

# Between Marx, Marxism, and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx’s Theory

[viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/](http://viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/)

October 21, 2013



The objective of the following observations is to offer a rough overview of central ways of reading Marx’s theory. These are to be presented – by means of a few selected topics – as Marxisms that can be relatively clearly delimited from one another, and the history of their reception and influence will be evaluated with regard to the common-sense understanding of “Marxist theory.”

A distinction will be made between the hitherto predominant interpretation of Marx, primarily associated with political parties (traditional Marxism, *Marxism* in the singular, if you will), and the dissident, critical forms of reception of Marx (*Marxisms* in the plural), with their respective claims of a “return to Marx.” The first interpretation is understood as a product and process of a restricted reading of Marx, in part emerging from the “exoteric” layer of Marx’s work, which updates traditional paradigms in political economy, the theory of history, and philosophy. Systematized and elevated to a doctrine by Engels, Kautsky, et al, it

succumbs to the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production and culminates in the apologetic science of Marxism-Leninism. The other two interpretations, specifically Western Marxism as well as the German *neue Marx-Lektüre* (“new reading of Marx”), usually explore the “esoteric” content of Marx’s critique and analysis of society, often consummated outside of institutionalized, cumulative research programs, by isolated actors in the style of an “underground Marxism.”

In order to characterize both ways of reading, some strongly truncated theses, limited to a few aspects, must suffice. In particular the ambitious proposition, first formulated by Karl Korsch, of an “application of the materialist conception of history to the materialist conception of history itself” – one that goes beyond the mere presentation of intellectual history, towards an immanent theoretical critique that critically considers the connection between historical forms of praxis and theoretical formations of Marxism – cannot be carried out here. In addition, a consideration of those readings which are critical of Marx or Marxism can also be disregarded here, insofar as their picture of Marx usually corresponds to that of traditional Marxism.

I therefore begin with the hegemonic interpretative model of traditional Marxism, and only at the end of my presentation will I conclude with a few positive determinations of what I regard as the fundamental systematic intention of Marx’s work. I do this primarily because a differentiated reading of Marx’s work can only be gained in the course of the learning processes of Western Marxism and the *neue Marx-Lektüre*.

## I. Marxism

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The term “Marxism” was probably first used in the year 1879 by the German Social Democrat Franz Mehring to characterize Marx’s theory, and established itself at the end of the 1880s as a discursive weapon used by both critics and defenders of “Marx’s teachings.” The birth of a “Marxist school,” however, is unanimously dated back to the publication of *Anti-Dühring* by Friedrich Engels in the year 1878, and the subsequent reception of this work by Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, et al. Engels’ writings – even if the terms “Marxism” or “dialectical materialism,” the self-applied labels of traditional readings, do not yet appear in them – supplied entire generations of readers, Marxists as well as anti-Marxists, with the interpretative model through which Marx’s work was perceived. In particular, the review of Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), the late work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), and the supplement to Volume III of *Capital* (1894/95), achieved an influence that can hardly be underestimated. Above all, however, it was *Anti-Dühring* that was to be stylized as the textbook of Marxist theory as well as a positive depiction of a “Marxist worldview”: for Kautsky, “there is no other book that has contributed so much to the understanding of Marxism. Marx’s *Capital* is greater. But it was first through *Anti-Dühring* that we learned to correctly read and understand *Capital*.” And for Lenin, it is one of the “handbooks of every class-conscious worker.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, a general characteristic of the history of “Marxism” is consummated: the initiators of the theoretical corpus regard it as “unnecessary [...] to themselves make an appearance as eponyms [...] the eponyms are not the real speakers” (Georges Labica). In many respects, Marxism is Engels’ work and for that reason actually an Engelsism. In what follows I will name only three points which an ideologized and restricted reception of Marx could draw upon.

## I.1 The Ontological-Determinist Tendency

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Scientific socialism was conceived of as an ontological system, a “science of the big picture.” The materialist dialectic functions here as a “general law of development of nature, society, and thought,”<sup>2</sup> while nature serves for Engels as a “proof of dialectics.”<sup>3</sup> Engels already undertakes a false analogy between historical-social processes and natural phenomena by the mere fact that in his elucidation of the main features of the dialectic, reference to subject and object is missing. “Negation of the negation” or the “transformation of quantity into quality” are identified in the changes in the physical state of water or in the development of a grain of barley. Against a static point of view, dialectic is supposed to demonstrate the “becoming,” the “transitory character” of all existence,<sup>4</sup> and is bound to traditional dichotomies of the philosophy of consciousness, such as the so-called “great basic question of all philosophy” “as to which component of the relationship between “thinking and being” has primacy.<sup>5</sup> The dialectic is split into “two sets of laws,” into the dialectic of “the external world” and the dialectic of “human thought,” whereby the latter is understood to be merely a passive mental image of the former.<sup>6</sup> Engels constricts – even distorts – the three elementary praxis-philosophical motifs of Marx, which he had partially still advocated in his earlier writings:

1. The recognition that not only the object, but also the observation of the object is historically and practically mediated,<sup>7</sup> not external to the history of the mode of production. Against this, Engels emphasizes that “the materialist outlook on nature means nothing more than the simple conception of nature just as it is, without alien addition.”<sup>8</sup> The naive realism of the theory of reflection systematized by Lenin<sup>9</sup> and others – which falls prey to the reified appearance of immediacy of that which is socially mediated, the fetishism of an in-itself of that which exists only via a historically determined framework of human activity – already obtains its foundation in Engels’ writings.<sup>10</sup> As “things refer to consciousness and consciousness refers to things,”<sup>11</sup> the concepts of praxis and the subjective mediation of the object, as well as ideology-critical considerations, have hardly any place in this paradigm.
2. The concept of *Naturwüchsigkeit* (“the state of being naturally derived”), which Engels had used in *The German Ideology* in a negative sense, is now turned into a positive concept. The *sublation* of specific social laws resting upon the unconsciousness of social actors is no longer postulated; rather, Engels postulates the conscious application of “the general laws of motion [...] of the external world.”<sup>12</sup>

3. If Marx writes in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that “all mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice,”<sup>13</sup> Engels reduces praxis to the experimental activity of the natural sciences.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, ambivalences and praxis-philosophical motifs can also be found in the writings of the late Engels, which were largely blotted out by the epigones. Nonetheless, Engels, bundling together the scientism of his epoch, paves the way for a mechanistic and fatalistic conception of historical materialism by shifting the accent from a theory of social praxis to one of a contemplative, reflection-theory doctrine of development.

The vulgar evolutionism of nineteenth-century European Social Democracy is a nearly ubiquitous phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> For that reason, it is not just for Kautsky, Bernstein, and Bebel that the deterministic concept of development and the revolutionary metaphysic of a providential mission of the proletariat<sup>16</sup> occupy a central place in Marxist doctrine. Accordingly, humanity is subordinated to a “scientifically verifiable” automatism of liberation. That which presents itself in the modern scientific garb of a fetishism of laws is ultimately nothing other than a historical metaphysic with a socialist signature<sup>17</sup>: precisely the inversion of subject and object that Marx had criticized. A process consummated behind the back of social actors is attributed a morally qualified aim.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, in the Erfurt Program of the German Social Democratic Party, this revolutionary passivity<sup>19</sup> is codified at an official level as consistent Marxism: the task of the party is to remain braced for an event that will “necessarily” happen even without intervention, “not to make the revolution, but rather to take advantage of it.”<sup>20</sup> The ontological orientation and the encyclopaedic character of Engels’ deliberations also feed the tendency to interpret scientific socialism as a comprehensive proletarian worldview. Ultimately, Lenin will present the “Marxist doctrine” as “omnipotent,” a “comprehensive and harmonious” doctrine that “provides men with an integral world outlook.”<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly, the negative concept of ideology is neutralized into a category for the determinate being of consciousness in general.

All of these developments, which undoubtedly constitute a theoretical regression, ultimately culminate in the theory of “Marxism-Leninism” conceived of by Abram Deborin and Josef Stalin. If for Lenin, Marxism constitutes – despite all emphasis upon the political – a “profound doctrine of development”<sup>22</sup> that calls attention to breaks and leaps in nature and society, in the case of Marxism-Leninism the naturalist-objectivist current is elevated to a state doctrine. The central argumentative figure will be: what is valid for nature must also be valid for history. Or: nature makes leaps, *therefore* so does history. Political praxis is thus understood as the consummation of historical laws. This impressive logic is perfected in Stalin’s work “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” – for decades an authoritative work in the Marxist theory of the Eastern Bloc. Historical materialism stands for the “application” and “extension” of ontological principles to society, which implies an epistemological essentialism (a theory of reflection, which in the form of Dialectical Materialism conceives of

“being” and “thinking” independent of the concept of praxis) and a sociological naturalism (a developmental logic – to be “consciously applied” or “accelerated” by the party as the highest technocratic instance <sup>23</sup> – existing independent of human agency). <sup>24</sup>

## I.2 The Historicist Interpretation of the Form-Genetic Method

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If Lenin’s statement that “none of the Marxists for the past half century have understood Marx” – a dictum that in this case however also applies to Lenin himself – has any validity, then it is certainly with regard to the interpretation of the critique of political economy. Even 100 years after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, Engels’ commentary was widely regarded as the sole legitimate and adequate assessment of Marx’s critique of economy. No reading in the Marxist tradition was as uncontroversial as the one casually developed by Engels in texts such as the review of Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) or the supplement to Volume III of *Capital* (1894). Here, considerably more explicitly than in the objectivist conception of historical materialism, Marxism is Engelsism.

Against the background of his conception of reflection, Engels interprets the first chapter of *Capital* as a simultaneously logical and historical presentation of “simple commodity production” developing toward the relations of capitalist wage labor, “only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences.” <sup>25</sup> The term “logical” in this context basically means nothing more than “simplified.” The method of presentation, the sequence of categories (commodity, the elementary, expanded, and general forms of value, money, capital) in the critique of political economy is accordingly “simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the historical course.” <sup>26</sup> The examination of the genesis of the money form is understood as the description of “an actual event which really took place at some time or other” and not as “an abstract mental process that takes place solely in our mind.” <sup>27</sup> In no other passage of his work does Engels so drastically reduce historical materialism to a vulgar empiricism and historicism, as is made evident by his associative chain “materialism – empirically verifiable facts – real process” vs. “idealism – abstract thought process – purely abstract territory.”

