

## Book Review

**Demirović, Alex, Sebastian Klauke and Etienne Schneider (eds)**

**(2015) *Was ist der ‘Stand des Marxismus’? Soziale und epistemologische Bedingungen kritischer Theorie heute.***

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To scholars and political practitioners left, right and centre, the publication of a book in the year 2015 asking about the ‘state of Marxism’ may sound like a provocation. After all, the question can be interpreted as suggesting that there is such thing as a unified theoretical–political Marxist project, whose relevance for the social sciences and political activism can be assessed. This goes against the common sense of the present day. Conservatives and liberals have consigned ‘Marxism’ to the scrapheap of history post-1989, seeing the failure of Eastern European socialism as proof that capitalism and liberal democracy are the best of all possible worlds. Voices from the left are not quite as dismissive but are equally sceptical: There are detailed accounts of the decline and decay of this best of all worlds that are incredulous about the prospects of a socialist alternative, a new reformism that is aimed at once again civilising capitalism, and a post-Marxist radicalism that sheds worker parties and working-class politics for social movements and populist pluralism. Self-professed Marxists are few and far between, and a clearly defined Marxist project remains out of sight.

Behind the book with the provocative title is the Association for Critical Social Research (*Assoziation kritische Gesellschaftstheorie*), a network of German-speaking radical scholars.<sup>1</sup> The association is committed to social analysis and social criticism from a pluralist left perspective; some of its members work in the various Marxist traditions, others less so. It was born out of a great defeat – a purge against left scholarship that took place in the early to mid-2000s at the former hotspots of the radical student movement of 1968, the Free University of Berlin and the Goethe University Frankfurt. In the eleven years since its establishment, the association has been holding workshops and conferences, publishing edited volumes and issuing public statements on current events. The book under review is one of these edited volumes. It is a compilation of contributions to a conference of the same title that took place in Berlin in December 2013.

The introduction, written by Alex Demirović, Sebastian Klauke and Etienne Schneider, and the opening chapter, written by Demirović on his own, discuss the context and the implications of the book’s title. Demirović et al. suggest that posing the question about the state of Marxism is about provoking debates, not about dealing in certainties. Accordingly, they make no claim to producing the next definitive version of historical materialism or to defending the doctrines of yesteryear. Their approach to the Marxisms past and present is to continuously ask, in the light of historical experiences and theoretical contestations, where their flaws and merits lie, and to what extent they provide resources for today’s struggles (pp. 16–18). In this sense, to quote Jacques

Derrida (1994: 67, original emphasis), the volume is an attempt to ‘*assume the inheritance of Marxism*’.

Correspondingly, all of the contributors stress, in some way or another, that there are theoretical and political practices from the Marxist traditions that deserve to be rescued and revitalised. Examples mentioned are: the call for a general theory of capitalism that reveals the relations of domination pervading it (pp. 13, 17–20, 24, 51, 176); the attempt to explain the dominance of certain ideas by inquiring into the social configurations and practices that produce and sustain them (pp. 27, 132); the decision to marry social theory with social criticism by identifying potentials for groundbreaking social change (pp. 20, 42, 54, 68, 109); the claim that social struggles play an important role not just in the constitution and reproduction of capitalist societies, but also in contesting the capitalist status quo (pp. 50, 130ff); and the commitment to a political project that aims at ending all forms of oppression (pp. 34, 58). That said, all of the authors represented in the volume also acknowledge the limitations of the various Marxist traditions and propose, in certain respects, to move beyond Marx. Correspondingly, there are two issues with Marxism that inform much of the narrative throughout the book:

- the ossification issue – that is, the fact that various Marxisms were transformed into static doctrines used to justify left authoritarianism and oppression; and
- the intersectionality issue – that is, the need to produce a non-reductionist account of capitalism that does justice to the multiple relations of domination pervading it.

Against this backdrop, the contributions can be divided into three categories:

1. historicising approaches that chart the intellectual history of Marxian and Marxist thought;
2. reconstructive approaches that address flaws in the Marxian and Marxist literature and in Marxist politics by providing alternative readings of canonical authors and making use of insights provided by other traditions of scholarship; and
3. expansive approaches that stress the need, in the light of certain flaws, to move beyond Marx and the Marxists while retaining certain motives and ideas.

