



A JOURNAL OF NATURE, CULTURE, HUMAN AND SOCIETY

id#: m&es.2208.01208

INTERVIEW

Interviews: Rethinking the Foundations of Marxism Today

*Vesa Oittinen, Sahotra Sarkar, Helena Sheehan, Christoph Henning,
Marcel van der Linden, Andrey Maidansky and Pepijn Brandon*

Interviewed by Cenk Saraçoğlu and Ali C. Gedik

CENK SARAÇOĞLU (CS) & ALI C. GEDİK (ACG): The following text and the four questions below were sent via email to the authors and they were requested to answer all four or the ones they select.

The totality of the contemporary crisis of capitalism rather invites us to rethink the fundamental premises of Marxism in its totality, as the method of understanding and transcending capitalism and reflecting on the historical, present, and possible future forms of human-human and human-nature relations. In an age characterized by the urgent need for a “new beginning,” the quest for revisiting, rethinking, and clarifying Marxism’s foundational premises in different fields of science is crucial. In this vein, we would like to kindly ask you to answer one of the following questions, at least, preferably in relation to your expertise:

- 1) To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism is actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?
- 2) In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?
- 3) How would you position some recent non-Marxist critiques of contemporary state of the world such as “Material turn,” post-humanism and new materialism vis a vis Marxism? Do you think these paradigms represent a complete rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism? Do you think a productive/critical engagement with these paradigms possible? How should Marxist scholars respond to the epistemological tenets of these paradigms?
- 4) What is the most pressing task of Marxist scholars and intellectuals today in the wake of the total crisis of capitalism? To what extent the fundamental premises of Marxism could inform the possible roles that intellectuals are supposed to fulfill in such a tumultuous times?

Oittinen, Vesa, Sahotra Sarkar, Helena Sheehan, Christoph Henning, Marcel van der Linden, Andrey Maidansky and Pepijn Brandon. 2022. “Interviews: Rethinking the Foundations of Marxism Today.” By Cenk Saraçoğlu and Ali C. Gedik. *Marxism & Sciences* 1 (2): 157–183. <https://doi.org/10.56063/MS.2208.01208>

- *Correspondence:* Cenk Saraçoğlu, Ankara University.
- e-mail: [cenksaracoglu\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:cenksaracoglu[at]gmail.com)
- DOI: 10.56063/MS.2208.01208
- *Available online:* 31.08.2022

Interview with Vesa Oittinen

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

VESA OITTINEN: What are “the fundamental premises of Marxism?” A complicated question! I believe most of us are acquainted with the claim of the young Lukács, according to which it does not matter, if every one of the concrete claims of Marxist theory would prove to be wrong—provided that we do not budge from the dialectical method which constitutes the core of Marxism.

The problem of Lukács’ assertion is that it does not explain why we should cling to just a dialectical method. If we take the assertion in its face value, it implies a claim that theoretical reason stays above practical reason—actually, a rather typical intellectualist position. In contrast to views like this, Kant, for example, the reader of Rousseau, noted that the questions of practical reason have a primacy in respect to those of theoretical reason. In the case of Marxism, it is rather easy to point to the main motive behind its practical reason: Marxist theory has an emancipatory interest, and in the first instance, it is interested in the emancipation of the class which has “nothing to lose but its chains,” the proletariat. The theory has this goal as its practical leitmotif.

It is specifically this peculiar interest which makes the difference when we compare Marxism with other social, political and economic theories which make up the mainstream in the West. One gets often the impression that the Western scientific community would gladly embrace Marx as one of the “classics” in the pantheon of social sciences, *al pari* with Adam Smith, Max Weber and others—if only he had not created that annoying theory of surplus value, which does not suit as a theme for conversation in finer company.

The stress on the emancipatory significance of theory is a trait which indicates that Marxism stays in intellectual continuity with other emancipatory ideas and movements. Essentially, Marxism is an heir of Enlightenment traditions, which of course does not mean it would receive them in an uncritical manner. But I think it is today worthwhile to underline these connections, since, from the 1960s and 70s on, many Left thinkers have, in the wake of postmodernism, contested the significance of the Enlightenment heritage, turning instead to embrace such figures as Nietzsche or Heidegger. In some cases, this has resulted in effects one cannot but call suicidal, for example when in the field of Postcolonial Studies some writers

have denounced the Enlightenment thinkers as eurocentrist colonialists and racists. It goes without saying that the horizon of the eighteenth century philosophers was not as wide as ours, but if we for this reason abandon the Enlightenment tradition with its arguments for equality, democracy and freedom, we only do a backhanded favor for the cause of emancipation. That these arguments were for the first time formulated in Europe does not diminish their universal value, as little as the fact that geometry as a strict science was first created in Greece would imply that Pythagoras' theorem is not valid outside Greece.

The “postmodern parenthesis” from the late 1960s to early 2000s has been detrimental for the Left tradition in other respects, too. I believe that it was not accidental that postmodernist ideas (here I speak of “postmodernism” *sensu lato*, as an ensemble of different theoretical currents advocating relativism and the extinction of *grands recits*) surged up about at the same time as neo-liberalist politics began to gain acceptance among the elites of Western economy and politics. Of course, that what we call “postmodernism” was not identical with neoliberalism, but they were nevertheless parallel trends. While neoliberalism inaugurated an attack against the social security of ordinary people and the organizations of the working class, postmodernism took care of their ideological dismantling.

