

Introduction: Marxisms lost and found

Andrew Pendakis and Imre Szeman

I

The confluence of the collapse of the Soviet Union with what was quickly framed as a new and inexhaustible paradigm of American-style growth worldwide, generated a tremendously persuasive historical narrative, one in which Marx became the signifier *par excellence* of theoretical hubris, redundancy, and error. In a flash, the Marxist cosmos, complete with whatever remained of its claim upon the future, disappeared. In its place emerged an order we once referred to euphemistically (and perhaps even a touch hopefully) as “globalization,” but which we have since come to realize was little more than an ever fiercer and more menacing capitalism in disguise. Although continuously emphasizing its historical novelty, this was an order simultaneously convinced of its own eternity and naturalness, a system of living and believing that claimed to have left behind for good the petty limits and aporias of ideological thinking. Not only did neoliberal hegemony rewrite history, it elided our capacity to speculate (retrospectively) alternative narrative arcs and possibilities, negating the ontological right of the past to its own contingency and open-endedness. Although virtually no Sovietologist in the 1980s would have predicted the imminent fall of the Soviet Union, from the angle of the 1990s Marxism was not merely defeated, but born dead, *impossible from the very beginning*.

It is essential to remember that in 1979 there was no reason to believe that the election of Margaret Thatcher was anything but an anomaly on a planet that was still, if not really *moving* Left, at least idling there. Capitalism was in crisis, gripped by unemployment, inflation, recession, and industrial unrest. Marxism, though certainly beleaguered everywhere

after 1980, was nevertheless a corporeal institutional universe. Included in this universe were not only those regimes explicitly governed by principles (ostensibly) derived from Marx's work—states governing almost one-third of the planet's population—but the whole ramifying complex of Marx-inflected political movements (in El Salvador, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, etc.), institutes, publications, union, and university connections that existed all over the world. From the vestigial Marxist-Leninist groupuscles and parties that still toiled from Paris to La Paz, to Western Marxist students and professors on university campuses around the world, to the material infrastructure and prestige of social democracy (surely an echo of Marx if ever there was one), Marxism then possessed a quiddity, *an empire of things* (MIGs, offices, rubles) such that it could in no way be placed *unequivocally* on the list of history's future extinct. It was a hundred years of ambivalent knowledge and practice, inseparable success, and failure, a vast configuration of inertia and possibility—and yet it was swept into oblivion at light speed.

This can be partially explained by the fact that the United States in the 1990s appeared to have definitively detached itself from a broad range of nagging twentieth-century materialities and limits. A novel species of growth—intensive rather than extensive, continuous rather than intermittent—seemed to be in the process of establishing itself, as business cycles and manufacturing-based trade surpluses dissolved into the debt-financed effervescence of the “new economy.” Growth without inflation (and without explicit unemployment), the apparent stabilization of wages, housing, and stock prices that appeared to rise without a hint of ceiling: all of these had the effect of producing the fantasy of an economy capable of resolving every possible social contradiction and tension. Although growth has had associations with utopic, depoliticized abundance in the United States since at least World War II, the dependence of the 1990s on highly fetishized technological innovation, especially in communications and medicine, imbued it with an aura of qualitative difference, a new order charged with connotations of social connectivity, ontological variety, and novel forms of political liberty. Even if the Soviet Union hadn't collapsed, the disconnect between its extensive growth—“stupid” flows of steel and wheat—and the American magic of computers would have been enough to secure a narrative of socialist backwardness and failure. Compact discs and social networks on one side of the Berlin Wall, steam-belching Fordist factories encrusted with dirt and rust on the other: the Soviet Union wasn't just politically illegitimate, but an aesthetic failure.

For 20 years Marx was deprived the right to have even been the name for a process of thinking; he was no longer—whatever his limits and mistakes—a canonically un-ignorable philosopher, but a stick-figure killer, a blunderer, a brain on repeat. When not ignored entirely Marxism came to exist in most spaces of academic, journalistic, and governmental knowledge production

as the easiest of foils, a laughable (though grimly brutal) form of secularized religion. Even if it were to be confined to a mere emendation in the history of ideas, we are happy to affirm that this period of caricature and ignorance vis-à-vis the work of Marx is now ending. Within the domain of what we still routinely call “theory” the status of Marx has changed so dramatically that any genuine reckoning with the scale of the shift requires a dreamy flashback sequence through the period furniture, gestures, and dress of twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle* critique. For those of us who floated in and out of universities, especially English and Comp Lit departments around this time, the 1990s strike us as now fully sutured to their own specificity, a process that is only now discernible as a completed historico-spiritual unit. These years have a discernible scent, a particular modulation of light, a tell-tale tone of the voice. Describing something as “problematic”—that was the 1990s. Garrulous peons to the ineffable; denunciations of the violence inherent in universals and the impossibility of the general proposition; endless questing after innumerable limit-experiences, border zones, and outsides: whatever the continuing value of the theories informing these gestures, we can no longer deny that something has transpired within the intensity or coherence of their persuasiveness. Hegel’s great innovation, one adapted brilliantly by Marx himself, was his method of determinate inquiry into all that is dead and alive in an age. We see as incontrovertible the necessity of curating this difficult eye to the historical metabolism of discourses. It is from this methodological starting-point that we want to suggest that the *spirit* of the 1990s is fled, even if its *letters*—the texts and theories on which it was based—must continue to be learned from, and remain, in some very real way, irreplaceable.

From the angle afforded today by retrospection, the factor most characteristic of 1990s criticism was the almost complete absence of political economy. This was a tendency inherited via the French post-Nietzscheanism upon which so much 1990s thinking relied for its style, objects, and method. Marxist economic analysis of the kind practiced by (say) Joan Robinson, Harry Magdoff, or Ernst Mandel operated within disciplinary and conceptual coordinates so foreign to those of post-1968 French thought that the former could only be perceived by thinkers influenced by the latter as archaic, determinist, and plagued by untheorized metaphysical remainders. The language of political economy, rarely stylized or self-reflexive, emptied of the ritual skepticism and play endemic to the writing of the period, to say nothing of the (mistakenly) intuited proximity of this language to the stale rhetoric of institutionalized communism allowed for its consignment to the invisibility of the already said. Political economy was to post-1968 thought what the Fordist factory was to the design aesthetic of Apple stores: heavy and left behind by time instead of light, futural, and effervescent. The shift away from an earlier Structuralist investment in the objectivity of the social sciences and toward a post-Heideggerian paradigm

grounded in the epistemological fecundity of literature and artistic practice further marginalized economics as a particularly misguided echo from the ruined modern dream of a truth expressible in math.

This trend was only compounded by the sense that the century's communist revolutions, entranced by the *deus ex machina* of heavy infrastructure, had failed to de-link from the political space of nineteenth-century liberalism, conserving against (or within) their best intentions its disciplinary, statist, familialist, and productivist norms. Whether in the form of the self-transparent, rational *homo economicus* or a socialized new man, an isomorphism appeared from the perspective of the period between liberal and communist iterations of the economic. Both seemed to rely on rationalist, humanist subjects that were to varying extents grounded in nature (from Adam Smith's bartering essence to Marx's naturalized species being) just as both seemed intent on domesticating human experience in the normative disciplinary circuits of production/consumption. Economics became the very paradigm of disciplinarity, of a thought which, far from liberating bodies, worked instead to insidiously train and domesticate them.

Also at work behind the scenes was a certain discomfort with the entire conceptual terrain occupied by the motif of causality. Time and time again, Marx distinguishes historical materialist science from the vague—in fact idealist—moralisms of the “true socialists;” what they lack, according to Marx, is precisely an expository or analytic power, an understanding of just how it is that capitalism actually works. Although Marx's dialectical method protects him from allegations of positivism, he always conceived of his work as *within* the nineteenth-century tradition of scientific naturalism, and clearly believed that historical materialism unlocked provisionally not only the causal structure of the past, but that of the near future, insofar as it was tendentially contained within a dynamic, politically ambivalent present.

All of these ideas will fare badly in the context of the post-Nietzschean turn in French theory. Linked on the side of the object with Newtonian mechanism and on the side of the subject with crude associationism, causation would henceforth be largely seen as belonging to the same wrong-headed epistemological space as representation itself. In all of the great genealogical texts of Michel Foucault, and despite his avowed commitment to movement and flux, there is a clear—classically Structuralist—predilection for the synchronic: one gets complex snapshots of historical systems at different moments in time, but very little in the way of a concrete *narration* of the causal nexus which intermediates their difference. In the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, causal knowledge is to some extent forgone for a philosophy organized around the creation of percepts, affects, and concepts; knowledge, to paraphrase Foucault, is not made for understanding, but to cut, produce, or intervene.¹ In Jacques Derrida's

corpus, the task is to dust away the layers of the palimpsest, rather than to articulate mediations within a broader, determinative causal context. Generally speaking, 1990s criticism—drawing on the sources mentioned above, and with the notable exception of the work of Fredric Jameson—eschewed a knowledge grounded in the uncovering of causes (often etiolated unfairly as “origins”) for one anchored in the production and dispersion of effects. It was via this broad rejection of the category of causation that Marxism—always interested in the myriad ways in which culture, politics, and life are multiply determined (and determine) economic reality—could be reframed as determinist and necessitarian, the error of an enlightenment will to truth matched only by the proper name of (Pierre-Simon) Laplace.

Another factor in the theoretical eclipse of Marx was a key transformation in the way we understand power. With the post-1968 turn in French philosophy, exploitation notoriously drains out of its classical moorings in the primary capital/labour binary and saturates the whole field of social relations. This fission of exploitation into a fragmented cosmos of micro-oppressions characterized along axes of race, gender, and sexual orientation—a process which echoed urgent, contemporary social struggles—nevertheless scrambled the signal of Marx’s universal subject of history, and with it the grandeur and mythos of the revolutionary project itself. These “others” were not uninvited guests whose arrival spoiled the party: the latter was in many ways already moribund and should in fact have been re-rejuvenated by these new energies of dissidence and rebellion. At the time, however, for reasons that are complex and retrospectively intelligible, this division between the multiple subjectivities excluded by history and the universal subject named by Marx could only be registered as crisis.

Although power and domination now flooded into the tiniest gestures—ranging from the operations of language to the movement of a gaze, from relations between a doctor and their patient to the ostensible violence of metaphysics itself—it paradoxically emptied out of precisely those domains previously understood under the category of the economic. The experience of exploitation undergone in an increasingly globalized, de-regulated process of production; the low-wage, precarious, and benefit-less realities of life in the fast exploding service sector; the increasing financialization of existence, ranging from new practices of mass investment to unprecedented levels of personal and public indebtedness; the complete colonization of the time and space of experience by advertising and commodity exchange: all of this went largely unnoticed in the 1990s and has only been widely registered by critical and theoretical commentators in the last decade, often under the codewords of “globalization” or “neoliberalism.” The critical practice known as “cultural studies,” unmoored from its New Left origins and more and more widely practiced, *did* take note of some of these developments as they were occurring. But even in cultural studies, causation

and political economy tended to be pushed aside in favor of a thematics of identity, meaning, and culture.

This was not conspiracy or malice, but that overcompensation and hiding that always takes place in the transition between the closing of one paradigm and the opening of another. From the angle of 1990s criticism talk of economic domination—and by this we do not merely point to the drama of labor, production, and distribution, but the power capital has over time, over the future, and over space, bodies, and practices—was largely bypassed as vestigial, a question subtended by a pre-Foucauldian conception of power that could no longer be taken seriously. With the ideas of the Marquis de Sade always there in the background of many of the period's most influential thinkers—Foucault, Pierre Klossowski, and Jean-François Lyotard come to mind—oppression itself lost its own transparency and social suffering became suddenly reinscribable as unconscious or transgressive pleasure. In the context of what was essentially a generalized nominalism, particularities, fragments, and identities flourished, and with them a conception of politics as privatized resistance or transgression. Revolution, not just as the description of a style of politics, but as the mere prospect of an outside to the general tenor of the present, now functioned as the very model of the violence always already present in the project of the universal. Although this again may be slavishly Hegelian on our part, we can't help but retrospectively name all of this as both *necessary* and *true*. Not only did the poststructural eclipse of Marx echo real conjunctural contradictions, it was in many ways the necessary precondition for the hybridization of a Marx much better equipped to grapple with and think the present. The flexibility and rigor of the Marxisms present in this anthology could not have come to be without the “excesses” and missed encounters of the interregnum of 1990s criticism, a moment that now seems as dated as the Soviet factories it once imagined itself to be leaping over into the future.

II

Just as Marxist analysis was eclipsed in line with the erasure of the economy as a viable category for thought, so too have its theoretical fortunes been revived alongside a renewed interest in economic forms. This is not merely some reflex epiphenomenon of 2008, the turn toward “alternatives” that even *The Economist* flirts with at the downside of every business cycle or protracted crisis. Certainly, the financial crisis and the Occupy movement it continues to gestate have dramatically placed back onto the radar of popular consciousness whole swaths of economic reality largely ignored for almost a quarter of a century. Inequality, unemployment, class, the role that finance plays in a de-regulated neoliberal economy: these have all

found their way into journalistic everydayness in a way unthinkable in the 1990s. What we might then call the “economic turn” is not just a whimsical shift in academic taste, that belatedness vis-à-vis “current events,” which is always generating new, embarrassingly precise field names (9/11 studies being perhaps the most symptomatic). This turn goes far beyond a question of academic “interest” or “relevance;” it involves an intense, violent, and labyrinthine irruption of the economic itself. Like an iceberg striking the hull of a ship, it is a question of a shift in the ontology of the present, a situation as likely to produce new knowledge and practice as it is wide-eyed bewilderment and collapse.

One key factor in the recalibration of the cultural visibility of the economic was the string of wars initiated by the United States at the turn of the century. Although war is often misconstrued as the outside or limit of an economy’s smooth reproduction, an extra-mundane exception to “business as usual,” it became quickly apparent to the millions mobilized by the antiwar movement just how brazenly intertwined these phenomena were in an era dominated by fantasies of a “new American century.” Of course, this relation has crucially sustained industrial demand in the United States since the 1940s and become an ever more critical element of its economic order since Ronald Reagan, but in this new conjuncture (national, capitalist) *Realpolitik*, industrial/corporate welfare and elite political cronyism merged so spectacularly that the relevance of that most Leninist of categories—imperialism itself—gained new theoretical purchase and texture (as captured so persuasively in David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism* [2005]). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were like parodic object lessons in “vulgar” Marxism, events so clearly articulated at a distance from their explicit, liberal intentions—human, women’s and minority rights—that not only the classic Marxist hypothesis of an analytically and causally primary infrastructural domain, but also that of a state-structure grounded in the false universality of a specific class interest, again became plausible—even indispensable—explanatory devices. War uncovered the economic, not in the mode of a machine silently subtending the future, but as a raw tissue of manipulations, interests, and brute force.

This image of the economy to some extent echoes the kind of inflated materialism one finds in Marx’s writing between 1844 and 1846 at precisely the moment he is trying to emphatically distinguish his position from both idealism and the “contemplative” materialisms circumambient to the period. This is not the late Marx construed by Louis Althusser as having quietly embedded within the body of *Capital* a (inchoate) dialectical materialist epistemology, but that Marx, much closer to Lenin, of “real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination.”² In this sense, oil and blood, interest and falsehood stand to the avowed humanitarianism of United States’ twenty-first-century wars with precisely

the same ontological pretensions as Marx's "real individuals" do to the spiritual phantoms of the Young Hegelians: in each instant something palpable, gritty, and epistemologically unmediated is counterposed to the inexistence of the merely Ideal. This was, then, an ambivalent turn. On the one hand, the wars aggressively invalidated the digital economy's claim to an equilibrium without friction, one happily separated from the anachronistic *heaviness* of resources, scarcity, nation-states, and class. They belied dramatically its claims to ontological difference and newness. On the other hand, the casual Marxism resurrected by the wars had the drawback of injecting into our understanding of how an economy works a certain *atmosphere of conspiracy*—a conception of politics grounded in the intentional malevolence of a ruling class or cabal (themselves untouched by ideology). If it was tempting at the time to rephrase the ontological specificity of the economic in the language of a sinister holism—"the System" invoked darkly as an entity without parts or limits—the wars, and the economic strings to which they were attached, could just as easily be dismissed by liberal centrists as atomized exceptions to the good rule of sensible capital (the kind of position taken, for example, by Nobel Prize winning economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman).

Equally critical in the remattering of the economic as a usable epistemological category has been the explosion into consciousness, both "theoretical" and "popular," of what we sometimes call "the ecological crisis." However stalled and ineffective existing political responses to the crisis have been, and however far we are from even remotely beginning to assess its full import, the *presence to mind* of the crisis is now undeniable. Even if it is too often expressed in the same tone reserved for mundane changes in the weather—that tone set aside for banal, inevitable phenomena—we are nevertheless now keenly aware of our location on the edge of an ecological abyss. This has had an important number of effects on the discursive positioning of Marxist thought. First, the crisis has clearly displaced an earlier (poststructuralist) fascination with the workings of representation and language, and redirected attention to what we might call *an emergency of the object*. Although good dialecticians tirelessly remind us that neither crisis nor nature, nor even an imminent *nature in crisis* remotely compromise the rule of mediation, and though any notion of a return to a zero point of the object beyond language or discourse is pure fantasy, it is nevertheless the case that we are witnessing a broad return, whether via Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy or a certain (often de-Marxified) Deleuze, to the object in all its complexity, immanence, and material thickness. If the gesture *par excellence* in the Derridean era was that of stammering—a lingering on the edge of the utterance, a certain pleasure taken in the surface of language—our own seems to be that of an excitement taken in the intricacy and complexity of that which is mediated by and produced through language, *the plenitude (and exigency) of the*

framed itself. The sophistic, skeptical tendencies of the 1990s have been replaced, for example, by the kind of Deleuzian (actually Spinozist) realism found in the works of Antonio Negri, a realism that conceives of language not as a mere instrument of representation, nor as a Lacanian thorn in the flesh, but as a communal power that passionately links us to the world and to each other. In the wake of the exhaustion of epistemology and its impasses there is a new hunger for determinate material knowledge, a knowledge or research that is at the same instant indistinguishable from an engaged form of political practice.

With this new theoretical openness to an engagement with a properly planetary object—escaping the motif, popular in the 1990s, of a plurality of incommensurable worlds—a transformation has taken place in the valence of two concepts long seen as indispensable to the Marxist project. First, the planetary emergency has put a definitive end to the habits of mind that styled as statist, inherently violent, or Eurocentric the very idea of a determining economic totality. This is not just because the ecological itself requires an idea of interconnected structure, nor simply that globalization has dissolved any possibility of an enclave beyond the law of exchange, but also because the economic origins of the crisis are so patently obvious. Marxists are making use of complex totalities and a reconfigured notion of system completely de-linked from their early associations with spiritual holism or final causality, just as they have done away, once and for all, with any trace of an implied “scale of being” that locates particularities in a low and ontologically impoverished distance from the high, substantial, causal abstractions of capital and labor. At the same time, the crisis has seemed to generate the conditions for a new receptivity to the notion of political universality, one mirrored within the domain of capitalist production by the now global experience of precarity. Such a confluence, despite all of the theoretical and practical obstacles, creates obvious openings for the reintensification of the political scale indexed by the concept of revolution. To insist on the fact that everything must change no longer requires a subscription to moral or political perfectionism or a naïve, progressivist faith in the good-heartedness of history; it is not a question of human nature perfected or a society holistically “improved” (in the Baconian sense), but a series of globally localized technical problems linked to the urgent incompatibility of capitalism and life. Although such change might portend a thousand shifts in the distribution of dailiness—from the structure and feel of a workday to the ready availability of day care, from the shape of cities to the visual content of our cinemas—ecological crisis has made systemic change the necessary precondition for that most English (and “realist”) of Hobbesian impulses—survival itself. Revolution, already fully domesticated by its expropriation by advertising, no longer draped in class terror or violence, is simply innovation, good, practical commonsensical thinking.

Also at work in the redistribution of interest in Marx is the waning of what we might call *the frission of the margin*, the orientation, long endemic to the poststructural, toward phenomena that take place at the borders, outskirts, and interstices of systems. With the shift away from an earlier Structuralist investment in the self-regulating and autonomous functioning of systems, and toward those qualities, phenomena, or events that consistently elude or violate them, came what was essentially a new regime of intellectual taste. Very schematically, we might say that this was a shift from the domain of Law to that of Crime. Madness, violence, error, the body, sex, forgetfulness, and death constituted a stable constellation of objects internally linked precisely via their shared distance from the old idealist norms and protocols—an idealism that was paradoxically expanded to include Marxist materialism as well! This was certainly a critical project and one that was in many ways invaluable: in an instant a whole terrain of phenomena long ignored as beneath or beyond the dignity of thought emerged into view and with it a completely reimagined sense for what could be done with thinking.

From today's vantage point, however, it sometimes appears as if this trend might itself have suffered from a one-sidedness popularly imputed (though mistakenly) to Marx himself: a certain incapacitating hatred of the bourgeoisie! This hatred of (really French) bourgeois culture—what Foucault once described in code as the whole realm of “mid-range pleasures” and which Deleuze and Guattari never tired of parodying—when translated into the recursive (and often very derivative) patterns of 1990s criticism became an obliviousness or indifference to all of the spaces and practices trafficked by commerce, property, and money.³ Thought today no longer labors on the edges of normativity, but immerses itself in its concrete texture and details: the turn toward Marx and economics constitutes a different turn to the phenomena ignored by thought—a turn toward the banal and the barely noticed, toward objects so grey they're interesting. What can we learn about the literature of the World Bank? What would an ethnography of Wall Street tell us? What is the precise style of governance adopted by a neoliberal state? How does a factory in Guangzhou subjectivize its workers? What can be learned about the social ontology of the new communications technologies? What are the linkages between serial femicide in places like Ciudad Juarez and the social and phenomenological coordinates of the maquiladora? How does capital alter the logic of urban spaces? This generation appears more open to reading texts their subcultures have trained them to instinctively dislike; however much they might prefer to be reading de Sade, Nietzsche, or Georges Bataille, they have their noses in Adam Smith, John Locke, and Friedrich Hayek, and can even be found flipping (half-bored, half-fascinated) through the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

III

If there is anything, however, which has directly revived interest in Marxist theory it is the sudden appearance on the scene, impossible to anticipate from the perspective of 1990s thinking, of a new generation of people for whom the word communism no longer merely signals stupidity, death, and failure, but a new horizon of political possibility and meaning. The specificity of the word matters here: the transfused energies of the word “communist” never cease to recall all that stands to be lost, botched, or destroyed by any genuine (transformative) political process. Unlike today’s liberal democrats, whose political affiliation effortlessly channels associations with liberty and progress (wholly screening out its historical complicity with slavery, racism, pauperization, war, and other injustices), the communist elects to take on a political sign culturally saturated by the synecdoche of the gulag. In this sense, stupidity, death, and failure are the internalized (but not sufficient) first principles of every neocommunist, a nontransferable subjective debt that can in fact be dialectically (even ethically) fruitful, a testing spur to better thought and politics. For some, communism’s abjection, its arrival from a space that is necessarily compromised and incomplete, is the very secret of its power: it is from this angle, one filtered through Jacques Lacan’s suspicion of wholeness as intrinsically alienating, that Slavoj Žižek can produce his injunction to “fail better.”⁴ For most, however, an awareness of communist crime and the atmosphere of shame it produces is only a negative first moment in a much more capacious process of affirmation, one replete with positive new pleasures, concepts, forms of togetherness, and imagination. Neo-communism today marks out a terrain populated less by austere figures of organized militancy or dogma, than by a montage sequence of reading groups, free schools, art sites, graffiti, protest, and occupation. They come from everywhere, these new communists—these *communizers*—from anarchism and from Lenin, from Christianity and Yoga, from *Operaismo*, unemployment, and art. What they share is a common sense of revulsion in the face of consumerist banality and a conviction that there is more to life than work, debt, and insecurity. For those of us who haven’t spent time on university campuses or with the urban youth and unemployed of Europe’s sinking cities, or among a new generation of students in places like São Paulo, Cairo, or Shanghai, this is a phenomenon without an image or concept: such talk will be registered as little more than wishful thinking or fantasy. However fragile its numbers, however inchoate its organizational strategy and strength, it nevertheless remains that communism as a scattered concatenation of bodies, a desirous conception of the good life and as a style of passionate analysis and politics is again drifting around on the horizon. The full force of this shift has been echoed *in* a recent flood of texts ranging from Jodi Dean’s *The Communist*

Horizon to Bruno Bosteels's *The Actuality of Communism*. The genealogy of this turn, conceived of in terms of dated publications, would appear to have begun in North America with 2001's *Empire* (through which the entire corpus of Antonio Negri was then rediscovered), with other textual landmarks along the way, including Retort's *Afflicted Powers* (2005), The Invisible Committee's *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), and, most recently, Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010). Conceived of in terms of political sequences, the new communism seems to have emerged in the West between Seattle and Occupy, a decade-long cycle of intermittent engagements that continues to draw on the political energies and organizational intelligence of movements (mostly South American) ranging from the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil to Zapatismo in Oaxaca, from Venezuelan Bolivarianismo to Los Indignados in Argentina.

Often obscured by Marxism's traditional contempt for the disciplinary privacy and quietism of ethics are the contours of its own special ethico-affective dimension. We are not thinking here of a system of moral maxims or imperatives thought to undergird his politics, the unwritten ethical substrate of a society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."⁵ Nor do we have in mind the Hegelian residues of an early Marxist conception of communism that longed to mingle essence and nature, being and truth, in a political structure grounded in universal recognition. By ethics we don't mean the kind of individualist moral calculus often associated with the word, but an affective register at once personal and collective that is rarely associated with Marxism, but always present therewith. Marx's complex proximity to the discursive codes of nineteenth-century science as well as his suspicion (inherited in part from Hegel) toward bleeding-heart reformers and utopians, has covered over and concealed what we would simply like to note as *the pleasures of Marxism*.

This is a subjective plenitude, a kind of dialectical joy, one which conjoins in the same breath a materialist clarity and distinctness, a science without mastery or comfort, with a genuine over-brimming of the "spirit." The latter combines a hatred of injustice with a love of the future, a feeling of connectedness to everything that has happened and that will happen on the planet with an almost painful awareness of the specificity and limits of one's locale. When it is not linked into vibrant, activist networks, the congeniality of political connection and work, Marxism retains nevertheless unique theoretical pleasures that delight of the understanding so passionately expressed by Spinoza in the context of seventeenth C science. Even Locke writes of the "constant delight" afforded by the work of knowing, a "sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure."⁶ How much greater and intense this pleasure is in the context of an immanent encounter not with being or nature or even "society," but with the interesting and infuriating flesh of capital: concealed and intelligible at the same time, mappable yet

infinitely complex there is a purely speculative, tinkerer's pleasure here, one represented perfectly by the thin, straining diagrams of finance made by conceptual artist Mark Lomardi or the organized chaos and texture of Andreas Gurski's photographs of visually exploding Chinese factories. This is that today rare sense that one is in touch with an essence of things, a "substance" composed out of nothing more than relations and forces, one that is entirely historical, contingent, and certainly very slippery, but which nevertheless has about it an utterly unforgettable expository weight, a power to reveal and to lay bare. This (provisional) conviction is precisely the same affective texture one experiences in the presence of others in the street during protest: though one encounter is ostensibly solitary and objective and the other subjective and crowded it would be impossible to divide this pleasure, this desire for knowledge and justice, which happens in the same breath.

We mention this unique Marxist *jouissance*, the self-sustaining pleasure of Marxist research and practice, because we are painfully aware that we are living, despite the shifts in the fortune of political Marxism mentioned above, in the ruins of the Left. This is in no way an inescapable fate and there are myriad reasons for hope, but the present nevertheless constitutes a miserable state of affairs for those taken by the possibilities of a different kind of world—a space in which the 1 percent has gained vastly at the expense of the 99 percent, in which we can expect a 4-degree Celsius in global temperature by the end of the century, and in which both unjust and damaging outputs of the present are as widely known as they are under-politicized. If the expository or analytic pertinence of Marx today is difficult to doubt—even the New York Times concedes this (though in the same register it reserves for "curiosities" of all kinds)—obvious strategic questions remain in the domain of politics. We live within tantalizing historical reach of a Left politics the corporeality, intensity, and scale of which dwarves our own or indeed that of past. We are not thinking here only of the so-called people's democracies, but all of the anarchisms, unionisms, antiimperialisms, feminisms, and social democratic movements that accompanied them across the long twentieth century. Living in the ruins does not mean living in the shadow of an absent perfection or harboring a desire to rebuild on the spot. It is, however, infuriatingly *lonely* in a way that constitutes an ever-present threat to the stamina and perseverance of a genuine politics. The theories anthologized here address in various ways a Marxism at once alive and dead, conjuncturally essential and nothing at the same time. For example, Badiou's philosophy is tailored to the maintenance of subjective organizational intensity in hard political times, an unambiguous philosophy of hope: it is the necessary spiritual fuel of the beleaguered (potentially universal) corpuscle. The autonomists have their own solution: communism is not, as Marx sometimes envisioned, a project 20, 30, 50 years in the making, but a project to be immanently produced in

the interstices of the present, one that we should invent in the here and now rather than await in the form of a messianic future event. Although there are signs of a shift in the winds, we live (and should admit it) in the ruins, a context without guarantees of “progress” or redemption. Nothing in this political conjuncture, however, even remotely threatens the relevance and pleasure of Marxist theory and practice, just as the continuing existence of patriarchy has no effect at all on the relevance and pleasures of feminism. The fact that things may be difficult doesn’t mean that the very real openings generated by the analytic rigor of Marxism, or the energetic way of being in the world produced by the connections and communities of Left practice, are unreal, or unnecessary, or aren’t desperately needed. Indeed, Marxist thought is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition if there is to be any hope at all of creating a world in which human beings can at long last shape maximally their own possibilities in the just and lively company of those with whom they share the planet.

IV

Anthologies are uniquely irritating objects, which is not to say that we can do without them or that there aren’t important differences between one kind of irritation and another. The question is not really *whether* but *how* an anthology fails. This one is no different, a tangle of awkward adjacencies and truncations. At the heart of the desire to anthologize are two irreconcilable injunctions. When grounded in a principle of inclusiveness—a kind of neutral scanning of the breadth and heterogeneity of a field—what is won in the domain of variety is often lost in thematic tightness or unity: pieces come to be incoherently tumbled together like items tossed into a laundry bag. When, however, the organizing principle isn’t adequation, but a strong, coherent shaping of the field’s structuring tensions and problems, the danger arrives in the form of exclusions and oversights of work and figures that everyone might think should be represented in an anthology. Where the first option gains a kind of panoramic, documentary breadth (while losing something like “spiritual” form), the latter gains coherence at the expense of the richness and depth of the field. The dangers are even more pronounced in a book of contemporary Marxist theory, one whose very title will be intelligible for many only as comedy or oxymoron. Isn’t to utter the words Marx and Theory in the same sentence already to speak in contradiction? Marxism, of course, is regularly parodied as beneath the threshold of thought, a politics born of blind practice or psychopathology, just as its contemporaneity to anything but the nineteenth century is still by many called into question. We’re confident that the texts included here are more than capable of de-mystifying both of these clichés.

This anthology has no interest in establishing the sanctity of a canon. Its exclusions are not passive aggressions, undeclared acts of war against unnamed schools or thinkers. We are tired of these rituals of faction, habits that are intellectually incurious and politically ruinous. We have excluded representatives from world-systems theory, Analytic Marxism, liberation theology, the New Dialectic, the UMass, and *Monthly Review* crews, as well as many other interesting clusters of contemporary Marxist research, not out of disinterest or suspicion, but out of an editorial commitment to using the word “theory” found in the title of this book not merely as a synonym for thought per se, but in the sense it has come to be used in North America as a byword for the transformation within philosophy enacted by the triple torsion of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. There are exceptions here: our choice to include Arif Dirlik’s essay met what we thought was an urgent need to acknowledge the role played by “the rise of China” in the new conjuncture, while Alain Lipietz’s work, though not conversant with the continental tradition, seemed pertinent in the context of the overwhelmingly productivist imperatives of contemporary capitalism.

What does it mean for a thought to be “Marxist?” What criteria or protocol legitimates this predicate? Is it a question of content, adherence to a package of empirical economic hypotheses or political tenets? Is there an axial Marxist hypothesis or position, one which when removed qualitatively changes the substance of a discourse? Or is it a matter of thresholds, a point reached in the complexion of a thought after which it simply ceases to be recognizably Marxian? Is it, instead a question of method or form? Here we might recall György Lukacs’s suggestion that if all of Marx’s signature empirical hypotheses were proven false—the rate of profit to fall, the labor theory of value, and so on—the “truth” of Marxism would in no way be affected. What he meant of course was that the richness of dialectical materialism survives the failure of any given positive Marxian postulate, that a thought characterized by dialectical precision must by definition perpetually overcome and surpass itself. Ultimately, we have to confess to finding the question of just what it is that qualifies a thought as Marxist uninteresting, at least insofar as it envisions itself as anything beyond an intriguing specialist imbroglio. Certainly, we also experience all the categorical and definitional impulses of anyone caught up in the pleasures of theory, that desire to create and clarify differences and to defend logical attachments, and there may indeed be more at stake in these distinctions in the context of a discourse that actively insists on the inseparability of theory and practice. But we have to admit that we discern in the background of this question a tired paraphernalia of patrol, the specter of blindly guarded territory.

If pressed, however, we would offer the following. If the vocational destiny of feminism is that of rigorously safeguarding the capacity of the human to think itself beyond the limits imposed on thought and practice

by patriarchy, then that of Marxism pertains to the need to equally contest the limits placed on thought and practice by the historical existence of capitalism. Both are arts and sciences of justice, which is to say, utterly essential analytic apparatuses *and* visionary political injunctions. The decisions that we made in bringing together the writers collected here was to offer an overview of the ways in which Marxism has responded to the complexities of our particular configuration of capitalism. It is a configuration in which capitalism reigns supreme, untouched, and unchallenged on the scale that would be needed to undo its logics and its structures, even as its self-certainties have been put into question and its ideologies no longer secure its future—a moment in which capitalism is undeniably powerful, constituting the very terrain of the quotidian, and yet stands all too ready to be jettisoned in favor of some other reality by the 99 percent for whom it doesn't even provide Keynesian comforts as it goes about rapidly making the planet uninhabitable.

Far from merely being characterized by tangential philosophical *interests*—something undertaken on the outskirts of the serious business of economics or politics—Marxist theory has functioned as an essential vector for the reinvigoration of philosophy itself. This is an improbable fate for a discourse often construed as fundamentally organized around a desire to escape or transcend the philosophical tradition. We have seen, precisely via the Marxisms of Étienne Balibar, Negri, Badiou, Žižek, and others, a tremendous resurgence of interest in the history of philosophy among a new generation of students and theorists. Balibar's recent comprehensive reevaluation of Locke, Negri's treatments of both Descartes and Spinoza, Žižek's Hegel and Schelling, Badiou's Plato: everywhere we discover Marxists scavenging essential theoretical bits and pieces from thinkers not just at a distance from their own tradition, but sometimes classically opposed to it. There are those for whom this pluralism will no doubt be the clearest symptom of revisionist decadence and confusion, a theory now so fully detached from practice (a further confirmation of Perry Anderson's famous argument about the character of Western Marxism) that it can risklessly drift, one enfeebled worldview among an infinity of others. However, we feel that this that turn toward Marx within philosophy is not just another instance of the latter responding belatedly to exigent historical conditions, but a genuinely dialectical shift within its own disciplinary and normative space, one in some sense being grown from within the limits, exhaustions, and aporias of the tradition itself. We see this omnivorousness of contemporary Marxist thought as a mark of its strength, a desire to contend with diverse positions and to hybridize what it has learned with other strains of thought. By putting various strands of contemporary Marxist theory into dialogue within a single text, we hope to further those philosophical *and* political inquiries that promise to reshape the terrain on which we will live out our collective futures, a terrain filled to the brim

with questions and dangers, but also unnervingly beautiful glints of reddish light.

Notes

- 1 The case of Deleuze, as seen below, is an ambivalent one. Although he makes certain to distinguish the passive, representational habits of tracing from the active qualities of the map, he is far more interested than Jacques Derrida or Maurice Blanchot in diagramming material assemblages. Nevertheless, the Marxism affirmed by Deleuze is less concerned with creating comprehensive maps of capitalism than it is with the task of subverting it.
- 2 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. Ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1999), 42.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 378.
- 4 Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 210.
- 5 Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*. Ed. Terrel Carver (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.
- 6 “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” Hackett Publishing Company (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.