

Interview

# On Marx - My way into Marxism and the challenges for Marx's thought in the world today

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**Isabelle Garo and Alex Cukier interviews Michael Löwy about his way into Marxism and the challenges for Marx's thought in the world today.**

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*How did you first come across [Marx's](#) thought?*

**Michael Löwy.** Let me start from the beginning. I was born in Brazil in 1938, in the city of São Paulo, the son of Jewish parents from Vienna who emigrated to Brazil in the 1930s. I discovered Marx at the age of fifteen, reading the Communist Manifesto that my brother had lent me. It was an immediate revelation, and I started looking for other writings by the same author, especially those of a historical and political nature: *The Class Struggles in France 1848-50*, The [Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#), *The Civil War in France* – all in French, which I had studied in school and at the Alliance Française. Shortly afterwards, I became active in a political organisation, the Independent Socialist League, a small group of Luxemburgist orientation. My mentor during these years was a young Marxist economist, Paul Singer, also of Austrian-Jewish origin, who introduced me to the writings of [Rosa Luxemburg](#). This was a second enlightenment: I was converted, body and soul, to Rosa Luxemburg's version of Marxism – an option that would determine, to a large extent, my reading of Marx.

From that time on, Marx's work would be present in all my writings, whatever the subject – directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. I fell onto planet Marx and never left that orbit.

When I entered the University of São Paulo to study social sciences in 1956, I was quite disappointed by the lack of references to Marx in the curriculum – despite the presence of several leftist teachers. However, around 1958, some of these, notably Fernando Henrique Cardoso, our sociology professor – and future (neoliberal) president –, José Arthur Giannotti, a philosopher trained in the French school, my friend Paul Singer and some others created a study group on Marx's *Capital*. This was an informal extra-curricular initiative, with weekly meetings around a chapter of the book. After a year, a few students were also invited, including my friend Roberto Schwarz and myself. This was my first serious contact with *Capital*.

However, my main interest during those years was in Marx's early writings. It was on the basis of this reading that I wrote my first paper, 'Man and Society in the Work of the Young Marx', published

in 1961 in a prestigious journal of the Brazilian left (Revista Brasiliense). I aimed to show that Marx's dialectical conception was a superseding of both liberal individualism and conservative organicism. Around the same time, 1960, I participated in the foundation of the Marxist revolutionary organisation 'Workers' Politics', which was the first important organisation to the left of the Brazilian Communist Party. Some of its activists would later join the armed resistance against the military dictatorship, including Dilma Rousseff, arrested and tortured by the military, who would also become the country's president a few decades later.

A third decisive discovery for me in these years was the writings of Lucien Goldmann, and, through him, of Georg Lukács. I decided, after finishing my degree in social sciences at the University of São Paulo, to go to Paris to do a doctorate on the Young Marx, under the direction of Lucien Goldmann. So, I left Brazil for France in 1961, with a French scholarship, not suspecting that I would remain there almost twenty years without returning to my native country.

[Redemption and Utopia](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Fire Alarm](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [The War of Gods](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Georg Lukacs](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Karl Marx](#) by [Werner Blumenberg](#)

*What was the theme, or rather, the intellectual and political objective of your doctoral thesis?*

The subject of my doctorate was 'The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx': it was a work of Luxemburgist inspiration, but using Lucien Goldmann's method of Marxist (Lukácsian) historical sociology. Presented in 1964 at the Sorbonne, before a jury composed of my thesis director, Jacques Droz and Ernest Labrousse, it received the highest distinction.

The thesis was intended as a Marxist study of Marx's political and philosophical evolution between 1842 and 1848, that is to say, a study of his ideas within the framework of the historical and social totality of which they were a part: nineteenth-century capitalist society, the workers' movement before 1848, the neo-Hegelian intelligentsia, etc. His 1842 articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* were still based on a Hegelian conception of the state, but he was already in conflict with the liberal bourgeoisie; after passing through the idea of a 'true democracy' he would convert to communism, initially in a neo-Hegelian idealist form (1844); it was only in the course of the years 1845-46 that his new conception of both philosophy and revolution would be established. The decisive turning-point in the movement of the young Marx's thought - I do not mean an 'epistemological break' - was the *Theses on Feuerbach*, 'the brilliant germ of the new world outlook' ([Engels](#)), which could be called 'philosophy of praxis' (Gramsci), rather than 'historical materialism'.