This said, one should, however, keep in mind that the parallel triumphs of neoliberalism and postmodernism were greatly facilitated by the defects of the socialist movement and the Marxism of the epoch. The countries of the so-called real socialism were not able to offer an attractive alternative to capitalism, at least not to the form it had in the metropolises of the imperialist world system. And as Marxist theory is concerned, it had obtained the form of either a dogmatic system of Soviet style or an intellectual pastime isolated from the everyday life of the people, as the Western university marxism. In this situation, postmodernism and neoliberal politics were able for a while to present themselves as real solutions to the problems of the modern world. Today, it is obvious that the period of the hegemony of neoliberalism and postmodernism will go into history as a rather short parenthesis only—a parenthesis which emerged as a result of a quite specific constellation of powers in the last third of the twentieth century. Neoliberalism lost its hegemonic grasp on politics at the latest after the financial crisis of 2007. Postmodernism, for its part, is receding since then it had proved that the intellectual tools it has to offer cannot deliver credible solutions for the ecological crisis. As Andreas Malm recently wryly remarked, the effects of the rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are

hard to dismiss by reverting to the claim that nature is but a “social construct.”

The decline of neoliberalism and postmodernism opens new spaces for a Marxist theory. Which would be the tasks for the Marxist theory in the emerging situation? The first thing which comes to mind is of course the need to respond to the ecological state of emergency into which humanity is now sliding. This is, I think, the most urgent question we now face. Despite this, I would not formulate the task so that we should simply “add” an ecological dimension to Marxism. Such a view would imply that we already have the answer and the only thing to be done now is to apply it to the ecology. This attitude fails to deal with the radicality of the task. What we need is a re-assessment of what I might call Marxist philosophical anthropology, i.e. its views on the human essence (if such an essence exists), what is to be understood with good life and ethically sound pursuits.

In the conditions of present epochal changes, it would be arrogant to believe that Marxism is able to carry out such an intellectual feat alone, without an open discussion with other currents, as the experiences of indigenous people and other traditions which do not share the utilitarian logic of capitalist accumulation. Marxism has here its own traditions on which to build, starting from Marx's critique of Feuerbach's anthropological materialism. Marx had criticized Feuerbach for lack of understanding of the socio-historical dimension of human development, and this will remain the starting-point of further Marxist theory. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the significance of the ideas for a practical materialism Marx sketched in his *Theses on Feuerbach* have sometimes been exaggerated, especially among the so-called Western Marxists. The concept of “praxis” is not a panacea which is able to solve all theoretical questions of a Marxist philosophical anthropology. The ecological crisis which has set limits for the claims of the postmodernists, requires in a like manner the Marxists to take seriously the question of the limits of human practice and reflect on its dependency on our natural surroundings.

A discussion of the anthropological foundations of Marxist philosophy is further needed in order to remove a further defect of the theory, namely the insufficient elaboration of the questions of ethics and morality. Marxists have always stressed that they stay for a science which does not base its analysis of social reality on moral arguments, such as that capitalism is “bad.” This is a correct and materialist position. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the naturalist and positivistic interpretations of the role of ethics which were current in the Marxism of the Second International have a kind

of afterlife in much of today's discussions. To my mind, the new assessment of a Marxist philosophical anthropology I would support should again reconsider some of the fundamental ideas of Kant. In the first instance, let us note that Kant's ethics were anti-utilitarian. In this respect, it offers a well-defined contrast to the logics of capitalist accumulation, which aim at an unlimited exploitation of "useful" natural resources. Secondly, Kant's sketch of the possibilities of a perpetual peace has a bearing for the present situation, too. Although we can find already in Kant a critical discussion of many of the shortages of the previous Enlightenment philosophy, there has been in the Marxist tradition a tendency to dismiss Kant's theory of cognition as a form of "agnosticism," because Kant spoke of the unknowability of things-in-themselves. However, if one takes a closer look, this famous Kantian sentence reveals itself as a tautology only: things-in-themselves are things outside of our cognition, and they remain such so long as we do not cognize them. I think that the German philosopher Hans-Jörg Sandkühler was on the right track when he already in the 1970s spoke of Kant's 'cognitive materialism' (*Erkenntnismaterialismus*), a tradition that Marxist philosophers should take in account. This is not the place to discuss further the subtleties of Kant's philosophy, so I think it suffices to say here, that this new, more positive assessment of Kant that I wish the Marxist philosophers are able to carry out does not have much in common with the project of a "Kantian socialism" of the early 1900s, a project which actually was more Neo-Kantian than genuinely Kantian. Indeed, as for example the studies of such well-known Marxist scholars as André Tosel and Domenico Losurdo have shown, the "real" Kant was much more radical than his later alleged followers. It goes without saying, that this rehabilitation of Kantian positions (especially in gnoseology) would lead to a decline of Hegelian interpretations of Marx—but as everyone of us knows, Hegelianism and dialectics are different things.

CS & ACG: *In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?*

VESA OITTINEN: At the moment, there does not exist a widely accepted theory of contemporary capitalism. Nonetheless in the 1970s we had the theory of the so-called state monopoly capitalism (Stamocap), which to a large extent built on the preparatory work of the Hungarian-born Soviet economist Eugen Varga. It became the leading theory of most Communist parties; for example in France the team around Paul Boccara produced their own version of the theory. After the demise of the USSR, the Stamocap

theory, too, disappeared almost in one night. The theory had its faults—above all, it was rather eclectic—but there was no discussion about its further potentialities. As a result, the Left has lost an internationally orienting theory of capitalism.

Today, we have an array of different theories of global capitalism, such as Wallerstein's world-order theory, or attempts to describe the present neoliberal stage of capitalism. They contain many good and important insights, but the old Stamocap theory had one advantage: it pointed to certain political consequences to be drawn from its analysis of capitalism. The Stamocap theory viewed monopolies as the latest form of the development of capitalism. The big capitalist monopolies attempt to force the whole of society to succumb and serve their interests. Thus, the primary task for the Left and all democratic forces was to fight against the influence of monopolies, for democracy and for the rights of ordinary people. In other words, the Stamocap theory helped to define the “enemy” and the concrete political slogans for the Left. The immediate demand was *not* that of a socialism. Rather, what was needed was an increased democracy, a claim supported not only by the working class but by all the stratas of society which suffered from the aspirations of the capitalist monopolies. In some respects, these political recommendations reminded of the *Front Populaire* strategies of the 1930s. To my mind, we need today a theory of global capitalism, which in a similar way helps to formulate concrete political tasks. The big difference to the situation of the 1930s is today that we are facing an immense ecological challenge, a dimension which was not present in the anti-Fascist struggles of those days.

