




Materialism and Politics, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 277–92

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Materialism against Materialism

Taking up Marx's Break with Reductionism

CITE AS:

Frieder Otto Wolf, 'Materialism against Materialism: Taking up Marx's Break with Reductionism', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 277–92 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_15>

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ABSTRACT: This text proposes to overcome the wide-spread error of dismissing Marx's critique of all materialism before him as being reductionist and therefore philosophically and scientifically unacceptable. Instead, it attempts to create a non-reductionist understanding and practice of materialism in philosophy — especially by referring to key contributions by Althusser and Bhaskar and by criticizing the 'materialist illusion' of the early Marx — thereby articulating another key element of the 'finite Marxism' defended by the author.

KEYWORDS: finite Marxism; after post-modernism; multiple domination; specificity of liberation struggles; historical materialism; capitalism; power relations

Materialism against Materialism

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INTRODUCTION

There is a problem in the air. On the one hand, after many post-modern criticisms, nobody (or very few people) want to rehabilitate traditional modern materialism in the vein of Julien Offray de La Mettrie or Georgi Plekhanov, to provide just two examples. Its strong tendencies towards simplification and reductionism seem to forbid any further engagement with the theory.¹ On the other hand, the post-modern variant of pluralism seems to have stifled the will to explore, know, or explain what is really going on, in contrast to mere 'outward appearances', as a necessary starting point for a perspective of active political intervention. In particular, any political practice committed to at least creating possibilities of liberating initiatives, which will be or will become capable of overcoming the very material structures of domination in place, will have to lift the veil of superficial 'illusion'.

1 Maurice Godelier has classically summarized the underlying criticism of 'false materialisms' in his debate with Lucien Sève. See Maurice Godelier, 'Dialectical Logic and the Analysis of Structures: A Reply to Lucien Sève', *International Journal of Sociology*, 2.2-3 (1972), pp. 241-80 (p. 253).

The perspective of ‘finite Marxism’, as I defend it,² opens the way to simultaneously address the plurality of the structures of domination in place while also maintaining the need to analyse their underlying structural dynamics, particularly including an analysis of the domination of modern bourgeois societies by the capitalist mode of production.³

In my opinion, the structures of domination in place today have been (more or less) adequately described by the ‘triple oppression’ formulated by activists of the 1990s. However, I would argue for replacing the triplet of ‘Class, Sex, and Race’ with the somewhat more refined and extended quadruplet of structural forms of domination — class, gender, (especially international) dependency, and ‘ecological overexploitation’ —,⁴ and not leaving out the elementary ideological dimensions of, for example, racism, antisemitism, homophobia, and comparable forms of discrimination.⁵ And yet I propose to accept the broader underlying claim of aiming at and hitting something real, namely a level of historical reality, as it has been (and still is) defended by the respective historical social and political movements. By so doing, I would claim that it is both possible and feasible to overcome the traditional notions of an essentialist and reductionist materialism. This reductionist approach to reality — which does not accept the complex reality of the given and considers the most immediate realities to be mere appearances (at the very least) — tends to be incapable of providing a realistic orientation for political practice, which has to deal with given socio-historical realities as they effectively present themselves.

2 See my attempt in ‘Die unabschließbare Aufgabe des endlichen Marxismus: Eine materiell verankerte Arbeit des Begriffs ohne Essentialismus oder Reduktionismus’, *Con-Textos Kantianos: International Journal of Philosophy*, 2018.5 (2018), pp. 200–17.

3 My thinking in this respect has certainly been influenced in important ways by Félix Guattari’s work since the 1970s, with whom I have had occasion to discuss problems of eco-socialist strategy building. A central role has certainly been played by his essay in *Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone, 2000) — but I am unable to reconstruct how it has impacted my own contributions to eco-socialist strategies.

4 Because they have been relatively focused upon by Marxist, feminist, ecological, and dependency theories. I do not see any possibility of integrating these disparate theories into one overarching theory, as some exponents of these theories have attempted.

5 By concentrating explicitly on this ideological dimension of intersectionality, Karin Stögner makes it salient that critics must also bring out the plurality of the structures of domination overdetermining this ideological dimension. See her article ‘Intersektionalität von Ideologien — Antisemitismus, Sexismus und das Verhältnis von Gesellschaft und Natur’, *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik*, 41.162 (2017), pp. 25–45.

