Introduction: Marx's Others

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"Was Marx right after all?" reads the headline of the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in 2022. A bushy-bearded Karl Marx winks from the cover, wearing a green T-shirt emblazoned with a windmill. The image belongs to an article that nonchalantly resurrects Marx for the oxymoron "green capitalism". *Der Spiegel* is not alone in its bold appropriation of Marx: in the same year, the *Financial Times* heralded "'Degrowth' – Marxism is Back for the Modern Age"; in 2018, *The Economist* proclaimed: "Rulers of the World: Read Karl Marx!" and the *Teen Vogue* magazine ran the headline: "Who is Karl Marx: Meet the Anti-Capitalist Scholar".

These are just a few examples of a wider trend: Marx has made his way back into the mainstream after being considered an irrelevant theorist at best and a taboo at worst for decades. The more capitalist crisis wreaks havoc, the more people seem to call themselves Marxists. Many, understandably, are outraged by the crises of our contemporary moment: climate disaster, imperialist warfare, far-right radicalisation and militarised borders against refugees and migrants. But to reduce Marx to moral outrage is to forfeit his power as a dialectical thinker. His key insight was not that capitalism is evil. It was that capitalism is a social relation – and as such could be changed.

That said, we cannot straightforwardly apply his more than 170-year-old texts to our fundamentally transformed world. Can we return to Marx today, and is Marxism as a political project still appropriate for the times in which we live? A glimpse into Marxist history is instructive: the question of how to update and develop Marx has plagued Marxists ever since the German SPD started codifying Marxist theses as revolutionary theory. In response, the philosopher Georg Lukács argued for a focus on method, not just content. Genuine Marxist critique, he insisted in 1919, is not "the exegeses of a 'sacred book'" (1971: 1), it can even "dismiss all of Marx's theses" (ibid: 1) – except for,

and this is crucial, the "dialectical method" (ibid) that Marx had adopted from Hegel.

This anthology, too, seeks to rework Marxist critique for the twenty-first century, using a dialectical approach.[1] But its subject is a different one: the worker in this book is no longer only the Fordist assembly line worker, but today's fragmented assemblage of racialised and gendered workers whose *bodies, affects and experience* this volume centres as material relations through which sexuality, "race" and gender are lived and enacted every day.

The problem with studying the experiences of this fragmented subject, however, is that we are still stuck in the false choice between vulgar Marxism and identity politics. Both are essentialising in that they assume the possibility of unmediated experiences. Vulgar Marxism, the Stalinist offspring of Marxism, assumes that workers have revolutionary consciousness simply because they experience alienation every day. What makes it vulgar is that it derives consciousness from the worker's social position, or to put it in Marxist terminology, the "political superstructure" from the "economic foundation" (Marx 1859: 263). This reductive and deterministic logic renders "race", gender and sexuality secondary to what is considered the primary economic contradiction of class. Despite its different premises, identity politics also centres experiences of oppression as the source of social identity, thus fragmenting people into different groups with shared interests which need to be protected through individual rights. Yet, in doing so, identity politics only ends up making everyone equal in the "dull compulsion" (Marx 1867: 726), as Marx put it, to sell their labour power.

This volume rejects this false binary by building on both older Marxian genealogies of thinking about sexuality, "race" and gender and more recent revivals (cf. Lewis 2022 [2016]; Gleeson/O'Rourke 2021). In fact, Marxism already has a rich tradition – think of August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg or Frantz Fanon – that rejected a simplistic economic determinism and took seriously the imbrication of capitalist society with racism and patriarchy. In that sense, this tradition is closer to Marx, who posited the need for political mediation between concrete experience and class consciousness, between the *base* and the *superstructure*.

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Building on that tradition and its emphasis on politics, the key contribution of this book is to link the experiences of racialised and gendered subjects with the challenge of forging a collective political subject under the current version of capitalism. This is important precisely because immediate experiences of subordination do not automatically translate into revolutionary subjectivity. Marx himself did not think they would – otherwise he probably would not have devoted thousands of pages to the critical task of welding workers into a revolutionary movement. But while Marx wrote at a time of an active socialist movement, which he both fiercely criticised and supported, today we lack a transnational organisation among workers.

