

# The United States of Marx and Marxism: Introduction

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## On the Actuality of Marx

The 200th anniversary of the birth of German philosopher Karl Marx on May 5, 1818 arguably gives reason to critically examine the influence of Marx's thought on the United States. While the anniversary of Marx's birth seems to us reason enough to revisit his thought, there are various other reasons that convince us that this project is timely—and maybe even necessary. Of course, the lasting effects of the unresolved financial and economic crisis that began with the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble in 2007 have made the turn to heterodox approaches to economics more attractive for many. The ongoing global crisis of accumulation has led to the re-emergence in public discourse of the idea that capitalism could end. For those who believe that “there is no alternative,” it gave way to a latent sense of a crisis of civilization. For many, it was proof of the notion that capitalist modernity has an intrinsic tendency toward crisis. For some, this generated the welcome prospect of capitalism's ultimate demise. The focus on the inequalities produced by the capitalist mode of production found in Marx, and the insistence on the systemic character of crisis, where the abstract-seeming “internal contradictions of capital” ceaselessly and necessarily (re)produce concrete and intersecting social antagonisms, began to appeal to wide circles of academics (Harvey 9).

But not just academics: While it may be surprising for some that “crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism,” it is hardly surprising that a crisis of this extent “shake[s] our mental conceptions of the world and of our place in it to the very core” (Harvey ix-x). In the Fall of 2011, thousands of New Yorkers occupying the privately owned public space (POPS) of Zuccotti Park started what soon turned into a nation-wide social movement. This “Occupy” movement that attacked increasing social and economic inequality initiated public debate about the power of the financial sector, rising debt, and austerity measures. While it was by no means a “Marxist” movement in its entirety, many of its participants did come into contact for the first time with a type of social critique that shared some preoccupations with Marxist thought—and some former occupiers have since immersed themselves more deeply in Marxist theory in order to make sense of their place in the world. Additionally, in the winter of 2011, the print issue of *Jacobin* magazine was founded. The magazine's trademark style of providing accessible Marxist analyses of contemporary politics and culture soon led to great success and the further circulation of Marxist ideas that has prompted some to speak of a Marxist revival (see Goldberg). Indeed, according to a 2016 poll 51 percent of Americans aged 18 to 29 reject capitalism (see Ehrenfreund). This came at a historical moment when Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was seen by many as a serious contender for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination. To be sure,

Sanders has more in common with the Scandinavian model of social democracy than with the Marxist tradition, but it is nonetheless telling that a self-identified “democratic socialist” could spark such enthusiasm—an enthusiasm that considerably revitalized the Democratic Socialists of America and socialist desire in general.

Given the spectacular history and pervasiveness of anti-communism in the United States, the contemporary resurgence of the very idea and name of not just “socialism” but “communism” (in the realm of radical thought and continental philosophy) seems all the more remarkable. The American political philosopher Jodi Dean has engaged this debate and contributed two monographs to it: *The Communist Horizon* (2012) and *Crowds and Parties* (2016). The former concludes that “our political problem differs in a fundamental way from that of communists at the beginning of the twentieth century—we have to organize individuals; they had to organize masses” (196). Dean reminds us that in the United States “communism” is constantly used as a term of opprobrium.

What is communist? National healthcare. Environmentalism. Feminism. Public education. Collective bargaining. Progressive taxation. Paid vacation days. Gun control. The movement around Occupy Wall Street. Bicycles are a “gate-way drug” to communism. Web 2.0 is communist because it holds out “the seductive promise of individual self-realization” [...] evoked in *The German Ideology*.

Who is communist? Anyone who protested US military aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, anyone critical of the Bush administration. Anyone who wants to tax the rich, close corporate tax loopholes, and regulate the derivatives market. (Dean, *The Communist Horizon* 40-41)

Rather than simply reading this as a return to the language of the Cold War and Red Scare, as a conservative retreat to a formerly effective rhetoric of fear, or as a sign of widespread political reaction, Dean’s argument is that “the antagonism that cuts across capitalist countries is increasingly apparent; dominant ideological forces can’t obscure it” (47). This antagonism is subsequently named “communism.” Despite its Lacanian-Marxist framework, *The Communist Horizon* is written in a polemical, interventionist, and popular style geared toward a post-Occupy audience and experience. Dean’s recent embrace of not just the communist hypothesis but the communist party-form prioritizes “the symbolic dimension of the party, its form as a place from which communists assess themselves and their actions” (Dean, *Crowds and Party* 219). For Dean, what appears most valuable about the party-form, both then and now, is that the “Communist Party provided an affective infrastructure through which everyday experiences took meaning separate from those channeled through capitalism” (220). Dean’s preoccupation with the party-form could thus be understood as a result of the experience of both the success and the limitations of Occupy.

