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The Marxist Tradition of Historical Writing in the West.

A Retrospect from the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

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Marxism is obviously in a crisis in the developed Western capitalist countries. But this crisis did not begin with the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and in the countries of Eastern Europe dominated by it. Western Marxism had already distanced itself much earlier from the Marxist-Leninist approach propagated by the Soviet Union. One of the theses of this paper is that the crisis of Marxism as a revolutionary working class movement came with the outbreak of the First World War. This crisis reflected the failure of Marx adequately to understand the social and economic realities of his time. His strength lay in the perceptive analysis of the development of a capitalist economy on a global scale, which in many aspects proved to be correct. Nevertheless this analysis was inseparably connected with a conception of history predicting the inevitable progression from capitalism to socialism which turned out to be mistaken. Marx had expected the transition from bourgeois society to socialism to occur still during his life time as the result of a victorious revolution of the working class.¹ Instead the working class movements saw the defeat of Chartism in England, the 1848 Revolutions on the Continent, and the Commune in Paris. As Richard Ashcraft wrote as early as 1978 in a review of Perry Anderson's *Considerations of Western Marxism*, "one unbroken link in the tradition of Marxism is certainly the defeat of the revolutionary working class within capitalist

¹ Marcello Musto, "The Rediscovery of Karl Marx", *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52 (2007), 477-498; Marcel van der Linden & Karl Heinz Roth, eds. *Arbeitsgeschichte und Arbeitsbegriff in der Konfrontation mit den globalen Arbeitsverhältnissen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2009), 16.

countries.”² Although after World War I Marxist communist and socialist parties, had some strength in parliamentary elections in Continental Europe, Marxist theorists moved away from a focus on economics and politics to philosophy and culture. Marxism was increasingly located at the universities, separated from political action. This break between Marxism and politics was completed in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The demise of Marxism did not, however, mean the death of the Left.³ But the Left, which reached a highpoint in the turmoils of 1968, distanced itself increasingly from Marxism. Nevertheless the Left continued to incorporate significant elements of Marxism such as the critique of capitalism and the struggle for a just society and human emancipation.

This paper is intended as part of a panel on the relevance of Marxist ideas for historical writing today from a global perspective with contributions on Marxist historical theory and writing in Japan, China, India, the Mediterranean world, Latin America, and the West. Further papers on Russia, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa have been planned for the journal publication of the panel.⁴ My own paper developed from a review I wrote on a collection of essays edited by Chris Wickham, *Marxist History Writing for the Twenty-first Century* published in 2007,⁵ which unlike our panel was written exclusively by Western historians and theorists with a focus on Marxist theory and historiography from Europe and on Europe. Of the eight contributors six were British. The focus was on European, for the most part British discussions. My paper also will be Western oriented, but as part of a panel with a comparative global approach. There is justification for this because a discussion of what constitutes Marxist historiography world wide, of course, needs to clarify what is Marxism and cannot ignore the nineteenth century Western origin of Marx’s thought.

² Richard Ashcraft, review of Perry Anderson, *Considerations of Western Marxism in Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Feb. 1978), 136.

³ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850- 2000* (Oxford, 2000).

⁴ To appear in *Storia della Storiografia*.

⁵ Chris Wickham, ed., *Marxist History-writing for the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford, 2007); review in *American Historical Review*, vol. 115 (2010), 186-188,

There have been considerable differences in the interpretation of what constitutes Marxism and more specifically of what are the key ideas of Marx on which these differing interpretations are based. As the other essays will show, the crisis in which Marxism finds itself in the West today does not exist in the same way outside the West. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of its hold over Eastern Europe and the decline and to a large extent dissolution of the Communist parties in Western Europe, the institutional basis of Marxism as a political movement was gone in the West. The Wickham volume thus rightly asked to what extent a Marxist approach to society was still relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century or belonged to the dust bin of history. The authors in the Wickham volume continued to maintain that despite the obvious shortcomings of Marx's conceptions, his insights continue even today to provide powerful tools for critical historical analysis. They still see him as a major social theorist of the past comparative to Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and Max Weber whom they cite.⁶ And indeed there continues to be a considerable literature on the remaining relevance of Marx.

The question, of course, arises what is understood by a Marxist approach to history and society. Once his ideas have been adapted selectively as they have by many social theorists and historians on the left and by very different political movements such as the dictatorial state capitalism in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites and the democratic liberalism of social democracy in Western Europe can they still be considered Marxist? As Tony Judd wrote: "The central tenets of Marxism ... are so much a part of modern historical writing that it is hard to say what is and what is not 'Marxist'."⁷ The self-identification of political theorists as Marxists is highly problematic because Marx's views were by no means systematic or consistent, but changed with circumstances.

⁶ W.G. Runciman, "Introduction" in: Wickham, 3. See also Moishe Postone, "Rethinking Marx (in a Post-Marxist World)" in Charles Camic, *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics: The State of the Scholarship* (Oxford, 1997), 45-80.

⁷ Cited in Paul Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester, 2006), 2.

