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Re-reading *Capital* 150 years after: some Philosophical and Political Challenges

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Abstract

This paper addresses some of the philosophical and political challenges we face following two important events: 150 years after the publication of *Das Kapital* and 100 years after the Great Bolshevik Revolution. It begins with discussing these great events of the previous century to the insufficiency of socialism through an elaboration on the ways one can read Marx's critique of political economy as the most correct theoretical basis. It is at this juncture that we can outline a possible form which can succeed in breaking up the political and ideological deadlocks of contemporary capitalism.

Keywords

Marx, communism, Hegel, human sciences, Žižek, critique of political economy, Party.

As always, weakness had taken refuge in a belief in miracles, believed the enemy to be overcome when he was only conjured away in imagination, and lost all understanding of the present in an inactive glorification of the future that was in store for it and the deeds it had in mind but did not want to carry out yet.

Marx

This is a year of remembrance and celebrations on the left. There are good reasons for that: 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), which is a hugely important historical fact for the Communist Idea. Also, this year is the centenary of the first great socialist revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution. There are a great number of academic and political conferences, books, journals and other intellectual and political initiatives devoted to these two events. However, we seem to be less attentive to another, perhaps equally important, historical fact in the long history of emancipatory struggles. January 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the formation of the (otherwise very short lived) Shanghai People's Commune. It was perhaps the most tragic case in the entire socialist experiments of the previous century. It was the most serious attempt to advance from socialism to the communist form of organisation of society; with the local workers attacking the Party and the army, thus establishing their own 'self-government of the producers.' The tragedy of the Shanghai Commune does not consist in the failure of the form of organisation of society, but on something more tragic: the *socialist reaction* to communism. And, there are other similar examples where socialism became an enemy of communist emancipation. I shall come back to this later on. However, a pressing question persists. Why do we celebrate the past events? Is it merely a ceremonial dimension of it, or is there a legacy that is worth sticking to and recuperating? Let us state the following: memory is not a political category. We do not need to remember in order to avoid the tragic experience of the previous century socialist experiments. The whole academic discipline of "memory studies" is one big ideological enterprise. What prevents, or rather has the potential of preventing, the same experience by the way of re-inventing the Idea of Communism is thinking. Thinking, pure thinking, and as Hegel would have it, thinking without further determinations, is the main and perhaps the only enemy of repetition in History.

To do away with socialism

In *What is To Be Done?*, discussing the new trends within socialism, Lenin asks:

He who does not deliberately close his eyes cannot fail to see that the new “critical” trend in socialism is nothing more nor less than a new variety of *opportunism*. And if we judge people, not by the glittering uniforms they don or by the high-sounding appellations they give themselves, but by their actions and by what they actually advocate, it will be clear that “freedom of criticism” means freedom for an opportunist trend in Social-Democracy, freedom to convert Social-Democracy into a democratic party of reform, freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and bourgeois elements into socialism.

Then he goes on to argue that

“Freedom” is a grand word, but under the banner of freedom for industry the most predatory wars were waged, under the banner of freedom of labour, the working people were robbed. The modern use of the term “freedom of criticism” contains the same inherent falsehood. Those who are really convinced that they have made progress in science would not demand freedom for the new views to continue side by side with the old, but the substitution of the new views for the old. The cry heard today, “Long live freedom of criticism”, is too strongly reminiscent of the fable of the empty barrel.¹

Today, the terms and the concepts (or, the idea) of socialism are ‘reminiscent of the fable of the empty barrel’. Socialism is the name of the out-dated political utopia, whose experiments in all their forms (Soviet, Chinese, Yugoslav, Albanian, Cuban...) failed thoroughly and completely in their implementation. In the contemporary situation, the usage of the term socialism is obscure, detached and alienated from its initial idea. But, what does socialism as a term mean in the contemporary present? Does it stand for the abolition of property as such (as Marx envisaged in *The Communist Manifesto*), or does it represent solely a transformation of ownership, so we have the shift from private property (capitalism), to state property (socialism)? It appears that it is easier to envisage what socialism is not,

rather than what today stands in the name of it. Socialism is not the negation of property as such, but it is a negation of *one* particular type of property, thus leaving untouched the field of social relations in which property (private, or state) operates and remains the touchstone of the existing social relations. Following Marx, Slavoj Žižek is right to refer to socialism as “vulgar communism”. In this sense, the future of socialism is always capitalism, because of the structural dimension of property itself. It is the flaws of the idea itself, which are constitutive of the idea of socialism, which necessitates its transformation into capitalism. Therefore, we should abandon the illusion that socialism is the ‘first phase’ towards full communism. Žižek argues that “the future will thus be communist... or socialist.”²

In our thinking, the way out of capitalism, we have to bear in mind that:

...it is not enough simply to remain faithful to the communist Idea; one has to locate within historical reality antagonisms which give this Idea a practical urgency. The only true question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today's global capitalism contain antagonisms which are sufficiently strong to prevent its indefinite reproduction?

