PETER BEILHARZ

21 Karl Marx

One Marx, or many? Both, or all of the above. The work of Marx can be interpreted in various different ways, including the early romantic critique of the 'Paris Manuscripts', Marx the philosopher, the historical anthropology of *The German Ideology*, the critical history of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* or *The Civil War in France*, Marx the historian, the private brainstorming of *Grundrisse*, the later critical economy of *Capital*, Marx the economist, and so on. And there is a panoply of interpretations, and the subsequent 57 varieties of Marxism—Bolshevism, social democracy, Trotskyism, Maoism, critical theory, Western Marxism, council communism, and so forth—all of which pick up one theme or other in Marx's writing—too much to make sense of.

One way to argue the unity of Marx's thought, rather than its fragmentation and subsequent proliferation into various Marxes, is to read his project as possessing a single over-arching theme: the critique of political economy. Marx's theoretical work began as romantic critique, subsequently to become ensnared within political economy itself. It was only after Marx's death in 1883 that his work was to become widely influential, but in the truncated forms of propaganda developed by the Soviets in the east and in the models of society encouraged by professional sociologists in the West. Like Weber's thought, Marx's theory lost much of its critical impact in the hands of stratification theorists. But the trajectory of Marx's own theory was also one which became progressively less critical and more fully locked into the logic of industrialism.

THE PARIS MANUSCRIPTS

The question of the relationship between the young and the 'mature' Marx was a major motif in the Marx renaissance that spread from the 1960s on. It was not just a spectacle organised by publishers and aca-

demics. The fundamental question involved was whether Marx's theory was continuous or whether there was some kind of qualitative shift in his work. Whatever the continuity, the path of Marx's own work is one from *praxis* to structure, from action to system.

Marx set out in his *Paris Manuscripts*, published in German in 1932 and in English only in the 1960s, to put political economy to the test. Classical political economists such as Smith and Ricardo had recognised the central economic contribution which labour made to the production of wealth or value, but they would not give labour its proper place in politics or in society. Partly they did this by fudging the nature of the *process* of the production of wealth, as though property preceded labour, whereas property was actually the result of creative labour or *praxis*, the sensuous human activity through which humanity constituted itself. Labour thus expended its lifeblood in creating capital which (to use a later image) turned on labour like a vampire (Marx 1867: 245; 1844: 322–34). This critique of political economy took Marx to the philosophical critique of the division of labour. His early work echoes the German romantics, such as Schiller; the orientation is to cast backward, and to contrast a postulated image of humanity as a whole before industrialism, a species which does not know alienation, to its dismembered, dethroned condition under capitalism. Alienation, the division of humans and their individual subdivision: these only arrive with capitalist civilisation.

The undercurrent in this argument is the necessity of human or proletarian redemption, which Marx progressively redefines as he enters the labyrinth of economy itself. By redemption Marx imagines the simultaneous supersession of private property (capital) and the recovery of human integrity. The issue here is that while Marx chooses to identify human suffering as a central social and theoretical problem, he also ascribes a central status to labour as the suffering and redemptive agent. The bearer of socialism, Marx tells, is the proletariat, the 'last class'—he portrays it as a mythical actor, inserting a teleology in history but also imputing the historic task of socialism to a particular class, as though a general cause could be pursued by a particular agent (Marx 1844: 333–48). The image of socialism in Marx's early work is thus that of a society of craft-labourers. By *The German Ideology* Marx's image of the socialist future is closer to the Renaissance (Marx and Engels 1845: 47).

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels also began to address the question of ideology, criticising—ironically, given the privileging of the proletariat in their theory—the pretensions of the bourgeoisie that their own interests were the popular and general interests. In 1848 Marx and Engels published their most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto*, a brilliant polemic sketching one key dimension of Marx's project: the profoundly *ambivalent* assessment of capitalist civilisation, which made everything possible, as it were, and simultaneously denied humanity its

potential for self-realisation. It was a brilliant achievement, anticipating Tönnies, Simmel, Seabrook and Berman, and drawing on inspiration such as Carlyle ('the cash nexus') and on Goethe's image of the sorcerer's apprentice. The bourgeoisie conjured up an economic spell of manic growth which it could not control; Marx simply sidestepped the question of whether this was a problem for which the proletariat was the solution.