Nevertheless there are several ideas which are basic to Marx throughout his writings, and are summed up concisely by Engels, “that economic production and the structure of society of every historical epoch necessarily arising therefrom constitute the foundation for the political and intellectual history of that epoch, that consequently (ever since the dissolution of the primeval communal ownership of land) all history has been a history of class struggles, a struggle between exploiters and exploited, between dominating and dominated classes at various stages of social development; that the struggle, however, has now reached a stage where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie) without at the same time forever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression, and class struggles.”⁸ This is the core of Marx’s conception of society and history, generally known as “historical materialism”,⁹ from which he did not swerve throughout his life. Marx considered his analysis of capitalist society and economy scientific, as did also Engels,¹⁰ but saw science not primarily in cognitive terms but as an instrument in the revolutionary struggle, positing an indissoluble unity of theory and practice. Throughout his mature life he was active politically, in 1847-48 in the Communist League in London and later in the International Working Men’s Association.

Marxism became a significant political program in the second third of the nineteenth century. In 1875 the German socialist movement in its Gotha Program accepted large parts of his doctrine as its theoretical basis.¹¹ So did the Second International in 1889. The language of both was revolutionary, its actual policies reformist. Marxist ideas played a role in Italian, Austrian, and to a lesser extent French socialism. It is striking that in Great Britain, the most

⁸ Engels, “Preface to the German edition of the “Communist Manifesto”, June 28, 1883 in Tucker, 472.

⁹ Marx never used the term “historical materialism”, instead spoke of the “materialist conception of history”. Historical Materialism is not entirely dead as shown by a journal by that name, located in London, founded in 1997, which holds that “Marxism constitutes the most fertile conceptual framework for analyzing social phenomena, with an eye to their overhaul.”

¹⁰ Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx”, Tucker, 681; and “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific”, Tucker. 683-717.

¹¹ See Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program”, Tucker, 525-541.

advanced industrial country, to which Marx's class analysis should have applied most, the reformist, non-Marxist Labour Party occupied the major role in the British working class movement. In the United States Marxism, and for that matter socialism, was even more marginal.¹² This reflected how inadequate Marx's class analysis of industrial societies was when applied to these two countries. Engels acknowledged the political conformism of the British workers which he contrasted to the class consciousness of the German industrial workers.¹³

The First World War and its aftermath saw the failure of the socialist movements to prevent the war. In fact all European social democratic parties supported the war effort of their countries, although before the war they had expressed their opposition. The Italian party was an exception, but the ultranationalist wing under Benito Mussolini left the party in support of the war. The American Socialist Party also opposed the war, and its leader Eugene Debs was incarcerated, but it played a very marginal role. Lenin's Bolsheviks succeeded in establishing a so called dictatorship of the proletariat, but Communist uprisings in Berlin, Munich and Budapest were bloodily suppressed in 1919. The postwar period saw Fascism in Italy, authoritarian dictatorships in all of Eastern Europe except Czechoslovakia, and ultimately the Nazis in Germany, Franco in Spain, and Salazar in Portugal. The interwar period saw the split in the socialist movements in Europe to which we have referred, between Social Democratic and Communist parties. Marxist historiography, as in the case of Italy and France, was closely linked to the orthodoxy of the Communist parties.

Nevertheless an important change took place on the intellectual level, the emergence of what has been called Western Marxism. Three works should be mentioned in this connection, the Hungarian György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), the

¹² Werner Sombart, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* (Tübingen, 1906); Thomas Welskopp, "Birds of a Feather: A Comparative History of German and US Labor in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York, 2009), 149-177.

¹³ Engels on British workers to Karl Kautsky, September 12, 1882, Tucker, 676.

German Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923),¹⁴ and the Italian Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, written in Mussolini's prison,¹⁵ which laid the philosophic foundation of what was to be known as Western Marxism.¹⁶ All three occupied a key role in their respective Communist parties, although Korsch broke with the party when it came under the domination of Stalin. What these works had in common is that they focused overwhelmingly on culture, social consciousness, and ideology rather than on economics, while continuing to assign Marxism a revolutionary role in combating capitalism. But a fundamental distinction must be made between the philosophic and political outlook of Antonio Gramsci in Italy and the form which György Lukács' Western Marxism took in Central Europe. In Central European Western Marxism turned increasingly to intellectuals and soon found a basis in academic institutions, as early as 1923 with the foundation of a Marxist institute of social research at the University of Frankfurt. Lukács still proceeded from a classical Marxist conception of class, assigning to the proletariat a fundamental role in the revolutionary transformation of society; Gramsci, although recognizing the role of intellectuals in a revolutionary movement, focused on what he called the "subaltern" portions of the population, recognizing the uneven economic and social development of Italy and the need of mobilizing the lower classes as well as industrial workers. Faced with the failure of the workers' strikes in 1919 and the subsequent victory of Fascism, he saw that the entrenched powers, which were not simply capitalist, established their political and cultural hegemony over the minds of the working masses. A revolutionary revival thus required a revolutionary cultural awakening of the masses. Lukács, who had not yet read Marx's early writings in which he developed his concept of alienation,¹⁷ which were only published in the 1930s, argued on the basis of a careful reading of *Capital*, that Marx had been misinterpreted as an

¹⁴ Second edition (Leipzig, 1930); Patrick Goode, *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism* (London, 1979).

¹⁵ See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London, 1991),

¹⁶ See Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (Chicago, 2007). On more recent historians related to Western Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Spectrum* (London, 2005).

¹⁷ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" in Tucker, 66-125.

empiricist and materialist. His critique of political economy did not only aim at the economic dysfunction of capital but also at the human price of what Marx called “the fetishism of commodities”,¹⁸ resulting in what Lukács called “reification” (*Verdinglichung*),¹⁹ akin to what Marx had called “alienation” in his early manuscripts. The Comintern committed to Marxist orthodoxy criticized Lukács, Korsch, and Gramsci. Lukács’ book was withdrawn and republished only in the late 1960s in a very different atmosphere.