Communists on the West Coast, many of whom participated in Occupy Oakland, or the “Oakland Commune,” and the series of major strikes and blockades in the wake of the Oakland and Ferguson events did not, for the most part, call for a new mass party. The Marxist positions of the left communist Endnotes collective, which formed in the United States and the United Kingdom in 2005 and publishes an eponymous journal, differ greatly both from Dean’s communism and

the democratic socialism of Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America. In the words of Tim Barker, “it is a journal whose scope, rigor, and utter lack of piety make it one of the consistently challenging left-wing periodicals of our time” and Perry Anderson called it one of the “most impressive publications to emerge in the Bush-Obama era” (“Counterpuncher” 65). *Endnotes* emerged from narrow Marxist debates, often drawing on the critique of political economy, historical materialism, debates in the French ultra-left, and American critical race theory, but the journal supplemented critical theory with exhaustive analysis of social movements in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. The editorial collective describes itself as “communist” and desires the abolition of capitalism, which in “our current age of riots and occupations demands that we confront again the unfashionable question of the revolutionary subject” (Barker). This opens onto questions of superfluity, gender, and racialization, which *Endnotes* takes up in a decidedly materialist way.

Since the 2016 American elections the focus has predictably turned away from Bernie Sanders and Occupy to the spectacle of Donald J. Trump. The rise of Trumpism in many ways mirrors the rise of Bonapartism that Karl Marx analyzed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (published first in 1852 in the New York-based monthly *Die Revolution*), showing how class struggle itself “created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part” (“Preface to the Second Edition” 57). As Sam Miller and Harrison Fluss note apropos the prospect of an “American Bonapartism,”

[t]he political parallels of 19th century France and 21st century America are striking and telling. Even the date November 9 corresponds to the 18th of Brumaire in the French Revolutionary Calendar. Both countries prepared the groundwork for the rise of authoritarian politics through the increasing desperation of poor and working people and a decimated left that subordinated itself to capitalist parties. In these outbreaks of common discontent, members of vulnerable groups found themselves lured in by the siren song of right-wing strongmen.

As Marx knew very well, of course, political-economic conditions are never absolutely determining. The field of social contest is held in tension, dialectically, by both the capacity of humans to “make their own history” and “circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (*Eighteenth Brumaire* 103). Both Trump and Bonaparte found their base of support in the middle class, certain sections of the working class, the rural poor, and republican elites. Bonaparte’s chauvinist speeches to some extent anticipate Trump’s rally rants, and both excelled in exploiting economic crisis by way of right-wing populism and national chauvinism. In fact, Marx’s descriptions of Bonaparte sound like echoes of Donald Trump’s clownish media persona: “clumsily cunning, knavishly naive, doltishly sublime, a calculated superstition, a pathetic burlesque, a cleverly stupid anachronism, a world-historic piece of buffoonery and an indecipherable hieroglyphic for the understanding of the civilized—this symbol bore the unmistakable physiognomy of the class that represents barbarism within civilization” (*The Class Struggles in France* 80). Trump’s “American Bonapartism” singles out racial scapegoats instead of capitalism, while constantly furthering the concentration of power in the head of the state, and blaming shadowy global elites and

international finance for destroying the lives of American workers, thus articulating elements of structural antisemitism and anti-black, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant racism.

Nancy Fraser has argued that “(neo)liberalism and fascism are [...] two deeply interconnected faces of the capitalist world system.” Hence, without a radical left “the maelstrom of capitalist ‘development’ can only generate liberal forces and authoritarian counterforces, bound together in a perverse symbiosis” (Fraser and Arato). In this sense, Trump’s victory speaks to an authoritarian turn rather than a crumbling neoliberal order. This is the political analysis of the present conjuncture shared by such diverse American Marxists and public intellectuals as Vivek Chibber, Mike Davis, Jodi Dean, David Harvey, Moishe Postone, Adolph Reed, and Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor. The amount of critical engagement with Marx today is overwhelming. The danger, of course, is to constantly talk about Marx and engage his thought in order that we need not act accordingly. Disavowal of the Marxian critique may well take the form of “Marx’s *Capital* is quite brilliant and may be more pertinent than ever before, *but...*” When Marx and Engels early on concluded from their analysis of the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois society that “[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (*Manifesto* 487), they were aware of the fact that this in no way guarantees that people will actually do so. But they may have underestimated the affective force of ideology, which became one of the defining problems for Western Marxists in the absence of a revolutionary subject.

In proposing to provide a fresh look on some relations between Marx, Marxism, and the United States, we do not want to attempt to give an answer to the old question of why there was no socialism in America. Neither do we want to provide a comprehensive history of Marxist social movements (for this, see Buhle). However, it seems useful, indeed mandatory, to survey and account for the widespread scepticism, rejection and/or disavowal of Marx within the field. This is not to say that these attitudes and processes amount to self-censorship or hostility, of course. Hence, the need for a critical survey rather than a polemical intervention. We simply argue that there is no “American exceptionalism” that prevents the study of U.S. history, society, and culture from a critical Marxist perspective (Denning, “The Special American Conditions” 360).

In 1980, as if to critically accompany the rise of both “Reagonomics” and post-modern academia (as part of the larger “cultural logic of late capitalism” analyzed by American literary critic Fredric Jameson), renowned Berkeley sociologist Manuel Castells was taking a hard look at the crisis afflicting Western economies in the 1970s in his book *The Economic Crisis and American Society*, suggesting that the very structures that had fostered economic growth since 1945 were the same structures that 30 years later were undermining these economics. Pinpointing the new forms of the capitalist mode of production and the contradictory nature of its class relations as the root of the problem, he offered a comprehensive critique of (not just) American society and its economy. At a time when economic crisis in the West is increasingly managed by means of neoliberal austerity, cost externalization, and state repression, it is hardly surprising and can, in fact, be

considered symptomatic that Castells's book has only recently (2014/2016) been reissued. It now seems a timely intervention into our historical moment. But it is to Marx's historical moment and that of the mid-19th century United States that we will now turn.