Who then are the political subjects capable of changing our world today? Is it still the proletariat, as Marx envisaged? Is it social movements? The question of the subject, in its current form, poses a dilemma: on the one hand, we cannot return to Marx's premise of an organised global working class as the political subject, which is difficult to achieve in our present moment. On the other hand, as the philosopher Holly Lewis cautions, we should not substitute the proletariat "for any oppressed population" (Lewis 2022 [2016]: 71). By neglecting class analysis, this move would shift "socialist politics from the political to the moral" (ibid), leaving us with a mere moral critique of oppression. The question of the revolutionary subject therefore requires rethinking, as today's dispersed and divided workforce no longer corresponds to the type of worker Marx encountered in his time. Edith Otero Quezada's interview with Verónica Gago, for example, focuses on labouring and revolutionary subjects in light of the shifting dynamics of capitalism and the way in which they are shaped by new forms of debt and profit extraction.

The subject, therefore, is the central concern of this book. The book asks: how can the embodied subject transform into a political subject? It answers: we cannot know, but we have to learn from the history of Marxist struggles. It deals with the subject in two senses: first, the embodied subject and how it experiences and is affected by the world, and second, the political subject and the question of its transformative power. We examine how these two subjects can be further fleshed out through Black feminist, queer and trans theory. Their strength is that they start from embodied subjects, deepening Marx's idea of the labouring subject, defined by the "productive expenditure of human brains, nerves, and muscles" (Marx 1867: 54), which forms its connective tissue with the world. Rather than discussing whether these theories and Marxism are commensurable, this volume shows that together they can help us to study bodies, affects and experience under contemporary capitalism.

Crossing disciplinary boundaries, this book draws on cultural and literary studies, philosophy, political theory and sociology, its material coming from novels, archives and interviews amongst others. Our contributors work at the intersection of art, academia and activism, and think at the intersection of Marxism, Black feminist, queer and trans theory. Each offers their own reading of Marx. What unites them is a commitment to Marx's imperative to overcome all relations that keep people in bondage. They re-engage with tenets of Marx's theory that, with few exceptions, have been declared obsolete as post-structuralism and post-Marxism won intellectual ground. But just at the moment when all Marxist thinking was proclaimed outdated, it began to haunt us. We cannot yet move beyond Marxism. Theories that claim the opposite, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), risk detaching "the political" from economic relations and reducing politics to discourse. But the volume does not return to the reductive and economistic version of Marxism that Mouffe and Laclau rightly criticised. Instead, it returns to 1) the embodied and 2) the political subject, which I will now discuss in more detail.

1. The Embodied Subject

Embodied subjects and their everyday experiences are the first key concern of the book. This is important, because it is subjects that make history, even if, as Marx famously wrote, they do so not under circumstances of their own choosing. While this sounds simple enough, Marx himself abstracts from subjective experience, stating right at the beginning of *Capital Volume I* that he will analyse individuals "only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories" (Marx 1867: 10). Although Marx is far from the reductive thinker he is often caricatured as, there are undoubtedly deterministic versions of Marxism that erase the subject in the supposedly lawlike motion of history. But to think that we can make sense of the world through subjective experience is equally reductive. Far from it: subject-centred approaches only take us so far, because the abstract mechanisms through which capitalist society operates are not directly accessible through concrete experience.

While individuals enter Marx's magnum opus *Capital* only as carriers of economic relations, Lea Ypi's *Free* discovers "the flesh and blood of a real person" lurking "behind every personification of an economic category" (2021: 308). Socialism, Ypi writes, "is above all a theory of human freedom, of how to think

about progress in history" (ibid: 305) – a reading that places Marx in the lineage of radical bourgeois thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. Like Ypi, we focus on flesh-and-blood subjects. And like Ypi, we are mindful about the political appropriations of the idea of progress given their tendency to disavow the role of human subjects in shaping the course of history. After all, the subject and its passions occupy an ambiguous place in a teleological philosophy of history such as Marx's and Hegel's. Postmodern intellectuals have even dismissed the idea of progress altogether (cf. Lyotard 1984), worrying that it grinds subjects in the mills of history. Hegel's world spirit (*Weltgeist*), the movement of reason in history, they claim, devoured the unconscious, particular desires of the individual and disgorged them as conscious, universal reason. It turned people into material and walked over dead bodies.

Yet the opposite is true. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* emphasise the concrete actions, aspirations and desires of the individual subject in moving history forward: "*Nothing great* has been accomplished in the world *without passion*" (2011: 92–93; original emphasis), Hegel tells us. Indeed, these passions and desires form the engine through which the spirit realises itself in the direction of freedom. Yet, this idea of embodied human progress, as is well known, was perverted by Stalinism almost a century later. Its doctrine that everyone must bleed for socialist progress rationalised all violence *post festum*. It repressed the thinking and acting subject.