With the “logical-historical” method, Engels provides a catchphrase that will be recited and stressed *ad nauseam* in the Marxist orthodoxy. Karl Kautsky, in his enormously influential presentations, understood *Capital* to be an “essentially historical work” <sup>28</sup>: “Marx was charged with recognizing capital to be a historical category and to prove its emergence in history, rather than mentally constructing it.” <sup>29</sup> Rudolf Hilferding also claims that “in accordance with the dialectic method, conceptual evolution runs parallel throughout with historical evolution.” <sup>30</sup> Both Marxism-Leninism <sup>31</sup> and Western Marxism <sup>32</sup> follow Hilferding in this assessment. But if the critique of political economy is interpreted as historiography, then consequentially the categories at the beginning must correspond *directly* to empirical objects, for example a dubious *pre-capitalist commodity not determined by price*, <sup>33</sup> and the analysis of the form of value must begin with the depiction of a coincidental, *moneyless* interaction of two commodity owners – with Engels’ so-called

“simple production of commodities,”<sup>34</sup> an economic epoch he dates from 6000 BC to the 15th century AD. According to this conception, Marx’s law of value<sup>35</sup> operates at times in this epoch in a pure form “unadulterated” by the category of price, which Engels illustrates with the feigned example of a moneyless “exchange” between medieval peasants and artisans.

Here we are dealing with a transparent social interrelationship between immediate producers who are at the same time the owners of their means of production, in which one producer labors under the watchful eye of the other, and therefore “the peasant of the Middle Ages knew fairly accurately the labor-time required for the manufacture of the articles obtained by him in barter.”<sup>36</sup> Under the conditions of this “natural exchange”, it is not some normative criterion that is for him “the only suitable measure for the quantitative determination of the values to be exchanged,”<sup>37</sup> but rather the abstraction of a labor-time consciously and directly measured by the actors. Neither the peasant nor the artisan is so stupid as to exchange unequal quantities of labor<sup>38</sup>: “No other exchange is possible in the whole period of peasant natural economy than that in which the exchanged quantities of commodities tend to be measured more and more according to the amounts of labor embodied in them.”<sup>39</sup> According to Engels, the value of a commodity is determined *consciously* by the labor, measured in time, of individual producers. In this theory of value, money does not play a constitutive role. On the one hand, it is an expedient and lubricant to trade that is external to value, but on the other it serves to obscure the substance of value: suddenly, instead of exchanging according to hours of labor, at some point exchange is conducted by means of cows and then pieces of gold. The question of how this notion of every commodity being its own labor-money<sup>40</sup> can be reconciled with the conditions of private production based upon the division of labor is not posed by Engels. Engels – as will be elaborated by the *neue Marx-Lektüre* – practices exactly what Marx criticizes in the case of the classical economists, above all Adam Smith: a projection onto the past of the illusory notion of appropriation through one’s own labor, which in fact only exists in capitalism; neglect of the necessary connection between value and form of value<sup>41</sup>; a transformation of the “objective equalization” of unequal acts of labor consummated by the objective social relationship itself into a merely subjective consideration of social actors.<sup>42</sup>

Up until the 1960s, Engels’ theorems continued to be passed on undisputed. Along with his formula (once again taken from Hegel) of freedom being the insight into necessity, and the drawing of parallels between natural laws and social processes, they gave sustenance to a social-technological “concept of emancipation,” according to the following premise: social necessity (above all the law of value), which operates anarchically and uncontrolled in capitalism, will be, by means of Marxism as a science of the objective laws of nature and society, managed and applied according to a plan. Not the *disappearance* of capitalist form-determinations, but rather their *alternative use* characterizes this “socialism of adjectives” (this term comes from Robert Kurz) and “socialist political economy.”<sup>43</sup> There is a significant disproportion between, on the one hand, the emphasis upon the “historical,” and on the other, the absence of a historically specific and socio-theoretically reflected concept of economic objectivity. This is made evident by the irrelevance of the concept of social form in

the discussions of traditional Marxism, in which it is at most is considered to be s a category for ideal or marginal circumstances, but not a constitutive characteristic of Marx’s scientific revolution. <sup>44</sup>