The thesis contained two relatively distinct but related dimensions. Firstly, A 'sociological' or socio-historical approach: Marx was the 'theoretical representative' (a Marxian term) of the proletariat. His theory of revolution as self-emancipation was formulated on the basis of the most advanced manifestations of the proletarian movement of his time: Chartism, the Silesian weavers' uprising, the Paris communist circles, the League of the Just, etc. This argument was, indirectly, a polemic against [Lenin](#)'s assertion, in *What Is To Be Done?*, that socialist consciousness is introduced into the working class 'from outside'. In my reading there is a dialectical relationship of reciprocal influence.

Secondly, a philosophical-political approach: Marx's theory of revolution was based on his philosophy of praxis, which broke with both French materialism and German idealism. For the materialists, men were the products of circumstances, so in order to change them, someone must rise above them; in the case of the Encyclopaedists and utopian socialists, this meant an enlightened despot. For the idealists (left-wing neo-Hegelians) it was necessary to transform men (their consciousness) in order to change circumstances: this was the role of philosophers.

This last position was still held by the young Marx at the beginning of 1844, in his brilliant essay *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where he explains that revolution is born in the mind of the philosopher, before taking hold of the masses: 'theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses... The point is that revolutions need a passive element, a material base'. Marx began to move beyond this neo/left-Hegelian view in the years 1844-45, when he met communist workers in Paris, discovered Chartism through Friedrich Engels, and read Flora Tristan's advocacy for the Union Ouvrière, as well as communist proletarian writings (Wilhelm Weitling).

But the decisive event that would provoke a real turning-point in his thinking was, in my opinion, the revolt of the Silesian weavers in June 1844. In the polemical article against Ruge that Marx published shortly afterwards in the newspaper *Vorwärts*, edited by left-wing German exiles in Paris, he enthusiastically welcomed this event and added the comment: 'Only in socialism can a philosophical nation discover the praxis consonant with its nature and only in the proletariat can it discover the active agent of its emancipation'. This statement contains three decisive new elements in relation to his conceptions in the articles of the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher*:

- revolution does not begin in the 'mind of the philosopher', since the people themselves are philosophical;
- socialism is not a pure 'theory', but a praxis;
- the proletariat is no longer a 'passive' element but the active element of emancipation.

This political break with neo-Hegelianism (represented by Arnold Ruge) would open the way for the philosophical break that took place a few months later, with the *Theses on Feuerbach* - after a brief passage through what could be considered an uncritical adherence to 'French' materialism, in *The Holy Family* (1845).

In the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), the young Marx would thus formulate a new worldview, the philosophy of praxis, superseding - in the sense of dialectical *Aufhebung* (negation, conservation, overcoming) - the previous materialism and idealism. He thus proclaims in the third thesis: 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.'

The political significance of this thesis is made clear in *The German Ideology* (1846): 'Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.' The revolution must therefore be a movement of self-emancipation of the proletariat - a thesis that Marx was to defend in all his political writings, notably his Preamble to the Statutes of the First International: 'The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the workers themselves'. A final formulation of this conviction can be found in a little-known circular that Marx and Engels addressed in September 1879 to the leaders of German social democracy, criticising the 'revisionist' theses of a group of social-democratic intellectuals based in Zurich (Höchstberg, Schramm, Bernstein):

When the International was formed, we expressly formulated the battle-cry: the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot ally ourselves, therefore, with people who openly declare that the workers are too uneducated to free themselves and must first be

liberated from above by philanthropic big bourgeois and petty bourgeois.

This reading of Marx was 'Luxemburgist' in inspiration, implicitly opposed to the conceptions of a certain Leninism (again *What Is To Be Done?*) on the role of the vanguard party. The last chapter of the thesis was a discussion of the ideas on the proletarian party in Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, [Trotsky](#), Lukács and Gramsci: with nuances and a concern to do justice to each, it was Luxemburg's ideas of the party that I presented as the authentic continuation of Marx and Engels's conceptions of revolution.

The historians on my thesis jury were mainly interested in its first aspect; they were sceptical about the existence at that time of a proletariat in the modern sense. This scepticism was shared by Lucien Goldmann, who expressed his doubts during the thesis examination, and later, in a 1969 lecture ('*Revolution and Bureaucracy*')

*How was Marxism born? What does Marx's thought correspond to? There is a common answer (even a thesis done under my supervision on this subject, by Michael Löwy, who tried to convince me) according to which Marx expressed the thought of the proletariat. That Marx assigns a fundamental revolutionary place to the proletariat is obvious. But whether this thought was, at the time it was born in France, in England, the thought of the proletariat (because for Marx, and as I've tried to show in all my historical analyses, it's always social groups that elaborate the major categories), whether the categories of French socialism in general at that time - the great renaissance of socialism is situated in France in the first half of the nineteenth century - were elaborated by the proletariat, I'm not sure. But, in any case, it's an important problem. How was Marxist thought born, from a thought that was the left wing of bourgeois-democratic thought, of the neo-Hegelians in Germany and of French democratic socialism?*

Goldmann concluded with a question mark, so the question remained open.