Instead, I want to propose a ‘materialism of materialities’⁶ — which would include a ‘materialism of emergence’, as has been programmatically formulated by Roy Bhaskar and Mario Bunge.⁷ In this chapter, I shall try to argue that re-reading Karl Marx may help us to overcome and change the traditional fixation of left-wing debates on the still-pervasive idea of a need for a materialist reductionism.⁸ This begins with Marx’s own breaking away from traditional ‘materialism’, which he found so decisively wanting that some have misinterpreted his rejection of ‘all hitherto existing materialism’ as a farewell to ‘materialism’ as such.

MATERIALISM OF MATERIALITIES, OR A NON-REDUCTIONIST MATERIALISM

One of the points Marx forcefully made in his private notes on Feuerbach⁹ concerned taking his distance from this ‘hitherto existing materialism (the one of Ludwig Feuerbach included)’.¹⁰ I want to argue for a re-reading of Marx which sees him (accompanied by Friedrich Engels) philosophically on the way towards a new, non-reductionist kind of materialism, i.e. a ‘materialism of materialities’.¹¹ Such a ‘materialism of materialities’ should be understood as fully ex-

6 See my ‘Ein Materialismus für das 21. Jahrhundert’, in *Kritik und Materialität: im Auftrag der Assoziation für kritische Gesellschaftsforschung*, ed. by Alex Demirović (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2008), pp. 41–59.

7 See Roy Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 2007), as well as his *The Possibility of Naturalism* (London: Routledge, 1979), and Mario Bunge’s *Emergence and Convergence: Qualitative Novelty and the Unity of Knowledge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). See also Tuukka Kaidesoja, ‘Bhaskar and Bunge on Social Emergence’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 39.3 (2009), pp. 300–22.

8 Which has taken a new (and regrettable) form in the more or less openly ‘vitalist’ turn taken by many defenders of ‘new materialisms’. See the critique formulated by Paul Rekret, ‘A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology’, *Subjectivity*, 9.3 (2016), pp. 225–45.

9 The obvious question of what may have been in his mind as ‘2’) seems to remain unanswerable, and is, therefore, ordinarily avoided.

10 Karl Marx, ‘Thesen über Feuerbach’, in *MEW [Marx-Engels-Werke, see abbreviations]*, III (1958), pp. 5–7 (p. 5; my translation).

11 As Louis Althusser has formulated it, influenced by Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the irreducible unconscious in modern subjectivity in parallel with Marx’s discovery of class-struggle as the material process underlying the reproduction of modern societies. See especially Althusser, ‘On Marx and Freud’, trans. by Warren Montag, *Rethinking Marxism*, 4.1 (1991), pp. 17–30.

tending to the worlds of feelings, practices, organizations, institutions, and even ideas.

This new materialist perspective of Marx was explicitly articulated (and partially worked out) by Louis Althusser in his struggle to overcome the historical crisis of Marxism as it had been constituted by Engels in its 'classical' form. I think it is time, after a long *traversée du désert* (crossing the desert), to reopen the question of Marxism, i.e. of a conscious development of Marx's theoretical critiques,¹² as well as the question regarding the corresponding, but clearly distinct, practical perspective of radical Marxist politics, as well as the articulation of both of these problematics in a philosophical materialism of materialities which can situate finite Marxism. According to this analysis, finite Marxism combines a specific scientific analysis and reconstruction of the domination of the capitalist mode of production over modern bourgeois societies, and of the ways in which modern states reproduce capitalist class domination, with the openness to learning from the theoretical breakthroughs arising from the other struggles of liberation which necessarily arise in modern bourgeois societies. Using this foundation, finite Marxism is aware of its own specificity as a limitation — and it rejects any temptations to 'overarch' or 'hegemonize' feminist theories, de-colonialism, or ecological critical theory. Instead, it recognizes and learns from the ways in which these theories understand specific structures and the internal 'contradictions' that are constitutive for these structures of domination in the historical reality of modern societies. On the other hand, finite Marxism also strives to deserve an equal treatment from these 'other sides'.