Lukács’ philosophy was elaborated and modified by Max Horkheimer, who in 1930 assumed the directorship of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. Together with his associates, including Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, he was forced to flee Germany after the Nazi accession to power in 1933. Horkheimer formulated a “Critical Theory” which gave up Marx’s master narrative of historical progress, to which Lukács had still adhered, and pursued a science of society which was not exclusively empirical but introduced norms of human freedom as parts of historical inquiry.²⁰ He nevertheless maintained a critique of capitalism with its destructive impact on modern culture. He and Adorno returned to Frankfurt in 1950 from their American exile and played an important role in the German intellectual scene of the 1950s and particularly the 1960s.²¹ Their most important student was undoubtedly Jürgen Habermas, who no longer considered himself a Marxist but a pronounced socially oriented democrat. Marxism took another form in the West Germany of the 1970s, where social science oriented historians, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler²² and Jürgen Kocka,²³

¹⁸ See “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” in *Capital*, vol. I in Tucker. 319-329.

¹⁹ See “Die Verdinglichung und das Bewußtseins des Proletariats” in Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein : Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (Berlin, 1923), 94-228.

²⁰ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” in Horkheimer, ed., *Critical Theory. Selected Essays* (New York, 1972).

²¹ See e.g. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1984), also Stephen K. White, *Jürgen Habermas: Reason, Justice & Modernity* (Cambridge, 1988).

²² See Wehler, *The German Empire 1871-1918* (Göttingen, 1973), English (Leamington Spa, 1985); also *Historische Sozialwissenschaft und Geschichtsschreibung* (Göttingen, 1980); *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 5 vols. (München, 1985-2008).

²³ Kocka has dealt extensively with the history of socio-economic classes in an industrial society, working classes and middle classes (*Bürgertum*), with a focus on Germany but a broad comparative transnational perspective; as examples see *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg: deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918* (Göttingen, 1978); his three volume edition, *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert: Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*

in their critique of the aspects of the German past which paved the road to Nazism took over a number of key concepts from Marx, including those of class and social inequality, via the sociology of Max Weber, and aspects of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School with its roots in Western Marxism²⁴

These discussions had at first little immediate effect on historical writing. Marxist historiography generally continued to follow the lines of orthodox historical materialism on two important points: the conception of history in terms of class struggle and that of the transition of European societies through the stages of feudalism, a bourgeois order, and ultimately communism. By this time Marxist historians, in France and Italy, and surprisingly in Great Britain, had attained a degree of academic recognition and engaged in exchanges with non-Marxist historians. In the United States Marxism was marginalized, although Marxist ideas of class, not recognized as such, played a role among the “Progressive” Historians,²⁵ as they had already in 1913 in Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. In Great Britain a small circle of young historians had organized the Communist Party’s Historians’ Group,²⁶ who in 1952 together with non-Marxist historians founded *Past and Present*, a journal of social history. The topic which occupied British Marxist historians in their exchange with non-Marxists was the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,²⁷ while the French Marxist historians dealt with the French Revolution in terms of class conflict between

(München, 1988) with a strong cultural component; and most recently his edition, *Work in a Modern Society: The German Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2010).

²⁴ On the Frankfurt School see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Boston, 1973), and John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, tentative title, to appear with the Cambridge University Press in 2011.

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²⁶ See Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, 1984); also Eric Hobsbawm, “The Historians’ Group in the Communist Party” in M. Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and their Causes* (London, 1978), 21-48.

²⁷ For a somewhat later discussion of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe from a Marxist materialist perspective, see the American historian Robert Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong”, Wickham, 49-111.

aristocracy and bourgeoisie²⁸ It is questionable how orthodox the class notion of Albert Soboul,²⁹ a committed member of the French Communist party, was, since the Sans Culottes, who in their radicalism for him represented the true revolution, were in fact held together less by social origin than by ideological preferences; he thus fitted into the radical interpretation of the French Revolution pursued by established non-Marxist academic historians such as Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez, who preceded him.³⁰ A more complex approach to the role of classes was reflected in Georges Lefebvre's *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939) and in his *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (1932)³¹ in which he focused on the psychological reactions of the masses. Yet these interpretations were soon challenged by non-Marxist historians, including the British historian Alfred Cobban,³² who demonstrated that there was no clear class distinction between the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie. Ernest Labrousse's quantitative study of prices³³ should be mentioned here as an empirical Marxist analysis of the economic causes of the French Revolution. François Furet³⁴ in the 1970s took apart what he considered Soboul's Marxist dogmatism and pointed at the important role which political and cultural factors played.

1956, the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's address on Stalin's crimes marked the exodus of a majority of the Marxist historians from the Communist Party in their respective countries. But while important young French historians such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and François Furet moved away from their earlier Marxism, the British historians continued to regard themselves as Marxists, but modified their Marxism reflecting an outlook akin to the Western Marxism which we just discussed. The most important work was that of E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Thompson distanced

²⁸ For a concise discussion of the French historians to Marxism, see William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 36-38.

²⁹ *The Parisian Sans Culottes* (Oxford, 1964).

³⁰ A similar Marxist focus on the radical wing of the French Revolution is contained in the East German historian Walter Markov's biographical writings on Jacques Roux.