For various reasons, which need not concern us here, my thesis was not published until 1970, by Editions Maspero, in the collection 'Bibliothèque Socialiste' directed by Georges Haupt, also a 'Luxemburgist'. It was then translated into Spanish, Italian and Japanese, and later into English and Portuguese. As in the case of my thesis jury, the reception focused on the 'sociological' aspect: the 'philosophical' hypothesis was often ignored. The main exception was Hal Draper, the great North American Marxist historian: in his monumental four-volume work, *Marx's Theory of Revolution*, he borrowed from my book (which he quotes) not only the title, but also the emphasis on the principle of self-emancipation. But I must immediately add this: during my formative political years in Brazil, I subscribed to the newspaper *Labor Action*, which was edited by Draper. I don't remember having read his writings on Marx, but all his thinking was inspired by what he would later call, in a famous essay, 'socialism from below'. So, it was a circular movement of ideas.

I would add that, during my stay in France, I was active in the Sorbonne cell of the PSU; I also participated, a little later, in the activities of the group 'La Voie Communiste' (Denis Berger, Felix Guattari).

[The Communist Manifesto](#) by [Friedrich Engels](#) and [Karl Marx](#) [The First International and After](#) by [Karl Marx](#) [The Revolutions of 1848](#) by [Karl Marx](#) [Surveys from Exile](#) by [Karl Marx](#) [Karl Marx](#) by [Werner Blumenberg](#)

*After the thesis, what was your career path? How did your political choices translate into your intellectual work?*

In 1964, a military coup established a dictatorship in Brazil. I joined my family who had emigrated to

Israel in the early 1960s. I taught for a while at the University of Jerusalem, and later at the University of Manchester, before returning to Paris in 1969. At that time, my Brazilian friends from the 'Workers' Politics' organisation had split off to create a new organisation, the Communist Workers' Party (POC), which decided to join the Fourth International. I shared this choice and therefore participated, with a small Brazilian delegation, in the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Fourth International (1969). A little later, I joined its French section, the Ligue Communiste - without giving up my ideas which were more Luxemburgist than Leninist. I got to know Ernst Mandel, whose political, rather than economic, writings interested me greatly.

With other intellectuals of the League, I participated in the polemic against the 'Marxist structuralism' of [Louis Althusser](#), with an article published in 1970: 'L'humanisme historiciste de Marx, ou relire le Capital', included in my collection *Dialectique et Révolution. Essais de sociologie et d'histoire du marxisme* (1973). The article highlighted the cognitive dimension of humanism - for example the critique of commodity fetishism, which reveals the social relations between men that lie behind the reified forms of the commodity economy - but also its ethical force - the critique of the inhumanity of capitalism - and political force, in the vision of socialism as a community of free human beings. As for historicism, it lays at the heart of Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy, which led Althusser to claim that Marx failed to understand his relation to classical economics... Finally, in the Marxian thesis according to which 'it is men who make their history' (admittedly, in given conditions), humanism and historicism are combined.

On my return to Paris, I enrolled for a higher doctorate (thèse d'état) with Ernest Labrousse on the theme 'The theory of permanent revolution in Marx' - a kind of 'Trotskyist' interpretation of his political writings. I wrote an essay - intended as a contribution to this hypothesis - on Marx's little-known articles on the Spanish revolution. I argued that, analysing the revolutionary events in Spain in 1854-56, Marx came to the conclusion that, despite the peripheral and undeveloped character of that country, the coming European socialist revolution 'will find Spain ripe for cooperation with it', since the same class divisions were to be found in that country as in Western Europe. I took up this article in *Dialectique et Révolution*, but I ended up abandoning the project of a thesis on permanent revolution around 1973, in order to do research on the young Lukács.

