolution from Above. – Strategically, statism could be defined as an approach to socialist politics that sees it as involving the expansion of state power to create a socialist revolution from above. This poses problems concerning the relative autonomy of the state as well as major problems of revolutionary strategy. Bakunin argued this was inherent in all forms of state communism – a political strategy that he attributed to Marx and Engels as well as Liebknecht and Lassalle. In Statism and Anarchy (1873), Bakunin suggested that any form of centralised co-ordination of economic production would entail a form of centralised state administration; and this, in turn, would inevitably lead to political domination over the workers by an educated and privileged minority, claiming that their insight into scientific socialism meant that they knew better than the popular masses what was in the latter’s interests. This forecast applies to the emergence of the Stalinist dictatorship which strengthened the separation of the state from the masses.

3.1 There is some evidence that Marx and Engels accepted a weak version of the statist strategy in the 1850s and 1860s. This is especially clear in the discussion of factory legislation in England: in The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845) and Capital, Volume I (1867), Engels and Marx analysed the role of Factory Acts and factory inspectors in protecting women and children. The inspectors can even be seen as exemplars of an Hegelian ‘universal class’ of bureaucrats; but their influence depended not only on legislation, regular reports, and publicity but also on alliances with workers, middle classes, elements in the aristocracy, and some enlightened manufacturers (Capital I). They also imply that an electoral strategy in parliamentary democracies could succeed in transforming the material situation of the working class (cf. MacGregor 1996). Moreover, in his
discussion of the contemporary state, Marx often contrasted the European Continent with England and the United States. He seemed to concede that England and the USA did not display the same trends towards authoritarian rule as Continental-European states. Thus, whilst Marx bemoaned the gigantism of the French state (whether in its democratic or authoritarian moments), he also saw the American state as one which, ‘in contrast to all earlier national formations, was from the beginning subordinate to bourgeois society, to its production, and never could make the pretence of being an end in itself’ (1857–61, 844). Engels also offered a series of comments in the 1870s and 1880s about the possibilities of a parliamentary-democratic road to socialism not only in the Anglo-Saxon states but also in mainland Europe. This was a view Engels would subsequently seek to neutralise by arguing that imperialism had transformed England and the US as well as European states into militarist, repressive, authoritarian states (Lenin 1917a, 313–14). More generally, he rejected such views on the basis of Marx’s comments on the Paris Commune (1917a, 312–27).

3.2 In conjunction with Marx’s comments on the Factory Acts, such views could be interpreted to support a reformist state socialism. This would suggest that Bakunin’s critique applied to Marx and Engels as well as Lassalle. Yet they rejected this criticism as far as it concerned them (Marx 1874; Engels 1872) even as they sharply criticised the Lassallean tradition in the German working class movement for similar tendencies. Lassalleanism was the most important manifestation of statism in the late nineteenth-century socialist movement. Lassalle argued that the only way in which the working class could escape the so-called ‘iron law of economics’ (which would drive down wages below the physiological minimum) was to organise producer co-operatives and that this could only be achieved through the support of state-sponsored credit institutions. This view was premised on an Hegelian view of the Prussian state in terms of which Lassalle regarded the state as the highest form of human organisation, as an embodiment of the organic unity of the nation, as having the function of leading humanity to freedom (Lassalle 1862, 198). This glorification of the state was associated with a belief that the working-class movement could ally with Bismarckian conservatives against the bourgeois (cf. Lassalle 1862, 1863). Similar ideas were promoted in the Gotha Programme (1875). Marx condemned the ‘Lassallean sect’s servile belief in the state, or, what is no better, by a democratic belief in miracles’ (1875, 97). Noting the specific form of the German Reich as ‘a police-guarded military despotism, embellished with parliamentary forms, alloyed with a feudal admixture and at the same time already influenced by the bourgeois, and bureaucratically carpentered’ (1875, 96), Marx retorts that this type of régime (as opposed to a democratic republic) is most unlikely to concede working-class demands. But he also reverts to his earlier and more general arguments about alienated politics and his recent discovery of the revolutionary political form of the Commune to add that ‘freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it’ (1875, 94). This would suggest that Marx rejects étatist strategies not just in situations where the state is relatively impervious to democratic influences but in all situations where the socialist movement expects to maintain the state form (cf. PIT 1989, 10–14).