Besides the need to revamp the general theory of present-day capitalism into such a form that it is able to give recommendations for actual politics, there exists in Marxism a yet unsolved theoretical problem concerning capitalism as a socio-economic formation. To this day it has not become clear, how the concepts “capitalism” and “modernity” relate to each other. I think that it is wrong to say that the Enlightenment was but a preparation for capitalism. The ideas put forth by the Enlightenment were, essentially, ideas about how a modern society should look: democracy, equality, human rights, rule of law. Capitalism, on the other side, can very well thrive without democracy or human rights; in fact, these institutions rather form an obstacle to its expansion.

It seems to me that one of the biggest mistakes of received Marxist thought has been the identification of modernity with capitalist economic formation. As a result, the achievements of modernity, like democracy,

have been declared to be positive accomplishments of capitalism, which actually does not deserve such credit. In similar flawed optics, the demise of the Soviet Union has been interpreted as the victory of “capitalism” over “socialism,” although the main problem with the so-called real socialism clearly was that it was not sufficiently modern. Obviously, here we have yet something to think about.

Finally, as I am preparing a book on the theme ‘Marx and Russia’ (forthcoming in Palgrave Macmillan), I think it is pertinent to stress that it is important to be able to discuss without prejudices the heritage of Russian and Soviet Marxism. Among the Western Marxists, it has for a long time been customary to reject this heritage. I find this as an unfair and unproductive attitude, to a large extent an inheritance from the days of the Cold War. But especially we think that we should study the experience of the *perestroika* launched by Gorbachev. As it led to the demise of the Soviet Union, the *perestroika* has mostly been viewed as a big failure only. However, the *perestroika* had moments—if you like, you can call them “utopian moments”—which are worth of a further study. It not only attempted to open for Russia a path to real democracy, but, in addition, the foreign policy inspired by it put forth the important theme of “general human interests.” This is a concept and idea which I think has a great potential. Above all, because it builds on the acknowledgement of the material interests of all men, it would offer a better lodestar for Left politics and diplomacy than the much less concrete liberal idea of “human rights.”

Interview with Sahotra Sarkar

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

SAHOTRA SARKAR: Marxism remains a living ideology, that is, a worldview with a deeply normative (or political content). Among political ideologies it has been unique during the last two centuries insofar as it attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the world, what it contains, what kind of dynamical processes govern its history, and how the world should be studied. Rephrasing one of the celebrated theses on Feuerbach, it is not only about changing the world, it is also about interpreting it. By Marxism I don't want to restrict myself to the works of Marx or Marx and Engels alone, or even to the classic contributions of Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, or Gramsci, but to others who have followed including more recent work such as those produced by the Subaltern Studies collective and figures such as C. L. R. James or even Thomas Piketty. Nevertheless, the extent to which problems such as those posed by globalization are anticipated even in such early works as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) is quite remarkable. What is invariant over all these different viewpoints is a recognition of the primacy of base over superstructure, the determining role in society and culture of the subsisting economic relationships, and an accompanying commitment to reorganize them in the interest of equity,

Marxism allows us to conceptualize our global problems in different ways than typically done. I will give one example. We are all correctly worrying about climate change. But, ask yourself why we are worried about climate change. It is not because an increase of the ambient temperature by 2 or 3 degrees would be physiologically devastating to us as organisms. It won't. It is because the structure of society around us—including, of course, national economies—would collapse. That this itself a Marxist insight. But there is more to come when we get down to specific details: we worry about climate change causing sea levels to rise and how that would lead to some regions such as small island nations (e.g., the Maldives) to sink in several centimeters of water. But there already are large areas of land that are below sea level, for instance, most of the Netherlands. What keeps the water out are expensive dams and walls that the Netherlands can afford because it is a rich country with a long history of trade and imperial theft. If the Maldives had access to the same resources as the Netherlands, it could build barriers of this kind and prevent the

rising oceans from flooding its land. The problem of climate change is a problem of the distribution of resources. The culprit is unbridled capitalism.

The same type of analysis also applies to other global change problems, for instance, extinction and the depletion of biodiversity. Biodiversity is in steep decline because of land-use-land-cover (LULC) change driven by the global flow of capital and the destruction of natural habitats in the interests of . And note that this chain of reasoning has a long Marxist pedigree starting with Engels (1844) in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

CS & ACG: *In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?*

SAHOTRA SARKAR: In the so-called democratic North, “liberal” and “left-wing” politics today is driven by fleeting coalitions of special interest groups advocating, for instance, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender-based, and other similar agendas (and sometimes, as in western Europe this year, environmental agendas promoted by “green” groups). One consequence of this is, as in the United States during the last decade, these “liberal” political entities such as the Democratic Party (in the United States) have lost their traditional working class base. In country after country the working class has been coopted by fascist populist agendas going back to the Reagan-Thatcher era and now represented by figures such as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump.

From my perspective, the only way out is to organize on the basis of class interests. This cuts across divides based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and so on. Instead of fragile alliances, it has the potential to lead to a genuine Left committed to equity and justice. (Of course, class has to be conceived more broadly than Marx and Engels did in the nineteenth century. Besides the so-called proletariat, we have to take subaltern social groups into account thereby integrating concerns motivated by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.)

It is my claim that such a class-based analysis, and political activism on that basis, can incorporate the concerns and interests of the special interest groups when they are politically valid. One example (again from the United States, which is my home) will suffice. Last week a woman’s federally mandated right to get an abortion was abrogated by a Supreme Court dominated by Religious Right bigots. What does that mean? Some states will allow abortions, others will not. A woman who lives in a state where abortion is banned will still be able to travel to another state to get an

abortion. (The same situation holds in many, many other regions of the world.) An upper-class woman will be able to exercise this option; even though it will still be inconvenient, money will buy the ability to end an unwanted pregnancy. Lower-class women will find it much more difficult to exercise the same option. So, the right to abortion is not merely about a woman's right to control her own body, it is also a class issue. This means that there is a potential for common cause organizing between labor activists and women's rights.