Based on this, Žižek enumerates four such antagonisms, which he names as “four riders of apocalypse”:

...the looming threat of an ecological catastrophe; the inappropriateness of the notion of private property in relation to so-called “intellectual property”; the socioethical implications of new techno-scientific developments (especially in biogenetics); and, last but not least, the creation of new forms of apartheid, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between this last feature – the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included – and the other three, which designate different aspects of what Hardt and Negri call the “commons;” the shared substance of our social being, the privatization of which involves violent acts which should, where necessary, be resisted with violent means.³

If the reference to the commons justifies the return to the concept of communism, then the first three antagonisms should be read from the perspective of the fourth antagonism. Otherwise, as Žižek notes, “the first three effectively concern

questions of humanity's economic, anthropological, even physical, survival, while the fourth one is ultimately a question of justice."⁴ The risk is then to avoid the liberal appropriation of the concept of the commons, to resuscitate it from vague notions such as solidarity, or the common good, and similar political and conceptual sophisms. The enclosure of the commons, results in a process of proletarianisation, which certainly goes beyond the social class imagined by Marx.⁵ Here is where communism gains its philosophical, conceptual and political relevance. Unlike socialism, which

...wants to solve the first three antagonisms without addressing the fourth—without the singular universality of the proletariat. The only way for the global capitalist system to survive its long-term antagonism and simultaneously avoid the communist solution, will be for it to reinvent some kind of socialism – in the guise of communitarianism, or populism, or capitalism with Asian values, or some other configuration.⁶

To push Žižek's thesis a bit further, we might say that in order for capitalism to survive as a dominant form of organisation of production it must become 'socialist.' How? One of the answers is automation of the jobs. No wonder that even representatives of Silicon Valley recognise this problem. According to Elon Musk, because of computerisation, intelligent machinery, robotisation and so on, the 'human' labour force will be replaced with machinery and robotics. As a consequence, "there is pretty good chance we end up with a universal basic income, or something like that, due to automation."⁷ Although this might ultimately be seen as the end of capitalism as such, we must nonetheless be attentive apropos universal basic income. Sociologists, such as Philippe van Parijs, have argued that the basic income is the only way through which capitalism can be reformed, and ultimately saved.⁸ In struggling against the ideologies of the time, Marx and Engels make a similar point in their critique of "critical-utopian socialism and communism." Their critique was centred on the nature of the class struggle, as well as on their ideas on the communal values that appeal to "everyone." To the utopian socialists and communists, argue Marx and Engels, "the proletariat, as yet in its infancy, offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement."⁹ The class antagonisms do not offer the prospects for the emancipation of the proletariat. Politics and revolution are not on their agenda, as they remain peaceniks. For them, 'society does exist' and they aim to improve the

living conditions of all members of society, including of those from the most favoured class. Their proposals, which Marx and Engels do enumerate, remain of a “purely Utopian character.”

The ultimate difficulty (at the level of the task) of philosophy, insofar as it is grounded on the Communist hypothesis, is to outline the ‘fundamental concepts’ through which one can think and critique the contemporary present. That is to say, how to move *beyond* capitalism, without falling into the socialist trap? We said that socialism is *not* the first phase of communism – thus we propose a thesis which will shed light to this ‘heretic’ proposition. In the history of the previous century there was a clear tension, or even antagonism, between communism and socialism. While the former was the name of the ferocious emancipatory potential of an idea and organisation (the Bolshevik Revolution from 1917 until say 1920, or the Cultural Revolution, and so on), socialism on the other hand was the name of the stabilising effect of this force. Socialism was introduced in order for a society to be ‘stabilised’ or put on a track, that is, it was introduced for domesticating purposes. Therefore, the (not so) paradoxical thesis is: after the failure of socialism, we need to rethink communism.

Philosophy for *Capital*

Does Marx’s writing on the critique of political economy serve as the guiding principle and a theoretical premise upon which we can rethink emancipation, and therefore communism? Can we simply return to Marx and look into his work for the solutions of the antagonisms and contradictions of contemporary capitalism? The blunt answer is, of course, yes. However, what complicates the picture is the manner in which the return to Marx should take. To clarify it further, and paraphrasing Hegel, the necessity *for* philosophy in fact is the standpoint from which we should read Marx.

But, it is interesting to note how most of the contemporary readings of Marx are done from the perspective of so called ‘human sciences’, be them critical theory, geography, economy, and so on. Indeed, Marx had a very complicated relationship with philosophy. The relation of Marx’s critique of political economy with philosophy constitutes one of its fundamental constitutive ‘uneasiness’. But there is another dimension in Marx’s work: the relation between the critique of political economy and the political novelty. Or as Žižek argues, the ultimate Marxian parallax is constituted

by the critique of political economy and politics. The parallax dimension relies on the fact that one is not reducible to the other. This is the Žižekian lesson: Marx's critique of political economy is not only a critique of the classical political economy (Smith, Ricardo...), but it is also a form of critique, a transcendental one according to Žižek, which allows us to articulate the elementary forms of social edifice under capitalism itself. And this 'transcendental' framework, cannot be other than philosophical. For instance, two of the most important thinkers whose work is an incredible attempt to reconstruct Marx on either non or anti philosophical foundations are David Harvey and Moishe Postone. The former carries out this task on anthropological and geographical grounds, thus ending up in what Althusser would call humanist and economist deviation. The latter, with his attempt to reformulate the critical theory of capitalism, ends up in theoreticist and historicist positions. The crucial misunderstanding should be avoided: deviations in Marxism are not *only* a result of attempts to reconstruct Marxism on non-philosophical groundings. However, these deviations have political and theoretical consequences, which as Althusser pointed out, in the last instance are philosophical.¹⁰ I do not wish to subscribe the philosophical dimension to Harvey and Postone, for they would not be happy about it. But, the theoretical deviations within Marxism itself are also philosophical and happen in the domain of philosophy itself. We can name a few great Marxists of the previous century who fell into them: Gramsci, Lukács, and Althusser himself. Philosophy is the only intellectual discipline that operates as a pure site of thought. As such, it the only discipline of thoughts which can account for the failures and successes of (in this case) the political struggles carried out under the banner of emancipation.

