

# 'Forschungsweise' und 'Darstellungsweise': Marx on Research Methodology and the Status of Theory

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## Introduction

Let us consider first why we should at all concern ourselves with revisiting Karl Marx and assessing the theoretical relevance of his writings for contemporary development studies. What exactly do we mean by "theoretical legacy"? What does it imply to "inherit" something theoretically, and what does one do with one's "heritage"? Here is a short list of possibilities:

a) Do we intend to assess if Marx's theory of history and capitalist development is still correct in its entirety and capable of providing the point of departure for stringent analyses of the interaction between developed and underdeveloped societies and, on this basis, accept it or reject it?

b) Is our approach that Marx's theory might be basically correct, but needs to be modified and expanded in the light of changes which have occurred in the world system and the nature of its societies since the late 19th century?

c) Are we assuming that Marx's understanding of societal development and his way of theorising are now outdated, but that some of his views and elements of his theoretical outlook and of his methodology may be eclectically saved, reinterpreted and incorporated with other inspirations to form constellations of theory and approaches which are relevant to our present conditions of modernity? This is what John Martinussen seems to imply in his introduction when he says that we lose nothing in Marx if we transform his "epistemological assumptions" into "methodological propositions" and combine them with similarly extrapolated propositions from Weber and other theoreticians?

d) Or are we regarding Marx's work as having only importance within the history of theory and philosophy, as something uniquely perceptive and comprehensive in its grasp and power of representation in its own time, and hoping to be able to draw inspiration from it in this capacity as we may from other great literature of the past? This seems to be the impact of the arguments presented both by Anthony Giddens in his

comments on Marx's "totalising" social theory and by Jean-Philippe Platteau in his presentation of Marx's theory of history.

## **Marx and the Garbage Heap of History**

Many aspects of life in what Anthony Giddens refers to as late modern, late 20th century society appear to have relegated Marx to the garbage heap of history.

a) The collapse of economies and social structures in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe allegedly guided by Marxist theory and socialist political philosophy (these events have definitely given Marx a bad name, but one should perhaps hesitate to blame him personally for the statues put up to him and for 20th century experiments with the practical implementation of socialist modes of production).

b) The emergence in strength of forms of politics and systems of rule basing themselves apparently more on identifications and dynamics of religion, ethnicity or other communalisms than on those of capitalist interest and economically rooted principles of class and contradicting the secularisation, individualisation and democratic potential which Marx envisaged as growing out of the gaining dominance of abstract labour and class orientation of social identity.

c) Changes in the world system and world hegemony which do not so much indicate the globalisation and unification of a capitalist mode of production as a diversification into blocks of market economies with such differences in potentials, institutional frameworks, trends of development and mutual integration that it has little explanatory reason to try to identify common denominators of development or modernisation in the way a Marx living today might have envisaged. A situation in which transnationalisation coincides with the organisation of new political forms of centres and with the emergence (after the demise of the "Second World") of a new type of Third World of economically and strategically "irrelevant" societies to be aided and policed without any perspective of eventual integration into world capitalism as described by international political economists like Robert Keohane.

d) Shifts in balances between social exploitation and environmental resources which appear to have undermined critically and irreversibly Marx's Faustian vision of the

development of humanity as progressive liberation from the "shackles of nature" (Naturwüchsigkeit).

e) In terms of the status and ambitions of his theory, Marx may appear to us now as the epitome of a 19th century dinosaur - building systems and thinking in global totalities in a way which is unsuited to help us come to terms with the dialectics of interaction between homogenisation and the creation of new forms of difference which appear to be characteristic of the present phase of modernity. The theory of Marx seems to envisage a process of unidirectional modernisation reaching its peak and culmination in the idea of a "bourgeois society" which may now already belong to the past and have given way to a much wider variety of societal and institutional frameworks than was imaginable a hundred years ago. The question is whether it is at all possible to formulate today, as Professor Giddens thinks, "a critical theory with totalising intent and practical implications"? If we think that it is, what status would such a theory have, would it benefit from entering into dialogue with the work of Marx, and what form could such a dialogue take?

In order to help discussion, it might be useful to consider again exactly how Marx regarded the status of his theoretical work, what he wrote about methodology, how he saw the relationship between the developmental logic he was aiming to reveal in capitalist relations of production, to consider if Marx had at all one or more theories of history and historical development, and if these have any relevance beyond the point in time at which they were formulated.