There are many other such examples. But the point I am making should be clear. It should also be clear that the Marxist emphasis on class is crucial for areas in the global South, whether it is to reject Trump clones such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or religious fundamentalists such as Narendra Modi in India and Recep Erdogan in Turkey.

CS & ACG: How would you position some recent non-Marxist critiques of contemporary state of the world such as "Material turn," post-humanism and new materialism vis a vis Marxism? Do you think these paradigms represent a complete rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism? Do you think a productive/critical engagement with these paradigms possible? How should Marxist scholars respond to the epistemological tenets of these paradigms?

SAHOTRA SARKAR: It would take a book to answer this question fully. Marxism has been under attack and gone out of fashion in the academy since the emergence of post-structuralism and post-modernism. (I recommend the analyses of Frederic Jameson.) That led to a celebration of disunity that exists primarily in the minds of humanities professors but not in the real world. New Materialism has no contact with science which makes it a somewhat odd discipline since what we know of matter comes from science. Moreover, all these new movements think of politics as an academic enterprise rather than attempt to engage in the everyday struggles of working people. These are self-centered elite ideologies that pretend to be part of the Left. All they generally achieve is to make theoretical analyses appear even more removed from the concerns of practical politics than what happened in the heyday of structuralism and critical theory. I remain to be convinced that engagement with these developments are worth the time it would take.

But there are important exceptions. The Subaltern Studies movement, initially organized by South Asian scholars, has produced work of singular significance in the field of history. (As the name indicates, Gramsci was a major inspiration for this movement by expanding class analyses to include

marginalized groups beyond the conventional economic classes of Marx and Engels.) Subaltern studies have since expanded to many other areas of the global South and provide a valuable counterpoint to postcolonial studies inspired by poststructuralism. I view the emergence of subaltern analyses as the most important intellectual development within Marxism (broadly construed) in the last half-century. Of course, it did not emerge from a vacuum and Gramsci is not the sole source of the movement as it has expanded. Howard Zinn's work was an important predecessor in the United States; that of C. L. R. James in the case of the Caribbean. In the United States I have great hopes for Critical Race Theory as it matures but it must go beyond its obsession with only race.

CS & ACG: What is the most pressing task of Marxist scholars and intellectuals today in the wake of the total crisis of capitalism? To what extent the fundamental premises of Marxism could inform the possible roles that intellectuals are supposed to fulfill in such a tumultuous times?

SAHOTRA SARKAR: Times are no doubt difficult but that is not an unusual situation for those on the Left. We should take inspiration from the words of Joe Hill as he faced the gallows: "Don't waste any time mourning. Organize." I am glad that you have called it a total crisis of capitalism. That is the right way to think of it even if the popular press will continue to call it an environmental crisis most of the time and focus on climate change as if it were an end-in-itself. We won't disappear as a species. But our social structures will be transformed as entire regions run out of water and productive habitats disappear along with culturally deeply valuable features such as the diversity of life. We will be left with barren lands and unhealthy populations living in misery. The culprit is capitalism and, in my view, the problem started in eighteenth century England with the enclosure of the commons and the assertion of private property by feudal lords so as to accumulate capital to drive the Industrial Revolution.

What can academics do about it. For one thing, they can expose the causal connections and, if they can organize with struggling working people, change the political landscape. I am optimistic about that. But academics and intellectuals right now also have to begin with some home cleaning and recapture universities around the world that have become corporatized and the market model for society has come to dominate all aspects of our life. In the United States, we have evolved a class of professional administrators who move around from university to university as Presidents, Provosts, and Deans, never teach or do

intellectual research, and carefully maintain power by structure of patronage reminiscence of ancient satraps. Administrators thrive by the ancient practice of divide-and-conquer exploiting differences between genuine faculty, students, and support staff. They maintain power because they are supposedly in tune with the market and bring money into the university. Of course, this particular class structure is not found everywhere in the world but it represents the kind of thing that intellectuals can organize against as a stage in participating in the broader struggles of political society.

Interview with Helena Sheehan

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

HELENA SHEEHAN: Marxism is still the unsurpassed philosophy of our times. Nothing else is so coherent, so comprehensive, so cognizant of the constant flow of empirical knowledge. Nothing else comes even close to it in explaining the world in which we are now living. The key to this is that it is simultaneously totalizing and empirical.

CS & ACG: *In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?*

HELENA SHEEHAN: First of all, it names capitalism. It exposes the nature of capitalism as a system and shows how it functions, often contrary to all the deceptions and seductions of the culture generated by capitalism. Further, it names socialism as a vision of an alternative, an alternative we have seen embodied, however imperfectly, in past and present socialist societies. Moreover, it has inspired movements to transform the world in this direction. This alternative needs to continue to animate our movements protesting against the injustices of capitalism in such a way that we envisage concrete steps to get us from here to there. I see it as a long march in which we bring elements of socialism into being first within our own movements and also within the larger the society. I do not think there can be capitalism on one day and socialism the next day. I once thought in vaguely insurrectionary terms in the grip of the power of the magnificent October revolution, but today I see it more as a process of electing left governments, transforming institutions of civil society, especially schools, universities, parties, trade unions, cooperatives. It is true that many of these efforts have failed, basically because they have been crushed by the power of the global system itself, whatever about the betrayals and corruption of power. I try not to despair after experiencing so many defeats of movements in which I have invested my efforts and my hopes. I keep going, because there are still people and movements seeing things this way and pushing this way. I would like to believe that socialism will displace capitalism on a global scale, however complicated and difficult that might be. I no longer feel confident that it will happen, but I still think arguing and acting for that is the only choice I have, the only way to live my life.