For the sake of argumentation, let us place critical theory and other non-philosophical disciplines under the banner of *human sciences* or *interdisciplinarity*. Alain Badiou once said that philosophy always struggles against sophism. The sophist is the main adversary of the philosopher. Can we therefore argue that human sciences, as was understood by Althusser, is always the double of philosophy? It is an adversary of philosophy because it is in itself an ideology. That is, human sciences occupy a space within the general theories which is in between theory and ideology. Therefore, the task of philosophy does not consist on *a priori* rejecting the human sciences and their validity, but rather in rendering visible their lack of conceptual tools in performing the task which they have set themselves. They seek in philosophy a conceptual base which would support or help establish their orientation (borrowing notions, concept, methods, et cetera), albeit rejecting the

philosophical conceptual apparatus as a whole. Therefore, they become a version of positivism. We can think of Lacan, who struggled against psychologism, or Althusser whose project consisted on the struggles against deviations in Marxism. Or today, aren't Badiou and Žižek the ultimate combatants of the contemporary sophism?

The title of Althusser's introduction to *Reading Capital* perhaps encapsulates best what is at stake in relation between Marxism and philosophy. The title goes: "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy." Philosophy as a discipline whose goal is not only to draw lines of demarcations (between sciences and ideology, truth and knowledge, philosophy and sophism, and so on), but also of reformulating the conceptual ground upon which we understand problems as problems. If what human sciences see as new answers, philosophy questions the very premise upon which they not only present the solution, but also formulate the questions themselves.

The most pressing questions qua problems of our time necessitate the "abstract" philosophical contemplation. And, where does Marx come in here? Isn't he the ultimate anti-philosophical thinker, who first compares philosophy to masturbation ("philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love"), to the abandoning philosophy altogether when he carried out the task of studying and outlining his critique of political economy? Perhaps more important than the position of Marx in the contemporary left, we should ask the following question: which Marx do we need today?

Following Lenin,¹¹ we can argue that Marx is present everywhere precisely because he has been neutralized. Everyone speaks of 'Marx', but in a distorted way. Whenever socialists refer him to, he is neutralized, rendered into a poet of a revolutionary past or into an archaic messiah. Marx is thus transformed into a harmless icon. Communists elevate Marx to a sacred position, which is another way of not engaging with what is at the core of Marx's work, that is, his *Capital*. It is at this point that one should locate the position of the contemporary Left. Or, to go a step further, we can say that at every conjuncture, we have a 'distorted' Marx – this was the case in Lenin's time and it is certainly the case now – but the difference lies in the form of this distortion: that is to say, today it is through over-exposure that we ultimately leave Marx alone.

The majority of the Left today, including the socialist governments and parties, silently accept that capitalism is the ultimate and unquestioned form of social organisation. Everyone is both 'Marxist' at the level of analysis, and non-Marxist, that

is to say, not communist in practice. This distinction takes this kind of form: yes, we know capitalism is bad, but Marxism does not provide solutions or a vision for politics, therefore the struggle against capitalism has to be fought culturally, etc. As a consequence, Leftist politics and theory exists only as a reaction to the actions of the ruling class, precisely because Marxism is taken as a purely critical tool, and as such only reactive politics becomes possible.

Taking this as the starting point and its premise, the Left is thus confronted with one of the darkest and weakest points of its history. There is a paradigmatic shift in the aims and goals of what the Left stands for today. While accepting Marx's fundamental thesis that capitalism is a global system, the Left today struggles for moderate changes at the level of reforms within the socio-political system, which is to say, rendering the contradictions of capitalism into more acceptable levels and more palatable forms.

Being a Marxist without being a Communist ultimately means that even when we speak of systematic change (from a Marxist point of view), we still end up lacking a practical point of view of totality from which to think action in equally global terms (that is, the communist point of view). This lack of vision is the postmodern turn of the Left. It is post-modern because it accepts Marxism as a de-constructionist tool, a critical weapon, but not as an invitation to build a new form of society – something that is equated with a “grand narrative.” In the same line and within the same horizon, the class struggle has been replaced with cultural politics of recognition (gay rights, anti-racist struggles, multiculturalism, and so on). The problem with this turn is that it ignores class analysis and struggle and instead engages in the reformist level of improving what can be justified to be improved within a capitalist coordinates of social organisation. Another problem, correlative to this and which haunts the contemporary Left is the spectre of post-colonial theory. The Left, especially the Liberal Western Leftists, take post-colonial theory very seriously, despite its obvious theoretical and political weakness and flaws.¹² Although this topic requires longer deliberation, I will refrain myself with putting forward the following thesis: The problematic point of post-colonial theory is rather well encapsulated in the distinction proposed by Badiou between the ethics of difference and the ethics of truth: the former is mostly oriented towards the past – reparation, reconstruction of heritage, and, ultimately, the avoidance of the return of evil. The latter paradigm, while acknowledging the historical basis of any action, maintains a reference to future systemic transformation. Post-colonial theory reconstructs the history of colonial struggles from the standpoint of this avoidance of evil, which leads it to overestimate

culture as a receptacle of lost heritage, to equate power with alienation in the other, and ultimately to dismiss universality and any systemic point of view as dangerous returns of euro-centric ideology.

Let us go further. Concerning the direct critique of capitalism, the Left is content with analysing and criticising the symptoms of capitalism: austerity, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and so forth. This comes as a result of abandoning a critique of ideology and further, a critique of political economy. As a result, the Left is engaged either in false struggles (neoliberalism, austerity) or in struggles that are already over-determined and decided by the ruling ideology.

More than this, the Left today seems to have abandoned the Party-form politics. Instead, a pseudo-Deleuzeian rhizomatic, horizontal form of politics is operating. The self-organisation of the multitude, in which the People take the position of the *subject supposed to know* seems to have become the predominant form of political organisation. Today, anti-Leninism constitutes the Left. All of this is the true name of its own defeat. Here we need to avoid a crucial misunderstanding: anti-Leninism is a conservative choice in the face of the ideological apprehension of Stalinism, of the terrible defeats of 20th century socialism.¹³

But, there is a way in between the blind repetition of previous failed solutions and the abdication of the problem altogether – which is to rethink the Party form of political organisation in a new relation to the state, society, etc. The true task of the true radical Left today is to rethink the Party-form of political organisation and the transformation of the State. Fighting the state power and resisting the seizure of the state power is what the contemporary Left abhors the most. The problem here concerns the theory of power.