The *Manifesto* also returned to the theme of history, discussed in *The German Ideology*. Here came the axiom that all history was the history of class struggle. For the young Marx, class struggle was the pivot; for the later Marx, it was class structure, labour and capital as formal categories. Here Marx planted the two-class model which sociologists and historians were later to seize upon and which also became concepts central to *Capital*. History was not merely the history of struggling classes—modern history was the titanic struggle between the two fundamental classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat.

THE GRUNDRISSE

Marx's shift from action to structure was politically determined by the defeat of the 1848 revolutions. If the world did not change, the obvious question was why not. How did it reproduce itself? (Korsch 1938: 114). This was to become the essential logic of *Capital*, a systems logic, an explanation of capitalist production, how it functioned and how it would allegedly dysfunction, collapse and inaugurate socialism. Marx's major transitional work here was the *Grundrisse*, the Notebooks for *Capital*. There are three major themes worth indicating here. First, in the '1857 Introduction' Marx discussed questions of epistemology and methodology (Marx 1857: 100–8). Marx's views were not novel, but his canvassing of the issues enabled the English readers of the *Grundrisse*, sometimes under the influence of Althusser, to begin to pose questions about claims to knowledge and premises of the construction of knowledge. Certainly the logic of Marx's approach was that knowledge is constructed and not 'discovered', and though Marx sometimes claimed the status of science for his work, this suggested that human science was a qualitatively different kind of endeavour to natural science. Thus Marx implicitly aligned his project back to Vico's proposition that humans know best that which is unique to them: human history itself.

This brings us to the second theme. Marx also discusses here the question of the transition from feudalism, in a passage much discussed in the *Science and Society* debate of the 1950s (Marx 1857: 471–98; Hilton 1976). The point here is less the content of Marx's views than the fact that his project was still governed by a sense of what apparently had happened in history; by *Capital*, history was marginalised, being introduced only into chapter 10. By *Capital*, then, Marx returned to his

earlier sense that History was necessity, a necessary process leading from feudalism to capitalism to socialism rather than a contingent process in which masses of men and women *chose* socialism. This problem of automatism or teleology also underlines the third pertinent theme of the *Grundrisse*. In a passage picked up later by Marcuse (1964: 42), Marx shifted to the proposition that the technological revolution and not the class struggle might inaugurate socialism. The internal developmental logic of capitalism was such that automation would pull the rug out from under class relations (Marx 1857: 704–6). The agent of history again became mythologised: the actors were not the sensuous, suffering human beings who populated the pages of Marx's early work, but the forces of history, or now, of economy, and even technology.

The *Grundrisse* has left us some of the most fascinating evidence of Marx's intellectual process, that twenty-year long labour which eventually culminated in the final publication of *Capital* Volume One in 1867. In 1859, however, Marx published another signpost to *Capital*, his 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Partly because of the codification of Marxism by his followers into the twentieth century, the book was less frequently read than the preface was. It was in the 1859 *Preface* that Marx, in passing, offered a thumbnail sketch of his project: to find the secret of bourgeois society in political economy. This was necessary, Marx claimed, because economy was the fundamental determinant, upon which there arose a legal and political superstructure and definite forms of social consciousness. In broad outline, humanity progressed from Asiatic, ancient and feudal to bourgeois modes of production, as productive forces came into conflict with existing class relations (Marx 1859: 20–1). This relatively innocent sketch of an intellectual agenda subsequently became catechism for generations of socialists and communists: base-determined superstructure; explain economy and all else is explained; socialism is inevitable, and so on. Marx, for his own part, may not have subscribed to all these cliches, but he did provide elaborate reasons for viewing capitalism as the central phenomenon of modernity, simultaneously the agent of its own self-promotion and its own downfall.