While it is true that Marx left his theoretical work to us as an 'unfinished project' (Raúl Rojas),¹³ he also opened up a field of real and effective scientific research which has found important continuation in the work of Marxists since the 1890s. This scientific work has been continued with considerable success — in spite of the relative blockade of the philosophical and political reflection of its presuppositions

12 In order to justify this plural I shall elaborate on the distinction between his critique of political economy and his critique of politics (cf. below, next paragraph).

13 See his pioneering study of Marx: Raúl Rojas, *Das unvollendete Projekt. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Marx' Kapital* (Berlin: Argument, 1989), which has not had the reception it still deserves.

and implications which seems to have started with Engels's redaction of the notes on Feuerbach where he eliminated some reflexive turns as being 'too difficult', and then has been finalized by Plekhanov's attempt to reinsert Marxism into the tradition of modern 'materialism'. Indeed, this historical blocking, very probably, has been the unavoidable side effect of academic exclusion of Marxist theory building and historico-empirical analysis, while, in the political sphere, Stalinism distorted the forms of Marxism within institutionalized science regarding 'real socialism'. The historical development of the political practices which have effectively emerged in Marxist politics have been decisively blunted and perverted by reformist or Stalinist practices. Accordingly, the second breakthrough realized by the late Marx has had a still more complicated fate. His radical and innovative 'critique of politics'¹⁴ has remained in the draft stages of his own analytical sketches, and has been generally misread as a mere application of the insights of the critique of political economy.¹⁵ Therefore, Marx's original critique of politics has found little direct continuation — although its problems have unavoidably imposed themselves upon Marxist political leaders — from Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, via Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg, to José Carlos Mariátegui, Antonio Gramsci, and Mao Zedong.

In this regard, one of the decisive blockades which have remained dominant in mainstream Marxism has been due to a notion of materialism that has ignored the insights of Marx on the need to overcome the reductionism characteristic of the radical French enlightenment. Engels did not follow Marx on this issue,¹⁶ as he repeatedly flirted with the French materialist tradition. Meanwhile, Plekhanov later conceived of Marxism as essentially building upon that French tradition,

14 As reconstructed in Étienne Balibar, Cesare Luporini, and André Tosel, *Marx et sa critique de la politique* (Paris: Maspéro, 1979), which is still in need of a proper sequel, and requires only some revision in view of the accessibility of further writings of Marx due to the progress of the MEGA.

15 Which has been doubly misleading, as it seems to imply the very idea of 'economicism' and class reductionism.

16 Although Engels first followed Marx in this, he then contributed to obscuring the issue of Marx's new materialism in his redaction of the first publication of Marx's notes *ad* Feuerbach as 'Theses on Feuerbach', or by his masking of the decisive breaks which separated their manuscripts for the *German Ideology* from their earlier publication of the *Holy Family*.

thereby obscuring Marx's explicit distance from what he called the 'old materialism'. Marx, instead, took up a non-reductionist perspective on the materiality of history, as it had been sketched out by Montesquieu¹⁷ and elaborated by Adam Ferguson.¹⁸

In order to make it possible to overcome this blockade upon scientific analysis and philosophical reflection, as well as political deliberation, we need to understand the decisive difference between the traditional, reductionist materialism of emerging bourgeois progressivism¹⁹ (which had the historical function of getting rid of pre-modern political and religious ideas) and the non-reductionist materialism of materialities Marx followed in his research practices (as well as in his organized political work). In this way, we should overcome and account for the 'real illusions' of modern bourgeois practice.

THE 'MATERIALIST ILLUSION' OF THE EARLY MARX

Even in his last-minute contributions to the *Holy Family* Marx still imagined a continuity between his own position and French materialism as it had been continued and radicalized by Jeremy Bentham.²⁰ Therefore, Marx still participated in the exercise of a reductionist materialism which, notably, provided the foundations for modern utilitarianism.²¹ This simplifying and strongly reductionist current of radical thought corresponded to the perspective of the radically indi-

17 And rediscovered by Althusser in his *Montesquieu. La Politique et l'histoire* (Paris: PUF, 1959).

18 See the analyses presented by Danga Vileisis in her 'Der unbekannte Beitrag Adam Fergusons zum Geschichtsverständnis von Karl Marx', in *Quellen- und Kapital-Interpretation. Manifest-Rezeption. Erinnerungen (Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch. Neue Folge, 2009)*, ed. by Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Richard Sperl, and Rolf Hecker (Hamburg: Argument, 2010), pp. 7–60.