Capital Today

What is at stake when we read *Capital* today? Reading *Capital* today confronts us with two difficulties: 1) political, and 2) philosophical. Unlike Althusser, who granted the primacy of the first reading to the second, we shall argue that the political problems posed by *Capital* are of same importance and as such, they constitute the axis of reading Marx's late works.

The triple relation of philosophy, economy and politics, analysed from the standpoint of Marxism, is what is at stake with every attempt at reconstructing Marx. With regard to the relation between economy and politics, Žižek argues that

Both logics are “transcendental,” not merely ontico-empirical; and they are both irreducible to each other. Of course they both point toward each other (class struggle is inscribed into the very heart of economy, yet has to remain absent, nonthematized – recall how the manuscript of *Capital* volume III abruptly ends with it; and class struggle is ultimately “about” economic power relations), but this very mutual implication is twisted so that it prevents any direct contact (any direct translation of political struggle into a mere mirroring of economic “interests” is doomed to fail, as is any reduction of the sphere of economic production to a secondary “reified” sedimentation of an underlying founding political process).¹⁴

This means that the

relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of “two faces or a vase”: one sees either two faces or a vase, never both – one has to make a choice. In the same way, one either focuses on the political, and the domain of economy is reduced to the empirical “servicing of goods,” or one focuses on economy, and politics is reduced to a theater of appearances, to a passing phenomenon which will disappear with the arrival of the developed Communist (or technocratic) society, in which, as Engels put it, the “administration of people” will vanish in the “administration of things.”¹⁵

How can we move beyond this dichotomy? Earlier we said that one of the weakest points of the contemporary left is the theory of power. The 20th century produced a theory of power, especially amongst French philosophers, that only leaves space for emancipation in the resistance against power, never in its exercise. We lack a theory of power that is active rather than reactive. A theory that, unlike the “deconstructive Marxism” of today, is propositive which is not merely reactive and critical: It is precisely in this field that we should shamelessly return to Lenin. One of the most polemic aspects of Slavoj Žižek’s “return to Lenin” is his simultaneous attempt to revitalize the Hegelian theory of the State. At the crossing point of these two lines of argumentation is the need to recuperate the “analytic” dimension of the Leninist Party-form and the need to rethink the critique of the State in order to conceive of a “non-statal State.” How, then, can we turn to philosophy?

Žižek argues that Marx was able to write *Capital* only after he re-read Hegel's *Science of Logic*. That is to say, "Marx needed Hegel to formulate the logic of capital."¹⁶ In a letter to Engels, Marx writes:

I am, by the way, discovering some nice arguments. E.g. I have completely demolished the theory of profit as hitherto propounded. What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel's Logic at which I had taken another look by mere accident. [...] If ever the time comes when such work is again possible, I should very much like to write – 2 or 3 sheets making accessible to the common reader the rational aspect of the method which Hegel not only discovered but also mystified.

The problematic thus is: how is it possible that Marx needed Hegel to articulate his *critique* of political economy? Isn't Kant's philosophy a better compendium for that enterprise, precisely because of the crucial notion of *critique*? Kant is perhaps best known as a critic of metaphysics. We all know his famous statement, in which he confesses that he has "to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*."¹⁷ However, the subsequent sentence, much rarely cited, gives another twist to this argument. "The dogmatism of metaphysics," argues Kant, "that is, the preconception that it is possible to make headway in metaphysics without a previous criticism of pure reason, is the source of all that unbelief, always very dogmatic, which wars against morality."¹⁸ It is an odd statement, if we take into account the era in which Kant lived, that is, the Age of Enlightenment, which marked the beginning of doing away with religion. It would be too simplistic to read this thesis as an attempt by Kant to assert the primacy of religious belief over reason. What Kant is outlining with this statement is the very core of Enlightenment itself. It was not an intellectual and political movement against religion *per se*, but a movement which subverted the true spirituality of religion, or extraction of religion's rational kernel, in the name of its perpetuation. This was what Kant was aiming at with that statement: the rational kernel of the Enlightenment lies not in abandoning religion altogether, but locating the 'non-religiosity' within the religious/religion itself. For Kant, this extraction operated under the banner of morality, that is, that dimension of religion which encourages morality.

It is not surprising, that his three critiques correspond to three certain domains: the critique of the scientific, of morality and of aesthetics. As many have elaborated, Kant established a dependent relationship between the three, with art being the

mediator. Indeed, this forms the 'totality' of Kant's system: thing-in-itself, phenomenon and the transcendental illusion, each of them being dependent on the other.¹⁹

The relation between philosophy and critique is, as Hegel knew, very important. It is critique, as well as philosophy, which are threatened today, precisely because they lack the conceptual framework within which they can articulate themselves as well as enact their operation as activities of thought. Lacking the conceptual framework, both critique and philosophy become sterile and obsolete, degrading merely into an articulation of opinions. Philosophical critique is thus possible only insofar as it operates within an articulated position, it has the validity to judge, demarcate, orient, et cetera. But, doesn't this bring us back to Kant (along with Lenin and Althusser), who in the same book, proclaims that "our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit."²⁰ Isn't this nothing but ruthless in a double sense: that "of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be."²¹ In almost identical fashion, a century later, Karl Marx formulated his imperative of the time: 'ruthless criticism for everything existing.'

