

# ‘Marx at 200’: Introductory remarks

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The recurrence of debates concerning the work of an author, the lively controversies it raises among opponents and followers and the redirection of its interpretations as time goes by is a sign of its continuing fascination and complexity. These debates do not follow a steady path, but have their own ups and downs, change their topics and shift the emphasis, are carried out in academic circles or in the media, and are often linked to some socio-economic or political event. But the most intense periods of ferment, in terms of intellectual achievements and additions to our knowledge, are often closely linked to the publication of new, more comprehensive editions of the works under consideration, which allow novel and more accurate readings and perspectives. This was obviously the case with regard to David Ricardo and the Sraffa edition of his *Works and Correspondence* (1951-1973), Adam Smith and the 1976 edition of his writings published on the occasion of the bi-centenary of the *Wealth of Nations*, or John Maynard Keynes and the publication of his *Collected Writings* from 1971 to 1989.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. A return to Marx’s texts

The work of Karl Marx is no exception to the rule, all the more so as Marx wrote a lot during his lifetime, only parts of which have been published every once in a while during more than one century after his death in 1883. As regards political economy, for example, some manuscripts were brought out rather quickly: Volumes II and III of *Capital* contain a selection of manuscripts made by Friedrich Engels and published

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<sup>1</sup> This is also the case, but to a lesser extent, with regard to the publication, from 1987 to 2005, of *Œuvres économiques complètes de Auguste et Léon Walras*, and the ongoing edition of Jean-Baptiste Say’s *Œuvres complètes*.

respectively in 1885 and 1894; and the three volumes of *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (*Theories of Surplus Value*) contain another selection edited and published by Karl Kautsky in 1905-10, presented as Volume IV of *Capital*. But some other important works had to wait much longer: the so-called 1857-58 *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* were first published in a not widely circulated edition in 1939-41, then in a more accessible one in 1953, and were only translated two decades later into different languages; the fragment of a draft (“Urtext”) of the 1859 *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) had to wait until 1939-41 to come out, together with the *Grundrisse*; and some important material for Volume I of *Capital* was only available, for a small part, from 1933 — this is the case, for example, of the so-called “unpublished Chapter 6”.

As regards philosophy, things are still more striking.<sup>2</sup> For a long time, only Marx’s introduction to the critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung”, and his article on the “Jewish question”, “Zur Judenfrage” (both published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*), were known. The pieces of Marx’s 1841 doctoral thesis that have come down to us — *Differenz der Demokritischen und Epikureischen Naturphilosophie* (*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*) — were only published in 1902; the 1843 essay *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*) in 1927; and the celebrated *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte von 1844* (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*) and the 1845 *Die deutsche Ideologie* (*German Ideology*), in 1932.

These facts ought to be recalled when trying to understand the history of the debates over Marx’s thought, as well as the present state of the Marx studies. Without going into details, five main points deserve to be stressed.

(1) First of all, it is clear that the availability or lack thereof of manuscripts, some of them of fundamental importance, had an impact on the various interpretations of Marx. During several decades after Marx’s death, numerous writings that are now considered as essential to a correct understanding of his views were simply not available to the

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<sup>2</sup> Marx’s more openly political writings were much better known and circulated, during and after his life, as pamphlets and newspaper articles.

general public and very often it was not even known that such writings existed. Yet the first interpretations, sometimes very sketchy and ad hoc, adopted and frequently promoted by political organisations, dominated the debates for a long time. This is true, for example, with regard to the general understanding of the content and “method” of *Capital*, especially in the theory of value and price, the falling rate of profit or the approach to economic crises. This is also the case with regard to the philosophical aspects of Marxism. Engels’ writings, sometimes tinged with Darwinism, coined a vocabulary and an orthodoxy, and were highly influential — whether on Ludwig Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians, the alleged “Utopian” and “scientific” socialisms, “historical materialism” (a phrase coined by Engels) or dialectics (that is, “materialist dialectic” or “dialectics of nature” based on a simplistic interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy). It is basically Engels’ line of thought, stated mainly in the 1880s after the death of Marx, and not Marx’s, that was developed by Marxists in several countries, for example in works popularising the “materialist conception of history”, or in a book by Kautsky on “the three sources of Marxism”<sup>3</sup> (German philosophy, French socialism and English political economy),<sup>4</sup> which involved a sketchy and questionable interpretation of Marx. Engels’ views were also influential in Russia, with the development of the alleged “dialectical materialism”, especially by Georgi Plekhanov and Lenin. In all this history, independent intellectuals such as Rudolf Hilferding, Isaak Illich Rubin, György Löwinger (alias Lukács), or Karl Korsch, were rare. Over decades, the use and abuse of some words like “dialectics” by authors whose knowledge of Hegel apparently was poor or nonexistent, led the discussions astray into blind alleys. Even some very usual vocabulary like the German word “Praxis”, used by Marx (and by Kant) to mean the ordinary practice of an activity, was misunderstood and, at best, confused with the Aristotelian distinction between “praxis” and “poiesis”, thus obscuring Marx’s intellectual developments. Needless to say, all this was a serious impediment to a better understanding of Marx’s texts and thoughts.

