

Marx after Marx after Marx after Marx

Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015. xiv + 292 pp., £20.67 hb., 978 0 231 17480 0.

The study of Marx in the anglophone academy – established during the boom years of sociological theory in the 1970s, when sociology was de facto a discipline of the Left – withered somewhat in the years of neoliberal triumphalism of the 1990s. Since then, however, it has experienced a lively revival, especially with regard to *Capital* and the critique of political economy more generally. Not only has the indigenous literature flowed (in the journal *Historical Materialism*, for example) but, through translation, hitherto nationally insulated alternative interpretative problematics have come if not exactly to confront one another directly, then at least to occupy the same discursive space: from the ‘social capital’ approach of Tronti’s early Italian workerism and the philosophical value-form analysis of Adorno’s students’ *neue Marx Lektüre* (triangulating the more familiar Althusserian reading in the 1960s), via the ‘regimes of accumulation’ of the French Regulation School and the ‘real subsumption of *society* to capital’ of Negri’s post-workerism (in the 1970s), to the social-geographic revival of debate on the limits of capital (Harvey and Smith) and Dussel’s ‘dependency’-focused reading of Marx’s *Economic Manuscripts* (in the 1980s), and on to the ‘accumulation by dispossession’ interpretation of neoliberalism – Harvey again (of the last decade).

With the coming together of these literatures, in the context of forcibly deregulating regimes of global capital, debate about Marx’s basic concepts of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’, subsumption (formal and real), commodification and the value-form has been renewed. The more technical work has in part been an effect of the belated publication of Marx’s *Economic Manuscripts* of 1861–67 (in German, 1976–92; in English, the 1861–63 manuscripts only, 1988–94), composed in the interval between the *Grundrisse* and the first published version of *Capital* Volume 1. But there have been more popular diffusions as well. The almost epochal shift in the vocabulary of economic and political journalism, from ‘markets’ to ‘capitalism’, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, has reconnected Marxist political-economic analysis to diagnoses of the present. However, much of the recent work has focused on the new forms

of value created by finance capital (credit default swaps and other kinds of securitization), the technological conditions for the production and realization of financial surpluses (high-frequency trading), and their apparent independence from social and political control – to the neglect of what is known as ‘historical capitalism’ as an analytical framework for the study of the present.

Harry Harootunian’s *Marx After Marx* enters this arena, intent on rectifying the anomaly, with a prestigious pedigree, a long run-up and some accounts to settle – not least a personal one with history itself. The book is dedicated to the memory of those members of the author’s family who perished in the Armenian genocide of 1915–17, ‘victims of the excesses of primitive accumulation inaugurating Turkey’s drive to transform a failing imperial order into capitalist modernity’.

Harootunian is a historian, but not every historian is a Harootunian (as Sartre might have said). More specifically, Harootunian is a US historian of modern Japanese history. But the more conventionally historical side of his writing has long been combined with theoretical and political interests rare among historians; especially over fifty years ago, when he co-edited his first anthology, *West and Non-West: New Perspectives* (1963). Harootunian made his name as a historian critical of the orientalism of Western approaches to Japanese history, with monographs on the growth of political consciousness in Tokugawa, Japan (*Toward Restoration*, 1970) – the first intellectual history of the Meiji Restoration in English – and discourse and ideology in Tokugawa nativism (*Things Seen and Unseen*, 1988). However, it is the collection *Postmodernism in Japan* (edited with Masao Miyoshi, 1989) and his 1997 Welleck lectures, published as *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice and the Question of Everyday Life* (2000), that best indicate the widening scope of his interventions.

Postmodernism in Japan used Japanese intellectual history to problematize the temporal and geopolitical assumptions of the postmodernism debate then raging in the USA. *History’s Disquiet* extended a long-standing critique of the theoretical form

(modernization) and political function (US foreign policy) of the discipline of Area Studies into the period of its globalizing postcolonial culturalization. By this point, a series of overlapping polemical oppositions had become stabilized as characteristic features of Harootunian's work: history of colonialism against modernization theory and postcolonial studies alike; history of capitalism against culturalisms of all sorts; unevenness and multiple temporalities against linear historical time (historicism) and Marxist 'stagism'; the 'resistant' difference and historical concreteness of everyday life against the commodification of life. (*RP* readers will be familiar with many of these themes, from Harootunian's articles and reviews over the last fifteen years.) These are all, at once, theoretical and political categories, the former of which is in each case affirmed. In so far as it is history as the history of capitalism – their identities and differences – that is at stake in each instance, the question of 'the expansion of capitalism' in its geographical, Luxemburgian, non-European sense (rather than its solely quantitative, value-theoretical one) has long provided an underlying unity to this work.