3.3 More generally, Lassalleanism can be seen as one example of statism as a general feature of all political strategies for socialist transformation that envisage a key role for (an unreformed) state apparatus in securing a ‘revolution from above’. It can be contrasted with Jacobinism (an emphasis on democratic radicalism) and anarcho-syndicalism (with an emphasis on the role of trade-unionist activity in securing the transition). The aim of statism is not to smash the state apparatus but to secure its support in a socialist transition as a mediator between the classes in conflict. Other examples can be found in Proudhon’s ‘social Caesarism’ (as evident in Proudhon’s tactical
appeal to Louis Bonaparte to use his coup d'état to support progressive forces rather than reaction; see especially Proudhon's book, *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état de deux décembre* (1852), social capitalism in the New Deal, the expansion of the welfare state in interwar and postwar advanced capitalism, or the so-called 'developmental state' in modernising newly industrialising economies.

3.4 Despite his apparent commitment in the 1850s and 1860s to a relatively non-violent, parliamentary, statist road to socialism, the experience of the Paris Commune led Marx back to a more anarchist position. He claimed in *The Civil War in France* (1871) that the Commune had demonstrated that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes' (1871b, 328). He suggested that the working class cannot use the instrument of its oppression to achieve its emancipation and that a new state form (the Commune) was necessary to secure the political domination of the proletariat (1871a, 485-7). This is a view developed most forcefully and one-sidedly in *Lenin's State and Revolution* (1917a). There appears in turn to have been some retreat from this position in subsequent commentaries by Engels and subsequent socialist political strategies have typically assumed some form of reformist, social-democratic orientation towards the use of state power in building socialism.

3.5 The strategy became particularly strong in German Social Democracy and is well expressed in the Erfurt Programme. This predicted the growing unity of democratic and socialist struggles and envisaged a key role for a democratised state in the socialist revolution. *Kautsky's* contribution to this programme and subsequent commentaries thereon emphasised the importance of parliament as an instrument of government in great states and the need to win a socialist majority in parliament. Thus, he argued for the importance of the parliamentary road, expanded bourgeois political and civil liberties, and a centralised bureaucratic-administrative apparatus (for which he was, of course, later strongly criticised by *Lenin* and *Luxemburg*). *Kautsky* rejected claims that direct democracy or direct legislation could ever replace central planning and administration in large-scale modern industry and argued instead for the reorientation of the policies of a parliamentary, bureaucratic state. Nonetheless, *Kautsky* also criticised the views that the workers' movement and the 'state-socialist' bourgeois reformers were natural allies. For he claimed against *Rodbertus* and his followers that the economic and political significance of nationalisation for the workers' movement would depend on the class character of the state: whereas a conservative state would use nationalisation to divide the movement, social democracy would use it to develop the organisational and political strength of the working class. Later, he would criticise *Bernstein* for his commitment to democratic reformism on the grounds that democracy was compatible with capitalism. *Kautsky* justified his reservations against a reformist course by saying that it could not be relied on in militarised and crisis-prone continental Europe. In certain key respects, *Kautsky's* arguments anticipate those of Eurocommunism.

4. Because statism is not a widely used term in the Marxist tradition, this entry has been more concerned with judging its relevance to various controversies and debates. There are three main reference points in this regard: the nature of alienated politics that stems from the institutional separation of state and society – a separation that provides the basis for a greater or lesser autonomisation of the state but that also limits the extent to which the state can become an instrument for overcoming that separation; the changing balance of class forces that conditions the extent to which the state apparatus or state élites can win some autonomy to pursue their own interests and/or to impose revolution from above; and the debate about the parliamentary road to socialism as opposed to more direct forms of class rule or dictatorship. The relative importance of these three reference points has changed over time. But each of them has proved important
enough for the Marxist tradition that issues of statism have regularly re-emerged in different guises and combinations.


Bob Jessop

Activity of the state, accumulation, administration, alienation, apathy in authoritarian command-administrative socialism, authoritarian populism, base/structure, Bonapartism, bourgeoisie, bureaucracy, centralism, civil servants/officials, civil/bourgeois society, class equilibrium, command economy, command-administrative system, corruption, democracy/dictatorship of the proletariat, developing countries, dismantling of the state, dominant/ruling class, domination/rule, elite, emancipation, Eurocommunism, factory laws, fascism, functionary, iron law of wages, Lassalleanism, legitimacy, nomenklatura, oriental despotism, Paris Commune, planned economy, power, power relations, reformism, relative autonomy, revolution, social democracy, socialisation, Stalinism, state, state capitalism, state class, superstructure.

Abbau des Staates, Akkumulation, Apathie im befehladenadministrativen Sozialismus, autoritärer
Notes on Contributors

Ian Birchall is the author of *Sartre Against Stalinism* (Berghahn 2004) and *A Rebel’s Guide to Lenin* (Bookmarks 2005). He is currently writing a biography of Tony Cliff.

ian@ibirchall.wanadoo.co.uk

David Camfield is Assistant Professor of Labour Studies at the University of Manitoba and a member of the editorial board of *Labour/Le Travail*. His main areas of research are public-sector unionism in Canada and theoretical issues in labour studies.

camfield@ms.umanitoba.ca

Paulo L. dos Santos currently lectures in the Department of Economics at SOAS.

je015a7824@blueyonder.co.uk

Pat Devine is a Marxist political economist, currently an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Manchester. His principal research interests are: postcapitalist economic models, in particular a model of participatory democratic planning; ecosocialism; and a Gramscian analysis of the political economy of twenty-first century Britain. His most recent publications are: ‘Review of *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* by Juan Martinez-Alier’, *Environmental Values* (2005); ‘The Promise of Participatory Planning: A Rejoinder to Hodgson’ (with Fikret Adaman), *Economy and Society* (2006); ‘The 1970s and After: The Political Economy of Inflation and the Crisis of Social Democracy’, *Soundings* (2006); and *Feel-Bad Britain: A View from the Democratic Left* (with Andy Pearmain, Michael Prior and David Purdy). <www.hegemonics.co.uk> (2007). He is a member of the Red Green Study Group and is currently writing a book provisionally titled *Twenty-First Century Socialism: The Political Economy of a Sustainable Self-governing Society*.

pat.devine@manchester.ac.uk

Jan Dumolyn is a postdoctoral fellow of the Foundation for Scientific Research- Flanders, connected to the Department of Medieval History of the University of Ghent. He has published on late medieval popular revolts, on the nobility and on Burgundian state formation.

Jan.Dumolyn@UGent.be

Bob Jessop is Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies and Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University. He previously taught in the Department of Government at Essex University. He is best known for his work on state theory, Thatcherism, the regulation approach, and welfare state restructuring; and is currently working on the discourses and contradictions of the knowledge-based economy. His best known work includes *The Capitalist State* (1982), *Nicos Poulantzas* (1985), *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations* (with Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, and Tom Ling), *State Theory* (1990), *The Future of the Capitalist State* (2002), and *Beyond the Regulation Approach* (with Ngai-Ling Sum) (2006). He has also published numerous book chapters and refereed journal articles on these and related topics. His next books are *State Power* (2007) and *Towards Cultural Political Economy* (with Ngai-Ling Sum) (2008).

Samuel Knafo is a lecturer in international relations at the University of Sussex. His main work focuses on English finance and the rise of capitalism ("The Gold Standard and the Origins of the Modern International Monetary System", *Review of International Political Economy*, 13:1, 2006). He has also written on Marxist theory ("The Fetishizing Subject of Marx’s Capital", *Capital and Class*, 76, 2002).

William S. Lewis is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Skidmore College. His research and teaching interests are in social and political philosophy, philosophy of the social sciences, and American pragmatism. His book *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* was recently published by Lexington Books and recent articles by him have appeared in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *Rethinking Marxism*, and *Borderlands*.


Kevin J. Murphy is a lifelong socialist and teaches Russian and world history at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. His *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* (Berghahn Books 2005) won the 2006 Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize and is now available in paperback from Haymarket Books. He is now working with Alexey Gusev (Moscow State University) on a long-term project on strikes in the Soviet Union, 1921–34.

Jan Rehmann is co-editor of the German *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism (HKWM)*. He teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York and at the Free

Janrehmann@aol.com