Michael Heinrich, author of the definitive German-language introduction to Marx’s *Capital* (2012), has contributed a chapter that mainly addresses the ossification issue and takes a historicising approach. Heinrich looks at the reception of Marx’s work, starting from a question that also serves as the title for his contribution: ‘Marx or Marxism?’<sup>2</sup> He is adamant that Marx was an enemy of ‘systems’ and ‘-isms’ and thus a victim of the theoretical and political practices of his followers, notably Karl Kautsky and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who paved the way for the later transformation of Marx’s ideas into a unified doctrine called Marxism-Leninism (p. 122f). According to Heinrich, Marxism became a ‘power-knowledge complex’ and an ‘instrument of domination’ (p. 127f) that was based on ‘philosophical simplifications’ such as ‘simple materialism, a bourgeois belief in progress, and vulgar Hegelianism’ (p. 124). He adds that the doctrinaire nature of Marxism produced exclusions not just in the East, but also in the West. After all, certain ideas and assumptions were presented by Marxist organisations as unquestionable certainties on both sides of the Iron Curtain (p. 128). Strikingly, a valid critique of this line of argument can be found in the introduction (p. 17): ‘To turn against “Marxism” in the name of Marx is based on the pretension that there are no changes in capitalist social conditions, which were the object of “Marxist” theorising; that an unmediated, direct grasp of Marx’s texts in a philological sense would be possible; that current works inspired by Marx bear no relation to the long traditions of Marxist debates’ (p. 17).

In contrast to Heinrich, Ingo Stützle – the managing editor of *Prokla*, one of the few surviving

academic journals in the German language that are committed to radical scholarship – chooses a reconstructive approach to the ossification issue. Stützle suggests that Marxist debates have been lacking sufficient knowledge of the ‘connection between social forms, history and social struggles’ in Marx’s Critique of Political Economy (p. 130). Echoing, to a degree, Heinrich’s suspicions about the Marxist reception of Marx, his chapter is a call to re-reading *Capital* with a focus on two issues. First of all, Stützle highlights the ‘central role’ of the ‘class struggle’ in Marx’s theory of the capitalist mode of production (p. 130), which also means that the ‘forms analysed by Marx do not reproduce themselves automatically’ (p. 133). Second, Stützle argues that the core structure of the capitalist mode of production cannot be measured empirically, but can only be discerned through abstraction and conceptual work (p. 132). This suggests, to use critical realist terminology, the existence of a ‘stratified ontology’ (Fleetwood, 2003: 67) with different layers of social reality, and the need to distinguish causal mechanisms located at the level of the capitalist mode of production from those that are located at the level of historic–concrete social formations and conjunctures. Stützle’s interventions are important because they show that Marx is not producing a “‘structuralist-functional’ construction a priori”. Correspondingly, Marxian thought cannot be reduced to a collection of laws governing capitalist societies, but always requires the ‘examination of multifaceted concrete material’ (p. 138).

The chapter that probably provides the most far-reaching reconstructive effort is supplied by Jena sociologist Klaus Dörre, who addresses both the ossification and the intersectionality issues. He deals with the former by stressing that there is not one Marxism, but many, and that numerous ‘ruptures and deficiencies’ exist in Marx’s work. In light of this, he argues for a ‘sociological Marxism’ in the vein of Michael Burawoy, which is based on constantly re-reading classical texts through the lens of insights from the contemporary social sciences (p. 39f). This raises the question of why social sciences are equated with sociology, and whether this process of academisation may prove detrimental in the end. After all, it threatens to cut the links between social theory and political practice and thus exposes the theory side, to a greater degree than a ‘political Marxism’, to the selectivities inherent in the higher education system as an apparatus of the capitalist state. From discussing sociological Marxism, Dörre moves to providing examples for his approach. He introduces Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of ‘landgrabbing’, which in his view has been largely ignored by the ‘Marxist orthodoxy’. According to Dörre, the accumulation of capital leads to the constant ‘interiorisation of the external, the occupation of a non-capitalist or non-market-based other’. The reason is that a ‘pure capitalism, i.e., a generalised commodity exchange based on a two-class system ... is not viable’ (p. 40). Dörre concludes that there is a ‘*permanent primitive accumulation of capital*’ (p. 41; original emphasis), and presents a range of conclusions that are in line with contemporary theorisations of capitalism. Some of these, crucially, concern the intersectionality issue. Correspondingly, he argues that there is ‘a limited *plurality of relations of exploitation*’ (p. 45; original emphasis) in capitalism. Among them are ‘primary forms’ of exploitation that are specific to capitalism because they are based on commodification of labour power and the ‘principle of exchange of equivalences’. There are also ‘secondary forms’ rooted in ‘politically legitimated mechanisms of disciplining’, which are used to conserve ‘divides between the interior and the exterior’, for example ‘racist or sexist devaluation’ or the appropriation of work carried out outside the sphere of wage labour (p. 46). Taking up Beverly Silver’s terminology, Dörre establishes that there are movements countering exploitation of the ‘Marxian type’, that is, ‘socialist labour movements’, as well as ‘non-class specific movements of the Polanyian type’ that are equally important social actors. Against this backdrop, he introduces Hans-Jürgen Urban’s concept of a ‘mosaic left’ (p. 50f.), which calls for a multiplicity of different social forces coming together to challenge capitalist structures of domination. All in all, Dörre deserves praise for showing how to articulate the two types of struggles against exploitation at the level of a general theory of capitalism

