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**Marx Through Post-Structuralism:
Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze
By Simon Choat**

Author's Reply by Simon Choat¹

I am enormously grateful to the editors of *Global Discourse* for this opportunity to respond to the three reviews of my book *Marx Through Post-Structuralism*, and equally grateful to the reviewers themselves for their careful readings, kind praise, and judicious and stimulating criticisms. My responses are offered in a spirit of intellectual generosity and I apologise in advance if reviewers or readers think I have overlooked the most salient or interesting points in the reviews.

Very broadly speaking, each reviewer raises questions about the concept of materialist philosophy that I put forward – specifically, about its relation to the current political and intellectual context, and its political consequences and possibilities. These questions seem to me to be extremely pertinent, for at least two reasons. First, they reflect a much broader discussion within present-day (Continental) philosophy, where materialism has become a key topic.² Second, the reviewers' questions get to the heart of my book – not only because the nature and status of materialist philosophy is one of its central themes, but also because it is a theme that is not fully developed in the book and therefore requires more discussion.

I wanted to reread Marx through post-structuralism not simply because the post-structuralists have something to say about Marx, nor simply because the former are influenced by the latter, but because I believe that both Marx and the post-structuralists are united in a common endeavour, namely the attempt to articulate a genuinely materialist philosophy. In analysing post-structuralist readings of Marx, I hoped to begin to outline the contours of that philosophy. This was not intended as a dry exercise in the history of intellectual thought: although it may be interesting to trace different connections between various thinkers, it is a relatively pointless exercise if it does not tell us anything about how we can analyse the present. I wanted to show that in developing a materialist philosophy, both Marx and the post-structuralists develop innovative theoretical tools for the analysis and critique of capitalism.

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² Cf. Slavoj Žižek and Ben Woodward 'Interview' in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (eds) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), p. 408: 'since materialism *is* the hegemonic ideology today, the struggle is *within* materialism'.

Portraying Marx and the four post-structuralists as critics of capitalism raised the question of the nature of the critiques they advance. One way to criticise capitalism would be to compare it unfavourably to a vanished past; another way would be to insist that it is doomed because it must necessarily develop into something else. In various places Marx does both these things – and he does both at the same time, advancing the myth of a lost origin (pure use-value, transparency of social relations, etc.) that will one day be restored. Taking my cue from Althusser, I dismissed this nostalgia for lost origins as idealism. Yet the central question then becomes: on what basis can we offer a materialist critique of capitalism?

In a sense it was this question that inspired and propelled the book. The question raises a series of problems, which are perhaps best encapsulated in the work of Lyotard. In *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard rejects all metaphysical foundations, mocking Marx's pious search for some region uncorrupted by capitalism, from where critique can be secured and to which we can escape. But having done so, Lyotard then seems to be left with only two alternatives: either to repudiate critique altogether, or to smuggle in alternative grounds for critique. I thus find it hard to agree with Jason Edwards when he says in passing that Lyotard is 'considerably less interesting' than the other post-structuralists. One reason that I put Lyotard at the start of the book is because he best sets out the problems that face both Marx and the post-structuralists (and, indeed, any contemporary critical theorist): how can we maintain a critical perspective without lapsing into idealism? On what basis can critique now be secured? Edwards implies that these are not really problems at all, asking, 'why do we need to return to this question of rooting or grounding philosophy in order to "secure" critique?' There are a couple of issues raised by Edwards here: first, whether critical analysis needs 'grounding' at all; second, whether this ground can be that of class struggle.

Edwards suggests that, in a post-Wittgensteinian (and post-structuralist) world, the grounding of critique may be a problem for philosophy, but not 'for those interested in how social relations in the present are constituted and may be transformed.' I do not necessarily object to framing the question of grounding as 'a problem for philosophy', but only if we recognise that (as Derrida, on whom I think Edwards is a little harsh, has shown) one of philosophy's roles is to probe and challenge the implicit philosophical and metaphysical assumptions that lie behind apparently non-philosophical endeavours such as the analysis of social relations. In other words, I am not so sure that those of us who wish to engage in an analysis of social relations can so readily dismiss philosophical problems.

