

REVIEW ARTICLE

Simon Choat, *Marx Through Post-Structuralism*. Continuum, 2010.

Rory Jeffs

Simon Choat's book *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* reminded this reviewer of one of Engel's well-cited quotes from Marx, when he wrote a letter to his son-in-law Paul Lafargue and the French Marxists just before his death. Dismayed by what was going in France in his name, Marx told them, if what they were proposing was Marxism, then "I am not a Marxist."¹ Jacques Derrida cited this phrase in his 1994 book *Specters of Marx*. Given what transpired during the twentieth century in the name of Marx, Derrida indeed found himself pondering there the question, "who can still say 'I am a Marxist?'"² And even since the two decades after *Specters*, one can wonder still *what* Marx would say today? What can Marx or Marxism contribute to our political and theoretical discourses in the twenty first century, the age of globalisation and anti-globalisation, financialisation and the GFC?

Marx Through Post-Structuralism contributes to reflection on these questions by performing the invaluable work of exploring the role Karl Marx's work played in writings of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. After an opening chapter on Althusser's decisive role in the French conjuncture, the book structures itself around a sequential analysis of these thinkers' respective engagements with the writings of Marx. While noting its own inner dynamics and internal differences, Choat presents post-structuralism as a coherent materialist philosophical trajectory characterised by the critique of structuralism, of teleology, and of humanism. The question guiding this book is: "What can be made of Marx after post-structuralism? What is Marx without ideology, with no dialectic, where the economic is not determinant, where class is not centre stage?" (155) In other words, can post-structuralist readings of Marx, which eschew the assumed pillars of classical Marxism, for instance, economic determinism, the critique of ideology, and a class-based sociology or theory of political agency, still provide the means for a critique of capitalist society geared towards some manner of collective emancipation?

One of the first positive traits of this book is its conciliatory attitude to the issue of the possibility for the formation of productive interaction between post-structuralism and Marxism. Parts of post-structuralist scholarship have consigned Marxism along with other "meta-narratives" to the dustbin of history, and not even recognised it as an influence on post-structuralism. Despite their own earlier affiliations with Marxist intellectuals and groups,

Lyotard and Foucault added grist for this “post-Marxist” mill by their public repudiations of Marxism. On the other side of the divide, Anglo-American Marxists like Perry Anderson, David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, and Christopher Norris since the 1980s in particular have come out swinging against the post-structuralist influence in the human sciences—and Choat also mentions Frederic Jameson and Jürgen Habermas, and might have added Slavoj Žižek. For these thinkers, post-structuralism and postmodernism are two sides of the same counter-revolutionary coin—presumed guilty of “surrendering all opposition to capitalism” (32). Importantly, Choat reveals how Anderson, Harvey, and even Habermas do not actually discuss the post-structuralist readings of Marx’s writings in any detail, instead honing in on what they deem to be the anti-Marxist implications in their work. Choat’s book approaches the question of Marx’s relation to post-structuralism in a different spirit, one that is open to a rapprochement rather than to strengthening current polemical divisions.

Louis Althusser plays a central, opening role in Choat’s consideration of Marx’s influence on the post-structuralists, and their responses to his *oeuvre*. Effectively, Althusser is considered responsible for re-inventing Marx after the arrival of structuralism in France, and distancing him from the neo-Hegelian reading of the “Young [humanist] Marx” and Stalinist historical materialism—both of which, Choat argues were extremely “unpalatable” for the post-structuralists. The Althusserian Marx however is a non-teleological thinker who conceived history as a “process without a Subject”. Furthermore, Althusser presents Marx as a materialist in the Spinozian tradition rather than as a heir to Hegelian idealism. As Choat clearly illustrates, such a Marx was fit for the post-structural picking. The post-structuralists, like Althusser, seek to challenge any teleological explanation of history in the mode of Hegel, premised on the recovery of a “lost origin,” whether through the overcoming of alienation, or the futural attainment of subject-object unity. The issue all such critiques face, at least to the extent that they wish to call on Marx’s name, is whether Marx’s philosophy of history can be truly divorced from its apparently everywhere-evident teleological trace. The issue the post-structuralists had with Althusser lies in the charge that the great structuralist Marxist never completely overcame the “idealism” residual in Marx. Choat discusses the radical nature of the post-structuralist reading of Marx in the context of a “new materialism” that would escape the confines of the traditional idealist-materialist dichotomy.