³¹ *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (Paris, 1932), English (New York 1972).

³² *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1968).

³³ *Esquisse des mouvements des prix et des revenus* (Paris, 1933).

³⁴ See Furet's response to Soboul,, „Le catéchisme révolutionnaire”, *Annales ESC* 26 (1971), 255-289.

himself from Marx's prototypical proletariat and instead dealt with "a concrete English working class" which entered the industrial age with its own traditions. Consciousness and culture thus played an important role in the "making of the English working class." In a similar vein Eric Hobsbawm, who remained a critical member of the Communist Party, George Rudé, also a former member of the Communist Party's Historians' Group, and Richard Cobb, a non-Marxist, examined the active role of the masses in political and economic protests in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.³⁵

We need to go back to 1945 and look at the economic and political context within which history was written in the three decades which followed. This was a period of the triumph of capitalism in North America, Western Europe and Japan. Of significance for Marxist historiography was the fact that the classical concept of class seemed increasingly outdated. Unlike in the interwar period of the 1920s and 30s, there was no major economic crisis until 1973. The working class was increasingly integrated into the middle class and with it its political consciousness as a separate class was undermined. This process was perhaps less pronounced in France, Italy, and Japan, where the Communist Party continued to be an important political entity with its impact on Marxist historiography. The industrial economy, which was the basis of Marx's analysis, was increasingly replaced by service industries. The small farmer gave way to the concentration of agriculture in large capitalist enterprises. In the United States the Progressive historians were succeeded in the 1950s by the Consensus School which claimed that in contrast to Europe classes and class conflict did not exist in the United States. The Cold War led to the increased rejection of Marxist historiography which had its major base in the Soviet Union and its dependent states. A dominant trend in American, but also to an extent British and continental historiography, was the turn to an empirical, analytical social science, with emphasis on quantification, which projected the

³⁵ See also E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136; Rudé with Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing* (London, 1993).

triumph of free market capitalism on a world scale as in Walt Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*.³⁶

This consensus was increasingly challenged in the 1960s with the growing critique of the capitalist status quo. In the United States this saw the emergence of the civil rights movement. Separate from this there was the increasing popular opposition to the Viet Nam war, which spread beyond the borders of the United States and involved the reaction against the vestiges of colonialism. In the United States the New Left historians such as William Appleton Williams and Gabriel Kolko saw the connection between American imperialist policies and economic interests. The critique of the status quo extended to a questioning of the fundamentals of traditional Western culture, an awareness of the extent to which this culture with its science and technology was linked with capitalism and spelled out not only the economic and political but also the cultural domination of the West over the non-Western world and called for an alternative, post-capitalistic and post-industrial, society. This new search for emancipation also reflected the emergence of a feminist movement which signaled a new history and a new approach to society which called for the recognition of the role of women, seen in the context of gender relations, as agents of historical and social change.³⁷

Yet the question arises in what ways these movements for change operated with Marxist concepts. At the core of the protests were not the working people but students who came largely from the middle classes. This was also true of the feminist movements. From the perspective of these protests the Marxist analysis of society and conception of history was outdated except for its call for emancipation, but emancipation was now understood in broader terms involving all aspects of life rather than primarily, even if admittedly not exclusively, concentrating on the economic foundation.

The Introduction to the Wickham volume had still raised the question: "Why, as often asked, did (Marx) give so little attention to the experience of women and colonial peoples in

³⁶ (Cambridge, 1960).

³⁷ See Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

favour of the experience of the European, white, male, working class?"³⁸ Yet these limitations could be corrected. Marxist historiography could and did take into account gender and the socio-economic conditions of the postcolonial world. But the Marxist idea of class now seemed out of place, even in its Thompsonian form which still gave little attention to the role of gender and ethnicity.

Behind this shift there was another concern, the belief that not only traditional Marxism but social science approaches in general, including those of the French *Annales*, had dealt with anonymous structures and processes, with little attention to the life experiences of concrete human beings. The new attempt to turn from economically based large scale histories to culture oriented small scale histories and from analysis to narratives involved both continuity with Marxist ideas and their outright repudiation.³⁹ The continuity lay in the stress on social inequality created by the capitalist economic system and the concern with what came to be called the "subaltern" classes.⁴⁰ This gave rise to *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) in Germany and to *microstoria* (microhistory) in Italy. Particularly *Alltagsgeschichte* sought a new methodology inspired by Clifford Geertz' cultural anthropology⁴¹ which rejected the application of theory and analysis to the study of cultures and called for what it called "thick description", the immediate confrontation with the "other".⁴² What was left of Marxism was a history from below. This was also the case with the Italian practitioners of *microstoria*. While Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, two important practitioners of *microstoria*, emphatically rejected the grand historical scheme and the illiberal politics of orthodox Marxism, they acknowledged the influence of the non-Marxist approach of Marc Bloch, the co-founder of the French *Annales*, who joined a study of social

³⁸ W. G. Runciman, "Introduction" in Wickham, 3.

³⁹ See Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative", *Past and Present*, 85 (November 1979), 3-24.

⁴⁰ The term "subaltern" originated with Gramsci and was then adopted by the Indian Subaltern Group and has since then been widely used outside of India.