### Marx and the United States

Marx's own relationship to the United States as European correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune* as well as his interest in the American Civil War and slavery found expression in Marx's famous letter to "Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class" (Marx, "Address of the International Workingmen's Association" 212). In the letter the German revolutionary congratulated then-President Lincoln for defeating the Confederate forces. Much has been written about the role of radical German émigrés and their role in the dissemination of Marx's and Marxist ideas and the formation of the labor movement in the United States. Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States* (first published in 1983), Bruce Levine's *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (1992), and Robin Blackburn's *Marx and Lincoln: An Unfinished Revolution* (2011) each provide an excellent historical account of the generation of 1848ers, especially in Chicago and New York. Marx's German American followers are sometimes portrayed as deferring to the prejudices of white, male trade unionists. However, when Joseph Weydemeyer, Marx's long-time friend and comrade of 1848, helped to found the American Workers League in Chicago in 1853, its founding statement of principles declared that "all workers who live in the United States without distinction of occupation, language, color, or sex can become members" (qtd. in Levine 125). Today such a formula sounds entirely conventional. But this may have been the first occasion on which a workers' organization adopted it and thus "readily adopt[ed] a critique of racial and gender exclusion pioneered by radical abolitionists" (Blackburn 24). Like other exiles, the German Americans quarreled with one another, some inclining to the Republicans and others opting for purely labor-oriented groups, and Marx's followers shared this division. With the founding of a labor party as the long-term goal, Weydemeyer also saw a tactical need to strengthen the Republicans and attack the slave power. According to August Nimtz, "the Marx party, specifically through Weydemeyer [...] played an important role in winning the German émigré community to the Republican cause" (170).

Marx himself, from 1852 to 1862, wrote a column for the *New York Daily Tribune*, the paper with the largest circulation in the world at the time. Marx produced eight years of commentary for the *Tribune* and analyzed political conflicts like the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the Irish Question, and the American Civil War. He insisted, for example, that the border states "where the system of slavery and the system of free labor exist side by side and struggle for mastery [is] the actual battleground between South and North, between slavery and freedom" and that the "war waged by the Southern Confederacy is, therefore, not a war of defense but a war of conquest, aimed at extending and perpetuating slavery"

(“The Civil War” 152). Marx’s political commentary on the Civil War in the pages of the *Tribune*, and later in the Austrian *Die Presse*, was instrumental in persuading workers on both sides of the Atlantic that the battle over the working day and against exploitation was necessarily linked to the struggle against slavery: “In the United States of North America, every independent workers’ movement was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (*Capital*, vol. 1, 414). According to a recent interview on “Marx and the United States” with Andrew Hartman, Marx was extremely well-read on American politics, partly “because [he] had long standing correspondences with some of the German 48’ers, his comrades who had emigrated to the United States following the revolutions of 1848.” Certainly Marx and Engels’s “finally coherent systematization of the revolutionary practices of their time” (Clover 166) was instrumental in convincing the “working classes” to support the Republican cause, “the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world,” rather than the perverted sense of national self-determination of the South (Marx, “Address of the International Workingmen’s Association” 212). When the Confederacy was “at an end,” Marx wrote a letter to Engels asking “What do you think of the workers of the United States?” He answered the question himself:

This eruption against the oligarchy of associated capital which has arisen since the Civil War will of course be put down, but it could quite well form the starting point for the establishment of a serious workers party in the United States. There are, moreover, favorable circumstances. The policy of the new President will turn the Negroes into allies of the workers, and the large expropriations of the land (especially fertile land) in favor of the railway, mining, etc., companies will convert the farmers of the West, who are already very disenchanted, into allies of the workers. Thus a fine mess is in the offing there, and transferring the center of the International to the United States might, *post festum*, turn out to have been a peculiarly opportune move. (Letter to Engels, 25 July 1877, 210)

Among the band of German anarchist émigrés and homegrown American anarchists that formed in Chicago and New York since the 1880s and included anarchists such as Albert and Lucy Parsons, Johann Most was the most influential in disseminating Marxian ideas, though Marx saw in him a “bottomless personal vanity” and thought little of Most as a radical *thinker* (qtd. in Goyens 90). Nicknamed “Dynamost” by fellow anarchists, the editor of *Freiheit* had come to Marx’s attention as a passionate public speaker and agitator who, like the “apologist for the commune of Paris” (*Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*, 12 Aug. 1871, qtd. in Blackburn 226), had also praised the Paris Commune, gone to prison numerous times for socialist activism, and had clearly chosen “the side of Radicalism” (qtd. in Goyens 91). Most arrived in the United States in 1882 with “substantial Marxist baggage” (Goyens 86), yet his radical philosophy was a rather mixed bag of Marxist-Blanquist and Bakuninist ideas. Between 1868 and 1878, before Most emigrated to the United States, he spent more than five years in prison, which he called his “universities.” He read Marx’s *Das Kapital* in Chemnitz and Zwickau jails and published *Kapital und Arbeit. Ein populärer Auszug aus “Das Kapital” von Karl Marx* in 1874—a pamphlet that would present Marx’s ideas in popularized form. This is the point at which we want to turn to the history of Marx’s theoretical reception.