CS & ACG: *How would you position some recent non-Marxist critiques of contemporary state of the world such as “Material turn,” post-humanism and new*

materialism vis a vis Marxism? Do you think these paradigms represent a complete rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism? Do you think a productive/critical engagement with these paradigms possible? How should Marxist scholars respond to the epistemological tenets of these paradigms?

HELENA SHEEHAN: I find that a lot of younger intellectuals know very little history, even the history of their own disciplines or of ideas they espouse, as if they are the first to discover the wheel or to speak prose. I think the material turn is a reflection of the stubborn reality of matter in the face of a lot of sophisticated froth denying it. That said, I see the new materialism as a weak and pale thing compared to the rich Marxist tradition of dialectical materialism. Many of its exponents proceed as if Marxism had never happened. I think that one form of constructive engagement might be to bring this to their attention. They should read *The Return of Nature* by John Bellamy Foster, for example. It is also necessary to enter into constructive polemic with their premises, as Andreas Malm has done in *The Progress of This Storm*. The new materialism is not anchored in a world view that connects philosophy to political economy, to the whole interacting nexus of forces in motion, with a complex but determining role played by the mode of production.

CS & ACG: *What is the most pressing task of Marxist scholars and intellectuals today in the wake of the total crisis of capitalism? To what extent the fundamental premises of Marxism could inform the possible roles that intellectuals are supposed to fulfill in such a tumultuous times?*

HELENA SHEEHAN: The total crisis of capitalism is seen clearly only by Marxists, whose approach is characterised by totalizing thinking. Otherwise, capitalism generates fragmentation of experience and fractured perspectives on almost every question. Capitalism functions most effectively when it is not named, not apprehended as a system. It is our responsibility to bring the clear light of Marxism to bear in every situation and through every channel of communication we can possibly mobilize. We should also be on the streets where people are protesting the present and reaching out for a better future.

Interview with Christoph Henning

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

CHRISTOPH HENNING: I do not think that the crisis of humanity is “total” —yes, the climate crisis could lead to an uninhabitable planet within a rather short time, and that is very horrible. But the language of “totality” invites a mindset of giving up on everything and letting go even those things that have worked quite well in the past—e.g., the sciences have made some progress in understanding the climate crisis, we have achieved at least some rights for women and minorities in some countries, and democracy and human rights are not replaceable. One fundamental premise of Marxism, as a school of thought founded by Marx and Engels, but which draws from many other sources as well, is the insight that “nature” was there before us, exists independently from us (even in this time of crisis) and is the foundation of human life on this planet, and of everything humanity has ever built. Hence, radical ecological thinking is very much in line with the Marxism of Marx, Engels and a group of scholars in the Marxian tradition, as described by J.B. Foster and others. I know that some scholars think differently, but I think the case is pretty clear.

CS & ACG: *In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?*

CHRISTOPH HENNING: Another foundational premise of Marxism, besides the importance of nature for political economy, is that nature is transformed by human labor. Hence, political changes need to focus on the ways human labor could be organized differently in order to fulfil human needs without destroying the planet. Recent research on the “ethnological Marx” has shown that a lot can be learned from pre-capitalistic modes of production all over the planet, where common property and practices of sharing have been much more sustainable (both socially and environmentally) than our current profit-oriented model of growth for growth's sake.

CS & ACG: *How would you position some recent non-Marxist critiques of contemporary state of the world such as “Material turn,” post-humanism and new materialism vis a vis Marxism? Do you think these paradigms represent a complete rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism? Do you think a productive/critical engagement with these paradigms possible? How should Marxist scholars respond to the epistemological tenets of these paradigms?*

CHRISTOPH HENNING: In as much as popular new-materialist-approaches are informed by a post-structuralist attitude of downplaying the sciences and notions of truth, objectivity and ontology, their radical attitude often remains a boastful rhetoric that in the ends turns out to be rather affirmative, precisely by affirming techno-fixes and industrial destruction as our new future, and thus abstracting away global imbalances of power and the destructive forces of capitalism.

CS & ACG: *What is the most pressing task of Marxist scholars and intellectuals today in the wake of the total crisis of capitalism? To what extent the fundamental premises of Marxism could inform the possible roles that intellectuals are supposed to fulfill in such a tumultuous times?*

CHRISTOPH HENNING: Marxists are not the only groups that see how pressing the climate crisis has become, and how it worsens global inequality and exploitation on a daily basis. It is most important to form global alliances of pressure and awareness groups that demand global changes towards sustainability and ecological justice. This can only be achieved without extractivism, nationalist populism and without wars of aggression. Marxists should give up claims that they are destined to “lead the revolution,” however, within any rainbow coalition of progressive forces they have important things to contribute exactly because their approach is not only based on ethics, but also on a sound social scientific analysis that uncovers mechanisms of power, exploitation, ideology, alienation and ecological destruction.

Interview with Marcel van der Linden

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN: One of the great paradoxes of the current era is that the world working class continues to grow, while at the same time many labour movements are experiencing a crisis. According to the ILO (International Labour Organization), the percentage of pure wage dependents (“employees”) rose between 1991 and 2019 from 44 to 53 per cent. Ever greater numbers of workers worldwide maintain direct economic contacts with one another, even though many are probably unaware of this. And the proportion of international migrants in the world population increased from 2.8% to 3.5% between 2000 and 2020. Despite this absolute and relative growth of the global working class and its increasing interconnectedness traditional labour movements are in trouble almost everywhere. Consumer cooperatives have mostly disappeared, trade unions are declining (global union density is now down to a mere 6 per cent), Social Democratic and Labor parties are not doing very well electorally. “Real socialist” attempts in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and Southeast Asia ultimately led to capitalist societies, while many of the communist parties in other countries have disappeared, or, if they still exist, are having a hard time.