### I.3 The Critique of the Content of the State

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Engels’ theoretical statements concerning the state in *The Origin of the Family, Ludwig Feuerbach, Anti-Dühring*, and his critique of the Erfurt draft program of the SPD from 1891, constitute the source of the traditional Marxist conception of the state. In *Ludwig Feuerbach*, Engels states that the fact that all needs in class societies are articulated through the will of the state is “the formal aspect of the matter – the one which is self-evident.” <sup>45</sup> The main question of a materialist theory of the state, however, is “what is the content of this merely formal will – of the individual as well as of the state – and whence is this content derived? Why is just this willed and not something else?” <sup>46</sup> The result of this purely content-based question concerning the will of the state is for Engels the recognition “that in modern history the will of the state is, on the whole, determined by the changing needs of civil society, by the supremacy of this or that class, in the last resort, by the development of the productive forces and relations of exchange.” <sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in his deliberations in *The Origin of the Family* Engels works with universal-historical categories onto which modern designations like “public authority” are projected, and constantly assumes “direct relations of domination, immediate forms of class rule” <sup>48</sup> in order to explain “the” state, which is consequentially understood as a mere instrument of the ruling class. From this content-fixated and universal-historical way of considering the state, it can be deduced that Engels loses sight of the actually interesting question, namely as to why the class content in capitalism takes on the specific form of public authority. <sup>49</sup> The personal definition of class rule extracted from pre-capitalist social formations ultimately leads to reducing the anonymous form of class rule institutionalized in the state to a mere ideological illusion, which, in the manner of the theory of priestly deception, is interpreted as a product of state tactics of deception. Engels in any case attempts to make the class character of the state plausible by referring to “plain corruption of officials” and “an alliance between the government and the stock exchange.” <sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, in Engels’ work there still exists, despite the predominance of the instrumentalist/content-fixated perspective, an unmediated coexistence between the determination of the state as the “state of the capitalists” and of the state as “ideal total capitalist.” <sup>51</sup> The last definition conceives of the state “not as a tool of the bourgeoisie [...] but rather as an entity of bourgeois society,” <sup>52</sup> and an “organisation that bourgeois society takes on in order to support the general external conditions of the capitalist mode of production against the encroachments as well of the workers as of individual capitalists.” <sup>53</sup> But the specific formal aspect of modern statehood is not yet explained by this reference to functional mechanisms. Engels also paved the way for the theory of state-monopoly capitalism. <sup>54</sup> In the *Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program* of 1891 he writes: “I am familiar with capitalist production as a social form, or an economic phase; capitalist private production being a *phenomenon* which in one form or another is encountered in that phase. What is capitalist *private* production? Production by *separate* entrepreneurs, which is



increasingly becoming an exception. Capitalist production by *joint-stock companies* is no longer *private* production but production on behalf of many associated people. And when we pass on from joint-stock companies to trusts, which dominate and monopolise whole branches of industry, this puts an end not only to private production but also to *planlessness*.”<sup>55</sup> Finally, in *Anti-Dühring* Engels writes of the state as real total capitalist: “The more productive forces it takes over into its possession, the more it actually becomes a real aggregate capitalist, the more citizens it exploits.” Here Engels reveals a limited understanding of private production, and a tendency to equate state planning and monopoly power with direct socialization,<sup>56</sup> reinforced by his construction of the fundamental contradiction and his tendency to identify the division of labor within a factory and the division of labor in society. Engels does note that “the transformation, either into joint-stock companies, or into state ownership, does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces,”<sup>57</sup> but nonetheless sees an immediate transition to socialism setting in as a result, whereas the concepts of monopoly and state intervention remain “economically completely undetermined.”<sup>58</sup> Engels thus suggests that the workers’ movement merely has to take over the forms of corporate bookkeeping in joint-stock companies and the comprehensive planning by monopolies developed in capitalism. For Engels, the bourgeoisie has already become obsolete through the separation of ownership and management functions.<sup>59</sup> The “transformation of the great establishments for production and distribution into joint-stock companies and state property” demonstrates, according to Engels, “how unnecessary the bourgeoisie are for that purpose”, i.e. for managing “modern productive forces”: “All the social functions of the capitalist are now performed by salaried employees. The capitalist has no further social function than that of pocketing dividends, tearing off coupons, and gambling on the Stock Exchange, where the different capitalists despoil one another of their capital. At first the capitalist mode of production forces out the workers. Now it forces out the capitalists, and reduces them, just as it reduced the workers, to the ranks of the surplus population, although not immediately into those of the industrial reserve army.”

Reviewing this history of reception (only roughly outlined here), one could claim that Marxism in the form presented here was a rumor about Marx’s theory, a rumor that was gratefully taken up by most critics of “Marx” and merely supplemented with a minus sign. In fact such an assertion – as accurate as it may be overall – makes things too easy, in that it disregards certain deviations from the dominant doctrine that also understood themselves to be Marxisms, while also regarding the above misinterpretations as completely external to Marx’s own theory, thus excluding the possibility of any inconsistencies or theoretical-ideological ambiguities in Marx’s work. To clarify this question, a glance at the differentiated reading of Marx’s texts worked out in the so-called “reconstruction debates” will be useful.

In this respect, traditional Marxism should be understood here as an elaboration, systematization, and assumption of dominance of the ideological content of Marx’s work – within the framework of a reception by Engels and his epigones. Practical influence was almost exclusively allotted to these restricted and ideologized interpretations of Marx’s theory, as historical determinism or proletarian political economy.



## II. Western Marxism

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The formation of a Western Marxism<sup>61</sup> arises from the crisis of the socialist workers' movement in the wake of the First World War (the collapse of the Second International as a result of the policy of defense of the fatherland, the defeat of revolutions in Central and Southern Europe, the emergence of fascist forces, etc.). Here it is Georg Lukács' and Karl Korsch's texts published in 1923 which assume a paradigmatic character. Above all Lukács is considered the first Marxist theorist who at the level of social theory and methodology called into question the hitherto self-evident assumption of the complete identity of Marx's and Engels' theories. At the center of his critique stood Engels' neglect of the subject-object dialectic as well as his concept of a dialectic of nature, to which the fatalism of Second International Marxism was oriented. Against this ontologization of historical materialism into a contemplative worldview, Lukács, like Western Marxism as a whole, understands Marx's approach to be a critical revolutionary theory of social praxis. Against the scientific talk of "objective laws of development" of social progress, Lukács posits the critique of ideology of reified consciousness, deciphering the capitalist mode of production as a historically specific form of social praxis ossified into a "second nature," and emphasizing revolution as a critical act of practical subjectivity. Self-descriptions such as "philosophy of praxis" (Gramsci) or "critical theory of society" (Horkheimer) therefore do not constitute code words or conceptual equivalents for official party doctrine, but rather emphasize a learning process from which "arises a critical, action-oriented current of thought of Marxist heritage."<sup>62</sup> Although Western Marxism at first positively adopted the activist impulses of the October Revolution, its leading representatives would quickly come to reject the doctrine of Leninism, above all its continuation of a naturalistic social theory and its false universalization of the experience of the Russian Revolution. Georg Lukács' critique of Bukharin's "Theory of Historical Materialism" serves as an example of the former. In his critique, Lukács charges that Bukharin's theory, with its concepts of the primacy of the development of the forces of production and the seamless application of the methods of natural science to the study of society, is fetishistic and obliterates the "*qualitative difference*" between the two subject areas of natural and social sciences, thus acquiring "the accent of a false 'objectivity' and mistaking the core idea of Marx's method, namely the ascription of "*all economic phenomena to the social relationships of human beings to one another.*"<sup>63</sup>