*Did you also share Rosa Luxemburg's views on the national question?*

Not really... In this area, I rather held to Lenin's positions. Shortly after my arrival in Paris, I was introduced to Nicos Poulantzas by a Brazilian friend who had been his assistant but was leaving for Chile (Emir Sader). Poulantzas agreed to take me on as his assistant, and, in 1970, we began to teach a course on Marxism and the national question together at the University of Paris 8 (Vincennes). We had opposing philosophical conceptions (Althusser for him, Lukács for me), and very different political commitments, but we became friends and worked together for seven years.

After the premature death of Lucien Goldmann (1970), I found stimulating intellectual support in Georges Haupt, historian of the international socialist movement at the EHESS. And, in 1973, he suggested that we work together (with the collaboration of Claudie Weill) to prepare an anthology on 'Marxists and the national question, 1848-1914'. Our conceptions were close, but there was a disagreement about Lenin: we therefore decided that he would write a preface, 'the history of the problem', and I would write an afterword, 'the problem of history', which was more theoretical. The first part of my text analyses Marx's writings on the national question, showing their limits, as well as, in a very critical perspective, Engels's writings on 'peoples without history' that were supposedly incapable of becoming true nations. The book was published in 1974 by Editions Maspero and my afterword was translated into Spanish, Catalan, English and, later, into Portuguese, German Turkish and Italian. This modest text earned me, wrongly, a reputation in certain circles as a 'specialist' on the national question.

In my thesis on Lukács (presented in 1975), I began to take an interest in anti-capitalist romanticism (a Lukácsian concept) and its relation to Marx and Marxism – which earned me a very interesting (critical but positive) comment from the English cultural sociologist Raymond Williams. My first attempt to develop this problematic was in my collection *Marxisme et romantisme révolutionnaire* (1979), but the book hardly had any distribution, as the publisher went bankrupt.

Throughout these years, I continued to be active in the Fourth International and its French section. My main intellectual contribution to our current was the publication of a book on the theory of permanent revolution, at the request of my friends at New Left Review. This book, which bore the somewhat off-putting title *The Politics of Uneven and Combined Development* (New Left Books, 1981), included, at the beginning, a long chapter on Marx: a kind of summary of the project, which I had not been able to complete, of analysing the theory of permanent revolution in his writings.

During the 1970s, I travelled frequently in Latin America, especially in Mexico, sometimes on political missions for the Fourth International; on these trips I gathered a vast amount of documentation, which I used to publish in 1980 an anthology on Marxism in Latin America.

*Why do you think Marx made an important contribution to the sociology of knowledge? How does he analyse the relationship between 'ideology' and 'science'?*

My situation at the University of Paris 8, where I taught with Poulantzas, was somewhat precarious: a 'chargé de cours'. So, I decided to try the CNRS, where I was given a position in 1977, with a research project on the sociology of knowledge. A few years later, this would lead to a publication, *Paysage de la Verité. Introduction à une sociologie critique de la connaissance* (1985), which compared positivist, historicist and Marxist views on the sociology of knowledge. The book contained a long chapter on Marx's conception of the relationship between knowledge and social classes.

A famous passage from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* allows a fruitful approach to ideological phenomena: it is not a question of 'lies', but of a certain way of thinking, a certain problematic and a certain intellectual horizon, linked to the interests but also to the social situation of a determined class. I tried to show how in Marx's economic writings he analyses both the relationship between bourgeois economic science and the social class it represents, and the relative autonomy of scientific production. The great classics, such as David Ricardo, were characterised by honesty and love of truth: they represented 'the highest level that can be reached from the capitalist point of view'. The vulgar economists (J.B. Say, Senior, etc.), on the other hand, were mere sycophants in the service of the bourgeoisie. How to explain this difference? For Marx, it was the result of the class struggle: 'In so far as political economy is bourgeois... it can only remain a science while the class struggle remains latent.' As soon as the struggle becomes threatening, 'it sounds the knell of scientific bourgeois economics... It was no longer a question whether this or that theorem was true, but whether it was useful to capital or harmful (...), in accordance with police regulations or contrary to them.'

This chapter also made a polemical point against Althusser: far from separating 'ideology' and 'science' with an 'epistemological' cleaver, Marx conceived of a bourgeois science whose horizon of thought was limited by its class ideology. As for Marx's own science, he does not hide its relationship with a social class, writing in *Capital*: 'In so far as such a critique represents a class, it can only represent the class whose historical task is... the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat'. The words 'in so far as' refer to the question of the relative autonomy of science from the class point of view.