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase was coined by Kautsky in 1908 and was taken up by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, alias Lenin, in 1913.

<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes stated that a source of inspiration for this view is to be found in a celebrated book anonymously published by Moses Hess in 1841, *Die europäische Triarchie*, where a fundamental role in contemporary history is given to Germany, France and above all the United Kingdom. But Hess’ discourse was different.

(2) Second, this overall chaotic state of things showed the need of a comprehensive edition of Marx's works. Three attempts were made in this direction.

In 1927, such a systematic and complete edition started to be published by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, under the directorship of David Borisovich Goldendakh (alias David Rjazanov). However, in 1931, Stalin ordered Rjazanov's detention (Rjazanov was executed in 1938) and Vladimir Viktorovich Adoratsky replaced him in the project. The result was the first MEGA — that is, *Karl Marx. Friedrich Engels. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke. Schriften. Briefe* (MEGA being the abbreviation of *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*). This project was stopped in 1935 after 12 volumes<sup>5</sup> had been published.

After World War II, almost all work had to start again. A new publication project was launched: the *Marx-Engels Werke* (MEW). From 1956 to 1990, the Institutes for Marxism-Leninism in Moscow and in East Berlin published jointly 44 volumes.<sup>6</sup> While containing some of the most important writings and correspondence — but still deprived of many significant manuscripts — the edition is far from complete and lacks the characteristic features of a critical edition.

Hence, finally, a third attempt to bring out a complete critical edition. The *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, that is, the second MEGA or MEGA<sup>2</sup>, was put on track by the same Institutes in 1970, but came to an end as a consequence of the breakdown of the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union. In 1990 the Internationale Marx Engels Stiftung (IMES) decided to resume the project in an academic context. However, the number of the originally planned 164 volumes was reduced to 114. This is still work in progress, but a large part of the project has by now been accomplished: the third attempt can be expected to be successful.

(3) Third, it is also clear that Marx's thought is much more complex and wide-ranging than the various Marxist vulgates claimed it to be as time went by, and this raises significant questions: What is the link between all these writings? Is there a continuity, or a break, or a more complex relationship, between Marx's youthful philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> Volume I been published in two parts.

<sup>6</sup> This edition is based on the second Russian edition published from 1954 onwards

ideas developed in the 1840s and his more mature work on political economy and politics — a question that includes an assessment of his relationship with Hegel’s philosophy and the writings of the Young Hegelians? What is the meaning of his constant intention to write a “critique of political economy”? Is it possible to identify beyond reasonable doubt Marx’s intellectual evolution and the elements of his thought that became permanent and stable? All these questions were, inter alia, discussed again since the nineteen-sixties, along with the republication of the *Grundrisse*, the progressive issuing of the volumes of MEW and MEGA<sup>2</sup>, and the various translations of parts of them into English, French and Italian in particular.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, Marx’s most important concepts and approaches have been questioned and studied anew, as for example the definitions and role of “alienation” and “fetishism” in Marx’s youthful writings and in *Capital*, the meaning of “abstract labour” in the theory of value and its links with “value-form” analysis and money, the precise description and role of some Hegelian dialectical devices used by Marx in his political economy, the meaning of his notion of “critique”, etc. For this general work of reinterpretation — which swept aside much of the conventional discourses of the past — some critical reappraisals of central themes (dialectics, abstract labour, value and money, the deduction of concepts in *Capital*) played an important role: see, in particular, Lucio Colletti (1969, 1975) in Italy, Hans-Georg Backhaus (1967) and Helmut Reichelt (1971) in Germany, and the rediscovery of Rubin’s work in the early 1970s. Many innovative developments were inspired by these analyses.