19 Of which La Mettrie presented an advanced form. See the still classical reading by Friedrich Albert Lange, in the chapter on La Mettrie in his *The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*, 3 parts (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1925), II, pp. 49–91.

20 The new turn taken by Marx in these texts has been convincingly analysed in Danga Vileisis, 'Marx' frühe, utilitaristische Auffassung des Kommunismus', in *Marx, Engels und utopische Sozialisten (Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch. Neue Folge, 2016/17)*, ed. by Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Richard Sperl, and Rolf Hecker (Hamburg: Argument, 2010), pp. 9–38.

21 In spite of his earlier sympathy towards Bentham, Marx later attacked him as the philosopher giving voice to the 'appearing surface' of modern bourgeois societies, and thereby blocking scientific inquiry: 'It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality,

vidualized private subjectivity of the owner of commodities.²² Due to having to consider his or her own labour power as a commodity to offer on the market, the perspective of the private individual reduced everything to its market price. This, evidently, implied an attitude and a practice of more or less violently ‘abstracting’ from all specific ‘use values’, while in actual practice referring exclusively to the acquisition of exchange value and the embodiment of the same in the form of money.

Later on, in the *German Ideology* manuscripts, Marx explicitly articulated his break from this kind of ‘old’ materialist reductionism, which is evident in the original version of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach.²³ As becomes clear in the manuscripts produced for a projected journal under the title of ‘German Ideology’, Marx was quite firm — especially in his critique of Stirner — that his project was not to anchor modern society in a reductionist view of ‘human nature.’²⁴ In this critique, Marx, later followed by Engels, began to address the underlying logic of domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies. He still had a long way to go in articulating this critique as a scientific alternative to Hegel’s philosophical reproduction of the structures of domination in place in modern bourgeois societies. Initially, Marx formed his critique on the basis of an alternative Feuerbachian philosophy that attempted to replace Hegel’s central category of ‘spirit’ with Feuerbach’s idea of the ‘human’ (*Mensch*).

Property, and Bentham’ (Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1976), 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes, p. 280).

22 For a critique, see my *Radikale Philosophie. Aufklärung und Befreiung in der neuen Zeit* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2002), p. 17.

23 Much less so in the *Theses on Feuerbach* after Engels’s editorial revamp, see George Labica, *Karl Marx. Les thèses sur Feuerbach* (Paris: PUF, 1987).

24 Marx has fallen into other kinds of reductionism in his manuscripts for the so-called ‘Feuerbach-chapter’ in the *German Ideology* manuscripts, as Danga Vileisis and myself will show in our forthcoming book *Deconstructing Historical Materialism*. To disentangle his search with its advances and setbacks is a main task of contemporary Marx research, which clearly goes beyond mere philology.

MARX'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AS AN EMERGING SCIENCE ON 'PROPER FOUNDATIONS'

Marx used a number of steps to continuously work out his critical struggle concerning the illusions shaping the 'surface' of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies. He pursued this project in his critique of Proudhon, the *Communist Manifesto*, the immediate pre-history of *Capital* (especially in the *Grundrisse*), and in the elaboration of the manuscripts for *Capital* itself. By so doing, he achieved a decisive breakthrough towards real scientific analysis by unveiling the secret of how capital achieved the production (and realization) of surplus value within a framework of an exchange of equivalent values. Although, in the final analysis, he still had to leave the production of a definitive text of his magnum opus to his friend. Indeed, Engels was the only one capable of presenting Marx's scientific breakthrough in its entirety and full importance.²⁵ Even volume I of *Capital*, when read from a perspective of the enlarged reproduction of the domination of the capitalist mode of production, succeeds in conveying this radically new scientific perspective. However, Engels had to admit that it remained impossible for him to reconstitute the 'aesthetic unity' of this work as Marx had planned to realize it. Or, in other words, we can say that the closing of the dialectical circle from the wealth of nations constituted by many commodities at the beginning of *Capital*, and the different 'forms of revenue' of the different categories of commodity owners outlined at the end of *Capital* volume III, turned out to be far less significant than Marx himself had anticipated.