My book had very little echo in France; only a few feminists (Christine Delphy) took it up, to better support their cause. On the other hand, in Brazil, which I began to visit regularly from 1980

onwards, the book – published with another, more playful title, *The Adventures of Karl Marx against Baron von Münchhausen* – went through about ten editions; a shorter and more ‘paedagogical’ version, based on notes from a course on the same subject, under the title *Ideology and Social Sciences*, went through about twenty editions. The Münchhausen of the title refers to the chapter on positivism: in criticising the thesis of Durkheim and the positivist sociologists on the need for social scientists to extricate themselves from their prejudices, I compared him with the famous adventurer who claimed to have pulled himself and his horse out of a dangerous swamp by his own hair...

*Can you explain why you think romanticism concerns Marx’s though? This is not a thesis that Marxists are unanimous about.*

This was perhaps my most ‘innovative’ – but also most controversial – contribution to the discussion of Marx’s relationship to culture: anti-capitalist romanticism. In 1992, together with my friend Robert Sayre, a sociologist of literature and also a former student of Lucien Goldmann, I published *Révolte et mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, in the Payot collection ‘Critique de la Politique’ directed by Miguel Abensour. This book continued the research on Lukács in my thesis and then in the collection *Marxisme et romantisme révolutionnaire*, but it was a far more systematic and thorough attempt at a Marxist analysis of the romantic phenomenon, conceived not as a simple literary school of the early nineteenth century, but as a world-view that emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century but persists, in various forms, until today. I started from George Lukács’s concept of ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ to designate a cultural protest against capitalist industrial modernity, in the name of pre-capitalist, or pre-modern (social, cultural, religious) values. However, while Lukács saw romanticism only in its reactionary form, I was convinced that the romantic galaxy is very heterogeneous from a political point of view, certainly with retrograde currents, dreaming of an impossible return to the past – Novalis’s Christian Middle Ages – but also manifestations that I designated as revolutionary romanticism, which effect a detour through the past in the direction of a utopian, democratic (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) or communist future (William Morris, Ernst Bloch).

One of the chapters in the book attempted to account for Marx’s relationship to romanticism – a theme I have taken up subsequently in various essays. Let me try to summarise. For me, Marx and Engels, as critical heirs of the Enlightenment, were not really romantics. However, the romantic critique of capitalist civilisation – developed by political thinkers, economists, anthropologists, socialists – was none the less an extremely important, and generally neglected, source of their thinking. A few key texts give an account of their general attitude towards the romantic perspective as we define it.

In the [\*Communist Manifesto\*](#) (1848), Marx and Engels referred to ‘feudal socialism’ as ‘half echo of the past’ and ‘half menace of the future’; despite their ‘total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history’, these thinkers had the merit of ‘striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart’s core’ with a ‘bitter, witty and incisive criticism’.

However, more important than these ‘feudal’ critics of the liberal bourgeoisie was the discourse of the ‘petty-bourgeois socialist’ Sismondi – the most eminent of the nineteenth-century economists who could be called romantic – whose contributions they emphasised: ‘This author dissected with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production. He laid bare the hypocritical apologies of economists.’

This is not to say, of course, that the Manifesto is a romantic document! I simply wanted to make it clear that Marx and Engels were interested in the anti-bourgeois critique of the romantic authors.

One of Marx’s most significant texts in relation to romanticism is a passage from the *Grundrisse*

(1857-58):

In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out the fullness of his relationships and erected them as independent social power and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with the present complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and the romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis [berechtigeter Gegensatz] up to its blessed end.

This passage is interesting in several respects: in the first instance, it takes up the romantic argument about the greater 'fullness' of the pre-capitalist past; in the second instance, it rebuts both the romantic illusion of a return to the past and the bourgeois apology of the present. Finally, Marx considers the romantic critique of the bourgeois world as legitimate and a kind of negative counterpoint to it, which will accompany it to the end, i.e. as long as bourgeois society exists.

It would be wrong to limit the positive interest shown by Marx and Engels in romanticism to their youth, when they were closest to this cultural sensibility. For it is in their later writings that we find a great deal of attention paid to the work of anthropologists and historians inspired by romanticism on the subject of so-called 'primitive' communities: Maurer, Niebuhr, Morgan, Bachofen. The motivation for this interest was directly political, as Marx states in a letter concerning the German historian Georg Ludwig Maurer, addressed to Engels on 25 March 1868 - a highly significant document that draws both an affinity to and a distance from romanticism:

*The first reaction against the French Revolution and the Enlightenment bound up with it was naturally to see everything as medieval, romantic; even people like Grimm are not free from this. The second reaction is to look beyond the Middle Ages into the primitive age of every nation, and that corresponds to the socialist tendency... Then they are surprised to find what is newest in what is oldest - even egalitarians, to a degree which would have made Proudhon shudder.*

What Marx does not seem to take into account is that romanticism is not necessarily attached to the 'medieval' angle: reference to a 'primitive' egalitarian past is also one of the forms that the romantic critique of civilisation can take, from *Rousseau and his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* to socialist anthropologists.