To critique, therefore, means to give rise to a position, a thesis, which would otherwise not exist, without the process of a critique. This is how the function of philosophy as an intellectual activity of drawing lines of demarcations gains its meaning. By drawing lines between idealism and materialism, between truths and opinions, knowledge and opinions, science and ideology, philosophy is able to articulate itself, propose its positions (idea) and position itself in the philosophical battlefield.

The ultimate difficulty (at the level of the task) of philosophy, insofar as it is grounded on the Communist hypothesis, is to outline the 'fundamental concepts' through which one can think and critique the contemporary present. But, is *critique* as such proper to a philosophical vocation? Let us take a short detour into some of the predominant orientations within Marxism as such. There are Marxists who read *Capital* especially in the light of the famous line from the *Manifesto*: "capitalism produces its own gravediggers" – for them, a crisis in capitalism is a crisis of capitalism, in the sense that it produces the tools for overcoming it. For others, *Capital* is read in light of another statement from the *Manifesto*, the one about the permanent social revolution brought about with the bourgeoisie – for them, a crisis is a moment of internal revolution to capitalism, part of capitalism's own form of self-reproduction. Which option is correct? Perhaps neither: the much more frightening realization we have come to grasp is that capitalism does reproduce its own logic

indefinitely *and* it does meet an immanent limit point – but this limit is not socialism or communism, but barbarism: the utter destruction of natural and social substance in a “downward spiral” that does not recognize any “reality testing” in this destruction. In this sense, the “gravediggers” that capitalism produces are gravediggers both of capitalism *and* communism – which is why no emancipatory project should count with the immanent logic of capitalism to point a way out *nor* wait for the collapse of capitalism in the hope that we will not be dragged along with it.

What is then the right path? I have argued elsewhere²² that Hegel was the anti-critique philosopher par excellence. Indeed, the Hegelian thinking, where the entire philosophical system is dedicated to emptying out the “beyond” of any substance, doing away with all essentialist dualisms. A thinker who tries to carry out the task of accepting “the whole truth and harshness.” In this sense, in the capitalist mode of social organisation, exploitation and domination are in the way they *really* are. Do we take the notion of *critique*, or that of the *ground* as the philosophical framework of reading Marx?

Taking this as the guiding thread of the present work, albeit with far more modest aims, I will seek to outline some of the pressing issues regarding the contemporary relevance of Marx. This poses crucial philosophical cross paths: critique or grounding? The path one takes here determines the consequences of reading Marx. To go back to our initial thread, and formulate it in Hegelian terms, which should be our “attitude of thought toward objectivity”?²³ The Hegelian metaphysics can perhaps be formulated as the attitude of thought, which aims at understanding the “thought-determinations” in thinking what there is. It is not an attempt to reconcile thinking with the external object which is independent of mind, but it is the “movement of thinking” which determines the object themselves. How then to proceed with a Hegelian based philosophical critique, given that the philosopher himself critiqued critique itself? Marx’s critique of political economy is structurally the same as the Hegel’s (and not Kant’s) critique of metaphysics.²⁴ Like Hegel *a propos* metaphysics, Marx is not concerned with the conditions of possibility of the existence of critique of political economy; rather, he is concerned with its concepts and their relations. This is, perhaps, another way of defending Marx’s Hegelianism, against the critiques of this line, and most notably Louis Althusser’s Spinozism.

The difficulty resides therefore on reconciling the notion of *critique* (Marx) with that of the *grounding* (Hegel). Nonetheless, it would be important to point out that

using the term *critique* would place Hegel's philosophy in the tradition of the Kantian one.

A few contemporary tasks: some Žižekian considerations

Earlier we spoke of the theory of power. The entire Marxist tradition has largely neglected the theorisation of the State, and of power. Thus, the present paper can be concluded by presenting the elementary and basic contours for the schematization of a *Žižekian Theory of the State*.

For any reader of Žižek this presents an impossible task, for none other than the simple fact that Žižek himself never claimed that he aims at constructing such a theory, and at many levels, he also resists and opposes this formalization. Nor does he aim to provide a systematic critique or analysis of it. Although Žižek himself never claims that the goal of his writing is to construct such a theory, his writings nonetheless seem to 'betray' his conviction. There are elements in his work that can serve this purpose. The crucial sources for such an endeavour are Hegelian philosophy, Žižek's return to Lenin and his theorisation of the contemporary mode of capitalist production. For Žižek, the Party is the site of politics. For politics to exist, it has not only to exist in an organised form, but in order for an activity to be qualified to be politics, it has to be organised in the party-form. An immediate and equally important question beckons: why do we need to go back to the party-form politics after the catastrophic failure of Socialism in the previous century experiments? The contemporary forms of egalitarian horizontal forms of organisation simply do not do what they aim to do. The Communist party-form (in opposition to the bourgeois party) is perhaps the only political form of organisation which proposed itself to be organised around an indifference, rather than around a differentiation. This manifests itself both in its "unreal" claim to aim at the abolishment of capitalism – which makes it detached from the world – and in the sense that it produces an identification of "comrades" that is not grounded on any concrete or particular aspect of the militants as well as the militancy. Therefore, the Communist party-form is the appropriate form of politics to deal with problems that are not reducible to local, or to directly concrete oppression, such as the capitalist exploitation, et cetera. Far from questioning the coordinates of global capitalism, they engage in what can be called "moral" issues of capitalism (environment, refugees, gay rights, minority rights, etc.). For example, with regard to the refugee crisis in Europe the majority of the Left plays