⁴¹ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

⁴² See Hans Medick, "Missionaries in the Row Boat", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29 (1987), 76-98.

structures with that of mentalities, but also that of E. P. Thompson's cultural Marxism. Unlike the advocates of *Alltagsgeschichte*, they distanced themselves from Geertz' interpretative anthropology. According to Ginzburg and Levi *microstoria* did not reject the social sciences as such, but stressed the methodological need for testing their constructs against existing social reality on a small scale.⁴³ Here considerations of hegemony and social inequality, which were prime concerns of Marxist historiography as understood by Gramsci, formed parts of the historical conception of the Italian microhistorians.

But the main attack on Marxism came not from *microstoria* but from post-modern proponents of the cultural and linguistic turn who challenged the very possibility of a social or historical reality apart from discourse.⁴⁴ Although the advocates of this orientation for the most part considered themselves as belonging to the left, they rejected Marx's conception of class not only because it was not comprehensive enough, but primarily because it rested on an economic reality which for them was the construct of language, not language the reflection of reality.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly Marx's conception of class as a real existing entity was overly narrow. But this narrowness, which as we noted reflected the dominant male oriented and Eurocentric outlook of the time, could be corrected as in fact it has been in a good deal of current historiography on the left, whether it identified itself as Marxist or not, without sacrificing a Marxist conception of class. The cultural and linguistic orientations have in fact enriched the understanding of social reality by placing capitalist society into the context of culture and everyday life. Thus Gareth Stedman Jones in his study of the Chartist movement rightly pointed out the decisive role of language rather than of purely economic forces which shaped the political consciousness of British workers at that time, yet ultimately also reduced social

⁴³ See Levi, „On Microhistory” in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives in Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 1992), 93, 95.

⁴⁴ On Marxist reactions to post-modernism, see Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London, 1998); Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, 1998).

⁴⁵ Cf. Joan W. Scott. “On Language, Gender, and Working Class History” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 53-67; see William Sewell's review essay of her book in *History and Theory*, vo. 29 (1990). 79.

reality to discourse.⁴⁶ Yet when the linguistic turn was carried to an extreme in which the real conditions under which class functioned in a capitalist society were reduced to forms of discourse, it ignored the actual functioning of the capitalist economy which brought about the interconnected inequality of money, power, and position.⁴⁷ It is here that Marx's economic analysis of society and history still had a degree of validity, if one took into account the tremendous changes in the corporate world on a global scale, which Marx foresaw only partly, and the roles of gender and cultural diversities in the operation of the economy which he largely ignored.⁴⁸ Cultural and social history were not mutually exclusive, but complement each other as they increasingly do today.

We need to go back once more to the years around 1968 to understand the intellectual outlook since 1990. The turmoil of that year in fact involved a challenge to the capitalist status quo, a new interest in Marxist ideas; but the protests which shook the Western world and to an extent also Soviet dominated countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary had concerns which went in different directions. New issues gained importance and continue to play an important role today, centering on gender, ethnicity, ecology, sexual orientation among others. They shared with Marxism the concern with social inequality, saw a close connection of these issues with capitalism, but no longer shared the traditional Marxist vision of a revolutionary working class. The ideas which motivated the protests in 1968 were successful on one level, on another level they failed. They were successful in so far as there was a fundamental change in many aspects of everyday life, an increasing recognition of the role of women in public and professional life, greater equality in the relation between the genders, the acceptance of differing sexual orientations, particularly in North America a new

⁴⁶ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), also his essay, "Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism, and the Discursive Approach to History" in Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung* (Göttingen, 1997), 149-209. See also William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime until 1848* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁴⁷ Similarly Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, 2007); 194. Also Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005) and William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History*.

⁴⁸ Kevin B. Anderson would dispute this.

orientation to ethnic minorities, and a new awareness of the threats posed by the capitalist economy to the climate. But they did not succeed in reforming the political and economic system.

The protest movements were not a result of negative economic developments which set in only in 1973 with the oil crisis. The economic and political power of capitalist interests was not weakened in the aftermath of 1968 or the oil crisis of 1973, but strengthened, and not even fundamentally shaken as a consequence of the financial crisis of 2008. The wages of the working populations in the years that followed until now stagnated or even declined, while the incomes of the capitalist segments of society rose, so that a growing gulf arose in all capitalist countries between the wealthy and the disadvantaged. But there were no signs of a revolutionary working class. Instead a new political conservatism set in. This was the period marked by Reagan and Reaganism in the United States and Thatcher and Thatcherism in Great Britain, the triumph of laissez faire neo-liberalism and the consolidation of the power of the large financial institutions, the concentration of capital on a global scale which Marx and Engels had predicted, relatively unfettered by regulations. But the result was not the formation of a significant working class party, but a definite decline of social democracy as well as of labor unions. As a matter of fact, the German Social Democratic Party had already broken with its Marxist ideology at its Bad Godesberg convention in 1959 and proclaimed itself a people's party (*Volkspartei*), seeking to recruit support across class lines. It is in this context that the Marxist historiography of the past two decades must be understood.

The end of the Cold War marked not only the end of Communism as a political program, but the rapid dissolution of Communist parties, also in Western countries where the Communist party had been an important electoral force such as in France and Italy. By 2010 only relatively small Communist splinter parties were left in these countries. The imminent collapse of the Soviet Union led the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in 1989 to proclaim the final defeat of socialism and the definitive victory of free market capitalism as

the ultimate fulfillment of world history,⁴⁹ which for him went hand in hand with democratic political institutions. These ultimately would be adopted by the rest of the world, and lead to the end of wars. In fact the events of 1989 marked the end of Marxism as a political program generally in the Western world, although as we shall see in the remaining essays not in non-Western countries where a modern capitalist economy was as yet less developed.