Choat begins the first of his four chapters on the post-structuralists’ readings of Marx with Lyotard. Despite Lyotard’s exit from the Marxist political association *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the 1960s, Choat discusses how Marx “remained a persistent figure” throughout Lyotard’s writing. (38) Lyotard rejected the orthodox language of Marxism, such as class, contradiction, alienation and exploitation in favour of something he considered more radical. Yet instead of positioning Lyotard’s turn away from Marxism as a wholesale rejection of Marx, Choat proposes that Lyotard’s later writings offer “new insights” into Marx’s legacy. The use of Nietzsche and Freud help Lyotard chart an alternative way of looking at capitalism and its greatest critic. As Choat specifies, it is problematic to say that Lyotard offers a critique of Marx, for the idea of critique presupposes another “form of representation” that “would merely sustain and perpetuate that which it criticized.” (46) Hence, Lyotard’s reading offers itself as a kind of psychoanalytic reading of Marx, focussing on the irreconcilable tensions within his work, personified by “Marx the prosecutor” longing for judgment and completion, and Marx “the little girl”, offended by capitalism. That Marx does not finish his case against capitalism in *Capital* is a sign for Lyotard of the impossibility of ever finishing such a critique. Recalling Althusser’s critique of a teleology of origins and ends, Lyotard protests against what he sees in Marx as a “reliance on a natural given” or primordial unity that has been lost due to capitalism and “will one day be restored.” (48)

In some ways, Choat suggests, Lyotard seeks to get beyond the theoretical discourse and turn Marx inside-out, by uncovering the heterogeneity of the libidinal forces and “intensities” within his work. Choat discusses how this strategy initially seemed to strengthen Marx’s materialist analysis and make it even more immanent to capitalism rather than weaken it. Choat singles out Lyotard’s introduction of the role of desire in the dynamic of capitalism as important, if a little hypostatized. But he rightly critiques Lyotard for overlooking the aspects of Marx’s work that reveal no desire at all for a “lost Whole” or wish to abolish the “*différend*”—adding that Lyotard is “too hasty in dismissing Marxism as another meta-narrative” (62). For Choat, Lyotard’s renunciation of critique and neglect of the specificity and historicity of capitalism ultimately means he is unable to negotiate

a path that allows for “hope for the future” (54).

Jacques Derrida, Choat’s next subject, barely referred to Marx before *Specters of Marx* was published in 1994. Interestingly, Choat explains Derrida’s “silence” in criticising and engaging with Marx was due to his desire to be not mistaken for a political conservative in a largely Marxist French intellectual milieu. When Derrida finally comes to address Marxism, it is to speak of “the spirit of Marx”, a spirit, which he observes has adopted many forms, from the “metaphysical” Marx, to the Marx of dialectical and historical materialism, as well as the Party-based *Marxisms* that politically adopted his legacy. Yet for Derrida, only one of these spirits of Marx remains relevant for the critique of liberal democracy post-Fukuyama, which he hails as a “New International” that will offer us a “link of affinity, suffering, and hope” (75). Wary in particular of the metaphysical aspects of Marx’s writing, Derrida follows Lyotard in seeking to emphasise the “event” or rupture Marx’s thought illuminates. Choat thinks Derrida’s reading “marks an improvement on Lyotard’s” (67) in that it avoids reducing Marx to a teleological philosophy of history, and suggests there is something *other* in Marx that evades teleological reduction, which he goes onto to name as the “messianic without messianism”. Again, there is a sense in Derrida as in Lyotard that they are more interested in Marx’s unconscious (i.e. the “two Marx’s” for Lyotard; or for Derrida, the “ghosts” haunting a Shakespearian version of Marx), and his ontology. For these reasons, they read Marx primarily as a philosopher, rather than a figure who aimed to overthrow all philosophy hitherto given that it was restricted to only interpreting the world. Indeed, Choat sees through Derrida’s aphoristic allusions, gestures and abstractions, revealing how little Derrida engages with Marx’s politically and empirically focussed writings, such as the Marxian texts on alienation and exploitation. Ultimately, Choat observes, even though Derrida revives Marx’s importance, his reading lacks a robust political significance that can apply that importance.