This situation leads to interesting questions regarding the reasons for this impossibility. Was it a contingent failing due to Marx's early death and Engels's admitted lack of theoretical capability? Or was it somehow implied by some elements of philosophico-political prejudice that were still inherent to Marx's argument? Asking such explicit questions opens up the perspective of looking at the traditional issue of the '*Abschluss*' (closure/finalization) of 'Marx's system', as it was

25 See Michael R. Krätke, *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute. Zeitgenosse Marx* (Hamburg: VSA, 2017), pp. 211–43.

introduced by Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk in 1898, in a different light.²⁶ Accordingly, in this perspective, the non-closure of Marx's systematic presentation follows necessarily from its very structure as a materialist dialectic which consciously and methodically respects the 'limitations of the dialectical mode of presentation', as Marx himself underlined. This not only opens up the possibility of looking at Marx's apparent unwillingness to return to his previous elaborations for volume II and III of *Capital*, but, much more importantly, it also makes it possible for us to understand the limitations of *any* possible closure of his theoretical reconstruction of the system of capitalism domination — which is not a way of producing another blockade, but rather encouraging further systematic elaboration concerning the specific field of the ongoing reproduction of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies — as the relation of Marx's 'general theory' to the historical plurality of modern bourgeois societies should be understood.

It is true to say that Marx actually intended for considerable future research to be carried out in the field of the critique of political economy, as he had opened it by his epistemic breakthroughs. In the new MEGA the real state of his work in this field was made accessible as such,²⁷ which also made it possible to fully appreciate Engels's disparate work to finish and complete this unfinished work.²⁸ More importantly, Marx's and Engels's selective publications have been historically sufficient to open up a field of effective scientific inquiry that has been taken up and continued by others. The project of laying bare the inner workings, structures, mechanisms, and tendencies of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies, and at least to begin to understand how they present themselves in actual lived experience, has not been entirely lost, in spite of

26 See classically, Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, *Karl Marx and the Close of his System: A Criticism* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), as well as the retrospective presentation of the ensuing debate in Hans G. Nutzinger and Elmar Wolfstetter, *Die Marxsche Theorie und ihre Kritik: Eine Textsammlung zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Marburg: Metropolis, 2008).

27 I am referring to the latest complete edition of the works by Marx and Engels in German: 'Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe' (MEGA²). This new edition has replaced the first MEGA, which had been discontinued under Stalinism.

28 See Michael R. Krätke, *Friedrich Engels oder: Wie ein Cotton-Lord den Marxismus erfand* (Berlin: Dietz, 2020).

many simplifications and strong reductionist tendencies as they have dominated large parts of the history of ‘official Marxism’.

In this way, Marx also decisively contributed to the opening up of a field for further research concerning major politico-economic developments, such as credit, monopolization tendencies, or the role of politics and the state within the capitalist mode of production. Despite many impediments and obstructions, this field of scientific research has developed and produced an important body of relevant insights into the actual workings of the historical domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies. However, neither a first wave of popular rebellions like the Paris Commune, which Marx analysed, nor the socialist revolutions and radical reform initiatives of the twentieth century, which were discussed in ‘classical Marxism’, were capable of permanently overcoming the ‘really existing’ domination of the capitalist mode of production.²⁹ On the other hand, the merely scientific concretization of Marxist theory in terms of the ‘concrete analysis of the concrete situation’ (Lenin) has turned out to be unfeasible if not downright impossible — and had to be reformulated as the central task of political deliberation.³⁰

The resulting deep ‘crisis of Marxism’, which broke out in the sixties and seventies,³¹ finally produced the insight into the finite character of the Marxist theorization of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies. It was only in the 1960s, against the background of a world-wide movement of reading

29 This does not justify the retreat from this historical task as pursued by leading exponents of ‘neomarxism’ in the 1950s and 1960s, as e.g., in a reflective perspective, in Lucien Goldmann, *Recherches dialectiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) or in a new, activist vein in Paul Mason, *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

30 See Georg Lukács’s ‘Postscript 1967’ [1967], in his *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*, trans. by Nicholas Jacobs (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 86–97, where Lukács argues that the position taken by Lenin in referring to ‘the concrete analysis of the concrete situation’ is not an opposite of ‘pure’ theory, but — on the contrary — it is the culmination of genuine theory, its consummation, the point where ‘it breaks into practice’, which I take as an implicit recognition that it is logically impossible for scientific analysis ever to fully arrive at this starting point of any meaningful political deliberation.