Yet this did not mean the end of Marxism as an intellectual paradigm, nor did it mark the end of Marxist historiography. But Marxist discourse was now largely restricted to academic discussions as in fact it had already been earlier, which led Eric Hobsbawm to question whether intellectuals who ceased being social revolutionaries could still be considered Marxists.⁵⁰ Nevertheless there was a relatively lively literature expounding Marxist theory and approaching history from Marxist perspectives. We have to be selective in the presentation of this literature and are restricting ourselves to works which reflect the main trends in recent years of interpretations of Marx's theories as they pertain to Marxist historiography. There was general agreement that Marxism did not yet belong to the dust bin of history, but as the Wickham volume suggested, with certain corrections still was relevant for the analysis of contemporary political, economic, and social conditions. Interestingly the major part of these discussions again took place in Great Britain, in some ways continuing the Anglo-Marxist tradition. There was a host of Marxist publications, last but not least Perry Anderson's *New Left Review*. It became apparent even to committed social historians on the Left, like the editors of the British *History Workshop*, that the traditional Marxist analysis of society, which they still pursued in the late 1970s, now needed to be modified. The journal, founded in 1976 as a "Journal of Socialist Historians" by a group of committed Marxists, six years later recognized that it had given inadequate attention to the experience of women and changed its subtitle to "Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians", but in 1995 dropped the

⁴⁹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *National Interest*, 16 (Summer 1989), 3-18; *idem.*, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1996); also his "Reflections on the End of History Five Years Later", *History and Theory*, 34:2 (1995), 27-43/

⁵⁰ Hobsbawm in Wickham, 180.

subtitle altogether with the explanation that the Marxist analysis of class no longer corresponded to “the political conditions in which we work (which) have changed almost out of recognition in the fourteen years since we last amended our mast head.”⁵¹ By now the Thompsonian conception of class to which the journal had adhered appeared inadequate in view of the actual complexities of society. What was left was not the Marxist theory of society, much less the commitment to revolutionary change, but nevertheless a critique of the capitalist social order and a call for emancipation on a broad scale across gender and ethnic lines.⁵²

The last twenty years lead us to question Fukuyama’s prognosis. They show not only the inadequacy of Marxist but also of neo-liberal analyses of the present global situation. Violent confrontations have taken a different form from those of the Cold War. Neither Marxists nor neo-liberals can explain these confrontations adequately along primarily economic lines. Both have worked with a concept of modernization, although they differ about the outcome of this process, which for both assumed the acceptance of Western norms not only of technology and science but also in the social and cultural realms. It overlooked the

⁵¹ „Change and Continuity“, *History Workshop* (Spring 1995), iii-iv,

⁵² I am not dealing with Eastern Europe where dialectical materialism was imposed by decree in the Soviet client states after World War II, since another paper shall deal with them. However, even there, there were dissident voices, particularly in Poland and Hungary, and in the 1960s in Czechoslovakia, which were influenced by or participated in Western Marxist discussions, for example in the so-called “Budapest School”. Polish economic historians such as Witold Kula, Jerzy Topolski, and Andrzej Wyczański published in the French *Annales* as did as did Russian cultural historian Aaron Gurevitch. In many ways these historians followed approaches which were akin to Western Marxism. In East Germany (German Democratic Republic) there were few new initiatives, nevertheless a number of historians began in the 1980s to include cultural factors in their analysis of modern societies and at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig turned to comparative international studies, dealing not only with the French Revolution (Walter Markov) but also with the capitalist penetration of Africa and Latin America (Markov, Manfred Kossok) – see Georg G. Iggers, ed., *Ein anderer historischer Blick* (Frankfurt a/M. 1991). On historical studies since 1989 see Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi and Peter Apor, *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Budapest, 2007).

diversities of cultures and traditions which lead to different roads to modernity.⁵³ But Samuel Huntington's explanation of the resulting conflicts as a clash of civilization is one sided in largely ignoring the social and historical context of these conflicts⁵⁴, seeing these "civilizations", the West, Islam, and China, as organic units, not taking adequately into account their complexity and the interrelation between them.

We can discern three important trends in Marxist theoretical discussions dealing with the changed realities after 1990. The first, best represented by Perry Anderson, frankly concedes the defeat of the Marxist paradigm. Anderson had already recognized this defeat in his important reflections in *Considerations of Western Marxism* (1976). In 2000, in an important editorial in the *New Left Review*, he concluded, similarly to the *History Workshop*, that since he took over the editorship of the journal in 1962, the environment in which the journal functioned has all but completely disappeared. The only starting point for a realistic Left now was a lucid registration of historical defeat. "Capitalism has come to stay, we must make our peace with it" and free ourselves from the "illusions that the system is moving in a steadily progressive direction."⁵⁵ For the first time in its history, he noted in 2005, capitalism was without a rival, let alone a challenger.⁵⁶ But what then is left of the Left he asks? Despite everything he sees no guarantee of the perpetual power of neo-liberalism. The *New Left Review* would continue as a political journal and occupy a critical role. American imperialism remains its primary enemy. Anderson criticized advocates on the Left, including Jürgen Habermas, Norberto Bobbio, and John Rawls, who supported NATO military intervention in Yugoslavia and later in Iraq.