My negative position, to speak dialectically, is that one can at least dismiss a few of the attacks that have been launched at the nature of Marx's own theorising for being e. g. evolutionist and necessitist by looking more closely at what he wrote and distinguishing this from the formulations of later interpreters who happened to call themselves Marxists from Bernstein to Stalin. This leaves open the more positive question of what worthwhile insights might be furthered today by activating the heritage of Marx which I shall postpone dealing with until the end of the paper.

### **Marx's Methodology and the Status of his Theory**

The formulations on "Forschungsweise" and "Darstellungsweise" which are referred to in the title of the paper

appear in a postscript to the first volume of *Kapital* in one of Marx's attempts to summarise briefly his "scientific method". I translate from the German:

... the mode of presentation will have to distinguish itself in form from the mode of research. The process of research must appropriate the material ["den Stoff"] in detail, analyse its varieties of development and trace their inner connection. Only when this work has been completed, is it possible to represent correspondingly the real movement ["Bewegung"]. If this representation is successful, and if the life of the material ["das Leben des Stoffs"] is mirrored ideally, then it might appear as if we had to do with an a priori construction (MEW, vol. 23, p. 27).

One has to be careful with the brief summaries of method and theory provided by Marx in his various prefaces and letters as one must be with his journalistic formulations, which are often schematic and misleading in comparison with the fully unfolded presentations (which I shall come back to later), but in this case the sketch of method corresponds well with the most ambitious and interesting of Marx's writings on method, the "Einleitung" to the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* from August-September 1857.

This text is the fullest exposition we have of both Marx's dependence on Hegel and of his independence - his attempt to turn the poetry of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* into prose, or, more prosaically, make Hegel's dialectic walk on its feet. In "Einleitung", Marx describes what he calls "the scientifically correct ["wissenschaftlich richtige"] method" as an inductive-deductive one which he sees as radically different from Hegel's essentialist logic in which the self-development of the spirit generates and decides the forms of appearances of historical reality.

Marx, however, preserves the notion of a dialectic between an abstract and an empirical reality, but maintains that it is only possible to arrive at knowledge of the determining forms or structures of abstract reality, the "Realabstraktionen" or "das reale Subjekt" which lie at the heart of the social system's mode of functioning and developing, through a process of research which moves forward and backward between the interpretation and ordering of empirical phenomena into "thought abstractions" and the application of the effects of the working of these upon different levels of empirical reality until as close a relationship as possible has been established between "thought abstractions" and

"Realabstraktionen". In terms of status of theory and method, it is probably this - as I would argue - *non-absolutist* conceptual realism which provides contemporary readers with the greatest problems.

The next important point is that, unlike Hegel, Marx does not regard the interaction and relations of determination between "Realabstraktion" and empirical reality - and consequently also not his mode of research and representation - as universal, but as characteristic of and applicable to only "fully developed modern bourgeois society", which forms the object of his investigations, and whose fundamental determination is that of the form of value and the relationship between capital and wage labour.

It is the mystification and reification inherent in the forms of exchange value and capital which motivate and justify the methodological procedure outlined by Marx for the critique of political economy and its endeavour to uncover the relationship between "appearance" and "reality", between empirical phenomena which are only seemingly concrete and the underlying "laws" of social development. Consequently, the method of investigation and representation is also only valid within the realm of "fully developed modern bourgeois society whose "logic" of development Marx is attempting to understand.

Two important qualifications apply to the "lawfulness" or "logic" of the development of modern bourgeois society as Marx describes it. Firstly, it is a purely societal logic, grounded in the totalising effects of the capital relationship within modern society, and this distinguishes it from the forms of determination which guided the fate of all earlier types of society which were "embedded in nature" ("naturwüchsig") and dependent on the cruel arbitrariness of natural forces, and whose developments were therefore not bound by any "lawfulness" in the same sense of the word.

Similarly, the development of an imaginable future communist society, which would have liberated itself both from reliance on the whims of nature and the shackles of reified labour, would also not be dependent on laws of a comparable status, but only on the will, intention and agreement of its humans.

