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

Review by Jason Edwards¹

Simon Choat's *Marx through Poststructuralism* is an admirably clear book that convincingly puts the case for a re-evaluation of the work of some key post-structuralist thinkers (namely Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze) in light of the influence on them of Marx. More than this, he attempts to construct out of the engagement between Marx and these authors a conception of materialism that is relevant and useful in the present. While I readily agree that what we need to take out of Marx's work - and indeed where possible that of the post-structuralist thinkers under consideration - is a critical materialist analysis of the social relations of the present informed by the study of the past, I am less convinced by Choat's concluding argument that we can ground such a form of critical materialism in class struggle. By shedding light on the possibilities and difficulties that arise from the post-structuralist encounter with Marx, Choat points us in the right direction but his solution to the problem of the grounds of critique raises more questions than it answers. Indeed, the problem here may be that there isn't a problem - a point which I'll come to at the end of the review.

I'll confine myself to some comments on and criticisms of Choat's engagement with the work of Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze (I have little to say about the chapter on Lyotard, partly because I find him a considerably less interesting or original thinker than the other three) before returning to the issue of the grounds for materialist analysis and the significance of Althusser's work for Choat's project. With all the post-structuralist authors examined in the book, Choat manages to show well that even in moments of silence about and hostility towards Marxism they were still working around a problematic shaped by the impact of Marx and Marxism. In Derrida's case, the texts of the 1960s that contributed to the emergence of deconstruction were written in a milieu in which the theoretical anti-humanism of structuralism had come to inform the structural Marxism of Althusser and his colleagues. Derrida stood at some distance from this work on Marx, but nonetheless, as Choat demonstrates, the critique of metaphysical conceptions of onto-teleology at the centre of Hegelian Marxism and certain versions of phenomenology, including that of Sartre, were warmly welcomed by Derrida. But Derrida used this anti-humanist and anti-historicist critique of metaphysics in order to undermine structuralism (and by implication structural Marxism), to demonstrate that the centre

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of the structural totality can never be present but is always deferred. This led to the insights developed in Derrida's most important work – particularly 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' – about the reliance of the texts in the history of Western metaphysics on binary oppositions between terms, oppositions which the interminable play of language allows us to undermine.

As Choat recognizes, there is a way in which we might see deconstruction as a form of materialism. It cannot be materialism in the sense that it is the opposite of idealism – that would be to revert to the kind of binary opposition that deconstruction seeks to undermine. Materialism would have to appear as 'third term', as something that stands for the undermining of the either/ or opposition by virtue of a kind of material practice. But exactly what kind of practice is this? Choat is quite critical of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and rightly so, because of his focus on Marx's putative ontology at the expense of the practical and political import of Marx's work. This is manifested in Derrida's invocation of the 'specter' as a way of deconstructing Marx's opposition between use-value and exchange-value. Choat's analysis here is excellent and perhaps he is too reserved in asserting what he demonstrates very well: both the flimsiness of Derrida's claim that the figure of the specter is central to Marx's texts and his one-sidedly selective reading of Marx on the relationship between value, use-value and exchange-value. Choat exposes here the poverty of Derrida's contributions as a political theorist, something evident from his other works on politics, such as *The Politics of Friendship*. For while Derrida himself argues for Marx as a political thinker, his own analysis in *Specters of Marx* tells us little of Marx's political value beyond the messianic invocation of 'democracy to come', a recondite concept that neither helps us to analyse politics in the present nor point to where we can go in the future. But the point Choat could have pushed further here is that Derrida's failure to illuminate Marx as a political thinker is not simply a product of his imprisonment within a particular kind of philosophical discourse, but of how this philosophical discourse as a material practice has been politically shaped. To say the same thing, deconstruction has a politics on its outside that it has proven loath to acknowledge, one that is intimately linked to the intellectual, academic and cultural life of certain kinds of late twentieth century capitalist societies.