This generalized crisis appears to mark the end of a long cycle, which roughly includes the period from the 1820s to the present. Following a prelude since the fourteenth century, countless efforts at self-organization and political articulation of labour interests have been observed from the eighteenth century, peaking inter alia with the revolutions in Haiti, Russia, and Bolivia and the rise of powerful labour organizations in parts of the Americas, Europe, Southern Africa, East Asia, and the western Pacific. Of course this advance has not consisted exclusively of successes, and the defeats may even have outnumbered the victories. For a long time, however, the general trend seemed to be improvement: “tomorrow the International will be the human race.”

Critical analysis of this great cycle—specifically in combination with the continuously growing global working class—is a challenge of enormous scholarly and political interest, especially because in many countries the decline coincides with a revival of the radical right, which presents itself as an alternative to the traditional workers’ organizations. The long cycle needs to be studied in depth to discover what the movements’ results and

prospects are. Why could some results be achieved? Why did some failures and defeats happen? Obtaining such insights is not an antiquarian exercise. A second “great cycle” is by no means inconceivable and in fact already seems to cautiously announce itself. Class conflicts will not diminish, and workers all over the world will continue to feel the ever-present need for effective organizations and forms of struggle. If a second great cycle emerges, historical research might offer insights and help avert mistakes.

Our theoretical and political tasks are huge. I see a number of important issues that need to be tackled. Let me mention three of them. First, there is the theory of value, the core of Marxism. This theory is in need of reconsideration. The fact that after more than 150 years of debate on *Capital*, vol. I, there is still not even the beginning of a consensus on basic conceptualizations, seems to indicate that the fundamental problems of the critique of political economy are not only due to “misreadings” of Marx, but may well be partly caused by inconsistencies in Marx’s work as such. Why, for example, should we assume that wage-earners “sell” their labour power? Ordinarily, one may call such a transaction (i.e. the piecemeal ‘sale’ of a commodity, without change of ownership) *letting* and not sale. It would make much more sense to say that wage-earners hire out their labour power. And why can slaves (fixed capital) not produce value? And so on.

A second major problem lies in the logic of capitalist development. Merchant capital is commonly understood to have been the *precursor* of industrial capital. At first, traders acted as mere intermediaries, collecting commodities from producers and distributing them to consumers. Subsequently, they increased their hold on the production process by advancing part payment for commodities to be fairly and duly delivered, and ultimately, they fully came to control the whole production process and became “productive capital” (Marx). Nowadays, however, many capitalists appear to have, by contrast, gone back to the former practice. They usually are able to do so while tightening rather than weakening their control over the chain of production which has grown much longer than used to be the case in the past. Backed up by the latest communication technology and state-of-the-art business management ploys, these multinational conglomerates succeed in dictating the terms of the global trade. As a result, we see a return of merchant capital at a much larger scale than was usual in the past. Connected with this is the increasing power of mercantile money capital and rent-seeking capital. One of the outcomes of this is that

the growing influence of merchant and money capital has changed the balance of power within the capitalist class. Productive capital is often no longer dominant, but has become subordinate. The power of trade unions where they are allowed to operate is weakened by this development, since they are often much stronger in the productive than in the mercantile and financial sectors.

A third problem concerns strategy. It appears that socialist movements in highly developed capitalism have reached a historic impasse. So far, the two classic strategies for creating a post-capitalist society—reform or revolution—have both proved ineffective. The revolutions of the twentieth century all took place in pre-industrial or industrializing countries, and never in fully developed capitalist societies. Some might consider this a coincidence, but the consistent absence of working-class revolutions rather suggests a structural reason. Although the working class became extremely numerous as economic growth advanced during the twentieth century, it never again behaved anywhere as radically as it had in Russia in 1917. Another symptom of the non-arrival of revolutions in advanced capitalist societies seems manifest in the fact noted by Perry Anderson that counter-institutions of dual power have never arisen in consolidated parliamentary democracies: “all the examples of soviets or councils so far have emerged out of disintegrating autocracies (Russia, Hungary, Austria), defeated military regimes (Germany), ascendant or overturned fascist states (Spain, Portugal).” There has been a considerable growth in collectively useful state functions in advanced capitalist countries, and the importance of public administration for the daily lives of the people has accordingly increased enormously. A revolution would therefore completely disrupt daily life. The changed role of the state has driven sharply upwards the ‘costs’ of attempts to overthrow capitalist society. On the other hand, the peaceful abolition of capitalism through reform has also so far proved impossible, a problem most clearly to be seen in the popular front governments in Spain (1936-39), France (1936-38), and Chile (1970-73).

Should there be a revival, the new forms of socialism will probably look different from the more traditional ones. It seems safe to say that success will be possible only if the major challenges (global economy, ecology, gender equality, social security, climate change, etc.) are substantively combined and tackled transnationally. If socialism is to survive it will therefore presumably have to combine ‘from-below’ and ‘from-above’ approaches by strategically uniting government policy, self-organization, and large-scale mobilization. Such change will take a great deal of time. According to Max

Weber, “the spirit” of capitalism has been “the product of a long and arduous process of education,” a development continuing over centuries. Likewise, a socialist society is probably conceivable only as the outcome of a comprehensive process of education, a process in which social change is accompanied by self-change.

Interview with Andrey Maidansky

CS & ACG: *To what extent do you think, the fundamental premises of Marxism are actual and viable in the wake of “total” crisis of humanity?*

ANDREY MAIDANSKY: If I may, I would strike the reference to the crisis of humanity from the question. This ideological cliché is not conducive to a reasonable answer to the question posed. Another reservation: Marxism is highly heterogeneous. For instance, Soviet Marxism was mainly a *state ideology*, although within it profound *scientific* concepts could emerge, e.g., in the works of Evald Ilyenkov and his circle. Already in Marx’s own writings, scientific concepts were mixed up with political ideologemes, so it is not a trivial task to identify the actual and viable premises of Marxism. I would point out three fundamentals:

(i) Human labour is the substance-subject, i.e. the basis and driving force, of world history. This is the Copernican discovery in social sciences. Marx’s teaching overall, like social life itself, revolves around the ‘sun of labour.’ All the concepts of his theory, without exception, are derivatives of the concept of labour.