31 In 1978 a German collection of Althusser’s essays from the 1970s was published under the title *Die Krise des Marxismus* (Hamburg: VSA, 1978).

Capital,³² that new attempts at understanding the epistemological perspectives opened by Marx's scientific breakthrough were made.³³ In this period, the philological reconstruction of Marx's scientific development from the available manuscripts finally began to be employed for a better understanding of key scientific and political problems.

REDUCTIONIST TEMPTATIONS WITHIN HISTORICAL MARXISM

Generally speaking, Marx's break with reductionism in history — and, accordingly, with reductionist illusions in political practice — was not followed in the dominant 'Marxist' line of thought as it emerged with Kautsky, Bernstein, and their followers. Their attempts at 'popularizing' Marxism in the labour movement avoided or even concealed Marx's philosophical and political insistence on a materialism of materialities, with its implicit break with materialist reductionism, and, instead, these thinkers created a line of continuity between Marx and reductionism.

Early creative contributions to advancing scientific knowledge in the fields of inquiry opened up by Marx's two major breakthroughs (in his critique of political economy and his critique of politics) range from applications to historical (or contemporary) analysis of real societal processes and struggles. Examples include Kautsky's discussion of the 'agrarian question' (1988),³⁴ Lenin's analysis of the impact of the capitalist mode of production on contemporary Russian society (1964),³⁵ and theoretical constructions addressing central aspects of

32 Which I know from personal experience to have reached Paris in at least the end of 1963 — and to which Althusser formulated a first philosophical response by means of his famous seminar of 1964, resulting in Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Estabiet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Maspéro, 1965).

33 The breakthrough was articulated as an 'epistemological cut' by Althusser or as 'reconstructed' as a 'systematic science' in the Frankfurt variant of a 'new reading of Capital'. See Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen. Die neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (Berlin: Akademie, 2008), pp. 30–87.

34 For a careful and (exceptionally) non-dismissive recent discussion of this question, see Jairus Banaji, 'Illusions about the Peasantry: Karl Kautsky and the Agrarian Question', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 17.2 (1990), pp. 288–307.

35 For an exhaustive reconstruction and critical analysis of this question, see Projekt Klassenanalyse, *Neue Stufe des Wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus? Zum Verhältnis von Marx'scher Theorie, Klassenanalyse und revolutionärer Taktik bei W. I. Lenin* (Berlin: Verlag für das Studium der Arbeiterbewegung, 1972).

the full development of the capitalist mode of production Marx had not yet been able to fully work out (like credit, state intervention, and international exchange). These aspects were specifically addressed in pioneering research by, for example, Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, and Eugen Varga — even if these texts were often in need of broader clarification regarding their actual presuppositions and implications. In contrast to these developments, and, in parallel, addressing a problematic debate on ‘revisionism’ vs ‘orthodoxy’, an effectively ‘conservative’ philosophical operation has attempted to stop these dynamic developments of Marxist theory: Kautskyanism — and, in a hidden and much more decisive, later parallel, Stalinism — have not only worked upon ‘philosophically’ reintegrating Marx’s science into the ‘old materialism’, with the central effect of replacing a rationally grounded practice of open political philosophical debate by traditional forms of a linear historical and dogmatic determinism. Much more importantly, both vulgarized Marx’s theory of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies by reducing it to a schematic theory of historical ‘capitalism’ which was neither clearly systematic nor specifically historical, thereby missing the specific reality of the capitalist mode of production as an ‘ideal average’ (*idealer Durchschnitt*).³⁶

Taking Marx’s explicit reference to the ‘ideal average’ as the decisive indication for a materialist theoretical reconstruction — which, in his opinion, should take place in the ‘real sciences’³⁷ — has important implications. Firstly, it assists to overcome the illusions of ‘theoreticism’ which view concrete, practical reality as a mere ‘emanation’ of the level discussed in theory building. Secondly, it reveals the assumptions behind ‘empiricism’³⁸ and ‘practicism’ (*Praktizismus*)³⁹ that put aside the requirements of theory building and only address practical

36 In German, this has been exposed in an exemplary fashion by Michael Heinrich in ‘Geld und Kredit in der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie’, *Das Argument — Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Sozialwissenschaften*, 45.251 (2003), pp. 397–409.