### Which Marx? Whose Marx?

In 1875, the leaders of the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (German Socialist Workers' Party) asked Marx to revise the pamphlet for a second printing. Marx complied and rewrote several chapters, most significantly the first one analyzing the commodity and money (cf. Hecker and Stütze 19-20). In a letter to his friend Friedrich Sorge, another 48er who had ended up in the United States where he organized the American section of the First International, Marx mentioned that he did not want his name to be attached to the revised version, since this would require him to make further changes (Letter to Sorge, 14 June 1876, 125). Later, Otto Weydemeyer, the son of Marx's friend Joseph, produced a slightly abridged English translation that was published in 1877/78 in the United States by Sorge—without a reference to Most, however, with whom Marx and Engels had broken over his support for the German social democrat Eugen Dühring, among other things. Interestingly, in the revised chapter Marx treats the development of the forms of value as a historical succession of different “stage[s] of trade” (*Extract 3*). Thus, Hecker and Stütze conclude that the chapter on the commodity and money differs significantly from the first chapter of *Capital*, in which the transitions between the forms of value are strictly logical (21). In fact, this popularized version of *Capital* more resembles the view made famous by Engels that Marx's “logical method of approach” was “nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and of interfering contingencies” that would come to shape the Marxist tradition for decades to come (Rev. of Marx, *A Contribution* 475).

There are, in other words, differences between Marx's writings and the way in which they have become popular—among his followers and detractors alike. For one thing, Marx's own positions, politically and scientifically, changed considerably in the course of his life. The story of Marx's development from the left Hegelian writings of the early 1840s to the break with his “former philosophical conscience” in 1845 and the turn to political economy after the defeat of the 1848 revolution is well known (Marx, “Preface to *A Contribution*” 264). Fewer people might be aware that Marx both spent much of the 1850s and 60s refining his critique of political economy, producing several drafts (most famously the unpublished *Grundrisse*), and later made substantial changes to the first section of *Capital*, vol. 1, for its second edition (see Heinrich). Moreover, in the last years of his life Marx turned his attention once more to the United States:

The most interesting field for the economist is now certainly to be found in the United States [...]. Transformations—which to be elaborated did require in England centuries—were here realized in a few years. [...].

The imbeciles in Europe [...] might learn a wholesome lesson by reading the *official* Yankee reports. (Letter to Danielson, 15 Nov. 1878, 344; emphasis in original)

Marx read those reports (see his Letter to Danielson, 19 Feb. 1881, 61) and, as Ingo Stütze writes, decided to “fundamentally rework” *Capital* using the United States, which had become the “center of capitalist development,” as his “main example.” Unfortunately, this plan remained unrealized before Marx's death on 14 March 1883.

So, “Marx was not born a Marxist” (Hook 11). And, arguably, he never became one, either; his quip “*je ne suis pas Marxiste*” (quoted in Engels, Letter to Bernstein, 2-3 Nov. 1882, 356) is famous. Instead, it was Engels and particularly his *Anti-Dühring* (1877) that founded the tradition that, as Ingo Elbe argues, could, thus, also be called “Engelsism.” After Engels, it was the German social democrat Karl Kautsky whose writings influenced the workers’ movement. And not just in Europe; Eugene Debs, the five-time presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America, was given Marx’s *Capital* by the German radical immigrant Victor Berger while he was imprisoned for his involvement in the 1894 Pullman strike. While he did become a socialist in jail, he found Marx’s book “awfully dull” and preferred Kautsky’s writings (Ginger 173). In the hands of Engels, Kautsky, and others, there emerged a Marxism that could serve as an “all-encompassing worldview” to the growing industrial working class (Heinrich 65). In the form of Marxism-Leninism, it was arguably transformed into an “apologetic science” (Elbe), and a serious debate about Marx’s ideas became impossible. This assessment is shared by Perry Anderson in his influential 1976 book *Considerations on Western Marxism* (cf. 19). At the same time, he argues that in the 1920s a new group of Marxist theorists began to work in Western Europe. But Anderson’s account is critical of these “Western Marxists,” arguing that their distance from the workers’ movement caused them to trade the investigation of concrete issues of economic theory and political strategy for abstract philosophical discussions, often centering on questions of aesthetics and culture. For Ingo Elbe, on the other hand, the work of Western Marxists such as Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and others constitutes the beginning of a heterodox Marxism that challenges Leninist and Stalinist dogma.

It is fairly common to locate the tradition of Western Marxism in Western Europe and to claim that the Marxist tradition remained weak both politically and theoretically in the United States before the 1960s—and certainly not without reason. Yet, there existed heterodox Marxist currents outside of the Communist Party in the United States, many of them attracted by the relative “intellectual freedom” (Hartman) offered by Trotsky. As in Europe, many turned to questions of aesthetics, engaging in a Marxist-informed “Culture Critique” (Buhle 155-83). But there were also attempts at an undogmatic reading of Marx himself. The philosopher Sidney Hook, who combined a Hegelian Marxism with John Dewey’s pragmatism, traced Marx’s intellectual development in *From Hegel to Marx*. In the introduction to the 1962 republication of the 1936 book, he focuses on Marx’s concept of alienation, according to which “men are not free to create or redetermine their own natures” when they have to “labor for subsistence” rather than “self-fulfillment” (8). He continues that “unalienated man is the creative man, any man engaged in significant or meaningful work.” But this, he claims, does not exclusively concern capitalist market economies (8). Marx, he insists, would have rejected the “grotesque and terrible caricature of his social ideals” in actually existing communist societies (2). Hook’s thought, then, includes many elements that characterize Western Marxism according to Elbe: a return to Marx’s early works, a “sense for the Hegelian legacy and the critical-humanist potential” found therein, and an opposition to Stalinism.