the role of exercising moral agency, specifically engaged in an attempt to *humanize* the refugees and their plights. This take is purely racist, precisely because it infantilises a whole group of people. The public sentiment of welcoming the refugees is simply insufficient. What is equally – if not more – important is their systematisation; that is to say, their access and involvement in social provisions, on-going, timely and appropriate medical care, enrolment and participation in the education process, and so on. It is not that one should not feel sympathy with the refugees but rather, to *precisely* understand that the causes of their sufferings are the results of the deadlocks of late capitalism. Differently put, by only sympathising with the refugees we are depoliticising the very cause of the crisis and problematically reducing complexities to a moral order. The refugee crisis is not a moral crisis, but a crisis precipitated and exacerbated by the dynamics of late global capitalism. The slogan ‘they are also like us’ is the ultimate form of racism and thus serves to replace class struggle with empathy. More so, it is not enough that we locate the problems of the refugees *only* in the domain of imperialist or colonial struggle but also within the totality of capitalism (as well as the problem of the excluded, ecological catastrophes, and so on – which will precipitate the next influx of massive population displacement). No matter how benevolent the Left appear, crises like the refugees (and those to come) illustrate the limits of any form of grassroots democratic movements. When Žižek drew from Jameson’s thesis on global militarisation²⁸ didn’t he mean precisely this? Instead of merely sympathising with refugees from a cosy and safe distance which included expressing solidarity mostly via social networks, why not unconditionally support the organisation of the transportation of refugees and their proper systematization in third countries? This point becomes clearer if we bring about the distinction between organising around the indifference/difference (or, identity) which in fact was the ambition of party-form politics. This will shed light to the thesis developed above and especially why Jameson brings up the military thesis. The army is one of the few instances where this productive and inclusive indifference is still maintained in some vague level in today’s world. The military cuts across particular identifications by focusing on logistic and organisation of life. In fact, what interested Lenin and the Bolsheviks about the military-form-of-life, that is, the militarisation of life was both their attempt to survive in the very difficult and rough situation in Russia, as well as at the same time, experimenting with some level of productive indifferenciation.

The problem here is even deeper and I want to move a step further: the difficulty is breaking away from the taboos of the Left, which Žižek has extremely well

enumerated in a recent essay,²⁶ so that we can actually fight for certain organisational tools that today are monopolised by the ruling class. Today the Right occupies the monopoly of any form of organisation that does not depend on consensus or on identity. Some of such known forms are, for example, the commodity form, the State form, the global logistics, informational networks, etc., in short, the whole fabric of social life, whereas the Left is content with just resisting the power in the name of diversity. Furthermore, the reaction of the Left apropos the refugee crisis and Žižek's take on it renders palpable its impotence. There is a radical incompatibility and contradiction between a true Leninist and the figure of *the beautiful soul*. Whenever one is engaged in providing a 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation' (as Žižek did), the beautiful souls of the Left immediately react by evoking Marx and sometimes even Lenin in order to make up and justify for their total lack of concrete positioning towards concrete situations. The real difficulty in Lenin's dictum is not analysing "the concrete situation" (what is truly going on singularly), but rather, providing a "concrete analysis". This is to say, an analysis that is not more committed to the identification of the analyst (as an "abstract analyst" of a concrete situation or as a someone who can guarantee that providing the correct analysis will guarantee his/her recognition by others as a "true" Marxist). Undertaking a "concrete analysis" is traumatic precisely because it gives priority to the concrete situation over the reproduction of the analyst as an abstract individual, which means that it takes the side of the people over the side of the Left, and waiting for the effects of the intervention/analysis in order to find out where one stands. It is precisely this point where risk is located. And one cannot but argue that refugees, who are in a desperate and hopeless situation, would rather endorse Žižek's proposal of a military organization of their lives in this hopeless moment, rather than having a thousand "Marxists" claiming that their ties should be further loosened, the fragile organisation of their lives being further dissolved in the name of an abstract notion of freedom. In his *Lectures on National Right and Political Science* Hegel proposes two interesting and problematic theses. Let us quote him:

Public opinion, this powerful lever of today, includes an essential element of reason, but equally superficiality and falsities, and cannot be taken as an infallible guide.²⁷

He goes on to elaborate:

Democracy is the beginning of the freedom of the will; but democracy can no

longer endure in the regulated state, for otherwise terrible conflicts arise. In other words, the principle of labour is the precondition for democracy.²⁸

The difficult task presented here by Hegel is the following: How to distinguish between truths and the common sense? In the present predicament, the common sense approach is far more progressive than the pseudo-sophisticated and “radical” positions of the Left. But at the same time, the Left *a/ways* and without exception miss the point of truth (as did Trotsky - the champion critic of bureaucracy - in *Terrorism and Communism*).

All this points to a universal Party-form of political organisation, which should include the military aspect proposed by Jameson. We should bear in mind that it was also Lenin who in his text, *Dual Power* also proposed a somewhat militarised state. The standard critique of twentieth century Socialism is that it was the unification of the Party and the State. In the USSR everything belonged to the State, with one exception, which was the Communist Party, which functioned from a clear distance from the State. The status of the Communist Party was that of public organisation. With regard to this thesis, Žižek’s position is that the failure of 20th century Communism was due to its deliberate distancing, not its proximity, to power. When he writes about the relation between the State and Politics, he says that

[t]he failure of the Communist State-Party politics is above all and primarily the failure of anti-statist politics, of the endeavor to break out of the constraints of the State, to replace statal forms of organization with ‘direct’ non-representative forms of self-organization (‘councils’).²⁹

Today when the market economy as well as the State (as we know it) are not the answers to the growing and radicalisation of the contradictions of global capitalism, we need to propose the third solution: the Party-State which is best characterised as neither the subtraction from the State, nor taking over the government together with accepting the agenda which was set by the enemies. Žižek offers a response to the predominant Leftist position of the distance towards the State:

If you do not have an idea of what you want to replace the State with, you have no right to subtract/withdraw from the State. Instead of withdrawing into

a distance from the State, the true task should be to make the State itself work in a non-statal mode.³⁰

This is the crucial task today, the *sine qua non* of every contemporary communist politics. The Left should unconditionally rehabilitate and re-appropriate (from the Right) the necessity of having a strong body that is capable of radically transforming and reorganising the whole of social life. Far from being afraid of this as a new totalitarian project, a strong political body is necessary, a condition, for any politics whose aim is breaking away with global capitalism and imagining new forms of a social organisation, that is not based on private interests and profit. This form of social organisation is ultimately much closer to the Left than it is to right-wing politics. A new form of organisation emerges, which takes the form of people-movement-party-leader.³¹ Žižek's tetrad is the "civic" form of Jameson's universal military-form of organisation.