37 Marx’s changing ways of referring to ‘wirkliche Wissenschaft’ — which understandably have made many Marx scholars diffident about his claims to scientificity — finally seem to come down to this.

38 Which has been one of the main tendencies of the dominant bourgeois thinking about science.

39 As it has been philosophically elaborated by pragmatism.

singularities. The level of reality which is reconstructed by the theoretical operations of constructing concepts and statistically describing averages is neither to be confused with the concrete historical realities of particular modern societies (and their states) nor relegated to the status of a mere theoretical fiction. It is a decisive level of historical reality that constitutes a specific characteristic of all modern societies. Sometimes this has led to the illusion of distinguishing and opposing this level of theory (e.g., under the name of a 'theory of value') from or to a real understanding of class struggle, whereas, in actual fact, this level of theory only implies the search for a clear understanding of how class struggle lies under and structures the whole process of the reproduction of the very forms of capitalist domination.

A renewal of Marx's radically innovative perspective on a non-reductionist kind of materialism can make use of two contemporary sets of information. Firstly, a more complete understanding of the complex reality of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in the plurality of modern bourgeois societies, as they are overdetermined by other structures of domination (especially gendered, transnational, ecological). Secondly, a renewal of the philosophical debate about the meaning of materialism today.

Accordingly, 'finite Marxism' does not have to relinquish the scientific or political claims characteristic of the 'critique of political economy' as Marx initiated it — and yet, it is also uniquely capable of understanding the 'specific materiality and the characteristic contradictions' of other fields of domination. In particular, finite Marxism will be able to make a significant contribution to concretizing a new kind of radical politics by combining alliance building and mutual respect for the different kinds of liberation struggles with an effective deepening of class struggle. It will do this by seriously taking up Marx's work that has hitherto remained in the form of initial exemplary analyses and general argumentative sketches, especially in his later critique of politics. In doing so, it will decisively advance Marx's 'originary' project of a politics of liberation by not restricting its perspective solely to the politics of class struggle, but fully taking on board the political implications and objects of 'gender trouble', anti-racism (and its correlates), ecological conservation needs, and international co-ordination requirements as they are elaborated by feminist, anti-racist, and eco-

gical theory and research. Again, this will not be achieved by offering 'Marxism' as an overarching theory, but by emphasizing its own specific contribution to understanding the domination of the capitalist mode of production and the structure of the modern state as an agency of domination.

Thereby, finite Marxism will show itself capable of taking up the relative findings of the other fields of scientific research pertinent for modern bourgeois societies in its own research, as well as to conclude non-instrumentalist alliances with other struggles for effective liberation, based on their potential for a mutual understanding of the structures of domination each one is struggling against and for a broad solidarity against all attempts to curtail their liberty. Opening Marxist debates to the findings of feminist, anti-racist, ecological, and 'dependency' theory — without attempting to subsume them to Marxist generalities — will help to revitalize finite Marxism in its 'own field' of class struggle. And a new philosophy, a non-reductionist 'materialism of materialities' will, accordingly, become capable of making decisive contributions to the bringing under way of a process of constituting a real historical alternative — scientifically, as well as politically.

RETURNING TO MARX AND DEFENDING 'FINITE MARXISM'

When he sketched his notes on Feuerbach, Marx still had a long way to go towards his definitive scientific break-through in *Capital*. Step by step, in a journey that was certainly not linear, he discovered the road towards a non-reductionist kind of materialist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, as it is, indeed, dominating modern bourgeois societies. In so doing, he learned to respect the specific kinds of material reality of the many different dimensions of historical and present societies. This is what made it possible for him to actually think of class struggle in its effective historical reality: not as a confrontation of pre-existing subjectivities, but as the emergence of distinct and, eventually, antagonistic subjectivities within the very processes of societal reproduction and historical change.⁴⁰

40 In the mainstream of Marxist theory, however, as exemplified by Kautsky and Stalin, this was schematized into assuming the pre-existence of 'class subjectivities'.