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci provided the exemplary critique of the fixation of revolutionary strategy upon the model of the October Revolution. Initially, he had greeted the October Revolution as a "revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*,"<sup>64</sup> that is to say as a refutation of the allegedly proven impossibility of socialist revolution in industrially backwards countries. In an almost religious manner, he cited the voluntaristic "socialist annunciation" as a source of a collective socialist "popular will" against a class consciousness mechanically derived from the economy and the level of its forces of production. Later, Gramsci would confront the Marxism of the Third International with his theory of hegemony, which rejects the "war of maneuver" of a frontal attack upon the repressive state apparatus as

being a useless revolutionary strategy for modern Western capitalist societies. According to Gramsci, within these social formations “civil society” is composed of a labyrinthine structure of apparatuses in which patterns of thought and behavior are generated which exhibit an inertia that cannot be shaken by grandiose political deeds. The Russian revolutionary model is also condemned to failure in the West because the belief in the universal nature of experience of the Bolsheviks with a centralist-despotic Tsarism leads to a disregard for the relevance of ideological socialization by means of the apparatuses of civil society, and their effect: subjection in the form of autonomous agency. However, both Lukács and Gramsci remain loyal to the “exclusively proletarian” conception of revolution to the extent that the former, despite his reflections upon reified consciousness, still attributes an epistemological privilege to the proletariat guaranteed by its economic position, while Gramsci’s strategically motivated theory of civil society is fixated upon the room for maneuver of the working class.

With the attempt at a social-psychological exploration of the drive/structural foundations of the reproduction of an “irrational society,” above all in the form of authoritarian and antisemitic attitudes, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, after Max Horkheimer’s assumption of its directorship in 1931, achieved a level of reflection that other representatives and currents of Western Marxism could not match,<sup>65</sup> and which gives up on the reassuring support of an imagined class consciousness of the proletariat. Finally, the empirical class consciousness of the proletariat as the only existing class consciousness is subjected to analysis, while the “irrational,” emotional dimensions of social praxis ignored by other theorists, such as the social dimensions of the libidinal, are considered. This theoretical insight into the uncompromising nature of critical theory is at the same time an admission of the historical process of an increasing rift between emancipatory theory and the perspective of revolutionary praxis. With the propagation of socialism in one country, the Bolshevization of the Western Communist Parties, and the establishment of Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology of the Third International after the mid-1920s, there begins the characteristic isolation of the representatives of Western Marxism: this current is left with neither political influence nor (with the possible exception of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research) the institutional foundations for a normal scholarly praxis. The general characteristics of this Marxist formation – its sense for the Hegelian legacy and the critical-humanist potential of Marx’s theory, the incorporation of contemporary “bourgeois” approaches to elucidate the great crisis of the workers movement, the orientation towards methodology, the sensitization to social-psychological and cultural phenomena in connection with the question concerning the reasons for the failure of revolution in “the West”<sup>66</sup> – provides the framework for a new type of restricted exegesis of Marx. This is essentially characterized by the neglect of problems of politics and state theory, a selective reception of Marx’s theory of value, and the predominance of a “silent orthodoxy” concerning the critique of political economy. Although the first to understand the character of capitalist rule the way Marx did – anonymous, objectively mediated, and having a life of its own – the “founding document” of Western Marxism, Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness*, avoids a reconstruction of Marx’s theory of capitalism. Instead of an analysis of Marx’s dialectic of the form of value up to the form of capital, which in the theory of real subsumption offers an

explanation of the connection – so decisive for Lukács – between commodification and the alienated structure of the labor process, one finds merely an analogizing combination of a value theory reduced to the “quantifying” value-form (due to an orientation towards Simmel’s cultural critique of money) and a diagnosis, oriented towards Max Weber, of the formal-rational tendency of the objectification of the labor process and modern law. Until the mid-1960s it seems that no Western Marxists extended their debate with traditional interpretations of Marx into the realm of value theory. Some positions go even further than this silent orthodoxy, and – without having seriously engaged with the critique of political economy – contrast the “humanist cultural critic Marx” with the “economist Marx” or even regard a “Marxism” without a critique of political economy as being possible.<sup>67</sup>