So given this, what is to be done? One of the issues of the contemporary Left is that of representation versus participation. Žižek argues that the "original sin" of the modern Left is to be found exactly where one doesn't expect it – in the "young Hegelians" who rejected the authority and alienation effect of the State.³² Domenico Losurdo suggested that the Left should re-appropriate the Hegelian idea of the ethical State, a State which is founded on the shared ethical order. Hegel writes that "the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw."³³ Or better still, the ethical order or ethical substance is "an absolute authority and power infinitely more firmly established than the being of nature."³⁴ In other words, this is the name of the Party. The Party, in its Žižekian conceptualisation is not an electoral one, but a strong body which doesn't only represent the people, but includes everyone in it. The *inclusion* is not so much an easy solution as the crucial problem in every attempt to recuperate Hegel's theory of the State, which is a very difficult task. The first thing to show is that Žižek is *very* clear in his remarks on the state not being an answer to socio-economic problems internal to a given nation. This is the liberal answer to the problem of the State. In his understanding, the State is the answer for the internationalist as well as the problems of the commons, which do not fit neatly into borders and other parameters. Hegel was aware of this, and it is for this reason that the State is "the march of God in the world"³⁵, that is to say, it is a State which is ultimately not representative of a nation or community. For Hegel, the State was tied to the problem of dealing with multiple

nations, as was the case with the Prussian Empire, that is to say, in the pre-German state. On this point, a reference to Kojin Karatani is useful. In his seminal *The Structure of World History*⁶⁶ he shows that the nation-form offers a logic of exchange for dealing with intra-communitarian problems, based on the logic of the gift. The State-form is rather a form to stop the cycle of reciprocal action (both gifts and revenge, wars et cetera) and organise the relation between the communities through a non-reciprocal form, the law. Finally, capital is the third form of exchange that deals with the relations between states, in the interstices of the law form.⁶⁷ In his understanding, the triad constituting the capital-nation-state is inseparable as such and it has to be revolutionalized completely, “knotted” by a different form of exchange and a different form of institution.

The Hegelian State, if it were to be rethought today in the period of the absolute domination of global capitalism, would have to take a different form. It has to be rethought in more radically global terms and frameworks than global capitalism itself. The difference can be thought in terms of multinationalism (capital) versus the internationalism. During the time of the second *Internationale*, Marxists had an intuition to this issue, precisely with the debate between the Leninists and Trotskyists on the forms of political association. Namely, the debate was centred on whether the International should take the form of a party or an association of parties. Lenin preferred the latter, which in fact brings him much closer to Hegel than to many Marxists, given the federative character of his proposal. For him the International should be an international state, that is, an association of emancipatory forces from each local fight against global capitalism. Based on this, it is of crucial importance to show that when Žižek talks about the State and Hegel, he does so under Marxist conditions, that is to say, he talks about it from the perspective of internationalism and associationism.

The Party is the only political organisation which can make the State work in a non-statal way. In short, it is irreducible to the nation, to the state and to the firm, the three institutions that Karatani associated with the “trinity” which organizes global capitalism. At the present time, there is no tendency onto which we can rely. The currents are against us, in all their forms and shapes. The Party is the only form of political organization which can go against the big Other, that is, against the present historical tendency. There is a tendency among some Leftists to return to the nation-state. The current crisis of capitalism, with all its “excesses” (refugee crisis, et cetera), if nothing, rendered visible one fact: the nation-state is *not* an answer to the antagonisms produced by the dynamics of global capitalism. The “enclosure” of the

commons, the shared ethical substance, compels us towards a radical reinterpretation of Marx's notion of *proletariat*. Earlier we said Žižek identifies four such 'enclosures' (intellectual property, ecological catastrophes, biogenetic revolution, explosions of social divisions). The proletarian position today with regard to what Žižek refers to as the 'four horse-riders of the apocalypse' is the position which relates to the deprived substance of our subjectivity. That is to say, the proletarian position is the position of the "worker whose product is taken away from him, reducing him to a subjectivity without substance"³⁸. Employing the notion of the proletariat, (and proletarianization, proletarian position) is crucial for remaining within the field of politics.

All these problems cannot be solved within the confines of the nation-state. Herein comes the necessity for rethinking the Party-form politics, and working for a Party-State form. In the struggle against global capitalism, this is the only way to move beyond the bourgeois State-form. Through taking over the State and the state power, and transforming it in such a way that the Party doesn't remain only a Party – but it effectively *becomes the State*. Such is our task today. The party-form is appropriate to the challenges that lie ahead of us precisely because it is essentially tied to the problem of indifference. The universality through indifferenciation, unlike the identitarian paradigm or the classical universalism, is the only one that can withstand internationalization. This should be our starting point. However, unlike previous incarnations of it, which kept the logic of indifference and the logic of the state separate, with the former only putting the latter in check, making sure people could "speak" as anyone (indifferently) within the party, our task is to create a version of the party-form that, by taking over the State's claim to power over our lives, can also guarantee people's right to "live" as anyone (anywhere, et cetera). Only when we can be anyone, can we also be anywhere. It is for this reason that the strong organisation that doesn't put the emphasis on the particularities as special or unique, but rather thinks them from the standpoint of cold logistics and other "technicalities" – only such an organisation can produce – if done properly – an internationalist subjectivity that is politically useful today. One of the main challenges of 21st century Communism is to think of a radically new form of social organisation, which is neither reminiscent of the previous century state-controlled economy, nor of the contemporary (regulated, controlled...) market economy. While this is a serious challenge of our era, we know too well that it cannot be done either in the forms of local and organised communities, nor within the confines of nation-state form. In this regard, it is worth thinking of the Universal Party-form as an alternative to the state