Following Michael Denning's classic 1986 article on "The Special American Conditions," one can argue that the discipline of American Studies emerges here as a "substitute marxism" (358). It arose, he claims, as "both a continuation of and response to the popular 'discovery' and 'invention' of 'American culture' in the 1930s" (357). Its ambitions were similarly "interdisciplinary" and "totalizing," yet it remained committed to both a rejection of Stalinism and a belief in "the uniqueness of the American experience" (358). While the early generation of Americanists was a product of the "politically charged atmosphere of the 1930s," as Leo Marx puts it, and anticapitalists were in the majority, they based their critique on a "reaffirmation of the egalitarian Enlightenment principles of the American revolution" rather than historical materialism ("On Recovering 126-27). To be sure, Denning acknowledges that they studied American culture in a more sophisticated manner than the Trotskyist Marxists of the 1930s, but this also meant that they did not engage seriously "with the more sophisticated marxism of the anti-Stalinist left" ("The Special Conditions" 359). One consequence—that remains common in non-Marxist literary and cultural studies to this day—is the "random borrowing of terms" from (Western) Marxist thinkers that removes them from their theoretical "context" (360). Perhaps, we might surmise, this is the story of a missed encounter in which both sides lost out.<sup>1</sup>

But while American Studies might have kept its distance from Marxism, the latter did not remain confined to continental Europe. In 1983, Perry Anderson noted that the center of Marxist debates shifted to the Anglo-American world (*In the Tracks* 24), and it is in particular Marxist historiography that he highlights. What Anderson does not take into account is the influence that the Frankfurt School has had on American Marxism.<sup>2</sup> In his comprehensive study of the global reception of Marx after 1965, Jan Hoff argues that the American New Left was characterized by a certain "hostility to theory" (38; emphasis in original). But it was Herbert Marcuse, especially, who nonetheless exerted a considerable influence on American radicals.<sup>3</sup> Others, particularly Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, also became more popular as a means of countering both New Critical formalism and the liberalism of the Parsons school in sociology (Hohendahl 199). Perhaps no one has done as much to introduce their work to an Anglophone

<sup>1</sup> In his 1964 classic *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx draws on his 19th-century namesake and the theory of alienation sketched in the 1844 manuscripts precisely because it promises a critique of capitalism with a "humanist core" (177), thus echoing one dimension central to many Western Marxists. Recently, Alan Trachtenberg has argued that the relationship between Leo Marx and the traditions of "Marxism and socialism" remains understudied (232).

<sup>2</sup> His designation of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and others as Western Marxists, which for him means Marxists working in Western Europe, also fails to see that there would be "no Critical Theory without America" (Claussen 27). Marcuse addressed the German Association for American Studies in 1964 with a talk on the influence of German emigration in American thought, subsequently published in *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Hoff points out that some of Marcuse's American contemporaries that also produced Marxist work have been all but forgotten: the Marxian economist Paul Sweezy, who co-founded the *Monthly Review* in 1949—using funds provided by the Christian socialist Americanist F. O. Matthiessen (Buhle 215)—or the humanist Marxist Raya Dunayevskaya, who collaborated with C. L. R. James, and others such as Grace Lee and James Boggs (Hoff 38 n. 66).

audience as Fredric Jameson, whose 1971 book *Marxism and Form* emphatically welcomed the revival of “a relatively Hegelian kind of Marxism” and was meant to introduce Americans to “dialectical culture and the essential critical weapons which it provides” (ix; xi).

But there was also a return to Marx’s own texts beginning in the 1960s and 70s (cf. Hoff 27), which—like Western Marxism—rejected Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, but—unlike Western Marxism—looked not to the young, humanist Marx but to the project of a critique of political economy begun by the older Marx. Accordingly, an attempt was made to liberate Marx from the layer of interpretations that, as Michael Heinrich puts it (quoting a famous passage from Marx), “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (65). Among the issues that were debated were the role of Engels as well as Marx’s own understanding of the methodology and the object of his critique of political economy. One issue for English readers was that a critical edition of Marx and Engels’ *Collected Works* (now encompassing 50 volumes) only began to be published in the mid-1970s. Thus, the American debate lagged behind the one that had been taking place in West Germany (see Bellofiore and Riva). Yet, in recent decades a sophisticated debate has begun in the Anglophone world, including North American philosophers and economists such as Martha Campbell, Paul Mattick, Jr., Fred Moseley, Patrick Murray, Bertell Ollman, Moishe Postone, Tony Smith, and others.<sup>4</sup> These discussions often focus on the relationship between Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic* and the role of money as the necessary form of appearance of value.