In order to provide contrast to Lyotard and Derrida’s readings of Marx, Choat presents Foucault and Deleuze as being more concerned with present change and political economy than an open-ended future. Foucault in particular approaches Marx at the point Derrida leaves him, from the perspective of the political activity of philosophy itself. Foucault barely refers to Marx in his writings, yet Choat proposes he is a continual presence underneath the surface. Choat’s reading of Foucault focuses on the Foucauldian historiographical method in its various phases: in *The Order of Things* with its “certain anti-Marxism,” then the archaeological method in *Archaeology of Knowledge* and the genealogical method in the later writings. Surprisingly, despite the obvious influence on Nietzsche on Foucault’s turn to genealogy, Choat claims that Marx’s presence is even more important. In this chapter, Choat’s distinctive claim is Foucault’s historicist development from 1968 onwards shares characteristics with Marx’s materialist conception of history such as an emphasis on economic processes, and the “specific studies of concrete situations” as formed by contingent social power relations (110). Whether this is enough to stand as a cogent claim for a hidden Marxism in Foucault, rather than testimony to Foucault’s avowed Nietzscheanism, is open to debate.

Of the four chapters dealing with the post-structuralists, it is probably Choat’s Deleuze chapter, which is most the most productive and interesting. In contrast to the other three post-structuralists, Choat reveals how Deleuze actually invested in Marx’s enterprise, and publically identified himself as a Marxist. He consistently pursued a sustained engagement with Marx’s writings, although his death in 1995 halted him from making a planned book-length analysis, to be called *Grandeur de Marx* (125). Like his fellow post-structuralists, then, in Deleuze’s extant *oeuvre*, he writes little about Marx directly, but Choat reminds us that what he does write is always in the mode of critical admiration or praise (128).

Like Lyotard, Deleuze’s engages with Marx in terms of a wider philosophical emphasis on desire, which Choat sympathetically represents as a necessary theoretical response to the rise of consumer capitalism since Marx’s death. Pivotal to Deleuze’s understanding of desire and capitalism, Choat argues, is Deleuze’s critique of Freud on desire in *Anti-Oedipus*. By revealing how capitalism uses the “Oedipal Subject” to ensure its reign, Choat remarks, “capitalism nears the point that Deleuze’s own philosophy aims at: the plane of immanence before all organisation and actualization, a reinvigoration of the creative potential of life.” (139) Deleuze observes a

particular logic of repetition, reproduction, and “deterritorialisation” in capitalism, one which he argues must be confronted and not simply overturned with a teleological externality. Although not a “contradiction”, Deleuze suggest capitalism leads to a contorted gesture rather than a simple contradiction—“decoding” with one hand, while “axiomatising” with the other (143). Choat uses the example of “[t]he fusion of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism” as following “the rhythm of capitalism in its purest and clearest form.” (142) He adds that, in the Deleuzian schema “capitalism cannot bear its own effects”—that it turns in on itself through regulatory means or “re-territorialisation”. (146)

As Choat sees it, Deleuze’s analysis seeks to explode the capitalist process into an indefinite series of “decoding” and “de-territorialisation” that is beyond recoverability and “re-territorialisation”. The immanent potential such a strategy offers is the liberation of the productive forces themselves into the “exterior limit of schizophrenia” and “pushing the deterritorialisation of capitalism even further” (146). Choat discusses how the micro-political and molar “lines of flight,” those modes of escapes “without recapture”, can possibly evolve into collective movements and struggles. However, he is cautious to embrace such concepts, given it would impossible to know whether such “lines of flight” would lead “to a dead end” or “hardening into a sedentary rigidity (as in the bureaucratization of a revolution, for example).” (149) Choat is aware that Deleuze’s liberation is tantalising close to Lyotard’s “libidinal” near-celebration of capitalism—but it is at such a pivotal point that Choat argues whether Deleuze has actually relapsed into the no-man’s land of “transcendent critique”. Indeed, Choat critically suggests that Deleuze in *A Thousand Plateaus*, with Guattari, fell into a kind of formulaic and abstract analysis that arguably commits the same sin he charged Marx’s dialectic with, offering us: “concepts which fit anything but which shows us nothing.” (153)