Generally speaking, many themes inspired by the romantic critique of capitalist civilisation can be found in the writings of Marx and Engels. This is the case, in particular, with the denunciation of the brutally quantifying character of the bourgeois ethos, its dissolution of all qualitative values - cultural, social or moral - into mere quantitative value, measured by money. This problematic is widely developed in the 1844 Manuscripts, but also in the famous lines of the *Communist Manifesto*, which denounce a society invaded by the 'icy waters of egoistic calculation', where the only link between human beings that remains is 'cash payment', the cash nexus, in short, a society in which the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, 'has resolved personal dignity into exchange-value'. What characterises these critics as romantics is the comparison - implicit or explicit - with a pre-capitalist past, where this corruption of social relations had not yet taken place.

It is clear that certain themes of romantic origin recur frequently in the writings of Marx and Engels, both in their youth and in their 'mature' period, notably: 1) the degradation of human labour through the evils of the machine system and the division of labour; 2) the loss, in the process of civilisation, of the human qualities of the so-called 'primitive' communities, from the clan-based societies of the past to the Iroquois tribes or the Russian rural communities, perceived as free, egalitarian, communitarian societies. While these thematic elements are only one facet in the thought of the



founders of Marxism, and do not constitute a comprehensive perspective, it is nevertheless true that this romantic dimension is crucial as well as underestimated.

My book has been translated into English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Greek. If the echo in France has been limited, in the United States and England it has provoked a real debate.

I have also been interested in what I call 'romantic Marxists', such as [Ernst Bloch](#) (whom I was lucky enough to interview in 1974) and, above all, Walter Benjamin (a fascination shared by my friend [Daniel Bensaïd](#)) but that's a bit out of the way in this interview on Marx.

[Redemption and Utopia](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Fire Alarm](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [The War of Gods](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Georg Lukacs](#) by [Michael Löwy](#) [Karl Marx](#) by [Werner Blumenberg](#)

*How did you 'get into religion'? What is the relationship to Marx?*

A bit by chance, I joined the Sociology of Religion Group at the CNRS in the late 1970s and started working in this field. I leave aside my work on Jewish messianism, which has little to do with Marx. But I became interested in liberation theology, which I saw as playing a very important role, especially in Brazil. From 1980, after the amnesty granted by the regime, I often visited Brazil, and participated from 1980 to 2013 in the experience of the Workers' Party, along with my comrades of the Brazilian section of the Fourth International. During the 1980s I met several liberation theologians (Leonardo Boff, Frei Betto) and social and political activists from grassroots communities.

In 1996 I published, again at the request of my friends at New Left Review, a book on this theme: [The War of Gods. Religion and Politics in Latin America](#), later translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese. I devoted a chapter of this to the analysis of Marx and Engels's ideas on religion.

Does the famous phrase that religion is the 'opium of the people' (*Contribution to Hegel's Critique of the Philosophy of Right*, 1844) represent the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon? In fact, there is nothing specifically Marxist about this formula. It can be found before Marx, with various nuances, in Ludwig Feuerbach, Moses Hess, Heinrich Heine and many others.

When Marx wrote the above passage, he was still a disciple of Feuerbach, a neo-Hegelian. His analysis of religion was therefore 'pre-Marxist', classless and rather ahistorical. But it was no less dialectical because it grasped the contradictory character of religious 'distress': sometimes legitimising the existing society, sometimes protesting against it.

It was only later - particularly in *The German Ideology* (1846) - that the properly Marxist study of religion as a social and historical reality began. The central element of this new method of analysing religious facts is to consider them - together with law, morality, metaphysics, political ideas, etc. - as one of the multiple forms of ideology, i.e. of the intellectual production (*geistige Produktion*) of a people, the production of ideas, representations and forms of consciousness, necessarily conditioned by material production and the corresponding social relations.