Now, it is admittedly easy to denounce this reading of Marx as a “German disease” (Clover and Benanav 746). After all, in its philological rigor it might end up forgetting that the point is not to correctly interpret every manuscript Marx wrote, but to change the world. And yet, Marx’s value theory is far from insignificant politically. The autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver argues that Marx’s “labor theory of value” is “a theory of the value of labor to capital,” that is, “a theory of the capitalist project of reducing the world to a global work machine.” Thus, what follows from this is the necessity of a “struggle against work” (13). For those familiar with the Marxist tradition and Soviet forms of *Proletkult* this might come as a surprise—was Marx not the champion of labor rather than its enemy? One can well turn to one of the most influential readings of Marx offered in the last decades, namely that of Moishe Postone, who received his PhD in Frankfurt in 1983 and, thus, serves as a figure connecting the German and the American ‘new’ reading of Marx. In his 1993 book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Postone offers a reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory that does not base its critique on “the standpoint of labor” but rather turns the “historically specific” form of labor in capitalist society into the “object” of critique (5-6; emphases in original). The former approach merely criticizes the private appropriation and unequal distribution of wealth and tacitly affirms industrial production and proletarian labor as more or less transhistorical ways of organizing the creation of wealth. According

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Mattick, Jr. is the son of Paul Mattick, a German left communist, who moved to Chicago in 1926, where he was involved in the unemployment movement. With his *Marx and Keynes* (1969) he made an important contribution to Marxist crisis theory.

to Postone, it is essential to adequately grasp the “real social relations of capitalism” (6) constituted by abstract labor, value, and capital conceptually; if it remains unclear what exactly characterizes the capitalist mode of production, it will be impossible to think about meaningful alternatives, after all.

Let us consider an example. In a recent volume on *Approaches to American Cultural Studies*, Jodi Melamed briefly discusses how American Studies has been informed by, and reacted to, Marxism. What is interesting about her article is that it well shows the limits of the Marxist tradition. At the same time, its critique of Marx remains limited itself precisely because it reads Marx through the prism of tradition. She begins with a brief summary:

For Marx, the basic antagonism of capitalist society is that when the worker sells her labor power to the capitalist, she receives a wage that is less than the value her labor power produces. The extra value that the capitalist extracts from the worker is called surplus-value and comprises profit. Jumping off from his critique of this uneven relation, Marx theorizes the commodity form, the transformation of money into capital, [etc.]. (135)

One would expect Marx, then, to begin *Capital* with an analysis of exploitation in the production process and then move to a discussion of basic economic categories. A brief look at the table of contents, however, shows that this is not the case—and how could this be, for it would require Marx to analyze surplus-value before having grasped value. In fact, it is the other way around: After beginning with the analysis of the commodity, value, money, and capital, Marx only discovers in chapter 6 that he must descend to “the hidden abode of production” (*Capital*, vol. 1, 279).

If the analysis of basic economic forms is treated as secondary and the “uneven relation” of exploitation is treated as essential, these very forms—commodities, money, capital—might appear to structure each and every possible social formation. While Melamed acknowledges that capitalism is “just one mode of organizing social forces,” she goes on to claim that “[s]ocialism [...] would re-organize society such that capital, which is always [sic] socially produced, would be socially distributed rather than captured by capitalists” (136). If socialism here is meant to serve as a synonym for a “post-capitalist future,” we might pause and wonder why there should still be “capital” that can be distributed, if more equitably. This is, in short, how Postone characterizes the perspective of “traditional Marxism.” But then, industrial production—with all its environmentally destructive consequences—and the forms that “structure the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of life in [capitalist] society” are naturalized (Postone 18). There would be, in other words, no alternative to capital; each conceivable post-capitalist future would amount to an eternal return of the same.

### **Blind Spots**

Yet, we want to emphasize that it is not our intention to simply make an example of Melamed based on several paragraphs of her article. Her reading conforms to a widespread (mis)understanding of Marx as a critical political economist—that is what it means to speak of a tradition, after all. The more significant issue

seems to us that humanities scholars will often rely on traditional accounts that have been reproduced in introductory accounts of Marxist thought since at least Engels. We agree that the tradition thus constituted does suffer from various blind spots that are concisely presented by Melamed, some of which are particularly relevant for American Studies:

Post-Marxist American Studies scholarship is troubled by the way Marx's historical materialism in some of his most well-known volumes is caught within a Eurocentric dynamic, fixed on industrial capitalism, and theorizes labor in ways that marginalize slavery, colonialism, and the exploitation of women and children. Similarly, American Studies rejects the dogma, received more from institutionalized Marxist tradition, that history is developmental, driven by the growth of productive forces alone, and progresses through distinct stages toward a proletariat-led revolutionary socialism or communism. (137)

Indeed, the Marxist tradition has very often failed to address these issues or dealt with them in a very reductive way. But, in order to deal with these blind spots, it seems useful to pay closer attention to the distinction between Marx, the Marxist tradition, and the various heterodox Marxisms we have already begun to address above.