By contrast, the authors in this collection build on those critical traditions that recover the embodied, affective and experiencing subject from Marxist history. They explore, for example, the relation of Black feminist abolitionism to Marx's, Engels' and Lenin's reflections on the dictatorship of the proletariat (Lola Olufemi); they envision an alternative pregnancy, challenging genetic parenthood and the nuclear family in the context of what is a growing global surrogacy industry (Sophie Lewis), they analyse the affective dimension of alienation (Ivo Zender) and the class struggle of trans workers (Jules Joanne Gleeson).

Thinking about bodies, affects and experiences from a Marxist perspective is complicated by two considerations. First, reified notions of bodies, affects and experience as metaphysical matter, such as those prevalent in some strands of phenomenological, psychological and new materialist research (cf. Massumi 1995: 91), should have no place in Marxism. But can one argue that embodied experiences are historical and social, that they are not some simple manifestations of some fixed inner "truth", and still postulate some truthfulness and agency at this level? And can we then avoid the trap of ahistorical pri-

mordialism and essentialism? Second, how can we think about bodies, affects and experience in dialectical terms, that is, without collapsing the subject and object, the social and psychological, the individual and society?

On the face of it, there seems to be a contradiction between a Marxist-Hegelian dialectical method and a phenomenological approach centring on bodies, affects and experience. For Hegel, our experiences and senses do not give us immediate access to truth: what appears as brute fact is already a standpoint mediated by a subject (Hegel 1979: 64–65). This is why sensuous experience alone gets us only so far in grasping the contradictions of capitalist society. Marx shows this in *Capital* (1867) where he begins with what we can feel and perceive about the commodity (the particular), but ends with what we cannot see, its value (the universal), moving from the immediate appearance of the commodity to its content.

Similarly, the contributions to this volume begin with particular experiences of "race", gender and sexuality, but then analyse how they are mediated by capitalist society – their key point being that gender and "race" are also the social ties of capitalist society that make it work rather than some separate social forms that just happen to coexist with capitalist relations. Bourgeois society, for example, tells us that "sex" is the biological division of people into men and women, which goes hand in hand with specific social attributes. But if we place "sex" in its historical context rather than freezing it at a particular point in time, its content reveals itself: what appears as a biological division is in fact a social division of labour, inextricably linked to the mechanisms of capitalist production and reproduction (cf. Vogel 1983; Federici 2004; Fraser 2014).

Even though contemporary capitalism does not seem to operate strictly in line with the gender binary anymore, it still feeds on forms of oppression that feminise certain bodies, while simultaneously blurring these distinctions and incorporating queer and trans workers into its exploitative relations. No doubt, if capital can make value out of queerness and diversity, it will; what matters is the creation of value, not what creates it. But how can we recognise at once that capitalism can adapt and appropriate without returning to the logic of the main economic contradiction, rendering gendered and racialised contradictions secondary?

The volume opposes the Stalinist primacy of economic determination, which sees history driven towards freedom by economic forces rather than by embodied subjects. To the contrary, freedom is painstaking work. Hegel's "slaughterhouse" (2011: 90) of history might point to a speculative challenge: if we do not realise freedom, all the sacrifices, the countless lives lost in the

struggle for freedom, will have been in vain. Lea Ypi beautifully reflects on this challenge in her book on freedom:

> In some ways, I have gone full circle. When you see a system change once, it's not that difficult to believe that it can change again. Fighting cynicism and political apathy turns into what some might call a moral duty; to me, it is more of a debt that I feel I owe to all the people of the past who sacrificed everything because *they* were not apathetic, *they* were not cynical, *they* did not believe that things fall into place if you just let them take their course. If I do nothing, their efforts will have been wasted, their lives will have been meaningless. (2021: 310; original emphasis)

What makes this paragraph so evocative is that it does not place history in the past, but relates it to the present. But does Ypi reproduce the teleology of progress here? After all, this passage might sound like an expression of what one might call a Stalinist affect – perhaps, in part, explaining why so many people were persuaded and motivated by it: it is exactly the logic of not letting things just take their course, but acting in the name of both past sacrifices and future freedoms, even if it means using violence here and now. Indeed, Stalinism, though enabled by ontological and epistemological determinism, was not just determinism, but determinism combined with a belief in the select agency of the party. Arguably, the main problem with it is not that it denies the agency of actual subjects, but that it all too effectively creates a monstrous subject. What can this detour into Marxist history tell us about the possibility of welding workers into a political subject today? This is the question I examine in the next section.