From 1846 onwards, Marx paid only occasional attention to religion as such, as a specific cultural/ideological universe. Engels showed a much more sustained interest than Marx in religious phenomena and their historical role. His main contribution to the Marxist sociology of religion is undoubtedly his analysis of the relationship between religious representations and social classes. Christianity, for example, no longer appears in his writings (as in Feuerbach's) as an a-historical 'essence', but as a cultural ('ideological') form that is transformed in the course of history and as a symbolic space, an arena of antagonistic social forces.

Thanks to his method based on class struggle, Engels understood – unlike the Enlightenment philosophers – that the conflict between materialism and religion is not always identical to that between revolution and reaction. In England, for example, in the seventeenth century, the materialist Hobbes defended the monarchy while the Protestant sects made religion their banner in the revolutionary struggle against the Stuarts.

In his study of a great Christian movement – the Peasant War in Germany – Engels pays tribute to Thomas Münzer, the theologian and leader of the revolutionary peasants and heretical plebeians of the sixteenth century, who wanted the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God, the millenarian kingdom of the prophets, on earth. According to Engels, the Kingdom of God was for Münzer a society without class differences, without private property and without state authority independent of or alien to the members of that society.

Through his analysis of religious phenomena in the light of the class struggle, Engels revealed the subversive potential of religion and opened the way for a new approach to the relationship between religion and society distinct from both Enlightenment philosophy and German neo-Hegelianism.

My book on the ‘war of the gods’ had little resonance in France. On the other hand, in Brazil, where it received a prize from the National Library (best essay of the year 2000), left-wing Christians were very interested in this attempt at a Marxist interpretation of liberation theology.

*One of your latest books is a comparison between Marx and [Weber](#). Aren't they very heterogeneous authors, who don't have much in common?*

Certainly, their methods – dialectical in one case, neo-Kantian in the other – and their political options were diametrically opposed. They also had very different analyses of the origin of capitalism: the Protestant work ethic and ascetic frugality, according to Weber; the primitive accumulation of capital through violence, according to Marx. The political meaning is not the same!

But I try to show in my book *La cage d'acier. Weber et le marxisme wébérien* (2013) that, despite their undeniable differences, Marx and Weber have certain points in common in their appreciation of modern capitalism: they share a vision of this economic system as a universe where ‘individuals are ruled by abstractions’ (Marx), where impersonal and ‘reified’ (versachlicht) relations replace personal relations of dependence, and where the accumulation of capital becomes a largely irrational end in itself.

For each of them, the analysis of capitalism is inseparable from a critical stance – explicit in Marx, more ambivalent in Weber. The content and inspiration of the critique are very different, but we can compare Marx’s denunciation of the loss of freedom through alienation, commodity reification and fetishism, with Weber’s definition of capitalism as ‘masterless slavery’, which locks individuals into a kind of iron cage.

What separates them is, of course, the political option: while Marx wagers on the possibility of overcoming capitalism through a workers’ socialist revolution, Weber, hostile to any form of socialism, was rather a ‘cultural pessimist’, a fatalistic and resigned observer of a mode of production and administration that seemed to him undesirable but inevitable.

This book, which also attempts to analyse the ‘Weberian Marxists’ (Lukács, Merleau-Ponty and others) has been considered too Weberian by several Marxists, and vice versa. Both are probably right.

*In your opinion, what are the great challenges for Marx's thought in the world today?*

I think that the ecological question - climate change, and the programmed destruction of living conditions on the planet - is already, and will become even more so in coming years, the greatest challenge for Marxism and for all emancipatory thought. As I have tried to show in my book *Ecosocialism. Une alternative radicale à la catastrophe capitaliste* (2013, translated into English, Spanish and Portuguese), Marx's work, despite its limitations, which correspond to a time when the ecological crisis was far from having acquired its current catastrophic shape, offers some important pointers for an 'ecological communism'.

Many ecologists accuse Marx of being a 'productivist'. This accusation does not seem to me justified, insofar as no one has denounced the capitalist logic of production for production's sake, the accumulation of capital, wealth and commodities as an end in itself, as much as Marx. The very idea of socialism - in contrast to its miserable bureaucratic counterfeits - is that of the production of use values, of goods necessary for the satisfaction of human needs. The supreme objective of technical progress for Marx is not the infinite increase of goods ('having') but the reduction of the working day and the increase of free time ('being').

The other alleged proof of Marx's productivism is that, following Ricardo, he attributes the origin of all value and wealth to human labour, neglecting the contribution of nature. This criticism results, in my opinion, from a misunderstanding: Marx uses the theory of labour-value to explain the origin of exchange-value in the framework of the capitalist system. Nature, on the other hand, participates in the formation of real wealth, which is not exchange-value but use-value. This position is formulated very explicitly by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* against the ideas of Lassalle and his followers: 'Labour is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use-values (and surely these are what make up material wealth!) as labour. Labour is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour-power.'