Secondly, the "lawfulness" which Marx aims at reconstructing theoretically for capitalist society has not the force of a law of nature, but constitutes rather a set of governing pressures or determinations, of developments which manifest themselves *δυναμει* or "der Tendenz nach" - two favourite

expressions of Marx.<sup>1</sup> Tendencies which are modified or checked by sets of counteracting tendencies, and whose validity and power of asserting themselves depend basically on the levels of understanding and the powers of action of human agents.

Thus, on the basis of the above, I would argue that Marx - in terms of his methodology and the status he assigns to the central body of his theory - can be classified neither as a) a Hegelian "Wesenslogiker", b) an evolutionist, c) a necessitist (as he was accused of being by David Booth in the late 1980s debate on Marx, Weber and development studies in *World Development*), d) a structuralist (in the understanding of Althusser, Poulantzas, or John Martinussen), nor e) a general theoretician of history (as is, I think, assumed in the contribution by Jean-Philippe Platteau).

### From Prehistory to the End of History

"Einleitung" as well as other parts of *Grundrisse* - such as the section on "Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen" - also contain central formulations by Marx relating to his understanding of history. I translate again (though it is somehow difficult to get this to work quite the same way in English):

Bourgeois society is the most developed and multi-faceted historical organisation of production. The categories which express its relationships, the understanding of its structure, at the same time provide insight into the structure and productive relations of all past ["untergegangenen"] societal forms, with the ruins and elements of which it has built itself and of which some remnants still drag themselves along within it without having been conquered/digested ["unüberwundene"], while what used to be mere indications ["Andeutungen"] have developed themselves into unfolded significances. The anatomy of the human being contains the key to the anatomy of the ape. The indications of something higher in the subordinate species of animals, on the other hand, can only be understood when the more highly developed is already known. The bourgeois economy provides the key to the understanding of that of antiquity, etc. (*Grundrisse*, p. 25-6).

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<sup>1</sup> Who was never reluctant to demonstrate "Bildung" and enrich his formulations with intertextual resonances from classic literature and philosophy - in this case Aristotle.

Because of being governed by purely societal forces, bourgeois society in the understanding of Marx is the first one *to have* a history, or, at least the history of bourgeois society is radically different from the histories of earlier forms of society. From the point of view of Marx's modernity, their development provides a *prehistory* of gradually and more or less accidentally bringing together the elements of productive forces, money, trade, "emancipated" labour, collapse of feudal power, forms of state, etc. which make it possible for the dynamic "lawfulness" of capitalist history to establish itself.

At the same time, capitalist society also in a sense represents the end of history, since, in its turn, it builds the preconditions for the establishment of a different form of social organisation in which directions of development are not guided either by blind natural or reified social forces, but by the conscious efforts of human beings.

Alongside this "hard" theory of history - which is more properly a theory of capitalist development for which scientific categories of understanding can be constructed - there exists in Marx's writings a much "softer" or vaguer philosophy of historical materialism and the interaction between man and nature which has a very different status. This philosophy is articulated in Marx's early writings, most poetically in the Paris manuscripts on economy and philosophy from 1843-44, but it continues to exist as a general backdrop in the later writings like *Kapital* and *Grundrisse*:

All forms of society have a specific production which decides and whose productive relations decide the priority and influence of all other [forms of production]. It provides a general lighting in which all other colours are tinged and which modifies their specificity. It is a certain ether which determines the special gravity of all which comes to existence in it (*Grundrisse*, p. 27).

It is therefore wrong, I think, to argue that there is an "epistemological break" between the younger and the older Marx, in the way Althusser and his followers have done. Instead, one could conclude that Marx - instead of formulating a general theory of history and of stages of historical development whose categories in his view would be unscientific - combines a theory of capitalist development with a not similarly elaborated philosophy of historical materialism which contains also elements of a sort of historical existentialism - of man through history becoming

individualised and realising his potentials as "Gattungswesen" - "species being".

### **Base and superstructure, structure and agency**

The status of the lawfulness of capitalist development as "dynamic tendency" has implications in other respects also - for Marx's understanding of the relationship between economic structures, politics, culture and human agency, and for his views on the globalisation of capitalist relations of production.