Marx After Marx takes up the question of the expansion of capitalism outside of Europe, in polemical opposition to a simplified image of 'Western Marxism', by constructing a non-European Marxist tradition for which 'formal subsumption' is the key to comprehending the unevenness and necessary incompleteness of capitalist development. Indeed, the book might have been, more accurately (if less popularly), entitled *Formal Subsumption: The General Process of Capitalist Development*. For that is very much, single-mindedly, what it is about. It proceeds from a reading of carefully selected (one might say 'selective') passages from Marx's later writings, to serial expositions of works by non-European Marxists that recapitulate the proposed interpretation of Marx, enriching its historical content through its application to their own national contexts. The discussion of time promised by the 'history and time in the expansion of capitalism' of the subtitle is only really taken up in the first chapter (about one-fifth of the book). It does not involve theoretical argumentation so much as a repeated, contrapuntal statement of a position (multiple temporalities articulated by competing synchronizing and resistant non-synchronizing practices) derived from Max Tomba's excellent but nonetheless problematic *Marx's Temporalities* (2013).

We have had *Marx Beyond Marx* (Negri, 1979), *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (Saree Makdisi et al., eds, 1996 – including Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Marx After

Marxism' among its contributions) and *Marxism: With and Beyond Marx* (Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee, 2014). Now we have *Marx After Marx*. It can seem crowded on the head of a pin. Yet the nuance (the difference between the 'beyond' and the more prosaic 'after') is significant, nonetheless. For as the formal structure of repetition in the phrase 'Marx after Marx' indicates – suggesting at once a new reading of Marx provoked by the historical circumstances since his death, and a following in the image of Marx, a mimesis of Marx, determined by those circumstances – an orthodoxy is being constructed here. Harootunian spent near on half a century as the dissenting insider in US East Asian Studies, largely because of his Marxism (subjecting 'culture' to the problematic of capitalist development). The inversion of this polarity – transferring his fire from the non-European context back towards Western Marxism – places the detail of his understanding of Marx under closer scrutiny.

The narrative arc of the book's argument (more clearly stated in the Afterword than the Introduction) is as follows. 'Western Marxism owed more to Max Weber's cultural analysis than it was willing to admit, inasmuch [as] it was promoting a unique cultural configuration as a model of imitation.' It thus became the basis for a Eurocentric Marxist version of modernization theory or developmentalism. This fitted neatly into the stageism of modes of production propounded by orthodox historical materialism. After 1989, this falsely universalized culturalism and neglect of the study of production processes was continued in another, more explicit form by the 'new provincialism' of postcolonial studies, which focuses on 'the singularity of culture regions'. Thus,

postcoloniality paradoxically resembled a distant inheritor of the legacy of Western Marxism, insofar as it turned Marxism-derived strategies inward (and away from Marxism) toward contemplating the uniquely irreducible character of specific cultural endowments.

In contrast, Harootunian wants to reinstate a concern for labour and production processes within diverse non-European regions, focusing not on what he takes to be the supposition of the inevitable fate of the 'real' subsumption of labour to capital (the supposedly 'unique cultural configuration' of European capitalism), but rather upon mixed economic forms, both within the envelope of formal subsumption and in combination with it (non-capitalist and 'really' subsumed forms alike). Such a concern, it is argued, highlights 'the everyday encompassing work' as 'the

site where a worldly capitalism was encountered and imprinted on the local, embracing and embodying it yet at the same time being mediated by it'. This everyday is taken to be 'the flashpoint' of workers' struggles against capitalism, which are the consequence of 'the continuous appearance of uneven rhythms'. Marx's text is thus to be 'deprovincialized', by being rid of the privilege accorded to the development of capitalism in England, in *Capital*, with the focus instead on his remarks about non-European societies in the *Grundrisse* and the increasingly celebrated late letters to Vera Zasulich.

This is a provocative and powerful, superficially plausible, yet ultimately highly problematic scenario. In particular, it runs together discrete theoretical and political tendencies into singular simplified models. Let us start with the oversimplified image of the provincialism of Western Marxism. There are three quite different aspects to the way the idea of Western Marxism is constructed here. One is a twist on the interpretation of the well-known Weberianism informing Lukács's account of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*. Another concerns the extension of Marx's concept of subsumption from the wage-form ('formal') and the labour process ('real'), first, to the exchange relation in general (the Frankfurt School) and hence to 'total reification', and second, to the subsumption of 'society' as whole to capital (Negri). (These extensions have a similar totalizing form, but their arguments are quite different; not least because one is value-theoretical while the other is based on the rejection of value theory *tout court*.) The third is the above-mentioned theoretical privilege accorded to the historical model of

the development of capitalism in England, in *Capital*; especially the final part of Volume 1, on 'so-called' primitive (better, 'originary') accumulation.

