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

Review by Saul Newman¹

Simon Choat, in exploring an encounter between Marx's thought and that of key post-structuralist thinkers, has done something important here. He has provided an alternate way of thinking about both Marx and post-structuralism, two critical perspectives that have hitherto been seen by many as irreconcilably opposed. From the point of view of the Marxist defenders of the faith, post-structuralists like Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard have been seen as at once irresponsible relativists and conservative reactionaries, preoccupied with the play of discourse, power and desire at the expense of serious economic analysis; they thus not only deny revolutionaries a genuinely critical perspective, but are actually complicit in the ideological and cultural reproduction of postmodern capitalism. As an antidote to such nihilism we are exhorted to return to the 'scientific' rigours of Marxist political economy - or to its revolutionary permutations in various contemporary Leninisms and Trotskyisms. From the terrain of a certain unreflective and politically vacuous postmodernism, on the other hand, we find an equally questionable refrain: Marx's thought is seen as crudely reductionist, out of date, universalizing, totalizing and hostile to difference.

Both these positions in their own way reflect a fundamentalism when it comes to Marx thought, and exhibit the dangers of not reading Marx properly, and at the same time insisting on a too rigid, purist interpretation of Marx, thus turning him to a dead dogma – something that is entirely unfaithful to 'spirit' (if we can invoke Derrida's deconstructive reading here) of Marx. As Choat wants to show in this book, the most productive way to read Marx - and the best way to reaffirm or reconstruct his relevance today – is to recognise that there are, as with any great thinker, many Marx's; that there is a heterogeneity to Marx's thought and writings which invite new and heretical interpretations. And it is through post-structuralism – a series of theoretical interventions that affirm singularity, heresy, contamination, discontinuity and the destabilisation of fixed identities – that Choat finds the best way of renewing Marx. Whether or not Choat would approve of this way of putting things, he is performing a kind of deconstruction of Marx: the richness of Marx's thought – not unmixed with tensions, contradictions, ambiguities – is unmoored from the fixed, uniform identity of 'Marx', one that was in any case retroactively imposed by the Marxism. We can, in other words, read Marx against Marx, just as Foucault showed

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us new ways of reading Kant against Kant: just as the critical, rebellious spirit of the Enlightenment could be mobilized against its rigid, universalizing categories, so too can a certain contingent materialism in Marx counter its tendencies towards Hegelian idealism and strict historical determinism. The Marx that emerges from Choat's book – a figure animated and in a sense constructed out of post-structuralism – is a new kind of materialist Marx, one who emphasises the contingency rather than determinacy of history; who sees capitalism as emerging from a haphazard concatenation or 'overdetermination' of forces and events; and who sees the subjectivity of the proletariat as being constructed, in a Foucauldian sense, through the disciplinary mechanisms of the factory system and the warlike clamour of class struggle, rather than founded on a human essence whose original destiny would be revealed at the end of history. This singular materialism that Choat reconstructs in Marx should be understood as in terms of a Nietzschean (and Foucauldian) genealogy: a field of antagonistic force relations and contingent events from which economic and political assemblages nevertheless arise, but which is not founded on any sort of deeper essence or dialectical unfolding. Choat shows us how post-structuralist thought, despite – or rather because of – its taking a certain critical distance from Marx, allows this heretical materialism to be deepened and expanded.

Just as post-structuralism gives us new insights into Marx, so too does the engagement with Marx open up new approaches to post-structuralist thought. Concepts such as disciplinary and bio-power, productive desire, the differend and the event, are given new and astonishing resonance and clarity by considering them in relation to Marx's analysis of capitalism. Hidden connections and convergences are uncovered, which at the same time allow a modification of concepts. Choat's analysis therefore allows a genuinely productive *contamination* of ideas, which I always think is the best way of revealing their truth. However, we should not imagine that this heretical, deconstructive interpretation implies in any sense a sloppy, careless or unfaithful reading of any of the thinkers concerned, least of all Marx. On the contrary, Choat's reading is rigorous, thorough and careful. I don't always agree with his interpretations – for instance, Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is not wholly intelligible within the schema of Marx's analysis of capitalism, despite certain resemblances - and at times the parallels that are drawn feel a little forced. But on the whole the arguments are convincing and the theoretical engagements between thinkers are well justified.