Another characteristic of the research during these last decades is a strong revival of the studies of the young Marx and his formative years. Warren Breckman (1999) and David Leopold (2007) cast new light on his relationships with the Young Hegelians, thus supplementing some classic studies like McLellan (1969) and Rosen (1977); see also the studies edited by Emmanuel Renault (2008), which focus on the *1844 Manuscripts* and insist, in particular, on the crucial role of Moses Hess in the development of Marx’s thought. For his part, Rojahn (1983) showed how the *1844 Manuscripts*, traditionally presented as a coherent book, consist in fact of a simple juxtaposition of various texts

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<sup>7</sup> Attempts to assess the importance of MEGA<sup>2</sup> for the Marx studies and the interpretation of *Capital* have been made (see, e.g., the papers in Bellofiore and Fineschi 2009; Roth 2010; or Heinrich 2016).

written at different points of Marx's intellectual evolution and thus does not have the philosophical status attributed to them in the past. Other more or less youthful works have also been examined, for example the *Grundrisse* (see, e.g., the contributions in Musto 2008), and reappraisals of Marx's overall philosophical development and its importance for his approach have been published (see for example Renault 2009, 2014; and Fischbach 2015).

(4) Of course, a great many of the new texts in the MEGA<sup>2</sup> have been made available in specific contexts, which had an impact on their reception and the ensuing post World War II controversies. As regards political economy, one major event was the publication of Piero Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (1960), which quickly became a focal point in the discussion of Marx's approach to the theory of value and distribution. Marx's "law of the falling tendency of the rate of profit" was also scrutinised with the help of Sraffa's theory and found to be wanting. In the course of the multiple controversies that Sraffa's work raised, many diverging attempts have been made to rescue or restate certain parts of Marx's analysis. The above-mentioned developments on abstract labour, value and money are cases in point, and so are the new readings of the concept of alienation, which replaces, in some authors' views, that of exploitation, which is considered to be too much tied to an ill-founded labour theory of value. Some other approaches were put forward, either in favour of a more traditional understanding of Marx's labour value-based reasoning, at least on an aggregative level (see e.g. Foley 1982, 2000), or in a radically diverging way. A celebrated example of the latter is the so-called "analytical Marxism", launched by Gerald Cohen (1978), John Roemer (1981, 1982, 1986) and Jon Elster (1985), trying to reformulate certain ideas of Marx within a marginalist or neoclassical framework, using rational choice and game theory. In a still different perspective, some developments were inspired by the "critical theory" of the Frankfurt School (see, e.g., Postone 1993, and the "critique of value" approach by Larsen et alii 2014).

(5) Finally, some useful additions to Marx studies have been made in synthetic or historiographical perspectives. Some collective syntheses of Marx and Marxism in general, or Marxian economics in particular, have been published (Carver 1991, Bidet and Kouvelakis 2008, or Fine, Saad-Filho and Boffo 2012), together with reading guides of *Capital* (inter alia Heinrich 2004 and Harvey 2010-13). Then there is the

highly ambitious, and necessarily only partial, attempt by Jan Hoff (2009) to review the Marx debates across the entire world since the mid 1960s. Last but not least, the classic biographies of Marx, sometimes politically tinted, by Franz Mehring (1918), Boris Nikolaevskij and Otto Mänchen-Helfen (1937), or David McLellan (1973), were complemented by several new, more academic accounts of the life and works of Marx by Jonathan Sperber (2013), Gareth Stedman Jones (2016), and the first of a projected three-volume work by Michael Heinrich (2018).

## **2. Some new developments**

The papers included in this special issue deal first with Marx's formative years. The main part then turns to some developments in Marx's political economy — among which those dealing with the new MEGA are grouped under a specific heading. Some new research on the immediate reception of Marx's work in the United Kingdom and France concludes the issue.

### *The formative years*

As was noted above, the recent Marx studies have been characterised by a significant revival in research of Marx's formative years and his (sometimes quick) philosophical developments, all themes which prove now to be of importance for the understanding of the “mature” Marx. The three chapters included in this part exemplify this.

The first chapter, by Herbert De Vriese, deals with the controversies between Marx and the Young Hegelians at the beginning of the 1840s. Focusing on an hitherto neglected novel published in 1843 by a former close friend of Marx, Edgar Bauer, it shows how the young Marx was negatively depicted by his former friends, and uncovers the element of truth in this portrait but also the theoretical reason lying behind the attitudes of the protagonists: a different conception of the role of critique.