These three aspects are combined by Harootunian into a new concept of 'Western Marxism': a formal intellectual construct taken to project a single path of capitalist development, involving the evolutionary universalization of commodification, to a point of 'completion' (total subsumption), at which point only, it is alleged that 'Western Marxists' believe, does one have capitalism proper. The image is powerful, perhaps because it is a fantasy construct. Which is not to deny that it may well be out there, structuring the historical unconscious of some contemporary Marxists in the West; although it seems closer to the self-image of capital itself. One would be hard pressed to find a textual instantiation of its combined elements. Indeed, it is peculiar – to put it mildly – to attribute a formative role in 'Western Marxism' to an argument developed during the late 1970s by a *post-Marxist* (Negri), for whom 'subsumption to capital' is *not* 'subsumption to the value-form', and who has no discernible interest in commodification.

What is most distinctive about Harootunian's reading here is that Lukács's (and Frankfurtian) Weberianism is taken to lie not just in the use of the concept of instrumental rationality to generalize the theory of commodity fetishism but, as a result, in a *cultural particularization* of the tendency towards the universalization of the capital relation and hence the commodity form: 'promoting a unique cultural configuration as a model of imitation'. But did Western Marxism (as opposed to capital itself) really do that? Was it not, rather, acutely aware of its difference



from 'the East', by which was understood the Soviet Union (rather than Europe's 'middle' or 'far' east). And just how 'culturally provincial' to Europe are the commodity form and the labour-based process of accumulation of capital, as such, once established on a world-scale? Is there not a fallacy of genesis here? Ironically, given Harootunian's polemics against culturalism, his construction of Western Marxism seems to exhibit a hyper-culturalist reading of both Western Marxism and capitalism itself. This is not to suggest that there are no specifically capitalist cultures; but they are *cultures of abstraction* (abstraction from historically received cultural practices), economic and temporal cultures of pure form, which consequently coexist with a historical multiplicity of other received cultural practices – as Harootunian acknowledges, indeed emphasizes with regard to non-European societies, but which he inconsistently denies to Euro-American capitalist societies.

The source of the problem here is the incoherence of Harootunian's understanding of 'real subsumption', whereby he retroactively but inconsistently uses a late Negrian conception. Its consequence is a lack of coherence in his conception of capitalism. At the level of his general argument about the difference between European and non-European capitalist societies, Harootunian associates real subsumption (of which formal subsumption is an acknowledged condition) with the 'completion' of capitalism. He thus rejects the general idea of a transition or movement from formal to real subsumption in the development of capitalism, on the grounds that this would put all societies that encounter capitalism onto a similar path to 'completed' capitalism, destroying the intrinsic 'unevenness' of development. But this notion of 'completion' is a peculiar one, made up of two different (and incompatible) conceptions from Marx and Negri, respectively.

Harootunian's idea of 'the completion of capitalism' conflates Marx's account of what makes a capitalist society capitalist (a mode of production in which the commodification of labour-power is sufficiently both extensive and intensive to enable generalized commodity production to become the dominant economic form) with a Frankfurtian/Negrian conception of the subsumption of *all social relations* to capital, and hence what has been called 'pure' or 'absolute' capitalism (cf. Balibar above, p. 20 n7). He thus effectively dissociates 'real subsumption' from the role it plays in Marx's text, focused on the labour process (which Harootunian claims he wants to recover, against Western Marxism, as

the focal point of analysis), by totalizing it in the direction of post-Marxism. This leads, reactively, to a more-or-less exclusive fixation on formal subsumption as 'the general form of every capitalist process of production' (Marx), which, at a general-theoretical level, involves denying real subsumption (and hence genuinely 'capitalist' status) to 'unevenly developing' non-European societies. And this despite the fact that this overextended usage of 'real subsumption' inconsistently cohabits in *Marx After Marx* with Marx's own more restricted (albeit for Marx capitalism-defining) usage, when particular non-European societies are discussed: China, Japan, India, Peru, West Africa, in particular. In these cases, Harootunian draws upon Marx's notion of hybrid subsumption to accommodate a mix of formal and real subsumptions – although this conflicts with his own extended usage of 'real subsumption' to refer to a phantasmatically 'completed' capitalism.