and market based organisation of society. Therefore, my hypothesis is: one way of thinking of the new form of social organisation, both beyond the (nation) State and the market is through thinking of the Universal Party and its structures.

Therefore, the Universal Party-form, no matter how utopian it might sound, is the only way to fight global capitalism. And it seems increasingly clear that in desperate situations such as those we are currently facing, Utopias are the only viable solutions. Indeed, perhaps only Utopias are the name for a new field of experimentations of, what Marx used to call “possible communism.”

1 V.I. Lenin, “What Is To Be Done”, in *Essential Works of Lenin* (New York: Dover, 1987) 56-7

2 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p.95.

3 Ibid., pp.90-91.

4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Allen Lane, 2017) p. xix.

5 Cf. Gabriel Tupinambá, *The unemployable and the generic: rethinking the commons in the communist hypothesis*, Palgrave Communications, nr.3, August 2017.

6 Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p.95.

7 Quoted from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/04/elon-musk-robots-will-take-your-jobs-government-will-have-to-pay-your-wage.html>

8 Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom For All: What if (Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

9 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto”, in *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics), p. 37.

10 Louis Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), p.26.

11 V.I. Lenin, “The State and Revolution”, in *Essential Works of Lenin*, p.272.

12 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Repeating Lenin* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 2001) pp.13-19; Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013). It is enough to look at the anti-immigrant sentiment that is arising in Europe and the Leftist response to it. I shall come to this below.

13 For a more detailed elaboration on this topic, see Agon Hamza & Gabriel Tupinambá, “On the Organisation of Defeats”, *Crisis and Critique*, 3:1, 2016, pp.427-441.

14 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p.55.

15 Ibid. p.56.

16 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p.252.

17 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1929), p.29.

18 Ibid.

19 The most interesting and profound attempt to read Marx as a Kantian is without a doubt Kojin Karatani’s *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), which deserves a rather long elaboration, which cannot be done on the format of this paper.

20 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, p.9

21 Ibid.

22 See Agon Hamza, "Imprinting the Negative: Hegel, Marx and the Critique of Political Economy", in *Reading Marx*, by Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda and Agon Hamza (London: Polity, forthcoming)

23 Speaking of festivities, there is another important historical fact that is not being raised by the Left at all, and which in the final instance of analysis can be qualified as the condition of modernity itself, and thus of the emancipatory struggles that arose from modernism onwards, as well as modern philosophy as a whole. In October 1517, Martin Luther hung his *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of Wittenberg Castle church. One could argue that the consequences of accepting or rejecting the Protestant event, determines one's position in the philosophical orientation within Marxism itself. It is of philosophical and political importance to draw the consequences of what is at stake if a philosopher accepts not only the consequences of the Christ-event ('man was made man'), but also the Lutheran event (as Hegel put it, "to recognise reason as the rose in the cross of the present"). Today, the philosopher who fully embraces the consequences of these events, or to quote Hegel, the thinker that tries to carry out the task of accepting "the whole truth and harshness" of the world's "God-forsakenness" in contemporary Marxism, is Slavoj Žižek. The name of the Marxist philosopher who rejects this and instead embraces Catholic universalism is Louis Althusser. In the last instance of analysis, this is the ground on which the difference between Althusser and Žižek is constituted. For the latter, Cf. An Interview with Louis Althusser: Crisis of Marxism, available online at <http://crisiscritique.org/blog.html> and Agon Hamza (ed), *Althusser and Theology: Religion, Politics, Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). For Žižek's engagement with Christianity and Hegel, see Agon Hamza, "Žižek and the Dialectical Materialist Theory of Belief", in *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity*, eds. Sotiris Mitralaxis & Dionysios Skliris (London: Routledge, forthcoming)

24 Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) 5

25 Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2016).

26 Slavoj Žižek, *In the Wake of Paris Attacks The Left Must Embrace Its Radical Western Roots*, In *These Times*, 16 November 2015, available online at <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18605/breaking-the-taboos-in-the-wake-of-paris-attacks-the-left-must-embrace-its>

27 G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on National Right and Political Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.241.

28 Ibid., p.244.

29 Slavoj Žižek, 'How to Begin from the Beginning?' in *The Idea of Communism*, edited by C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 2010) p.219.

30 Ibid.

31 Slavoj Žižek, *Answers without Questions*, in *The Idea of Communism, vol.2*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 2013) p.188.

32 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) p.200.

33 G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1942), p.152.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p.279.

36 Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: from modes of production to modes of exchange* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

37 Let us briefly outline his idea. According to Karatani, capitalism is not merely the existence of production, but the world economy based on four modes of exchange: A) reciprocity of the gift, B) plunder and protection, C) commodity exchange and D) the mode which transcends the other three. In our capitalist societies, however, the mode of exchange C is *dominant*. The whole point is to overcome the mode of commodity exchange (C), that is to say, inventing a new mode of exchange that resolves the contradictions of the mode C. For Karatani, this means the return to the mode A: "the mode of exchange D, as the restoration of A in a higher dimension, is in fact only possible with the negation of A.", *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

38 Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p.313.