Zacharias Zoubir then examines the concept of alienation in the 1857-58 *Grundrisse*, a concept which is not confined to Marx's more youthful writings but reappears strategically in his mature work. Zoubir shows that this reflects an evolution in Marx's thought during this period, the terminology of alienation acquiring a philosophical and

economic content different from that of his earlier work — the 1844 *Manuscripts* for example — and leading to a different conception of an emancipated society.

The following chapter, by David Andrews, focuses on the related concept of fetishism. Rather neglected in the course of the history of the interpretations of *Capital*, the importance and centrality of “commodity fetishism” for an understanding of Marx’s main opus was nevertheless stressed in the past by authors like Rubin or Colletti (who directly linked it with the concept of alienation). Andrews re-examines the “mysterious” or “occult” quality attributed to the products of labour and shows how in terms of Marx’s use of “natural” in the Aristotelian sense it pervades the entire “absurd” functioning of a capitalist economy.

#### *Around the new MEGA*

The altogether eight papers in this part deal with a number of themes spurred by the MEGA<sup>2</sup> edition and the new material it contains, which has not been publicly available in the past and which is bound to change some of the received views on Marx. It also sheds light on Friedrich Engels’ work as an editor of volumes II and III of *Capital*.

The first chapter is by Regina Roth who is involved in the MEGA project as editor and researcher and informs about the status of the editorial work and also about the novel concept of *MEGAdigital*. The latter puts Marx’s manuscripts and the published version of *Capital* in the context of Marx’s overall writing and then relates it to Marx and Engels’ correspondence and to excerpts and notes in Marx’s notebooks. Examining Marx’s manuscripts and studies on rent, reproduction and the rate of profit, the paper illuminates the way Marx worked and why he failed to accomplish his huge economic project.

The second chapter, by Heinz D. Kurz, asks whether and in what sense the MEGA<sup>2</sup> edition will turn out to be a watershed in interpreting Marx. The edition is said to be a watershed, because it documents that Marx apparently got doubts as regards the correctness of his ‘law of motion’ of modern society, centred on the falling tendency of the rate of profits. It won’t be a watershed, since Marx unswervingly stuck to his ‘law of value’, which, however, is difficult to sustain.

In his chapter, Izumi Omura, who is a part of the Japanese MEGA<sup>2</sup> team on economics, turns again to the question of who was the author of the chapter on Feuerbach in the *German Ideology*, Marx or Engels? Omura elaborates an argument that has all the characteristic features of a forensic, evidence-based account. He argues that Rjazanov's contention that the chapter was written by Engels alone and not dictated by Marx is difficult to sustain. Omura also rejects Mayer's view that the two co-authored the piece for a lack of evidence in support of it: according to him, the Feuerbach chapter was indeed dictated by Marx to Engels.

Nicolas Eyguesier, in the fourth chapter, re-examines the concept of 'primitive accumulation' against the background of Marx's explanation of the birth of 'capitalism'. He compares Marx's concept with that of development of Sismondi and argues that while the latter was essentially 'romantic' and cyclical, the former was based on the idea of progress and in an eschatological aim of the history of mankind. While Marx took notice of Sismondi's doctrine, he rejected its core message.

The following two chapters are dedicated to an assessment of Marx's extensive work on multi-sector models of expanded reproduction. Christian Gehrke in his chapter shows that balanced growth, which plays a prominent role in Engels' edition of the second volume of *Capital*, is not to be found in Marx's original manuscripts. The reader is rather confronted with Marx's investigation of the problem of the traverse between systems of production, which he analysed in terms of an intricate model with six sectors. Marx also pointed out the 'elasticity' of industrial production, which is due to the possibility of varying the intensity of labour and the rate of capacity utilization.

In the following chapter Kenji Mori, who is a part of the Japanese MEGA<sup>2</sup> team on economics, also deals with Marx's six-sector model of extended reproduction and the traverse problem. His attention focuses on Marx's attempt to understand the dynamics of prices in a world characterised by the diffusion of new methods of production. It is shown that Marx was well aware of some fundamental problems in dynamic analysis, which were tackled only a century later by economists such as Adolph Lowe.