Ironically, given the shape of Harootunian's career, part of the problem here seems to stem from a residual 'historian's' antipathy to theoretical concepts: a sense that, as he puts it on the opening page of the Introduction, with reference to Western Marxism, 'value has trumped history'. But if this might be said of some Western Marxists (Adorno), it cannot be said of Marx himself, for whom value was clearly a historical form, albeit a paradoxically dehistoricizing one. Value has not 'trumped' history, in some discursive game; it has *transformed* it and continues to do so in actuality, in non-European capitalist societies as well as in 'Western' ones. Despite Harootunian's acute sensitivity to and extensive knowledge of the social effects of the capitalist transformation of non-capitalist societies, there is a lurking disavowal of the depth – the social-ontological force – of the actuality of the capital relation within those societies today. (This is evident in the engaging and detailed criticisms of Banaji in chapter 5, for example.) It leads to an exclusive political investment in the resistant 'everyday encompassing work' that marks 'the continuing persistence of historical temporal forms ... from earlier modes in new historical environments'.

Harootunian is right that the economic function of these forms within the present gives the lie to the idea that they are 'merely remnants', but to make them the *only* social forms of resistance to capitalism in those societies is to reproduce the problematic of romantic anti-capitalism nonetheless. For it excludes a constitutive role within opposition to capitalist practices of social forms and practices (and forms of subjectivity) produced by capitalism itself.

The textual basis for Harootunian's interpretation lies in privileging the *Grundrisse* over *Capital* (Marx the 'historian' over Marx the 'theorist' of the value-form) and reading *Capital's* theoretical concepts as expressions of the particularities of the development of capitalism in England. However, the theoretical advances made in *Capital* can in no way be reduced to its historical grounding in the case of the development of capitalism in England. In fact, this historicist reduction of general-theoretical concepts is in direct conflict with Harootunian's own criticisms of historicism.

Critical reference to historicism as a falsely linear and homogeneous conception of historical time has become a familiar trope of left-academic discourse over the last two decades, largely as a result of the still-growing influence of Benjamin's writings. However, it often has a citational or positional function, rather than an analytical or theoretical one. And it is frequently accompanied by a failure to reflect on the historical meaning of the present in a manner necessary to break with the historicist time-consciousness of academic discourse itself. Harootunian's multiple polemics against Western Marxists and postcolonial theorists ground his discourse in a clearly defined academic present. Yet there is an odd lack of any sense of the world-historical present, in its post-1989 and post-2008 determinations of globally financialized capital and its crises. Polemically, Harootunian is conjunctural, but the materials across which he deploys his arguments are conventionally historical, in the sense of belonging to the past: the historical space of the 'expansion of capitalism' from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Within this space, *Marx After Marx* weaves together a complex series of regional comparisons, subsumed under the banner of formal subsumption. However, this focus on formal subsumption (hence the wage-form) also raises some important unasked questions about our wider present, which would give Harootunian's non-European historical materials more immediate political significance, for all capitalist societies. Such as 'What is happening to the wage-form in capitalist societies today, with regard to the invention of zero-hours contracts and the aggressive capitalist use of new technologies in service industries (such as deliveries and taxis) to legally redefine labour as self-employment?' Whatever one's interpretation of those matters, it cannot be denied that we are entering a new period of struggle over the legal form of the sale of labour-power, at the border of Marx's concepts of formal and real

subsumption. Harootunian's recovery of the concept of formal subsumption for the present speaks directly (if unknowingly) to this context.

Left techno-fantacists (journalistic and otherwise) may try to cut the knot of the present with their imperatives to 'accelerate!' or their simple declarations of 'postcapitalism', but *Marx After Marx* reminds us that capitalism is an intractable global phenomenon, articulating a multiplicity of mixed and contradictory historical-economic forms within its reproductive cycles. Neglect of the complexity, geographical dispersion and cultural variety of these forms consigns anti-capitalist politics to effective irrelevance.

Peter Osborne

Doubly so

Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith, eds, *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Södertön Philosophical Studies 18, Södertön University Press, Huddinge, 2016. 297 pp., £15.99 pb 978 9 18784 338 9.

At stake in this volume is the question of whether the phenomenological analysis of pregnancy belongs only to 'regional phenomenology' and can be accommodated by existing phenomenological methods and concepts, or whether it ought to be considered as 'transcendentally constitutive' and hence provocative of a more radical transformation of phenomenology's methodological and conceptual core. Indeed, depending upon how one defines 'phenomenology' in the first place, and what kinds of claims one wants to make in its name, we might well ask whether a 'phenomenology of pregnancy' is possible at all.

The most renowned attempt at a phenomenological account of pregnancy is that offered by Iris Marion Young in her 1984 essay 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in which she contends that the phenomenology of pregnancy radically undermines the traditional philosophical understanding of the self as a strictly bounded, self-contained unit. This challenge to 'a conception of subjectivity as self-contained, autonomous and rational structure', the editors explain, is a unifying theme among all the essays contained in this volume. However, the argument that emerges in Young's essay is somewhat unclear, and the ambiguity similarly permeates this collection: is the claim that pregnancy warrants more phenomenological attention due to its