“The key challenge faced by materialist philosophy is how to remain critical,” Choat concludes at the end of his book on these individual post-structuralists. This means: “How can a critical position be maintained if one abandons the themes of lost origin or a quasi-exterior ground from which critique can be secured?” (163) Choat has argued that all the post-structuralists covered in his book are in different ways compromised by what might be termed the abandonment of a foundational critique. Despite their aversions to the teleology of origin and end, Choat has demonstrated in particular how the post-structuralists converge when it comes to thinking the event, which lands them suspiciously close to an ahistorical and ontological mystification of the political. For this reason, Choat provocatively proposes that post-structuralists “fall prey to the same fault” as Marx in respect to teleology, but instead of presupposing a realm outside capitalism, they evoke a realm outside all historicity.

In his last chapter, then, Choat outlines outlines three “practical imperatives” for a new materialism, which the post-structuralists were never able to fully adhere to. Such a new materialism “must be critical”; it “must be historical”; and “it must focus on existing social relations” rather than ideal entities, lost origins, or rapturous events (172). Choat reveals how abandoning foundations and teleology as the post-structuralists do can easily lead to abandoning critical thought altogether. One could add too, other consequences such as encourages a new dogma of anti-foundationalism. In this context, Choat contends, Marx remains a vital critical resource in that he commits to communism as a *real* movement immanent to capitalist process rather than an ideal aim or “lost origin” to be theoretically applied. Therefore, Choat ends his book with the category he considers still an immanent potential in post-structuralist readings, which remained under-developed: “class struggle.” Choat asserts we need to understand Marx’s use class not in terms of a fixed socio-economic entity, but rather in respect to relations where “active struggles” are present and locatable through practical intervention. Here is the key to Choat’s conclusion: “Beginning from class struggles allows one to take a critical position without reference to ideal norms.” (176) Choat’s final argument that class struggle remains the last bastion of Marx’s legacy and one that can survive post-structuralist de-ontologisation and deconstruction may have some validity, but it has to be said that this idea is not elaborated in very much detail, as the book cuts off as soon as it is summoned by Choat. This is a shame, as one would like to know more about how class struggle maps onto today’s political agencies, radical democratic movements, and possibilities. Where does the Occupy Movement fit today against other “active struggles” for instance? Is it possible to unify and organise the divergent social

struggles of different agencies today in a way like to that which Marx originally conceived under the “Subject” of a class?

Marx Through Post-structuralism emphasises the materialist legacy of Marx, and shows how post-structuralism drew from that legacy, but also transformed and arguably in some ways lost the urgency of its original impulse. Although the book is large and ambitious in its scope, in addition, a discussion of contemporary political movements and struggles that reflect a kind of post-structuralist-inflected approach to Marx, would have arguably added depth and pertinence to his valuable theoretical work. Furthermore, Choat could have engaged more deeply with the Post-Marxism(s) of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which all traverse these similar crossroads between Marx and post-structuralism. Choat’s book still provides a thought-provoking contribution to the discussion and potential rapprochement between post-structuralism and Marxism that signifies there is still more “to-come” on this issue.

RORY JEFFS is a PhD candidate in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Deakin University. His thesis is a critical examination of the work and legacy of the Russian-born French Hegelian Alexandre Kojève, and its philosophical and political reception through figures such as Georges Bataille, Leo Strauss, and Carl Schmitt.

NOTES

1. See Marx cited by Engels, "Letter to Conrad Schmidt, August 5, 1890." Trans. Dona Torr. In Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *German Socialist Philosophy*. Ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher. New York: Continuum, 1997, 238.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 110.