### III. The “*Neue Marx-Lektüre*”

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It was first within the framework of the “*neue Marx-Lektüre*” (“New Reading of Marx”), which emerged in the mid-1960s, that problems of state theory and economic theory once again played a role outside of Marxism-Leninism. This new wave of reception of Marx’s theory was also more or less situated outside of Stalinism and Social Democracy. Alongside the new reading in West European countries, there were isolated rudiments of a “new reading of Marx” occurring in Eastern Europe.<sup>68</sup> Its genesis in West Germany coincided with phenomena such as the student movement, the first jolts to belief in a perpetual and politically manageable post-war prosperity, the breaking up of the anti-communist consensus in the course of the Vietnam War, etc., yet remained, despite its radical emancipatory claims, confined largely to academia. Here, we distinguish between this “new reading of Marx” in a broader sense<sup>69</sup>, and one more narrowly defined.<sup>70</sup> Whereas the former was an international phenomenon, the latter was confined primarily to West Germany. If the former still remained predominantly trapped within Engelsian dogma with regard to the critique of political economy, the latter foregrounded the revision of previous historicist or empiricist interpretations of Marx’s form analysis. In terms of content, a threefold abandonment of central topoi of traditional Marxism was consummated in the main threads of the debate, themselves contradictory and in no way shared by all participants: a move away from a substantialist theory of value<sup>71</sup>; abandonment of manipulative-instrumental conceptions of the state<sup>72</sup>; and a move away from labor movement-centric interpretations of the critique of political economy, or interpretations based on a “labor-ontological” revolutionary theory (or even upon revolutionary theory as such).<sup>73</sup> This new reading articulates its theoretical efforts in the form of a reconstruction of Marx’s theory.

With regard to the critique of economy, a crystallization of central questions and research tasks occurred within the framework of the 1967 colloquium “*100 Jahre ‘Kapital.’*”<sup>74</sup> A reinterpretation of Marx’s critique was envisioned from the methodological perspective of social theory: the question as to the original object of *Capital* (economic form-determination), the particularity of scientific presentation (the dialectic of the forms of value), as well as the connection between the three volumes (“capital in general – many capitals”) are posed anew, as distinct from quantitative approaches, and with a particular

emphasis upon the significance of the *Grundrisse*. Within the field of the conflict between “critical” and “structural” Marxisms, transitional moments of flight from existing methodological traditions arise, oblique to the classical points of conflict <sup>75</sup>: both structuralist anti-historicism as well as Hegelian figures of thought (“progressive-regressive method,” “return to the foundation”) play an important role in this.

Initially with a lot of “ifs and buts” <sup>76</sup>, and on some points remaining within the channels of traditional Marxism, the New Reading of Marx acquired more clearly defined contours over the course of the 1970s.

### Traditional readings of Marx’s theory

Classical Assumption of the Marxism of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals	Marx = Engels (unified paradigm, coherent argumentation, closed “worldview”)
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### Levels of the critical-reconstructive reading

Level 1: e.g. Backhaus ( <i>Materialien</i> parts 1 and 2)	Engels → exoteric vs. Marx → esoteric
Level 2: e.g. Althusser ( <i>Reading Capital</i> ); A. Schmidt; Backhaus ( <i>Materialien</i> )	Marx → exoteric meta-discourse vs. Marx → esoteric real analysis
Level 3: e.g. Backhaus ( <i>Materialien</i> parts 3 and 4); Heinrich ( <i>Science of Value</i> )	Marx → exoteric/esoteric meta-discourse Marx → exoteric/esoteric real analysis

Against the classical myth of the complete equality between the paradigms of Marx and Engels, with regard to both historical materialism and the critique of political economy, Engels’ commentaries were criticized as largely inadequate to Marx’s work and remaining at a purely “exoteric” level that perpetuated traditional paradigms. Thus, in 1974 Hans-Georg Backhaus emphasized with regard to value theory that the critique was aimed “at an interpretative premise which until recently was considered one of the few uncontested elements of the Marxist literature, and which structured the reception of Marx’s value theory without being challenged: the misinterpretation, touched off by Engels, of the first three chapters of *Capital* as a value and money theory of what Engels called ‘simple commodity production.’” <sup>77</sup> Backhaus assumes that “proceeding from this fundamental error, *Marxist* value theory necessarily inhibited the reception of *Marx’s* value theory.” <sup>78</sup> If therefore at this level an initial distinction is made between a Marxist theory and Marx’s theory, a problematization of Marx’s meta-theoretical self-understanding also occurs early on. Louis Althusser had already affirmed, with the aid of a “symptomatic” reading directed against a subject-centric intentionalist hermeneutic, that Marx’s work represents a scientific revolution in the theoretical praxis of the analysis of capitalism, which at the meta-theoretical level is

superimposed upon by a discourse inadequate to this problematic. Althusser defines the tasks of a reconstruction as the removal of the inadequate meta-discourse and the transformation of its dominant metaphors, which he reads as symptoms for the absence of an adequate self-reflection of the real procedure of the analysis of capital, into concepts.<sup>79</sup> As distinct from Althusser and his dualist conception of the relationship between the real object and the object of knowledge<sup>80</sup>, this issue is usually formulated in the reconstruction debate within the theoretical framework of a Marxian critique of ideology: Marx distinguishes between “esoteric” and “exoteric” levels in the works of classical political economy. If the former contains insights into the social context of mediation of the bourgeois mode of production, the latter is content with an unmediated description and systematization of the objective forms of thought of the everyday consciousness of social actors, remaining trapped in the reified illusion of the immediacy of phenomena which are in fact socially mediated. So the “exoteric” argumentation cannot be traced back psychologically to subjective deficiencies or even conscious attempts at deception on the part of theorists. It results from a determinate form of thought which is the systematic and initially involuntary product of the forms of social intercourse of the capitalist mode of production. The reconstruction debate would now apply the esoteric/exoteric distinction to Marx’s work itself.