If we attempt to abandon all foundations, the risk is either that critique itself is abandoned (and we end up with either a manic celebration the present – as in some of Lyotard's work – or a gloomy foreclosure of radical change – as in some of Foucault's work), or that we relapse into reliance on the very same foundations that we were supposed to have repudiated. Better instead to acknowledge that we cannot entirely do away with foundations: we always, necessarily, begin from some ground. This point can be made using the distinction, now common in Continental political thought, between anti-foundationalism and post-foundationalism: the former, in proclaiming the absence of all ground, simply mirrors traditional foundationalism, repeating its transcendental claims (what is the claim to have overcome or abandoned all

foundations, if not a new foundation itself?); the latter, in contrast, does not affirm that there are no grounds, but that our grounds are always contingent.³ I aim for a post-foundational rather than an anti-foundational materialism.

Acknowledging that we cannot do without some grounding, in *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* I suggested we could secure critique by rooting it in active social struggles, as Marx does. This brings us to Edwards' second point: why determine social struggle specifically as *class* struggle? This (though I don't know if Edwards would like the comparison) is Laclau and Mouffe's question to Marxism: must social agents have a class character?⁴ I concede that my comments on class, which come mainly in the final section of the book, are somewhat ambivalent (an ambivalence that at least in part reflects the difficulty of this question). My intention, however, was not to claim that all social struggles are in the last instance class struggles: I doubt if anyone would make this claim today, for it is clearly no longer tenable (if it ever was). My aim instead was to resist the exclusion of class that takes place in much post-structuralist-inspired commentary – not by straightforwardly reinstating Marx's analysis of class, but by showing that the post-structuralists themselves do not repudiate the concept of class, and by using post-structuralist insights to begin rethinking the notion of class. This attempt to rethink class is admittedly sketched very hastily at the end of the book, and would need much more work if it is to prove productive. Given our current political situation, however, I do not think that this is a time for downplaying class struggle: it is difficult to see how the actions and policies of the present British government, for example, could be explained without reference to class.

Rooting critique in social struggle in the way that I propose means that we should no longer expect philosophy to set political objectives for us. But it does not mean that philosophy becomes somehow depoliticised, reduced to abstract and apolitical reflection. On the contrary, philosophy now becomes radically politicised: both aware of its own social and political conditions, and engaged in the creation of resources for use by those involved in various forms of resistance and struggle. The difficulty for materialist critique is in maintaining a kind of balance: refusing to offer a concrete programme of political action, while at the same time refusing the depoliticisation of philosophy. I think something of this difficulty is reflected in the review by Saul Newman, who is careful not to demand that I offer an itinerary of aims and strategies, but who nonetheless claims that I have little or nothing to say about how 'to think about radical politics today'.

Newman's point is to an extent well taken, as I shall explain in a moment, but I am also a little wary of the political demand that he makes, or at least the way in which he makes it. In the first place, I wonder if his comments might reflect an implicit disagreement between us over the nature of politics: a disagreement rooted in a wider dispute between different theoretical traditions, namely anarchism and Marxism. Newman is perhaps best known as a leading theorist of 'postanarchism': an

³ Cf. Oliver Marchart *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).

attempt to reread the anarchist tradition via the lens of post-structuralism (Bakunin Through Post-Structuralism, so to speak). Elsewhere he has (like many other anarchists before and since) criticised Marx for reducing politics to economics and failing to recognise the autonomy and specificity of the political.⁵ Part of what I have tried to show, however, is that rather than reducing the political to economics, Marx politicises the economic: whereas for classical political economy, politics ends where the market begins (with the market characterised as a realm of natural harmony and order), Marx shows that this supposedly apolitical economic realm is invested with and contested by political relations of power.