without subsuming one to the other. Obviously, the question remains how to align the different struggles in everyday political practice, and what a sociological Marxism has to contribute to this issue.

Silvia Kontos, one of the leading theorists emerging from German second wave feminism in the 1970s, chooses an expansive approach and focuses on the intersectionality issue. Her entry point is the domestic labour debate from the 1970s. She suggests that Marxist theories of capitalism are incomplete because they ignore that ‘domestic labour may not be a type of labour directly creating surplus value’. Rather, domestic labour is ‘integrated into the production of surplus value’ and thus not a pre-capitalist relic, but a ‘key component of the capitalist mode of production’ (p. 79). What is needed, according to Kontos, is a theory of capitalism that starts from the ‘*specific integration of wage labour and domestic labour*’ (p. 85, original emphasis) and thus is capable of uncovering the ‘complex interplay of economic pressure (via wages), legal enclosure (marriage and family law, tax privileges), the interaction between public provisioning, commercialisation and privatisation (education, care) and repression (... abortion, ... prostitution, ... homosexuality)’ (p. 85). This statement illustrates well the issue of ontological layers raised by Stützle. Presumably, Kontos is suggesting that domestic labour is a concept at the level of the capitalist mode of production – but this does not tell us much about how it is organised, at the level of the social formation, via economic, political and ideological institutions. If we want to know more about domestic labour, we have to articulate Kontos’s fundamental claim with detailed accounts of the modalities of ‘public’ labour and domestic labour in different capitalist social formations, which will possibly reveal a great variety of articulations of class and gender domination.

The concluding chapter records an e-mail conversation between Pia Garske, Inga Nüthen, Benjamin Opratko and Katharina Pühl, which mostly deals with the intersectionality issue. Notably, Garske and Nüthen highlight the difference between making abstract declarations in support of intersectionality and developing successful theoretical, analytical and political practices that do justice to the complex articulations of different relations of domination in historic-concrete settings. Nüthen summarises the challenge for radical scholars thus: ‘To ask of individuals pursuing social criticism to take into account everything at the same time (as a left-wing super subject that has read and reflected on everything) means asking too much.’ In light of this, she proposes to base a ‘comprehensive project of critical social theory’ on a ‘combination of different approaches’. The charge of eclecticism does not bother her; in fact, she argues that it is essential to acknowledge that there is no single answer, and that people have to be prepared to enter broad debates (p. 174). Opratko complains that the left tends to produce a ‘master narrative’ on the ‘grand structures of capitalism’ that tends to sideline feminist, queer and anti-racist causes. However, he stresses that it would be wrong to dismiss ‘grand narratives’ altogether – first of all because there are grand structures, and second because grand narratives can be empowering (p. 165f.) In light of this, he proposes choosing work in a broad sense as entry point for a Marxist research agenda, and not the ‘relationship between capital and labour’ (p. 176).

With this statement, the elephant in the room comes into full view. Despite containing a number of remarks on class, the book does not contain a systematic reflection of the relationship between Marxism and labour movements past and present. This is surprising, given that Marxist intellectuals time and again claimed to supply a theory for organised labour; and that there were countless workers’ parties and unions that claimed to be putting Marxist theory into practice. So where is the organised working class in all the debates around the ossification and the intersectionality issues? And what could a class politics from below mean in an age where other relations of domination are no longer considered ‘side contradictions’? In the light of the valuable insights produced by the labour studies tradition, it appears a questionable move to rule out choosing the capital–labour relation as the entry point for research. This neither means that there

cannot be other entry points, nor that everything in the world has to be explained from this one standpoint. All in all, the editors of the volume should be applauded for creating a forum for open debate for radical scholars on the inheritance left by Marx and the Marxists. But given the history connected to this inheritance, it also needs to be stressed that the state of Marxism cannot be assessed without addressing the labour question.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Disclosure statement: The reviewer is a member of the association. However, he was in no way involved in commissioning, designing or publishing the reviewed volume.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations have been translated from the German by the reviewer.

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