And why shouldn't they be? As Choat points out, post-structuralist thinkers emerged out of, in the wake of, and in answer to, a certain tradition of Marxist thought – that of Althusser; they therefore bore the legacy of Marx and remained haunted by Marx, even if they were critical (often justifiably so) of many of his ideas, or at least of certain ideas associated with the name of 'Marx'. Indeed, all of us who see ourselves as critical thinkers are, in one way or another, the heirs of Marx, even as we seek to negotiate our own paths towards him. So the encounter between Marx and post-structuralism, while complicated and full of ambiguities, ambivalences and tensions, is a *real* encounter. It is nevertheless an encounter that had been largely forgotten or overlooked, and it is the great achievement of this book to remind us of it, and, moreover, to invite us to think about this radical legacy in new ways.

However, the question that remains unaddressed in this book – and in some ways this is a missed opportunity, a missed encounter – is how to put this radical legacy to work today. This is the political question, and for a study that wants to emphasise the *political* dimension of Marx’s thought – the material dimension of contingency, antagonism and struggle – it is surprising that there is no discussion about how the new conceptual approaches developed here can help us to think about radical politics today. How does this newly invigorated, heretically materialist Marx allow us to reflect on political situations in the contemporary world? How does it equip us with new ways of thinking about politics today; how does it allow us to think about, for instance, radical political struggles, social movements; how does it allow us to identify points of tension in global capitalism or in networks of power, and to act upon them? What forms of subjectivity and what forms of radical political action are conceivable today? If class is still a relevant category, and Choat seems to think it is – and if it is to be defined in terms of antagonistic relations rather than as a socio-economic category – then where can those points of antagonism be located? And if, as I’m sure Choat would agree, the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary model is defunct, then what alternate strategies, tactics and forms of political organisation may take its place? If many activists around the world reject Marxism as a political signifier and a theoretical resource today, looking elsewhere to other traditions – anarchism, various socialisms, ecologism, indigenous cultures, for instance – then what sort of bearing does this have on Marx’s theories? To what extent is Marx’s thought – whose immanent heterogeneity has been revealed in Choat’s account – open to contamination from political discourses that historically have come from outside the corpus of his thought? Can there be an anarchist Marx, for instance?: this particular question is relevant here, as I think that anarchist ideas and themes, that resurged in May ’68, resonate at least as strongly in post-structuralist thought, if not as explicitly, as Marx’s ideas.

Indeed, to raise such questions about the political relevance of Marx’s thought today points to a certain problem here: 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? Marx, as Choat reminds us, is a thinker of revolution, of the political event – of the political *as* an event; and if we are to therefore assume that politics is central to Marx’s thought, then why is there no discussion of what a political or revolutionary event would look like today? Indeed, it is extraordinary that Choat seems to reprove Foucault for insufficiently explaining resistance and for leaving “little room for thinking about the future” (see p. 123) when this same lacunae is to be found in Choat’s work. Here I think there could have been, if not the attempt to apply Marx to concrete political questions today, then at least some kind of intervention in debates amongst contemporary thinkers like Hardt and Negri, Badiou, Žižek, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe, thinkers who, in one way or another, are grappling with Marx’s legacy today. And if we are to compare Choat’s treatment of Marx with, for instance, that of Hardt and Negri, or, to take a radically different articulation, Laclau and Mouffe, while one might not agree with their analyses, they at least try to construct some sort of contemporary politics out of Marx: the immanent multitudes for Hardt and Negri, or the contingencies of radical

democracy and hegemonic politics for Laclau and Mouffe. No such attempt is to be found in Choat's work.

I am obviously not asking Choat to be prescriptive here. I am not demanding – and I'm sure this was not Choat's intention either – the construction of a politico-theoretical apparatus of a post-structuralist Marx (or a Marxian post-structuralism) which can give us an alternative conceptual mapping of the entire world and provide clear-cut political solutions. Such an enterprise would not only defy the limitations of space, but would also go against what I suspect is our mutual wariness of totalizing theories. My point is simply that if Choat wants to assert not only the contemporary theoretical relevance of Marx, but also the idea of Marx as a political thinker – of Marx as a political event – then some of the questions I have raised above should at least be broached?

Perhaps these comments can be taken as an opportunity to further the discussion in this symposium, and to open up some of the new political questions that this book, much to its credit, inevitably prompts.