If *Capital* is understood as a critique of the exploitation of wage labor alone, all forms of domination not mediated by the wage indeed fall out of its jurisdiction—and Melamed's charges would be correct. In recent years, many writers have reread Marx and discovered that his critique is not confined to the workplace, as it were. More precisely, various authors have looked to chapter 25 of *Capital*, where Marx analyzes the production of "relative surplus populations" (*vulgo*: structural un- and underemployment) alongside the reproduction of the wage-relation. Joshua Clover has aptly termed this dialectical process "the production of nonproduction" (26). Michael Denning, thus, quipped that "[u]nder capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited," at all ("Wageless Life" 79). The twin phenomena of exploitation and exclusion are, thus, not opposed to each other. Rather, they are mediated, though not mechanically determined, by the historical dynamic of capitalist accumulation. Judging from the perspective of the *longue durée* of chattel slavery and the capitalist plantation system analyzed by Marx to the African American (hyper-)ghetto and the carceral management and militarized policing of racialized surplus populations analyzed by Chris Chen, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Loïc Wacquant, and others, it seems mistaken to even try to disentangle race and class relations, especially in the United States. To conceptualize the intersection of race and class as a materialist would mean to conceptualize the interaction of racism and class domination, to think racialization and proletarianization together, as in Chris Chen's concise formulation of the dilemma:

The rise of the anti-black U.S. carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialization of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness. From the point of view of capital, "race" is renewed [...] through the racialization of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo. (217)

Along similar lines, Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Marxist Tradition* (1983/2000) eventually became instrumental in triggering debates among Marxists and critical race theorists about the mutability and persis-

tence of “racial capitalism” as a social formation. “Race,” as Stuart Hall put it, is a “modality in which class is ‘lived’” (342).

Starting from scattered clues left by Marx and his successors, above all Rosa Luxemburg, Mike Davis has recently outlined “a theory of class formation and socialist hegemony” in the pages of *Catalyst* that is premised on the thesis that “‘agency’ in the last instance is *conditioned* by the development of the productive forces but *activated* by the convergence (or ‘overdeterminations’) of political, economic, and cultural struggles” (Davis, added emphasis). In doing so, Davis, like Chibber, Reed, Taylor, and others, crucially resists the post-Marxist appropriation of Gramsci’s material-symbolic analysis yet decidedly materialist theory of hegemony, thus refusing both to desubstantialize power and to sever the link between political economy and social struggles. Power relations are hardly reducible to the antagonism between capital and labor. This has always been understood by Marxist feminists such as Gayle Rubin and her trailblazing *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex*, which developed a structuralist Marxist concept of the “sex/gender system” (1975). Needless to say, there is crucially important theoretical work being done on the “Logic of Gender” and the reproduction of capital (Gonzalez and Neton), to name just one example of recent Marxist feminist analysis. This extends, of course, to explicitly queer-Marxist theories of queer sexuality, the reification of desire, and homo-normativity in late capitalism (see Floyd, Drucker).

Finally, Melamed raises the objection that Marxist theory has falsely universalized the experiences of the industrial working class and turned it into a revolutionary subject that must—by the iron laws of historical necessity—start a revolutionary sequence. Thus, she argues that “post-Marxist American Studies theorize a much greater historical role for consciousness and culture as sites of contradiction and effective opposition to capitalist social relations” (142). By way of a lucid reading of Alex Rivera’s 2008 film *Sleep Dealer*, she comes to the conclusion that the “cultures of people subject to racist capitalist and colonial forms of discipline and exploitation” can serve as a basis for emancipatory political action (143). But in recent years, several authors have pointed out that Marx himself did not conceive of the European workers’ movement as the exclusive agent of revolutionary political practice. In letters to the Russian radical Vera Zasulich drafted in 1881, he suggested that the Russian peasant commune could also serve as a “*direct starting-point* of the economic system towards which modern society is tending” and that this new society could be built “without [first] passing through the capitalist regime” (“Drafts” 112; emphasis in original). As the Endnotes collective notes, this “upend[s] the stage-theory of history” (187; see also K. Anderson); moreover, it proves that Marx continued to study specific historical and geographical conjunctures throughout his life, instead of subsuming the entirety of world history under a schema based on Western Europe. But none of this requires us to reject the categories of Marx’s analysis; indeed, the work of Endnotes admirably shows that it is possible to “apply Marx’s principle of dialectical materialism to the whole history of Marxism itself,” as Karl Korsch, another Marxist communist who found refuge in the United States, famously put it (56)—even if this means having to bid farewell to some well-worn tenets.

The contributions to this volume, as will become apparent, do not subscribe to one single definition of what Marxism is (and neither would all contributors characterize themselves as Marxists, we assume). Michael Denning's article "The Mysteries of *Capital*" turns to Marx's major work. But he does not want to treat the text as an economic treatise that is only of interest for specialists. Instead, drawing on the experiences of *Capital* reading groups, he suggests that the book should be seen as a great "imaginative work" that demands to be read more like *Moby-Dick* than political economy proper. Denning, in other words, approaches Marx's work as a "modern epic" that requires "more hermeneutics." He accordingly proposes to divide the three volumes into five different "books," each of which engages with another dimension of "the totality of the world-system of capitalism" without attempting to "fix a single meaning on *Capital*." In a contribution to the debate about the transition from capitalism to socialism and communism, Joshua Clover begins by noticing a strange "genre" of books that argue that capitalism is beyond repair—and yet only imagine solutions to the ongoing human and environmental catastrophe that remain within the logic of capital. Engaging strategies proposed by American socialists, Clover argues that this perplexity is not simply a product of a lack of (socialist) imagination; instead, he provides a materialist analysis of a capitalist restructuring that has resulted in a situation in which the link between socialism—the "lower stage"—and a communist society that would fully transcend capitalist social relations has become more tenuous than ever.