2. The Political Subject

The second key concern of this volume is how subjects and their experiences can be assembled into political subjects, that is, into an organised collective movement. Put another way: how can the embodied subject transform the world politically?

For Marx, the struggle for political change is mired in contradictions: despite their struggles for better living conditions, workers kept constantly reproducing their own bondage. The main reason for their subordination was that in bourgeois consciousness, workers only appeared as the object of the

production process, when in fact they were also its subject. They are the ones that get up every morning to labour, and yet the product of their labour confronts them as alien; their labour is the source of all value, and yet they appear as "a living appendage of the machine" (Marx 1867: 487). They could work less thanks to the development of the productive forces, and yet they either work themselves to death to earn a living, or are thrown out of work by the million (ibid: 411).

Marx's solution to this subject-object inversion is well known: without a political standpoint that allowed workers to understand themselves as a class, they would continually reproduce their own immiseration. Without a political subject that did not just call for socialism in the abstract, but that linked the consciousness of class relations to concrete struggles for better living conditions, they would forever orbit in a capital-driven universe.

For Marx, this political subject was not just individual workers, but workers organised in what he called "*the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*" (1891: 95; original emphasis). When we hear the word *dictatorship* today, we hear the sabre-rattling of violent despots. Marx and Engels did not. Their concept of dictatorship came from the ancient Roman Republic. Crucial to this tradition of political thought was that *dictatorship* referred to a temporary form of rule by a collective subject to address a crisis (Ypi 2020: 278).

But why should a *dictatorship of the proletariat* be necessary at all – and what is the role of the state in this process? Lola Olufemi's contribution looks at this question. She argues that today's abolitionist movements, which renew the call for abolishing the state, highlight the importance of a continued engagement with the *dictatorship of the proletariat* but also its problems. Can the notion of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* inform current efforts to build a collective movement?

A digression into Marxist history is illuminating: while Hegel still believed in the state as a medium for the realisation of freedom, for Marxists and anarchists, the state, as the historically specific political form of capitalist society, was the means, to put it no doubt too simply, of one class to oppress the other. But this did not mean that the bourgeoisie could wield the state as an instrument at its own will – on the contrary, the crisis of capitalist society, its irresolvable contradictions, produce the state as an entity that becomes to some extent autonomous vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie (Marx 1852: 143). It was Vladimir Lenin who argued in *The State and Revolution* (1917) that, far from resolving the contradiction between capital and labour, the state merely prolonged its life and thus the rule of the bourgeoisie. Its function was to muffle the violent clash between

capitalists and workers, not to supersede it. The point, therefore, was not for workers to win power in order to reform the state, but to abolish it along with all its violent features: prisons, police, a standing army.

But while anarchists and Marxists agreed on the need to abolish the state, they famously disagreed on how to do it: the former believed in a direct transition to a stateless society, the latter in the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as a transition phase.

Notice that dictatorship did not designate a fixed form of government. It was above all a social form that could, in principle, take different shapes. In fact, for Marx and Engels, bourgeois democracy too was a dictatorship – even more violent, because a minority oppressed the majority rather than the other way around. Except that, in reality, the dictatorship of the proletariat, established after the Russian Revolution, also turned out to be, as is well known, a minority (the party) oppressing the majority. Should that have come as a surprise? For the anarchist thinker, Mikhail Bakunin, it certainly would not have. Already in 1870, he had predicted that the dictatorship of the proletariat was bound to ossify, to become an instrument of state terror. It would not wither away. Clearly, we cannot simply retrieve Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, nor can we ignore the anarchist critique of it.

Today, the state is once again at the centre of political critique and organising: mass incarceration, police violence, the criminalisation of climate activists and the securitisation of borders against migrants and refugees highlight the urge to confront the violence of the state. In this political climate, Black feminist abolitionism and its call for a world without prisons and the police have gained new impetus in recent years. Lola Olufemi's contribution brings Black abolitionism, which perhaps has more affinity with anarchism in its focus on building from the present, into dialogue with the dictatorship of the proletariat. It raises an unresolved problem: how can we build a radically different world without replicating forms of state power? The dictatorship of the proletariat, in its actual historical form, did not resolve this dilemma. It rather exacerbated it.