(ii) The means of labour are the backbone of history and “the indicator (*Anzeiger*) of the social relations within which labour is carried on.” Show me the means by which you labour, and I will tell you how your society is organised. This is how a palaeontologist reconstructs an animal’s appearance and way of life from its bones.

(iii) The development of labour tools and technologies, or man’s “productive forces,” inevitably comes into conflict with the existent social relations, from property relations to family ties. This contradiction is resolved in the social revolution.

‘Actuality’ is often referred to as the relevance of an idea to current historical circumstances. I prefer to call such relevance ‘topicality’, because of the respect for the category of the actual (*wirklich*) that Hegel’s *Logic* instilled in me.

The true actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of Marx’s doctrine is neither the waves of vogue for *Das Kapital*, nor the crises and other symptoms of the ‘decay of capitalism’ that so excite political communists. It is the appearance of new scientific theories, powerful and unorthodox, from the bosom of classical Marxism, that makes it actual. In principle, the same can be said of Euclidean geometry. Any theory is actual and viable as long as it helps to

give birth to new ideas—insofar as it serves as a springboard for the human mind.

CS & ACG: *In what respects the foundational premises of Marxism could inform a political strategy of exit from the contemporary crisis of capitalism?*

ANDREY MAIDANSKY: “The contemporary crisis of capitalism” is an ideological myth, like the “eternal return” of the Nietzscheans. Crisis is a natural cyclical phase in the development of bourgeois society, not something like a stroke or premortal convulsions. In the middle of the nineteenth century Marx thought that capitalism was already decrepit, so that the next economic crisis might be its last. Today we know that it was an illusion—*Capital* was still a pimply teenager. Since then, the scientific and technological revolution has transformed the world, proving quite compatible with private property, the “invisible hand” of the market, the exploitation of man by man and other attributes of bourgeois civilisation. In our century human productive forces are growing faster than ever before in world history. Capitalism is still in full swing. “No social formation perishes before all the productive forces for which it gives ample room have developed” (Marx).

Marx called politics one of “ideological forms,” placing it on a par with legal, religious, artistic or philosophic forms of consciousness. The assumption that there are any political (philosophical, religious, etc.) “strategies of exit” from capitalist formation is totally incompatible with the materialist understanding of history. Here Marx himself ceased to be Marxist, turning from a scientist into an ideologue. Just as Newton ceased to be a Newtonian when he betrayed physics with theology and alchemy.

In my view, Marx’s political beliefs (including the dictatorship of the proletariat and the 10 precepts of *Manifesto*, borrowed from communist utopias along with the terms) are, as it were, Marxist alchemy. The alchemists had some useful ideas, indeed, but it is better not to confuse alchemy with the science of chemistry.

CS & ACG: *How would you position some recent non-Marxist critiques of contemporary state of the world such as “Material turn,” post-humanism and new materialism vis a vis Marxism? Do you think these paradigms represent a complete rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism? Do you think a productive/critical engagement with these paradigms possible? How should Marxist scholars respond to the epistemological tenets of these paradigms?*

ANDREY MAIDANSKY: Since I am not familiar with the “recent non-Marxist critiques” in question, I will answer it in a general way. If critical dialogue with this or that non-Marxist scholar contributes to a deeper understanding of *reality*, i.e. social life, then such a dialogue can and should be conducted—no matter whether or not the rupture with the fundamental premises of Marxism is complete. Uncritical reliance on Marx’s words has done incomparably more harm to Marxist theory and practice than any rupture, revision or hostile attack.

CS & ACG: *What is the most pressing task of Marxist scholars and intellectuals today in the wake of the total crisis of capitalism? To what extent the fundamental premises of Marxism could inform the possible roles that intellectuals are supposed to fulfill in such a tumultuous times?*

ANDREY MAIDANSKY: Perhaps, for people who lived in Russia a hundred years ago, our “tumultuous times” would have seemed like a standing swamp of history. But the idea that Marxist scholars and intellectuals have a special role to play, especially in times of “total crisis of humanity”, goes back directly to Marx. We find this view already in his very first newspaper articles, when he was a Hegelian idealist who had not yet read Adam Smith.

Two natures coexisted in Marx—that of a true scientist and that of a prophet. As early as in 1843, he compared himself with Luther and dreamed of “stroking with a lightning of thought deeply into this naive soil of the people.” He was a firm believer in the inevitability of mondial revolution for “universal human emancipation” even before he took up political economy.

Marxists are used to cursing capitalism and prophesying its imminent end. Many of them reiterate, like a mantra, the idealist formula: “Theory becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses.” Who remembers that it was uttered by a Young Hegelian? Let us turn this thesis upside down in a materialist way, as recommended by the author of *Capital*. It is not an idea that grips the masses, but the masses that grip the idea which fits their material needs. Who cares there about verity or logical proofs?

The most pressing task for Marxists today and ever is not to deride or curse capitalism, but to understand it as “a natural historical process” (*einen naturgeschichtlichen Prozeß*).

Interview with Pepijn Brandon*

CS & ACG: *What are some of the fundamental features of a Marxist approach to history writing?*

PEPIJN BRANDON: This seems to be a straightforward question, but to answer is much harder than one would think. We could address it at the very general level of the relationship between structure and agency (“human beings make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing,” etc.). But Marxist historians can be found on either end of the spectrum, from the completely structuralist to the highly voluntarist. Another approach would be that it is a form of history writing that foregrounds class and class struggles, starting from a fundamental identification with the oppressed and exploited. This seems to me to be a crucial feature, but it also begs the question where to put most of the world systems literature, or the important Marxist literature on the state and conflict within or between ruling classes. Or one could see Marxist history writing as applying “historical materialism,” using Marx’s discussion of the relationship between base and superstructure as a starting point. However, Marxist historians have diverged widely in how they interpreted this analogy (starting with Engels’ “final instance”), and to what extent they found it useful for their practical work at all. Marxists who rigidly try to fit their findings within such a rough and elemental philosophical framework tend to write texts that are stale, predictable and didactic at best, if not simply empirically flawed.