I think the notions of "base" and "superstructure" - which again belong among the shorthand explanatory summaries emerging in the prefaces - are misleading as it is clear from Marx's understanding of his central economic categories as *relations* (capital as the relationship between capital and wage labour etc.) that the categories presuppose frameworks which are determined or consolidated by forces of power, jurisdiction and so on. And it is similarly clear that the working out of the lawfulness of capitalist development is influenced and modified by the possible action and counter-action of e. g. the state and organised labour, though Marx never got as far as elaborating on this in his grandiosely ambitious theoretical descent from abstractions in general through abstractions in their specificity to the actual demonstration of the unfolding of the lawfulness in historical reality.

In his contribution, John Martinussen sees Marx's journalistic writings on India from 1853 and from 1857 as contradicting each other in their respective underlining of the progressiveness and destructiveness of the impact of British colonial and capitalist domination. But is it really surprising that both these aspects should be prominent simultaneously in the mind of a dialectic theoretician? Or, that Marx, particularly his letters and journalism, should be at some times more euphoric about "the civilising tendency of capital" than at others - the changes of mood and outlook linking themselves to the possible outcome of periodical crises in a world capitalist system whose establishment he thought to be witnessing?

The letters and drafts of letters to Vera Sassulitsch from the 1880s, which debate the possibility of a direct transition - in the case of a Russian revolution - from the pre-capitalist *narod* community to socialism, explicitly see this possibility as dependent on the simultaneous existence of the capitalist world market and



the opportunity to incorporate all "the positive results which have been achieved through the capitalist system." So it is not convincing either to point to these epistulatory formulations as representing an "alternative" Marx, less preoccupied with lawfulness and tendencies of structural determination.

What is perhaps more interesting in Marx, and becomes an important theme in the debates of the Second International on colonialism from the 1890s onwards (which are in many ways more inspiring than the later discussions of Lenin's contribution), is the open-endedness of his understanding of the world market. Colonisation and the expansion of the world market may both further globalisation and the intensification of capitalist development and at the same time provide a modifying counter-tendency by offering an opportunity for "extensive" expansion of accumulation through exploitative production which does not further the development of productivity, but postpones the tendential fall in the rate of profit and thereby also the prospect of the great liberating crisis or "Zusammenbruch".

Marx did not live long enough to take personal part in this debate, in which three prototypes of argument regarding the possibilities of human action interfering with the lawfulness of world capitalist development become prominent: One which sees socialist interest as lying with a support for the "civilising tendency of capital" and the development of "higher stages" of global capitalism through colonisation; a second type favouring the development of socialist colonial policies to be implemented in the case of a socialist take-over of state power through parliamentary elections; and, finally, a minority position which regards colonisation as prolonging the life span of the capitalist system and, in the case of e. g. Belfort Bax and Rosa Luxemburg, argues the need for an alliance between European workers and colonised peoples in resisting imperialist expansion.

What is most striking, however, about the debates of the international socialist community in the period immediately after the death of Marx, and indicative of the political and intellectual environment of which he was part and into which his theoretical efforts were fed, is the extreme ignorance and degree of prejudice characteristic of the great majority of formulations on non-European people and parts of the world.

There is no particular need for us today to be condescending in retrospect about this, but to me it underlines more than anything else the historicity of the whole debate and of the context of Marx's contribution. It makes one feel more urgently and

dramatically than do Marx's own writings when read in isolation how far we are today from the late nineteenth century, and how different the present *fin-du-siècle* is from the previous one.

### Living with Legacies

Coming back then to the question of the meaningfulness of Marx's theoretical legacy for us today as development scholars, this must be seen as predominantly historical. Marx's work belongs to the great literary achievements of the mid- and late nineteenth century and may inspire us as such, but if we seek seriously to extrapolate elements from it, as others have proposed, and change their theoretical and methodological status, then we are indeed implementing an epistemological break rather than accommodating a legacy.

Marx's main theoretical contribution was the non-absolutist conceptual realism which he sought to demonstrate in the movement and mediation of categories in *Kapital* and *Grundrisse* as constituting the tendential lawfulness of development of a global totality.

If it is not possible to subscribe to such an understanding of theory today, we might still learn from it by seeing it in context as an impressive contribution to the development of dialogue within a tradition of socialist and democratic, intellectual and action-oriented, endeavour to come to terms with the "blindness" of modernisation. And we might well wish to carry this tradition forward by attempting to renew its meaning in our own circumstances.

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