In *Capital*, Marx succeeded in radically freeing himself (almost completely) from his previous reductionist illusions in order to completely focus his research on the historical structure of the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies. Therefore, he constructed a ‘missile’ and threw it against the dominating global bourgeoisie(s) and their allies, which led them to discredit his scientific insights and politically obstruct his theoretical insights from spreading into the established institutions of the economic, social, and political sciences.

However, and in spite of an impressive record of struggles aiming at overcoming the domination of the capitalist mode of production in modern bourgeois societies, there still is a tendency in the Marxist tradition to overlook an important caveat that Marx already clearly articulated. This involves the need to observe the difference between the general theory reconstructing the general structures and mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production and an analysis of its specific functioning within a given socio-historical situation, for which the general theory may only serve as a ‘guiding thread.’⁴¹ This caveat should be sufficient to overcome a tendency, still frequent among Marxists, of simplifying socio-historical analysis itself down to a deductive application of a general theory of ‘capitalism.’⁴² What is more — and this is a graver political consequence — is the tendency towards ‘class reductionism’, as it has spread in historical Marxism, whereas, in practical terms,⁴³ Marx, at the first Workers’ International, clearly addressed the issues of women’s liberation or of colonialism in their specificity and on an equal footing.

The renewal of Marxist analysis, needed today, will be capable of combining a critical defence of the actual achievements of Marxist

41 This is because critical theory can only establish the general laws of motion of the ‘ideal average’ (cf. above), and not be prolonged into the ‘concrete analysis of the concrete case’ without further empirical (or historical) research.

42 See my critique of this simplifying notion in Frieder Otto Wolf, ‘Karl Marx und die Globalisierung. Die Problematik des “Kommunistischen Manifests” und ihre Perspektiven’, *SoWi — das Journal für Geschichte, Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur*, 28 (1999), pp. 190–98.

43 Marx’s correspondence with Vera Zasulich (especially in his unsent drafts) also makes it clear that in his analysis there is no space for a class-reductionist and teleological or stage-based perspective on the transformation of societies.

science⁴⁴ with a renewed radical philosophy. A new openness to the contributions of feminism, dependency theory, and political ecology will help us to find new perspectives for a radical practice of Marxism and a renewal of liberation struggles today. In this way, it will overcome the historical ‘crisis of Marxism’: not by returning to the kind of Marxism constituted by Engels for the rising workers movement,⁴⁵ nor by retreating to a mere ‘Marxianism’ within scientific research,⁴⁶ but by beginning to define an adequate, and of course, unmistakably non-idealist, unequivocally dialectical, ‘unity of theory and practice’ for the twenty-first century.

In this way, finite Marxism will be capable of contributing to the elaboration of new comprehensive perspectives, developed conjointly with converging movements, which will work against the different structures of domination and the ways they function within given societies. It will also facilitate the politics of building ‘new alliances’ that will finally be capable of challenging and overcoming the combined structures of domination as they have re-emerged out of the ‘night of the 20th century’ (roughly from 1914 to 1946). Last but not least, it will assist us not to forget about the ‘real elephant in the room’, and to understand the specific requirements of organized political struggles and struggles within or about the modern state (in its more or less democratic forms) in the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴⁷

44 See the exemplary analysis in Stefano Breda’s *Kredit und Kapital. Kreditsystem und Reproduktion der kapitalistischen Vergesellschaftungsweise in der dialektischen Darstellung des Marxschen ‘Kapital’* (Würzburg: Königshausen&Neumann, 2019).

45 This seems to be the underlying project in Krätke, *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute: Zeitgenosse Marx*, which I find, indisputably, attractive, but far too limited, with regard to the tasks of analysis that lie ahead.

46 See e.g. Riccardo Bellofiore, ‘Taking Up the Challenge of Living Labour: A “Backwards-Looking Reconstruction” of Recent Italian Debates on Marx’s Theory of the Capitalist Mode of Production’, in *The Unfinished System of Karl Marx: Critically Reading Capital as a Challenge for our Times*, ed. by Judith Dellheim and Frieder Otto Wolf (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 31–89.

47 Decisive parts of the research underlying this essay were realized in cooperation with Danga Vileisis, to whom I am grateful for many insights. And the critical remarks to earlier versions of this essay provided by the editors have certainly helped me to find a clearer expression of my thinking, for which I am grateful.

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