But Choat is right not to dismiss Derrida and deconstruction, as some Anglo-American Marxists have done, as intellectually dishonest or unimportant. He is equally right to claim that the work of Foucault and Deleuze can better help us in seeing the continued relevance of Marx and the contours of a materialist approach to politics. Despite Foucault's often explicit criticisms of Marx and Marxism, Choat shows that there is a clear sense in which Foucault's genealogical studies are consistent with Marx's approach to history and to social conflict. An interesting point here is with respect to Foucault's concept of power as a productive force, often taken to be incompatible with Marx's view of power as primarily a negative phenomenon, an instrument of class rule. But if we have sympathy with the idea that we can employ Marx's work as a toolbox, an idea that Choat demonstrates Foucault to have held, then the stark contrast between the two views of power collapses. If we throw out the programmatic declarations about class power in Marx, what we find in analyses such as that of the working day and of primitive accumulation in *Capital* is a much more subtle approach that registers the contingency and openness of the outcome of conflict

given the character of particular kinds of relations of production in different times and places. Class conflict is, in that sense, itself productive from Marx's point of view as it changes the balance in relations of power, and gives rise to new classes just as it dissolves the bonds of the old.

Nevertheless, it is very hard to escape the fact that Marx envisaged communism as a form of human society in which power had been overcome, and this vision informed much of his work. Here lies the central problem with any attempt to reconcile Foucault's conception of power with Marx's: there may be affinities in some of the moments of the analysis, but ultimately Marx believes that self-realised human subjectivity in the absence of power is possible and desirable, a notion clearly at odds with the direction of Foucault's work. Similarly, we might ask whether Deleuze (and Guattari's) concepts of de-territorialization and re-territorialization are compatible with Marx's analysis of capitalism in the way that Choat seems to signal. He thinks that these can be 'useful concepts', but at the same time he takes Deleuze to task for over-abstraction and is right to point out that de-territorialization and re-territorialization, as concepts applied by Deleuze and Guattari to all kinds of phenomena, tell us little about the specificity of capitalism. I would want to press the point further: the Deleuzian focus on de/ re-territorialization, on bodies without organs, on de-materialization, flow, etc. re-instates a kind of idealism entirely inconsistent with a materialist approach. For Marx, such an approach meant proceeding from concrete instances, whether that be the commodity in his economic analysis, or revolutions, wars, laws, etc. in his political writings. A work like *A Thousand Plateaus*, in contrast, uses concrete instances only to substantiate pre-formulated abstractions, and in doing so give us a partial and flawed picture of the character of capitalist social relations.

These criticisms aside, Choat does succeed in showing that there is value in reading Marx alongside the authors he engages with and not least if we are interested in what constitutes the materiality of the material practice of analyzing politics and social relations in the past and present. In this respect, Choat is right to highlight the importance of a materialist approach that is critical, historical and focused on existing social relations. Against this yardstick, he is again correct in pointing out how in part the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze can be found wanting. But the conclusion of the book is disappointing. He argues that the post-structuralists have shown us the importance of avoiding an ontologized Marx, but then goes on to champion 'Marx's way of securing critique [by rooting] philosophy in active social struggles' (174). But it has to be asked, why do we need to return to this question of rooting or grounding philosophy in order to 'secure' critique? The question of whether there is any general ground for critique is a problem for philosophy. But it is not at all clear having gone through post-structuralism and cognate philosophical movements (Wittgenstein's later philosophy comes to mind) whether it is or should be a problem for those interested in how social relations in the present are constituted and may be transformed. Putting the answer to the question of the grounds of critique in terms of 'social struggle' or 'class struggle' does not help us get us out of the problem in philosophy, even if we accept that classes are material, historical, mutable etc. It is significant, I think, that Louis Althusser, who is seen by Choat as the key figure in the relationship between Marx and post-structuralism, once made similar recourse to the

idea of philosophy as ‘the class struggle in theory’ in renouncing his *Reading Capital* view of Marxism as the theory of theoretical practice. But the very problem with Althusser’s claim was that it was simply another abstraction, an assertion that class struggle is the ground or reference point for our critical engagement with the world. The danger is that we end up re-introducing another kind of social ontology – that of hegemonic conflict, class struggle – as a constraint upon the practice of critical materialist thinking.