Marx’s own work does not give us much direct guidance on what defines Marxist history writing. His writings on revolution and counter-revolution in France (*Class Struggles, The Eighteenth Brumaire, Civil War*) are brilliant exposures of the role of class in politics and history. But they were written as journalism, not as systematic histories, and partly it is the fact that they are comments on events that have not yet fully ran their course that gives these texts their dynamism and sting. In contrast, a text like *The secret diplomatic history of the eighteenth century*, where Marx did squarely engage in history writing, is largely forgettable. The famous chapters on “original accumulation” at the end of *Capital*, Volume I are unsurpassed in the way they conjure up the whirlwind of global processes that aided in the formation of the capitalist system. These chapters form a point of depar-

* Upon the request of the author, questions of the interview were reformulated.

ture for my own work, as they do for many other historians of global capitalism. However, it would be mistaken to read them as an attempt by Marx to write an actual history of capitalism in England, let alone of capitalism in general. Here like elsewhere in his magnum opus, Marx introduces “real” history for the purpose of developing specific theoretical problems that emerge at a certain stage of moving from capital in the abstract to the concrete operations of the capitalist mode of production.

For me personally, the most fruitful way of approaching the question of “fundamentals” is to say that what makes a history “Marxist” is that it starts from the broad problematic outlined by Marx, and creatively applies concepts and ideas drawn from Marx to further develop this problematic. Concretely, this means 1. trying to understand capitalism *in* history by situating it within the history of humanity, including the socially mediated place of human beings in nature; 2. understanding capitalism *through* history, i.e. studying concrete history to better understand its inherent tendencies and contradictions; and 3. understanding capitalism *as* history, i.e. as not the inescapable outcome of human nature, but as a specific form of social organization that emerges historically as a result of social struggles and that will end through social struggles (in ways that are ruinous, joyful, or probably a combination of both). We can then begin to translate these points into ambitious research programs covering specific periods and problems, encompassing both micro-history and large scale comparisons. In terms of scientific practice and standards of proof, Marxist historiography should be judged on the same criteria as any other attempt to make sense of the fragmented source-record through which we try to access the human past. Too often, Marxist writers contend themselves with providing theoretical reformulations of old problems based on secondary literature (also reflecting the fact that traditionally, a lot of Marxist historiography has been produced by sociologists and political theorists). Marxists can only hope to have any influence on their field, if they can show the value of their theoretical baggage by employing it to write better histories.

CS & ACG: *How would you position non-Marxist critiques of Marxist historiography. Do you see room for a fruitful dialogue?*

PEPIJN BRANDON: Marxist historiography as we know it had its heydays from the 1960s to the 1980s, as a result of the global explosion of social movements. It had a massive influence both in its more structuralist iterations, and in its “from below” variants that stimulated the rise of the new social history. The “cultural turn” within the field in general, leading to a

privileging of issues of representation and loosely related to the rise of postmodernism in philosophy with its stress on textuality, greatly damaged the prestige of Marxist historiography. Important, and unfortunately not always unjustified, critiques also came from writers who went through the new social movements that accused Marxist historians of blindness for issues of race, gender and oppression. Of these various critiques on Marxism “from the left,” postcolonial theory probably was the most effective. Branding Marxism as just another form of eurocentrism robbed it of what for most of the twentieth century had been its greatest point of pride: its ability to link an account of domestic exploitation and social struggles within the more industrialized countries to anti-imperialist solidarity with the most oppressed and exploited peoples worldwide. It must be acknowledged that even the best Marxist historiography of the preceding period left its flank wide open for this charge. Think of the work of the famous one-time members of the British Communist Party Historians Group. With all their strengths, they also shared fully in the British exceptionalism and methodological nationalism of their intellectual environment. Dipesh Chakrabarty was simply right when he asked what his own teacher E.P. Thompson’s stress on the traditions of the “free-born Englishman” had to offer the Indian working class.

Of course, this is not the whole story. That such critiques by and large did not lead to viable reformulations but to a complete rout that relegated explicitly Marxist historiography to a niche in academia cannot be seen outside the wider political context of that period. The defeat of social movements, the turn towards neoliberalism, the collapse of most of the dictatorial states that described themselves as socialist, the failures (often through brutal repression) of Marxist movements in the formerly colonized countries, all aided in the turn towards social conservatism and politically “safe” liberal criticism in academia. Unfortunately, that has also fostered a certain defensiveness among many who do continue to write histories inspired by Marx. Such a defensive starting point is understandable, but it is also self-defeating. This is especially true in the current conjuncture. The cultural turn is over. The multifarious crises of capitalism (economic, geopolitical, environmental, social) have again pushed larger systemic questions to the fore. The most influential historical works of the past decades have grappled with issues such as the long-term evolution of social inequality, the role of violence and slavery in capitalist development, the roots of systemic racism, and the origins of the Capitalocene (as opposed to the socially and historically undifferentiated Anthropocene). To

these efforts, Marxist historians potentially have to offer an unrivalled apparatus of systemic social critique. However, they will not be able to do so by standing on the sidelines and lambasting everyone else for “not having the proper definition of capitalism.” Marxist historians can contribute to these debates if they use their theoretical sophistication to produce original investigations that deal with these large questions that now confront society as a whole, are capable of doing so in terms that speak to the rest of the field, and are willing to critically consider their own fundamental premises in the process. After all, the purpose of critical history writing is not to prove the correctness of this or that theory, but to gain a better understanding of the past in order to bolster the fight for better futures.