CAPITAL

The culmination of Marx's science and of his mythology is *Capital*. Chapter 1, 'Commodities', is the most theoretically significant part of the work and also the most difficult. Marx provides a devastating critique of capitalist and utilitarian ethics. He sets the cue on the opening page of the 1859 *Contribution*, where he refers to Aristotle's *Politics*: a shoe is made for wearing, not for exchange—things have their own reasons for being, they are not commensurable. Yet commodification makes everything commensurable—two books are 'worth' one coat,

four meals—everything, lamentably, has its price. Bourgeois society, in short, reduces human value to economic value, and it levels out the differences which ought to be characteristic of everyday life. Our labours disappear into things, which then come to dominate us, appear to precede us and, fetish-like, we fall into praise of this artificial world. Thus Marx begins the carefully constructed narrative of *Capital*, leading us from the surface or end of the process into the Dante's inferno of production.

The substance of the book concerns a critical analysis of capitalist production; it is, in a sense, a pioneering sociology of the modern factory. It is not a *history* of capitalism, although history is discussed—the history of labour legislation, primitive accumulation: the bloody emergence of capitalism via the enclosure acts—and it reappears in the penultimate chapter, where socialist revolution steps unexpectedly on the stage: negations are negated, the expropriators expropriated, etc. Here, at least, there is one element of continuity with the *Paris Manuscripts*: the inevitability of socialism as redemption is again asserted, and the struggle is still primarily that between the two fundamental classes and the concepts they represent—labour and capital. What, then, happens to the class struggle, which Marx earlier viewed as the central fact of history? One response would be that *Capital* is not a work of history, but of theory; but the obvious response would be, what happens to history in Marx's theory? Where have the actors gone? What has happened to the other classes? (Rundell 1987; Beilharz 1985). Such is the objection raised, in different ways, by Castoriadis and Touraine; and there are numerous other criticisms such as Pateman's refusal of Marx's category labour-power as disembodied. For if Marx, in a sense, leaves the class struggle out, he also leaves the sex struggle out (except that he makes one important point: capitalism as a system itself is indifferent to gender: it will happily exploit anyone and everyone).

Capital remains, in all, one of the most extraordinary of works in social theory. Its architecture is splendid, and its narrative compelling and replete with insight. Its difficulty, by contemporary standards, lies in its attempt to produce the proper general theory of capitalism. Consequently, everyday life and the world system, the endless peculiarities and complexities of particular experience, are left out. The obvious response to such criticism is that it is a general work, but this is to beg the question whether it is better to shift from the general to the particular or the other way round. Certainly the idea of discussing capital today outside the world system is less than persuasive. The more general issue remains, however, whether this is an economic theory or a social theory; whether a theory of capitalist production can claim to comprehend all that is social and cultural; whether, in plainer terms, life can be reduced to labour. Marx himself was no enthusiast for the centrality of economy—he directed the first chapter of *Capital* against it. Yet he also

came to accept industrialism as fate, and to reconstruct his image of socialism in the grey colours of the city rather than the shades of the countryside. At the same time, his longing was always for the past, as well as the future (Prawer 1978). In terms of social theory, he is arguably still best read as a critic of capitalist culture rather than as a system builder for, like Weber, Nietzsche and Freud, he was nothing if not critical.

Marx's reception has been complicated, in Australia as elsewhere, both by his political and scholarly followers. Marxism has a long tradition of influence through the labour movement. With the expansion and radicalisation of the tertiary education system into the 1960s, Marcuse (and Gramsci) became popular, along with the writings of the young Marx. Marxism became influential in sociology via the work of Connell and Irving (1980), via Habermas in Theophanous (1980) and Frankel (1983) and Pusey (1991), via Althusser in cultural studies and political economy, as well as through the influence of Europeans and North Americans such as Braverman (1974), Mandel (1975) and Carchedi (1977). Enthusiasm for Marx's early works was also fuelled by the Australian sojourn of Agnes Heller. We are left with a situation in which, thanks to postmodernism, Marx is not even read to be 'forgotten' let alone remembered. This is unfortunate, because the end of Marx's own grand narrative also represents a potential beginning for many smaller, more local stories which remain to be told, heard, argued about and acted upon.

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