Chris Taylor similarly enters the transition debate, but, instead of thinking about present possibilities, turns to an "unnamed and unlikely" socialist future that was imagined by Jamaican ex-slaves in 1865. While recent histories of the relationship of slavery and capitalism insist on their interrelation, Taylor proposes a more differentiated model, arguing that the plantation remained in a relation of "immanent exteriority" to the capitalist world economy. This, Taylor shows in his article, also informed the possible futures imagined by slaves, and it is here, in a cooperative farming scheme sketched by Jamaican peasants, that he finds an instance of a potential if ultimately unrealized "direct transition into a socialist world." Christa Buschendorf's contribution looks at the often disavowed Marxism of W. E. B. Du Bois. Drawing on recent scholarship, she argues that the "critique of capitalist colonialism and imperialism on the basis of socialism and Marxism" were longstanding features of Du Bois's thought rather than a mere aberration toward the end of his life. Subsequently, she turns to *The Black Flame*, a trilogy of historical novels Du Bois wrote in the 1950s and 60s, which cover the period from the end of Reconstruction to the middle of the twentieth century and the "historical, political, and cultural education" of its protagonist. She pays special attention to Du Bois's struggle to find an adequate form to present his sociological and historical analyses in the medium of literature, concluding that his forays into fiction were part and parcel of his life-long quest to reveal the hidden "mechanisms of power and oppression."

Ben Hickman turns to the category of "life" as mobilized by proletarian writing and through this analysis explores proletarian realism's relation to Marxism and the avant-garde in the work of Michael Gold, Jack Conroy, and Langston

Hughes. Hickman posits testimony and allegory as proletarian vanguard writing's two central modes of expression and proceeds to investigate their relation before moving on to argue that proletarian realism's category of everyday life was defined by two Marxist commitments: to relation and to purpose. Hickman then uncovers two kinds of proletarian writing, one that tends to consign its particulars to a textual economy in danger of draining its evocations of everyday life of vitality, and a juxtaposed one that makes purpose a subject for thought and literary form, where everyday life's dynamism is carried over into committed writing. Magda Majewska's article "From Political Radicalism to Revolutionary Therapy" engages the Freudo-Marxism of Wilhelm Reich and traces how Reich laid the theoretical foundations for the politicization of sexuality and the redefinition of politics in terms of the personal, which became distinctive features of leftist counter-cultural activism in the 1960s. Majewska argues that Reich's particular blend of Marxist social theory and Freudian psychoanalysis resulted in the development of alternative forms and methods of therapy, which helped ignite U.S. therapeutic culture. Majewska thus manages to illuminate the turn within the revolutionary movements of the Sixties from direct political action to finding different ways of self-realization and fulfillment.

Jesse Ramírez's "Marx vs. the Robots" enters the debates about automation, digitalization, and the future of work that have proliferated in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2007-2009. As new labor-saving technologies from smart software to nimble industrial robots seem to explain why the post-Recession period has witnessed the decoupling of economic growth and employment, Ramírez argues that Marx's contribution to the automation debate is his critique of the contradictions and hollow promises of capitalist technological progress. Ramírez explicates why, for Marx, the robots—although they could potentially help to transform labor time—are ultimately frauds that express the emancipatory potential of science and technology in the inverted form of humanized machines and mechanized, superfluous humans. Juliane Strätz's article "The Ordeal of Labor and the Birth of Robot Fiction" engages the representation of artificial laborers in Karel Čapek's play *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*. Strätz argues that Čapek's original fictional robots dramatize the capitalist mode of production and capitalist social relations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reading the play as a complicated allegory of both slave and wage labor, Strätz argues that the play is informed by Marxist and liberal humanist concerns over alienated labor in a Fordist economy and industrial production.

Blair Taylor then takes up Marx's call for "a ruthless criticism" and practices *Kritik im Handgemenge*. Taylor asks whether a certain postcolonial left has already given up on the former as well as the enlightenment project of radical emancipation. Taylor argues that the Left, both in the United States and globally, is sharply divided on questions regarding the universality or particularity of liberatory politics, the validity of critiques of religion, and the role of international solidarity. For Taylor, concerns about false universality and the cynical manipulation of solidarity have translated into a generalized suspicion and increasing rejection of these once basic left concepts. Increasingly, as Taylor argues, one set of ostensibly left commitments, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-militarism,

is deployed against the values of universalism, free speech, and solidarity. Taylor concludes that this disagreement is reshaping the basic contours of left politics in the present. The volume concludes with an interview with Walter Benn Michaels, a literary critic who has, in recent years, demanded a return to a class politics in several provocative political interventions that also challenge some dominant leftist beliefs. Here, he speaks about his experiences as a student in the late 1960s, his turn to literary criticism and the vexing question of how socio-economic reality is related to literary texts and other cultural artifacts. Michaels also discusses the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and election of Barack Obama on the U.S. Left, offering a critique of horizontal tactics employed by various Occupy groups and making a case for socialist organizing.

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