The next chapter is also by Kenji Mori. It is devoted to Marx's empirical research in his notebooks known as *Krisenhefte* (*Books of Crisis*) dealing with the 1857 crisis, arguably the first economic crisis in history that affected the world economy. Marx's studies

continued the work of Thomas Tooke and William Newmarch on *A History of Prices*, published in the same year. His meticulous work has recently been published for the first time in the MEGA edition (Part IV, Vol. 14).

In his chapter Susumu Takenaga, who is a part of the Japanese MEGA<sup>2</sup> team on economics, sheds new light on Marx's various attempts to come to grips with the problem of rent and draws the attention to notes and manuscripts not contained in volume III of *Capital*, edited by Engels on the basis of a manuscript Marx wrote in 1865. The author shows how much Marx struggled with Ricardo's rent theory, the concept of 'absolute rent' he elaborated and his absorption of Justus von Liebig's path-breaking work on agro-chemistry.

#### *Analytical developments*

This part consists of altogether six papers, which elaborate analytically on some of the problems Marx tackled in his works.

In the first chapter Saverio Maria Fratini investigates whether Marx's concept of 'absolute rent' reflects the existence of a monopoly in agriculture. Marx had argued that this kind of rent has an upper limit given by the difference between the (labour) value and the production price of agricultural products. Critics disputed the existence of such an upper limit. The author argues that while the criticism is correct, it still makes sense to distinguish absolute rent from rent reflecting a monopoly.

The second chapter is by Carlo Benetti, Alain Béraud, Edith Klimovsky and Antoine Rebeyrol and analyses the numerical illustrations of the two-sector model of extended reproduction in volume II of *Capital*. The attention focuses on the problem of whether or not the economy converges to a balanced growth path and which role is played in this context by the way prices are determined. While Marx assumed prices to be given in terms of labour values, they introduce an endogenous price model that allows for an adjustment of prices according to the state of the accumulation process.

Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Matari Pierre Manigat in the following chapter turn to James Steuart's influence on Marx's monetary economic thought. Steuart was critical of the quantity theory of money and provided arguments in support of breaches of the link

between the quantity of money and prices, which Marx took up and elaborated in various directions. The focus is inter alia on the functions money performs and the difference between advances of capital and the spending of income.

The chapter by Wilfried Parys scrutinizes critically Marx's view of the 'common third' in the exchange of any two commodities. Marx identified 'abstract labour' to be the sought substance. His idea was soon challenged not only by marginalist authors who insisted that 'use value in general' is the *tertium comparationis*, but also by various scholars who pointed out that commodities entering directly or indirectly in the production of all commodities could serve the purpose. Energy is such a thing.

Rodolphe Dos Santos Ferreira and Ragip Ege in their chapter have a closer look at Marx's concept of the labour contract, which was supposed to substantiate exploitation, and confront it with the neoclassical concept. While the latter refers to a particular service, the former refers to the labour power the worker sells to the employer. The employer is entitled to make the best use of labour power with the wage covering its cost of reproduction. Externalisation of part of this cost, via the social security system or higher flexibility of the labour contract, allows the employer to increase exploitation.

The final chapter in this part is by Michaël Assous and Antonin Pottier, who compare the analyses of Marx and Michal Kalecki on the macroeconomic (in)stability of capitalism and the role of the class struggle between workers and capitalists in it.

### *The reception of Marx's works*

The reception of Marx's works in different countries has long been neglected, first because, like for other authors, this field of study was not really topical or fashionable, but also more probably because of the role played, until recently, by the official discourses of political organisations. Both obstacles being now absent, the two chapters included in this part offer analyses of two important moments in the reception of Marx in the United Kingdom and in France prior to World War I.

Michael White focuses on one author, Philip Henry Wicksteed, and deals with his developments in what was called the Jevonsian critique of Marx: how Wicksteed was

led to criticise Marx while defending Henry George's views, and why this was done in a questionable way, based on some misreading of Jevons's analysis.

Michel Bellet, in turn, studies a large group of authors who wrote in *La Revue socialiste*, the main French socialist journal prior to the First World War. He shows that Marx's writings, while judged important, were nevertheless received critically within an intellectual context deeply shaped by the ideas of the main French socialist writers of the nineteenth century (Constantin Pecqueur in particular), and how the role of Benoît Malon was central in this reception.

All these studies bring new material and fresh results. No doubt, thanks to the MEGA<sup>2</sup> edition, they are part of a novel start in Marx studies.

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