However, it is true that we often find in Marx or Engels (and even more so in later Marxism) an uncritical stance towards the system of industrial production created by capital and a tendency to make the 'development of the productive forces' the main vector of progress. In some texts, the productive forces appear to be 'neutral', and the task of the revolution is only to abolish relations of production which have become an 'obstacle' to their unlimited development.

For example, in some passages of Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, there is talk of socialism as synonymous with the 'unbounded' development of the productive forces: 'The expansive force of the means of production bursts the bonds that the capitalist mode of production had imposed on them. Their deliverance from these bonds is the one precondition for an unbroken, constantly-accelerated development of the productive forces, and therewith for a practically unlimited increase of production itself.'

*However, there are also other writings that take into consideration the ecological dimension of the socialist programme and open up some interesting avenues. Can we then consider Marx and Engels as precursors of ecology?*

It seems to me we must recognise that ecological themes do not have a central place in Marxian theory and that the writings of Marx and Engels on the relationship between human societies and nature are far from unambiguous, and can therefore be the subject of different interpretations. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that important insights for ecosocialism can be found in their works.

Marx and Engels's attention was focused on agriculture and the problem of the degradation of soils and forests. But their analysis also raises more general questions:

- 1) the break that the capitalist mode of production causes in the metabolism (Stoffwechsel), the system of material exchange, between human societies and the environment, by undermining the 'natural laws of life', and the 'eternal natural conditions' of all production.
- 2) The contradiction between the 'spirit of capitalism', with its immediate logic of profit, and the possibility of a 'rational' agriculture, based on a much longer temporality and in a sustainable perspective that respects the environment.
- 3) The destructive character of capitalist progress, which becomes 'progress' in the degradation and deterioration of the natural environment (starting with the soil).
- 4) The parallelism between the debasement and exhaustion of workers and that of nature, as a result of the same predatory logic, the logic of capitalist big industry and agriculture, whose 'blind greed' knows no limits.
- 5) Socialism as the rational control, by the associated producers, of the material exchange ('metabolism') between human societies and the natural environment, respecting the natural conditions of existence of future generations.

Admittedly, Marx and Engels lacked an overall ecological perspective. However, it is impossible to develop a critical ecology equal to contemporary challenges without taking into account the Marxian critique of political economy, and its questioning of the destructive logic induced by the unlimited accumulation of capital. An ecology that ignores or disdains Marxism and its critique of commodity fetishism is condemned to be no more than a corrective to the 'excesses' of capitalist productivism.

*To conclude, how would you assess your work based on Marx?*

Looking at my writings, the dominant impression is that of a formidable dispersion. The whole thing is heterogeneous, scattered and fragmented. The dispersion is not only geographical - Central Europe, Latin America, France (?) - but also thematic and disciplinary. Is there a common thread in this hodgepodge? Without doubt Marx, Marxism and the idea of revolution. But this common thread cannot prevent fragmentation.

I find it difficult to define the discipline of my work. For want of a better word, I declare myself 'undisciplined' and compare my writings to a salad, whose ingredients would be sociology, philosophy, history and literature, all spiced up with Marxism. If I absolutely have to name a discipline, I would say it is a kind of sociology of culture, of Marxist construction, but supplemented with German sociology (Weber, Mannheim). What Marxism? Originally Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Goldmann/Lukács, but, later on, Walter Benjamin, T.W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, José Carlos Mariategui, etc, etc. My Brazilian friend Carlos Nelson Coutinho used to say, with a touch of irony, that I am always adding new deities to my pantheon without removing the old ones, which makes for a very cluttered temple.

[1] Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 251-2.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 416.

[1] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), pp. 52-3.

[1] Karl Marx, *The First International and After* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 375.

[1] Lucien Goldmann, 'Révolution et Bureaucratie', 1970, in *Epistémologie et philosophie politique* (Paris: Denoel, 1978), pp. 188-9.

[1] 'Postface to the Second Edition', *Capital* Volume One (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 96-7.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[1] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 162.

[1] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress 1965), p. 201.

[1] Karl Marx, *The First International and After*, p. 241 (Marx's emphasis).

[1] Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 387.

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## **P.S.**

• Verso Books. 22 March 2022::

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5306-michael-lowy-on-marx>

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