Ultimately, even in the critique of political economy and in historical materialism – that is to say in the theoretical praxis regarded at the previous stage of reconstruction as an intact “esoteric” layer – “exoteric” content and conceptual ambivalence “between scientific revolution and classical tradition”<sup>81</sup> are manifest. The doctrine of the inviolability of the presentation of the critique of political economy in *Capital* is finally discarded. In place of the legend of a linear progression of knowledge on Marx’s part, there appeared the recognition of a complex coexistence and interpenetration of progress and regression in the method of presentation and the state of research of Marx’s critique of economy. Ultimately, the increased popularization of the presentation of the analysis of the forms of value from the *Grundrisse* to the second edition of *Capital* was pointed out. This popularization, to the extent that it increasingly concealed the form-genetic method, offered points of reference to historicist and substantialist readings.<sup>82</sup>

#### **IV. Learning Processes within Marxism**

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Since there is not enough space within the framework of this text to elucidate even approximately the aspects of a scientific revolution – internal learning processes, but also regressions to traditional economic and historical-philosophical positions in Marx’s work – I will attempt to briefly mention some of the points arrived at in the above-mentioned learning processes within Marxism.

Marx’s theory does not affirm some kind of automatic liberation; rather, it should be understood as the theoretical instance of a body of work, mediated by analysis and critique, contributing to the liberation from the automatism of an irrational mode of socialization. Marx’s assertion that he grasps the development of the capitalist mode of production as “a

process of natural history,”<sup>83</sup> often cited by both Marxists and anti-Marxists as proof either of the highest scientific status of Marx’s work or of unscientific prophecy, should be understood as a critical statement. “Nature” or “naturalness” are negatively determined categories for a social system that, on the basis of its constitution by the private division of labor, asserts itself with regard to social actors as a relentless machine using up abstract labor, as a “destiny of value” beyond all collective and individual control and yet reproducing itself by means of their activity.

Marx’s theory is “a unified critical judgment on previous history, to the effect that men have allowed themselves to be degraded into objects of the blind and mechanical process of its economic development.”<sup>84</sup> While Marx does succumb to a historical optimism that often tips over into a philosophy of history in the declamatory sections of his works, this is fundamentally contradicted by his scientific critique of philosophies of history and political economy.<sup>85</sup> But it is precisely from these clichés that the Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals, as well as the more educated among those who disdain Marx, paste together an abstruse system of iron historical necessities, up to and including a “law of the sequence of social formations” which establishes the “general historically necessary tendency of the progress of the human species.”<sup>86</sup>

The critique of political economy, which in the form of Marx’s late works “does not withstand comparison with the immanent claim of the programmatic declaration in *The German Ideology*,”<sup>87</sup> namely of presenting the capitalist mode of production in its totality, can be presented as a process of four critiques: 1) the critique of bourgeois society and its destructive “natural” forms of development, against the background of the real, objective possibility it generates of its own emancipatory transcendence, 2) the critique of the fetishized and backward everyday consciousness of social actors systematically generated by these social relations, 3) the critique of the entire theoretical field of political economy<sup>88</sup>, which uncritically systematizes these common perceptions, and 4) the critique of utopian social criticism, which either confronts the system of the capitalist mode of production with a model of social liberation, or presumes to bring isolated economic forms to bear against the system as a whole by means of reforms.<sup>89</sup> The critique is therefore not immanent in the sense that it would affirm the determinations of exchange, bourgeois ideals, proletarian demands for rights, or industrial production (which is subsumed to capital) against capitalism as a whole.

The method of the critique of economy can be described as the “development” or “analysis of forms.” It aims to grasp the specific sociality of historically distinct modes of production. Whereas “bourgeois” approaches conduct at best a science of the reproduction of society *within* specific economic and political forms, a critique of political economy must be conceived of as a science *of* these forms.<sup>90</sup> Political economy operates at the level of already constituted economic objects, takes them empirically as a given, or can only justify their existence in a circular manner, without conceptually penetrating the systematic process of

their constitution. It succumbs to the self-mystification of the capitalist world of objects as a world of natural forms <sup>91</sup>, thus depriving humans of the ability to configure and alter *their fundamental structures*.

In contrast, form-analysis develops these forms (such as value, money, capital, but also law and the state) from the contradictory conditions of the social constitution of labor, “clarifies them, grasps their essence and necessity.” <sup>92</sup> Form *development* is not to be understood as the retracing of the historical development of the object, but rather the conceptual deciphering of the immanent structural relationships of the capitalist mode of production. It unscrambles the apparently independent, apparently objectively grounded forms of social wealth and the political compulsion of the capitalist mode of production as *historically specific* and therefore – albeit in no way arbitrarily or in a piecemeal manner – as *changeable* forms of praxis.

Traditional as well as Western Marxism had completely ignored the revolutionary scientific potential of Marx’s approach, his *theory of the monetary constitution* of value. Above all, the *neue Marx-Lektüre* criticized the empiricist-historicist misinterpretation of the method of presentation that started with Engels, and the “premonetary” interpretation of the theory of value in *Capital*, but also ambivalences in Marx’s work itself and the popularization of his method, which meant “forgoing a systematic elaboration of fundamental ideas of value theory and methodology.” <sup>93</sup> Engels and Traditional Marxism interpreted different levels of abstraction of the presentation of the laws of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital* as empirically coequal levels of a model of historically distinct modes of production. Thus categories such as abstract labor, value, and the elementary form of value were reinterpreted in an empiricist way, and the connection between commodity, money, and capital – considered essential by Marx – was transformed into a coincidence. Marxism thus operated on a methodological and value-theoretical terrain that Marx had criticized with regard to classical economics. However, Marx’s *critique* of political economy is distinct from an alternative political economy in primarily two respects: in the first instance it is not the theory of surplus-value, but rather the form theory of labor that distinguishes Marx from classical political economy. Marx criticizes the way political economy unreflectively presupposes the form of “value,” never questioning its genesis, unable to grasp labor that takes the form of value as a historically specific social form (the question is not raised as to “why labour is represented by the value of its product” <sup>94</sup>). Political economy therefore operates fundamentally within the field of fetishistic forms. Moreover, Marx criticizes the premonetary character of its value theory, since it “treat[s] the form of value as a thing of no importance, as having no connection with the inherent nature of commodities,” <sup>95</sup> meaning it does not distinguish between intrinsic and external measure of value as categories existing at two different levels of theoretical abstraction, and does not grasp the necessity of the money-form for the exchange of commodities. Money is understood as a purely technical instrument which for reasons of convenience takes the place of exchange on the basis of calculations of labor-time magnitudes. In Marx’s work, on the other hand, money is developed as a necessary moment in the process of commodity exchange. Without a *general* form of value,



commodities cannot represent value for each other, and would be reduced to the status of products. One must therefore proceed from the “equiprimordial” constitution of abstract labor as a *logically* prior immanent measure of value, and money as the external measure of value. In this sense, Marx speaks of the substance of value as a result obtained in exchange which furthermore first acquires an intertemporal existence as capital. In contrast to the empiricism and ahistoricism of political economy, Marx’s approach thus reveals itself to be a perception of essence in the sense of the reconstruction of a structure and system of agency which is empirically not immediately perceivable – by means of the elaboration of a non-empirical theoretical level which first makes possible the explanation of empirical forms of appearance, such as money. Marx follows “a principle of the development of economic categories by distinguishing between different levels of abstraction.”<sup>96</sup> Categories such as abstract labor or value therefore have no immediate empirical referents. The sequence of the categories of commodity and money is not to be understood as a historical sequence of independently existing circumstances, but rather as a conceptual analysis.

## Overview of the Marxisms

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	<b>Important Theorists</b>	<b>Central Reference Texts of Marx/Engels</b>	<b>Core Concept: Marx’s Theory as...</b>
Traditional Marxism [1878ff.]	[F. Engels], K. Kautsky, E. Bernstein, Lafargue, F. Mehring, A. Bebel, G. Plekhanov, etc.(= 1st Generation); V.I. Lenin, L. Trotsky, R. Luxemburg, N. Bukharin, M. Adler, R. Hilferding (= 2nd Generation)	<i>Claim: Doctrine of the materialist conception of history as the center of the collaborative works of Marx and Engels</i> Engels: <i>Anti-Dühring</i> , Ludwig Feuerbach, “Review of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859) etc. Marx: <i>Capital Vol. 1</i> – Chapter 32, “Preface” to <i>Critique</i> (1859), <i>Manifesto</i> (M/E)	Closed, coherent proletarian worldview and doctrine of the evolution of nature and history (“becoming and passing away”)

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Western Marxism [1923ff.]	G. Lukács, K. Korsch, E. Bloch, H. Lefebvre, Frankfurt School, A. Gramsci, K. Kosik, Yugoslav Praxis-Group (G. Petrovic, P. Vranicki, etc.), Budapest School (A. Heller, G. Markus, etc.), L. Kofler, J.-P. Sartre	<i>Claim: Humanist early work as interpretative framework for the “scientific” later works</i> Marx: “Theses on Feuerbach,” 1844 <i>Manuscripts, The German Ideology</i> (M/E)	Critical-revolutionary theory of social praxis (“subjective mediation of the object”)
<i>neue Marx-Lektüre</i> [1965ff.]	[Predecessors: I.I. Rubin, E. Paschukanis] H.G. Backhaus, H. Reichelt, D. Wolf, H.D. Kittsteiner, M. Heinrich, SOST, Projekt Klassenanalyse/PEM, S. Breuer, State-Derivation Debate (B. Blanke, D. Läßle, MG, J. Hirsch, W. Müller/ Ch. Neusüß, N. Kostede, etc.)	<i>Claim: apprehending the whole Marx, or later works as interpretative framework for the early works</i> Marx: <i>Grundrisse, Capital Vol. I</i> first edition, <i>Urtext</i> , “Results of the Immediate Process of Production”	Deciphering and Critique of the Forms of capitalist socialization by means of logical-systematic method of presentations (“form-development and critique”)

– Translated by Alexander Locascio

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