Moreover, its bloody history has added to the difficulties of forging a political subject today, as political mobilisation has shifted in response, from centralised parties to decentralised movements. Social movements are now often hailed as the new agents of change: climate movements like *Fridays for Future*, anti-racist movements like *Black Lives Matter* in the US or feminist movements like *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina. This turn to movements has gathered new steam due to the fact that left-wing parties almost all over the world have

been in crisis. But the shift from parties to movements as the primary carriage of left politics raises further problems. It has contributed to the fragmentation of political subjects, organising in silos around different issues such as climate, housing or health, at the expense of strategic convergence. In the absence of an international workers' movement, Marxist theory and practice are falling further and further apart. The former is withering into academic niche products, perfectly reflecting what Marx called the separation of manual labour and intellectual labour to the point where they "become deadly foes" (Marx 1867: 509). In fact, given that intellectual labour feeds on the surplus value generated by manual labour (Luxemburg 2003: 107–108), the educated bourgeoisie actually has an interest in maintaining the capitalist relations that secure its existence. Short of an internationally organised workers' movement that can mediate between and bring together the hand and head, the particular and universal, workers have little chance of regaining intellectual planning and social control over their labour.

This is the political conjuncture out of which this volume was born, the history of Marxism weighing on its pages. The most pressing challenge today seems to be precisely how the embodied subject can transform into a political subject. These two subjects are non-identical. Exploitation does not necessarily give rise to socialist consciousness. It can produce very different forms of political consciousness, and even estrange workers from politics altogether. In the current political climate, we can only build towards both political mobilisation and a better understanding of the contemporary contours of capitalism, preparing for a moment in which revolutionary change will become possible.

3. Outline of the Book

The first part of the book brings together contributions that engage with the question of how embodied subjects can become political subjects.

The first contribution *Withering the State Machine*, by the writer Lola Olufemi, places the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the context of Black abolitionist thought and practice. Olufemi updates the problem of how we can abolish the state by engaging with Marx, Engels and Lenin and bringing them into a dialogue with Black feminist voices from the archives. Following thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, she rejects a linear and progressivist philosophy that conflates history with the past. Instead, her

dialectical approach allows communist struggles at different times to speak to one another in order to spark a moment of redemption in the present.

The second paper *Inverting Marxism*, by the writer and historian Jules Joanne Gleeson, centres the struggles of trans workers in the workplace, household and the clinic, focusing particularly on how the current far-right targets trans people and represents them as an ostensible threat to the nuclear family as a key site for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Gleeson reflects on the theoretical implications of what she calls "transgender Marxism" and what it has to offer to the Marxist tradition in terms of understanding our contemporary moment by challenging the juxtaposition of identity and class politics.

Edith Otero Quezada's interview with Verónica Gago reposes the question of the revolutionary subject today. Who is that subject and what would it take for workers, reproductive workers and movements to become transnationally organised? And how can we rethink *the worker* in light of the contemporary contours of capitalism and the way in which they play out through *expanded extractivism* and dynamics of debt.

The second part on "embodied subjects" gathers three contributions that shed light on the embodied experiences of contemporary capitalism.

In the contribution *Another Pregnancy is Possible*, the writer Sophie Lewis updates the long-standing feminist critique of pregnancy as a form of labour in the context of the global exploitation of surrogacy workers. In light of the commodification of babies, Lewis explores the potential that gestational labour poses for superseding the entrenched ideology of the nuclear family and genetic parenthood, instead opening up horizons for the socialisation of childbirth and child-rearing.

Ivo Zender's text on *Alienation in Christian Schmacht's Fleisch mit weißer Soße* reinterprets Marx's concept of alienation through a literary analysis of the autofictional contemporary German novella *Fleisch mit weißer Soße (Meat with White Sauce)*. Its protagonist, Chrissy, a trans sex worker, longs for closeness to others and a radically changed world, but finds himself trapped in separation, paralysis and depression. Using literature as a tool to explore affective and embodied experience under capitalism, such as the physical and mental uniformity of capitalist labour, Zender develops an account of alienation infused with insights from phenomenology without suggesting that we can return to an unalienated essence.

The last paper *Affective Becoming, Affective Belonging* by the sociologist Jannis Ruhnau, asks what it would take to bring the living individual into a critique

of contemporary capitalism given that Marx does not analyse individuals in their own right, but rather treats them as carriers of economic functions. To this end, Ruhnau combines Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology with social reproduction theory, focusing on how bodies reproduce themselves in order to labour. He interweaves these theoretical questions with empirical insights from narrative interviews to incorporate the individual and its lived experience for a deeper understanding of the contradictions of social reproduction under capitalist social relations.

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