This, I think, begins to answer some of Newman's questions. He asks: 'if, for Marx, the political is the economic and the economic the political, then why is there no real engagement with the political implications of this radical re-visitation of Marx's thought? Is Marx to be treated here simply as an analyst of capitalism?' One way to respond is to say that it is precisely by thinking of Marx as an analyst of capitalism that we think of him as a political thinker. Accepting the political implications of Marx's thought means acknowledging the broadened definition of politics he offers, so that 'simply' analysing capitalism is always necessarily and profoundly political.

If there is a risk that Newman's definition of 'politics' is too narrow, then at the same time I think his demand may be too broad. I am asked why I have not addressed the kinds of (political) questions raised by Hardt and Negri, Badiou, Žižek, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe. These are all important thinkers, and I have no doubt that valuable connections could be made between their work and that of the four post-structuralist thinkers that I examine. But detailed consideration of these connections would I think have stretched the scope of the book too far and diluted its central aim, which was to re-read Marx through post-structuralism. The work of Hardt & Negri and Laclau & Mouffe is explicitly excluded from consideration in the Introduction, because the work of these thinkers is derivative of rather than constitutive of what I call post-structuralism.

These qualifications notwithstanding, I agree with Newman that it is important the kinds of debates and issues these thinkers address need to be discussed. I always saw *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* as a kind of preliminary work, laying the foundation for further investigations. As such, I think Newman's comments could be read not so much as criticism but more as an invitation: to see what kind of politics can be drawn from the materialist philosophy I tried to outline. I take Mark Edward's comments in a similar spirit. While Newman asks that I look at thinkers like Rancière and Badiou, Edward calls for an engagement with an even more recent set of writers: those such as Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, who have been grouped under the term 'speculative realism'. It remains to be seen how enduring the 'speculative turn' will be, and some of their criticisms (especially of post-structuralist thinkers) seem to me to be aimed at straw men. But I do think that anyone writing about materialism today should welcome a dialogue with the speculative materialists. Nonetheless, I do have some preliminary reservations about their work.

⁵ See, for example, Saul Newman 'Anarchism, Marxism and the Bonapartist state', *Anarchist Studies* 12 (2004), pp. 36-59.

Edward suggests that materialist philosophy cannot be anthropocentric. Following Harman, he argues that we should reject human-centred correlationist philosophies and search for ‘a materialism that does not only concentrate on examining the relationship between human and world.’ My concern is how this philosophy might translate into political thought and practice. The question that Newman puts to me can be put (with, I think, even more force and pertinence) to the thinkers that Edward cites: where are the politics here? If (as Harman urges) we ascribe a kind of ontological equality to a prisoner, a brick, a nuclear explosion, a dream, etc., then where does that lead us? As those who self-consciously situate themselves within the speculative realist movement have recognised, the question of politics is an ‘unresolved issue’ in their work.⁶

I do not think that the questions of politics and ontology can be separated as easily as speculative realists seem to assume (in short, I think that all ontology is political), and I do not think that purely ontological questions are what we should be focusing on. I favour instead the ‘hauntology’ of Derrida or the ‘critical ontology’ of Foucault, where the aim is to undermine ontological assumptions rather than to construct a new ontology. One reason that I am reluctant to endorse Edward’s choice of *A Thousand Plateaus* over *Discipline and Punish* is because I think that the main problem with Deleuze is that he is too keen to offer a new metaphysical ontology – and in doing so he obscures the important political questions. If the collection of concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari (rhizome, deterritorialisation, etc.) can be applied just as easily to quilt-making as to capitalism, then are these concepts actually that useful? To reiterate: the question of materialist philosophy interested me because of its potential to provide tools for the analysis and critique of capitalism. Questions of ontology are important to this project, but they are not necessarily the place to start.

⁶ Cf. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman ‘Towards a Speculative Philosophy’ in Bryant et al (eds) *The Speculative Turn*, p. 16.