A second reaction to the crisis of Marxism and Marxist historiography was reflected in the attempts by British Marx scholars in recent years to rescue Marx from orthodox

⁵³ Depesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

⁵⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, 1996).

⁵⁵ „Editorial. Renewals“, *New Left Review*, January, February 2000, 13-15.

⁵⁶ Perry Anderson, *Spectrum* (London, 2005), 132.

interpretations which saw historical materialism as a form of either economic reductionism or as bland positivism⁵⁷ and to preserve the applicability of Marxist theory to the realities of the twenty-first century. One problem in reading Marx, they recognized, was that many of his writings were fragmentary and contained inconsistencies, so that Marx could be read in very different ways.⁵⁸ As Blackledge and Lucio Colletti argued, “never in Marx do we find economic categories that are purely economic categories.”⁵⁹ This is undoubtedly correct if we replace the word never by generally. As Engels had already stressed, for Marx and for himself “the economic situation is the ultimately determining element in history”, but various elements of the superstructure, “political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views ... also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles.”⁶⁰ And in his writings on past and recent events Marx took these factors into account. Blackledge maintains that Marx was no determinist but emphasized the role of agency in history, very much as Thompson understood it. Engels would agree: “History is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills.”⁶¹ But there are well known statements by Marx which lend support to an interpretation of him as a determinist, for example the “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Political Economy* and the “Preface” to the First German edition of *Capital* where he speaks of “the natural laws of capitalist production”, of “tendencies working with iron necessity toward inevitable results.”⁶² Kevin Anderson accepts Blackledge’s conclusions but in *Marx at the Margins*: (2010) he goes a step further in seeking to bring Marx into accord with present historiographical approaches. He argues, as the subtitle of his book *On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* suggests, that in fact Marx gave attention to all of these topics mentioned in the subtitle. Similarly he rejects

⁵⁷ Blackledge, 16

⁵⁸ Cf. Musto, “The Rediscovery of Marx”; Blackledge, 20..

⁵⁹ Blackledge, 22.TT

⁶⁰ Bloch, 760

⁶¹ See Blackledge, ch. 5, “Structure, agency and the struggle for freedom”. 153-199; Engels to Joseph Bloch, September 21-22, 1890, Tucker, 761.

⁶² Tucker, 296.

the commonly held notion that Marx held to a Eurocentric, unilinear conception of history. This had led critics such as Edward Said to accuse Marx of “Orientalism”⁶³ and Depesh Chakrabarty⁶⁴ to stress the Eurocentric character of Marx’s conception which posited a uniform process of historical development which refused to recognize that modernization can have very different forms in diverse cultures. It has been argued in recent Marxist literature that Marx meant that this process applied merely to Western and Central European countries and to North America and not to countries such as Russia, India, Indonesia, and China in which industrial capitalism was in its very early beginnings. Anderson admits that this Eurocentric outlook is contained in Marx’s early writings as late as certain of his articles in the *New York Tribune* in 1853, but that he then acknowledged the uniqueness of non-Western cultures and the diversity of historical developments, as he did in his well known response to Vera Zazulich in 1881,⁶⁵ in which he recognized that agrarian Russia may follow a different path to socialism than Europe. It is in his yet unpublished correspondence and notes that Anderson discovers Marx’s concern with non-white ethnicity, including that of the role which the Black slaves played in the development of Western industrial capitalism, and his treatment of the Irish as part of the British work force. But there are some problems with this reevaluation of Marx conception of history. Except for short passages in the *Grundrisse* to which Anderson refers, which were not published until well in the twentieth century, and for brief mentions in the preface to the French edition of the first volume of *Capital* these supposed reorientations of Marx’s thought were too little known to affect the acceptance of Marx’s theories. Moreover, a blatantly Eurocentric unilinear conception of history occupies a key place in 1859 in the “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Political Economy* (1859) and in the famous sentence in the preface to the First edition of *Capital* (1867): “The country that is more developed industrially (England) only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own

⁶³ Kevin Anderson, 17.

⁶⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁶⁵ Marx reply to Vera Zazulich, March 8, 1881, Tucker, 675; K. Anderson, 229-236.

future.”⁶⁶ Anderson suggests that Marx compared the situation in England to that in continental Europe, especially Germany, without mentioning any non-European societies.⁶⁷

A third approach is contained in the massive anthology, *Über Marx hinaus* (Beyond Marx), edited by the Dutch labor historian Marcel van der Linden and his German colleague Karl Heinz Roth⁶⁸ with contributions by scholars from various European countries, North America, Australia, and India. The focus is on Marx’s concept of labor and of labor history confronted with the global relations of labor in the twenty-first century. Unlike the Blackledge and Anderson volumes, this collection concentrates on the inadequacy of Marx’s conception of history and specifically of his concept of labor. Written in the midst of the global financial crisis which began in 2008, the authors are less convinced than Perry Anderson of the triumph of capitalism and see the need for a critical analysis of the dysfunctions of capitalism proceeding from Marxist economic theory but going beyond it. The extensive introduction examines five fundamental errors of Marx’s economics and conception of history. 1) Marx misjudged the durability (*Langlebigkeit*) of capitalism and, as we noted above, still expected a socialist revolution in his life time. 2) Marx by concentrating on capital, neglected the social and political dimension of history as it concretely affected the lives of the working population. He did not take into account the active role which workers have played, for example in the organization of labor unions. 3) Connected with this is what the editors call his objectivism, his belief that workers are the objects of the capitalist system. The editors thus see Marx as much more of a determinist than Blackledge and K. Anderson would concede. 4) Moreover in the opinion of the editors to the volume, Marx privileged the proletariat as against other working classes and saw it as the only revolutionary class. What is needed is a redefinition of the working class or working classes to do justice to the realities of the twenty-first century domestically and globally. 5) This leads to Marx’s eurocentrism – here the editors are of a

⁶⁶ “Preface to the First German edition, *Capital*, vol. 1, Tucker, 296..

