

Marcello Musto, ed.

Marx for Today.

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Marx is back, after making a steady return since the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto in 1998. It has taken decades of work to rethink, reapply, rework, and restore Marx to get to the renaissance that is clearly underway today. At the forefront of this renaissance is *Marx for Today*, a collection of nine probing articles by important authors, including the editor, Marcello Musto, in Part I and a survey of recent intellectual and social movements in ten regions of the world by participant reporters in Part II. (This is an expanded edition of a special issue of *Socialism and Democracy* 24.3 [2010]; Chinese and Spanish translations are about to see print.)

The return of Marx, and of Marxism, has been aided by the release from what was once called “actually existing socialism”, operating as it did through ideological lenses of simplistic mandatory texts in which large parts of the real Marx were neglected or distorted. Outside the ‘socialist camp’ Marx’s work, as explained in Part II, was prohibited, censored, and otherwise blocked for reasons as different as strict capitalism in South Korea, strict *juche* in North Korea, and other reasons elsewhere.

In Part I, many of the sources of misunderstandings, misapplications, and mistranslations are taken up, where the usual suspects are criticized, for example Lenin, Stalin, and Mao (Chattopadhyay), Stalin and diamat (Anderson), or the liberal contingent (Carver). These are among the sources that corrupted Marx’s ideas into a dogmatic system. There were also areas of neglect, for example when it comes to alienation and free association. Many authors, in both parts of this book, discuss the neglect of core parts of Marx’s work, such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* with the now famous section on alienated labor and the *Grundrisse*, which was preparatory to *Capital* (Marx’s magnum opus) with a wide swath of topics including alienation. (See Marcello Musto, ed., *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse* [Routledge 2008].)

Musto gives a detailed account of the neglect and distortion of the concept of alienation on both sides of the socialist-capitalist split, which illustrates many of the problems that obscured the richness of Marx’s work. First, the manuscripts were not brought to light until nearly a century after they were written, and then they were largely ignored. Next, they were treated as juvenilia to be abandoned and later said to be irrelevant in the modern world and in socialist society. In the meantime, authors from divergent political positions twisted the notion of alienation in various ways until the term became unrecognizable and did indeed lose most of its relevance. According to Musto, only a return to Marx’s original work will save his original idea with its contemporary significance.

Most of the papers in Part I discuss the ways in which Marxism has been corrupted and mangled. Some discuss new applications of Marxism, while others discuss Marx in the light of

contemporary politics. Everyone seems to agree about what they are against. In both parts of the book we see sustained attacks on a dogma of dialectical materialism, often called “diamat,” which is variously thought to use a unique unintelligible methodology, the dialectic, with strict deterministic laws about a narrow form of materialism. It became a system of thought that promised universal unilinear progress to the bounties of communism after capitalism is overthrown. Like others, Anderson rejects these ideas of a “totalizing” grand narrative (27). Some would jettison anything regarded as Marx’s special methodology while others would have us return to Marx’s distinctive methods of investigation. Carver explicitly criticizes those who have “constructed [Marx] as a theorist”, (117) and praises Marx’s sarcasm and rhetoric, with their political role, and for having explicitly “rejected systems of *every* kind … [for] critical insight” (132, quoting Marx in the rarely read *Herr Vogt*).

Questions of methodology are connected with a wealth of other topics, such as laws, structure, society, and human nature, which are mostly left, in Part I, to other times and places, although they are certainly understood as Marxian topics for today. Methodology has a place in some of the reports in Part II on Marx in the world. Hoff, for example, writes of the German trend of a “new Reading-of-Marx”, the aim of which is “to reconstruct Marxian method”. (202) Astonishingly, however, in his report on the Anglophone world, Blackledge says nothing about analytical Marxism, which has notoriously rejected dialectics and has been influential in discussing new methods for Marxism in several disciplines.

With an emphasis on textual and interpretive accuracy, the articles in Part I focus on other topics: nation, ethnicity, and race in Anderson; state and politics in Chattopadhyay; rhetoric and politics in Carver; human development and community in Lebowitz; emancipation and freedom in Cominel and in Musto; political tactics in Wallis; class struggle and democracy in Wolff; and democratic responses to ‘universal’ capitalism in Wood.

In general, the book is about overcoming injustice and oppression and securing human freedom through new alternatives. Interestingly, Part I, which is more discursive and investigative, focuses mostly on forms of freedom in new societies while Part II, which is more descriptive, focuses mostly on struggles in the face of inequality and exploitation. The theoreticians struggle to understand the future, while the activists and their movements struggle to build a future. The point of it all is to create a new world.

There is an emphasis throughout on community and, more generally, emancipation and free association. The idea of alienation connects to a story—with complications rarely recognized—of freedom and liberated people in a new socialist society or a new socialist people (see here Lebowitz’s essay) in a liberated socialist society. Not surprisingly, there are shoals still to be navigated, including some, I suspect, in this volume. Cominel, for example, proclaims “the complete emancipation of humanity” (91) and “overcoming *alienation*, in all of its forms” (85). This sounds like a totalizing narrative of a different sort, one that Marx was not immune from, as seen in Musto’s apparent acceptance of what Marx promoted, perhaps rashly. In *Capital*, Marx imagined an association of free people labouring “in full self-awareness as one single social labour force” (114). The idea that alienation and individualism would be totally eliminated in a new socialist world is not much more believable than that abuse in all its forms would be totally eliminated after capitalism. Even the best society that can be imagined will have defects.

Such thoughts lead to another focus of concern that arises in Lebowitz's discussion. If human beings are alienated and fragmented by capitalism, he claims, production should be reorganized to produce "socialist human beings" so that "everyone is able to develop his/her full potential" (68). If we are to "win a new world" (as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it), to what extent do we produce a new society and to what extent does that require producing new human beings? And if new human beings are to be produced, who would produce them? A danger of setting out new alternatives is that of creating new shackles, of constraining free choices for people in the future.

It is salutary at this juncture to remember what Engels said about lovers of the future not caring about what old dreamers wanted. As Engels said, "a new generation... will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual." (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 26, "Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", Chap. II, Part 4.) Engels would probably have said this about many other aspects of society, although there are also other approaches to take. Chattopadhyay, in criticizing Lenin's discussion of a socialist state, is probably technically right when he says that Marx envisioned a stateless society: still, Lenin was interpreting Marx's comments about "the future state of communist society", claiming that the question of what "transformation the state [will] undergo in communist society ... can only be answered scientifically". ("Critique of the Gotha Program", *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24, 94.) There is probably much about a new future that cannot, and sometimes should not, be charted out now, whether it is through conjectures and ideals or through scientific investigation.

If Marx is back (or still around), with all the problems to be better understood and the world to be changed, where is he? Practically everywhere, as revealed in Part II, which is richly informative about work on Marx—in movements, research, and publications—in countries (and regions) throughout the world.

There is no way to review all this work. It is encyclopedic, as it should be, and helpful in showing the political contexts from which Marxism rose or within which it has been sustained. Some things stand out in their absence. I would have expected attention to be given to liberation theology in Latin America and its influence. More might have been said about directions of Marxism in unique areas with their own histories and cultures. I would note conferences in North America such as those organized by Rethinking Marxism and the Radical Philosophy Association and various left-wing groups. One would also hope for something about Australia and New Zealand. Noting the absence of some things only increases the force, however, of the richness of Marxism in the world today. What Ducange says concerning Marxist studies in France applies equally well to this book: "a rich array of work whose multiple dimensions ... clash sharply with the virulent anti-Marxism of the 1980s which had made the reading of Marx almost impossible." (196) Part II of *Marx for Today* shows that there can be "a thousand Marxisms" (using Toxel's idea at 193). What is not noted in this regional review is the huge global development of international work involving Marxist studies, from the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto to the numerous meetings of the World Social Forum and many international conferences and alliances around the world. Marxism is cropping up both regionally and globally.

How can we determine that we are getting to the real Marx, or the best Marx for today? That is a central question if we are to retrieve Marx for today. If Marx's theories (pace Carver) were a science of a sort, then how would that science best be practiced today? Should 'Marxism' develop as much as 'Darwinism' has, for example? If Marx's ideas were not a science but a reflection of the culture and structures of society, then how would the changes of those affect the appropriateness of his ideas today? Marx expected change, and would certainly expect a change of ideas as the world changes. Marxism for yesterday is not simply Marxism for today, despite many common structures and common themes.

In this book one can sense a shift in Marxist studies. In the past, and for Marx himself, the core and focus of attention was a materialist conception of history based on economic systems. Marx in his day, like Marxism since, always included a glance to the future, with the concern about the future being largely focused on the development of economic systems. Marxists in the past tried to answer the question of where we are going by positing a 'science' that made reference to progressive epochs.

Today, as this book shows, there is a shift in focus to questions about human freedom in a future society. Many, perhaps most, still consider the economy basic and at the core of the 'theory', but ideas about alienation, participation, and cooperation loom larger and receive more attention. Today, Marxists are turning their attention to what a better world might be like and showing how another, socialist, society would at least mitigate many of the problems of actually existing capitalism.

Marx for Today is a good book to engage us in a renaissance of Marx and his legacies of problems and insights.

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