⁶⁷ K. Anderson, 177.

⁶⁸ Van der Linden, Roth, *Über Marx hinaus*; see also Gerhard Volker, ed., *Marxismus: Versuch einer Bilanz* (Magdeburg, 2001). ;

different opinion than Blackledge and K. Anderson. For Marx Western Europe embodied progress; only the letter to Vera Zazulich represented an exception. The present crisis of capitalism proves again the need for a response to the conditions of exploitation and growing inequality which mark the existing system. And this response calls for a theory built on Marx but going beyond him which can confront the complexities of the conditions of labor globally at the beginning of the twenty-first century, including the developing countries.

In conclusion, what remains of Marx's theory of history for historiography today? The attempts to modernize Marx by a host of theorists who consider themselves Marxist are only partly convincing.⁶⁹ Others who approach Marx from the left frankly see the limitations of Marx's analysis of society, rooted in the nineteenth century and even then reflecting an inadequate understanding of social and economic conditions of that time. They also see how the inconsistencies in Marx's political views made it possible for his views to bolster ruthless dictatorships which proclaimed themselves to be socialist. But Marxist ideas can still be drawn on to throw light on the dysfunctions of capitalism, now seen on a global scale, and the resulting backwardness and dependence of the so-called developing countries with which Immanuel Wallerstein has dealt from a Marxist perspective.⁷⁰ It is this critical aspect which lives on in a great deal of historical writing today, although freed from the dogmatic aspects of traditional Marxism.

P.S. After I completed this article in October 2010, Eric Hobsbawm's collection of essays, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*, appeared. Hobsbawm once more reflects on the history of Marxism and more generally of socialism from its pre-Marxist forms until today. Briefly summarized, Hobsbawm argues similarly to Perry Anderson and others that Marxism has been in a recession and in its traditional form is not

⁶⁹ E.g. Blackledge and K. Anderson

⁷⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World Economy: Essays* (New York, 1979), more recently his *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC, 2004). Also André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York, 1967). See the discussion of *dependencia* theory in Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee in *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, England, 2008), 290-295.

likely to be revived.⁷¹ Much of what Marx wrote, he notes, “is out of date and some of it is not or no longer acceptable.”⁷² The second half of the twentieth century has not only seen the eclipse of Marxism as an intellectual movement and in both its institutional revolutionary Leninist and reformist Social Democratic forms, at least in the highly developed countries on which Marxism has traditionally focused.

The shift from manufacturing to service industries has brought about a fundamental change in the nature of the working class. Like Anderson, Hobsbawm no longer sees the possibility of a revolutionary challenge to the capitalist economic order. In the emerging economies such as those in Latin America Marxist inspired ideologies, both revolutionary and reformist, still play some role. But Hobsbawm unlike Anderson is not yet ready to make his peace with modern capitalism. The financial crisis of 2008 has shown the vulnerability of laissez-faire market capitalism which since the 1970s has dominated the increasingly global economy and which has resulted in increasing social and economic inequality. He still believes that a number of central features of Marx’s analysis remain valid and relevant, including “his analysis of the irresistible global dynamic of capitalist economic development.”⁷³ However, Marx’s prediction that industrialization would produce populations largely employed as manual wage workers, which would create the basis of a revolutionary working class, turned out to be mistaken.⁷⁴ Together with Durkheim and Weber, Marx can still be considered a founder of modern social science.⁷⁵ Yet Hobsbawm has no answer to what he considers the crisis of the existing capitalist order. He concludes: “We cannot foresee the solution of the problems of the twenty-first century, but if they are to have

⁷¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven, 2011), ch, 1 “Marx Today”, 3-15,

⁷² Ibid, 12.

⁷³ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14; see also ch. 15, “Marx and Labour: the Long Century”, 399-419..

⁷⁵ Ibid., 390.

a chance of success, they must ask Marx's questions, even if they do not wish to accept his various disciples' answers."⁷⁶

Geoff Eley in his essay of 2011 "Thinking about the Left Today"⁷⁷ emphasizes even more sharply than Hobsbawm the break with the more benevolent forms of capitalism after World War II which had given workers a degree of security. "From the mid-1970s, every element in the democratizing architecture of the post-1945 settlement – planning, full employment, social services for all, retributive taxation, recognition of unions, public schooling, collective ideals of social improvement ... was brought under brutally effective attack," resulting in "new forms of the exploitation of labor"⁷⁸ at home, and closely tied to the exploitation of cheap labor in the formerly colonial world. And even more disillusioned than Hobsbawm, he now sees the days when "practical steps toward a just and egalitarian society" could be imagined as having "acquired a utopian flavor".⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 15

⁷⁷ Eley in *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, vol. 8, issue 4 (2011), 54-64.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁹ Ibid.