

# **Marxisms, theory, yesterday and today – Answers to questions from the Russian comrades in Vpered**

Monday 4 October 2010, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#) (Date first published: 29 December 2006).

## **Vpered: 1. What parts of the Marxist heritage clearly belong to the past, and which ones do you feel remain equally relevant today?**

Daniel Bensaïd: I'd like to start by nuancing or differentiating the very idea of heritage. There isn't one heritage, but many: an "orthodox" (Party or State) Marxism and "heterodox" Marxisms; a scientific (or positivist) Marxism and a critical (or dialectical) Marxism; and also what the philosopher Ernst Bloch called the "cold currents" and "warm currents" of Marxism. These are not simply different readings or interpretations, but rather theoretical constructions that sometimes underpin antagonistic politics. As Jacques Derrida often repeated, heritage is not a thing that can be handed down or preserved. What matters is what its inheritors do with it -now and in the future.

So, what is outdated in Marx's theory?

- To begin with, I would mention a certain kind of sociological optimism - the idea that capitalist development almost mechanically brings about the growth of an ever-growing, evermore concentrated, evermore organized and evermore conscious working class. A century of experiences has made plain the scale of divisions and differentiations in the ranks of the proletariat. The unity of the exploited classes is not a natural given, but something that is fought for and built.

- Next, I think we have to resume a serious examination of the notions of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the withering away of the state. It's a complicated question, because the words do not have the same meaning today that they might have had when they were penned by Marx. At the time, in the lexicon of the Enlightenment, dictatorship was counterposed to tyranny. It referred to a venerable Roman institution - a special power granted for a limited time, and not unlimited arbitrary power. Clearly, following the military and bureaucratic dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word has lost its innocence. For Marx, though, it meant something entirely new: a special power based for the first time on the majority. In his own words, the Paris Commune represented "the form at last discovered" of this special power. We should therefore speak today of this experience of the Commune (and of all forms of democracy "from below"). For Marx, the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat did not refer to a specific institutional order. Rather, it had a strategic meaning - that of emphasizing the break in continuity between an old social and legal order and a new one. "Between equal rights, force decides," he wrote in *Capital*. From this point of view, the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the proletarian form of the state of exception.

- Finally, we often hear that while Marx might have been (or actually was) a good economist, or a good philosopher, he was a mediocre politician. I think this is wrong. On the contrary, Marx was a political thinker, but not of the sort taught about in so-called "political science" where politics is a technical and institutional matter. Incidentally, outside of Great Britain there were scarcely any parliamentary systems of government in Europe or political parties of the modern variety known to us now. Marx saw politics as an event (wars and revolutions) and as an invention of forms. It's what I

have called “politics of the oppressed” - politics for those excluded from the state sphere to which bourgeois thought reduces professional politics. While this different approach to politics remains very important today, we cannot ignore the blind spots in Marx’s thinking. These blind spots can lead to taking shortcuts between the moment of exception (the “dictatorship of the proletariat”) and the prospect of a rapid withering away of the state (and of law!). In my view, these shortcuts are very much in evidence in Lenin (especially in *The State and the Revolution*), and this isn’t very helpful for thinking through the institutional and legal dimensions of the transition. All the experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century oblige us to think through the difference between parties, social movements and state institutions.

As for the present-day relevance of the heritage, this is very clear. The relevance of Marx is that of *Capital* and the critique of political economy - an understanding of the socially destructive innermost, impersonal logic of capital. This is also the logic of market globalization. Marx witnessed Victorian globalization - the development of transportation and communications (railways and the telegraph), of urbanization and financial speculation, of modern warfare and the “massacre industry”. We live in a very similar era - with a new technological revolution (Internet and astronautics), speculation and scandal, global warfare and so on. But whereas most journalists are happy to describe surface phenomena, the Marxian critique helps us understand the underlying logic, that of the widescale reproduction and accelerated accumulation of capital. It helps us get at the roots of the crisis in civilization: a generalized crisis of measurement, a crisis of a world thrown off kilter, due to the fact the law of value - which reduces all wealth to an accumulation of commodities and measures men and things according to abstract labour time - is getting evermore “miserable” (this is the word Marx uses in *The Grundrisse*). The result is that the partial rationalization of labour and technique has led to growing global irrationality. The social crisis (productivity generates exclusion and poverty, not free time) and the environmental crisis (it is impossible to manage natural resources over centuries and millennia through the split-second “arbitrations” of bond markets and the Dow Jones Industrial Average) are glaring proof of this.

Behind this crisis - which threatens the future of the planet and of the human species - lie the inherent limits of capitalist property relations. At a time when the socialization of work is more developed than ever before, the privatization of the world (not only of industries, but also of services, space, life forms and knowledge) has become a break on development and on the satisfaction of needs. In contrast to this, the desire for quality public services, the rise in the number of places providing certain goods and services free of cost, and the demand for the creation of “common goods for earth and humanity” (with respect to energy sources, and access to land, air and learning) express the demand for new social relations.

## **2. What are the main theoretical problems that Marxists have to resolve today?**

I will speak of problems that have to be worked on rather than resolved. Because the solutions are not purely theoretical, but practical as well. If solutions are found, they will be the outcome of the imagination and experience of millions upon millions of people. On the other hand, there are questions that have to be reopened and worked on in the light of a century of experiences that neither Marx nor Engels nor any of the founding fathers could have imagined.

- First comes the ecological question. Marx does present a critique of an abstract conception of linear progress (in the opening pages of *The Grundrisse*) and argues that any progress achieved within the framework of capitalist social relations has its underside of devastation and regression (in *Capital* on agriculture). But neither he nor Engels nor Lenin nor Trotsky really incorporated notions of thresholds and limits. The logic of their polemics against reactionary Malthusian currents drove them to gamble on abundance as the solution to the world’s problems. The development of scientific knowledge has made us aware of the dangers of irreversibility and of differences in scale. Today, no

one knows whether the damage inflicted on the ecosystem, biodiversity and climatic equilibria can one day be repaired. So we have to correct for a certain kind of Promethean arrogance and recall that – as Marx pointed out in *The Paris Manuscripts of 1844* – while man is a “human natural being” he is above all a natural being and therefore dependent upon his ecological niche. Just as the Marxist critique is now enriched by work done in other research fields (such as that of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen), in recent years we have also seen significant work on “social ecology” inspired by Marxian critique (John Bellamy-Foster in the USA, Jean-Marie Harribey and Michel Husson in France, and many others).

- Next, I think it’s important to consider the strategic consequences of the changes underway in the spatial and temporal conditions within which politics takes place. An abundant theoretical literature exists on the question of time, both on economic time (cycles, capital turnover, social indicators, and so forth) and the discrepancies between different category of social time (or what Marx himself called “contretemps” and Bloch called “non-contemporaneity”) – that is to say, between political time, juridical time and aesthetical time, a list to which we must now add the protracted category of ecological time. On the other hand, aside from the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre, the social production of social spaces has commanded far less theoretical attention. And yet globalization is producing a reorganization of spatial scales, a redistribution of the sites of power, and new forms of uneven and combined development. David Harvey has shown that Marx made interesting forays into these areas; and he has elaborated upon the relevance of Marx’s work for understanding contemporary forms of imperialist domination. Far from creating a homogeneous “smooth space” of Empire (as Toni Negri would have it), these forms have perpetuated and harnessed unequal development to further capital accumulation.

- A third major theme is that of work and its metamorphoses – from the angle of workforce management techniques involving mechanization, as well as from that of the reshaping of the relationship between intellectual labour and manual labour. The experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown us that formal transformation of property relations is not enough to put an end to alienation in and by work. Some have deduced from this that the solution is to be found in the “end of work” or in the drift (or flight?) from the realm of necessity. There is a two-fold understanding of labour in Marx’s writings. One is a broadly anthropological understanding, which designates the relationship of transformation (or the “metabolism”) between nature and the human species. The other is more specific or narrow and understands labour as constrained labour and especially the form of paid work in a capitalist social formation. In relation to this narrower definition, we can and must set our sights on liberating labour, liberating ourselves from labour, and socializing income with a view to the withering away of the wage-form. But we can’t eliminate “work” (even if we give it another name) inasmuch as it represents the activity of appropriating and transforming a given natural environment. It’s therefore a matter of imagining the ways this activity can become creative, since it is highly doubtful that a life can be free and fulfilled while work itself remains alienated.

- A fourth major question would be that of strategy (or strategies) for changing the world. Following the brief moment of euphoria and inebriation that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, the great promise of the free market quickly lost credibility. Each day provides examples of the scale of social and environmental damage wrought by “undistorted” market competition. The state of permanent war and exception are merely the logical flipside of this historic crisis. The birth of alter-global movements expresses an acknowledgement of failure: the world is not for sale; the world is not a commodity; and so forth. Fewer than 15 years after the supposedly definitive triumph of capitalism (Fukuyama’s famous “end of history”), the idea that this world of actually existing capitalism is inhuman and unacceptable is now widespread. At the same time, though, there are serious doubts about how it should be changed in a way that won’t replicate the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s failures and caricatures of socialism. Without jettisoning the centrality of class

struggle from our understanding of the system's contradictions, the task then becomes one of thinking through the plurality of these contradictions and of these movements and forces; thinking through their alliances; thinking through the complementarity of social and political spheres without merging them into each other; returning to the unfinished work on hegemony and the united front in the debates of the Third International and in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks; and deepening our understanding of the relationship between political citizenship and social citizenship. This is a massive undertaking that can only advance with the assistance of new experiences of struggle and organization.

- To be sure - and this is already implicit in the preceding point - this means grappling with the extent of the phenomenon of bureaucracy in modern societies and its deep roots within the social division of labour. One superficial notion is that bureaucracy exists solely in culturally backward societies, or that it stems from specific organizational forms (such as political "parties"). In fact, the more societies develop, the greater the variety of bureaucratic forms that they produce: state bureaucracies, administrative bureaucracies, and bureaucracies of knowledge and expertise. Social-movement organizations (e.g. trade unions and NGOs) are no less bureaucratized than parties. On the contrary, parties (it makes no difference whether you call them parties, movements or organizations) can be vehicles for collective resistance to financial corruption and co-optation by media (given that media bureaucracy is also a new form of bureaucratization). It has therefore become crucial to think through the ways in which power and politics can be deprofessionalized; to limit the number of elected offices that any person may hold concurrently; to eliminate material and moral privileges; and to see to the rotation of people in positions of responsibility. There is no sure-fire antidote; and these are just measures that track and limit bureaucratic tendencies. Genuine solutions over the long term require a radical transformation of the division of labour and a drastic reduction in constrained labour time.

Marx and the Marxist tradition offer a wealth of (often little-known or forgotten) resources to those working on these questions. But there are also important intellectual tools to be found in other currents of critical thought — whether in economics, sociology, ecology, gender studies, post-colonial studies or psychoanalysis. If we wish to move forward, we have to engage with Freud, Foucault, Bourdieu and many others.

### **3. In your opinion, who have been the most important Marxist thinkers of recent decades and what have they contributed to the development of Marxism?**

It would be pointless to establish a Marxist Studies honour role or top-ten list. For one thing, thanks to the socialization of intellectual labour and the overall rise in the level of culture, the figure of the "maître penseur" or "intellectual giant" (as people like Sartre and Lukacs could still be called in their time) no longer really exists. And this is rather a good thing - a sign of the democratization of intellectual life and theoretical debate. This makes it difficult and arbitrary to put together a list of the great figures of the present day. On the other hand, there is a much broader range of work and research inspired by Marx and Marxisms in a wide variety of fields and disciplines - from linguistics to economics, not to mention psychology, history, geography and beyond. One would have to draw up a list with dozens of names on it, taking care in many cases to specify the person's area of expertise - for while the dream of the "total intellectual" has probably become an illusion, the "collective intellectual" has gained in the process.

There's another reason that makes it difficult to provide a detailed answer to your question. When you list a handful of major figures from the history of the socialist and communist movement - Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Pannekoek, Jaurès, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci - you quickly realize that they were all "organic intellectuals" of the social movement. They were political activists who united theory and practice. The worldwide Stalinist reaction and defeats of the

working-class movement created an enduring separation between theory and practice. This question was at the heart of the short book Perry Anderson wrote on “Western Marxism” in the 1970s. In order to preserve their freedom of thought and theoretical activity, intellectuals — with a few honourable exceptions — maintained a safe distance from political commitment; and when they chose the path of political commitment they often had to sacrifice their conscience and theoretical work. The history of the relationship between French intellectuals and the communist movement is a chronicle of this tragedy. This is what happened to Paul Nizan, Henri Lefebvre, the surrealists, Pierre Naville, Aragon and many “fellow travellers”. In the 1960s Althusser went so far as to theorize a strict division of labour between theory and practice, with a view to freeing theoretical research from partisan tutelage and orthodoxy.

Today we can hope to emerge from this dark period. The alter-global movement is an opportunity for a new coming together of revived social movements and vibrant theoretical research — free from partisan hang-ups and censorship. This is an opportunity not to be missed.

#### **4. Can you tell us about your position on the question of the role of the dialectic in Marxist theory?**

This question is too vast and has been the subject of far too many debates for us to deal with it in a short answer to a short question. I’ll have to limit myself to some general comments. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Germans, Italians and even more so Russians needed dialectical critique in order to achieve their national and social emancipation. During this same time, following the events of June 1848 and then the Commune, French conservative ideology did everything it could to shed the country of dialectical critique. In France, the “underground materialism of the encounter” — to which Althusser elegantly refers in his final writings — was defeated even before Marx arrived on the scene. From the beginning, the “elusive Marxism” (“marxisme introuvable”) of Guesde and Lafargue was tinged with positivism. It was difficult for this brand of Marxism to shift from a classificatory logic founded on definition to a dynamic (dialectic) logic founded on determination of the sort Marx brilliantly deployed in *Capital*. In its most rigid forms, the structuralism that was fashionable in the 1960s effectively prolonged this repressed form of thought — taking petrified structures as its object for study, setting aside events and subjectivity. Structuralism looked at systems devoid of historical context — as if in reflection of the fact that it was becoming more and more painful to think about the history of the century.

Orthodox Marxism — made an official state doctrine in the 1930s by the triumphant Stalinist bureaucracy — took advantage of this state of affairs to tighten the grip of its “Diamat”, now dogmatized and canonized. This was the second assassination of the dialectic, a kind of Thermidor in the field of theory whose premises were clear following the condemnation of psychoanalysis and surrealism at the gloomy Kharkov Congress of 1930. Stalin’s immortal pamphlet *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* set this doctrine in stone. The “dialectic” then became a formal meta-logic, a state sophistry for all seasons and especially for breaking men. The dialectic of critical consciousness (that of Lukacs and Korsch) retreated in the face of the imperative of “reasons of state”.

This reaction within theory combined with another process, especially in France. Under the (up to a certain point legitimate) pretext of defending rationalism and the Enlightenment against the mythology of obscurantist thought, a kind of Popular Front within philosophy supplemented the Popular Front in politics — sealing an anti-fascist alliance under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. This apology for non-dialectic Reason was also a posthumous victory of the Holy Cartesian Method against the dialectician Pascal. Lukacs stood up to his detractors, up to and including in the (very recently rediscovered) 1926 essay where he defends *History and Class Consciousness* and its ideas on spontaneity and consciousness. And yet even he went on to pen the second-rate book *The*

Destruction of Reason (that was only published after the war). The victory of the bureaucratic counter-revolution demanded binary logic in accordance with the principle of the excluded third (*tertium non datur*): “If you’re not with us, you’re against us.” There would be no allowance for struggles – even asymmetrical ones – on two fronts. This logic of intimidation and guilt did enormous political damage (at the time of the Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, martial law in Poland, and once again in the 1980s during the invasion of Afghanistan).

We may be witnessing a rebirth of dialectical thought. That would be a welcome sign that the winds are shifting and that the work of negation is regaining strength against advertising communication strategies that command us to “think positive” at all costs – and against the rhetoric of consensus and general reconciliation.

- The first reason is historical. Following the tragedies of the past century, we can no longer frolic about in the tranquil waters of unidirectional progress, ignoring the formidable Benjaminian dialectic of progress and catastrophe. This has become even more the case in the context of the uncertain transformation of the world that we have seen over the past 20 years. This need for the dialectic is also expressed in the need for a critical ecology capable of intervening on two fronts – against the blissful platitudes of market-driven globalization; but also against the obscurantist inclinations of deep ecology.

- There has also been a renewal of the categories of dialectical logic in light of scientific controversies around deterministic chaos, systems theory, holistic and complex causality, the logic of life and emerging order. Provided that we proceed with caution when moving between one field and another, this raises the need for renewed dialogue between different fields of research and renewed testing of dialectical logic.

- There is a pressing need to think through globalization and the transformation of the international order, from the point of view of the totality (an open totalization) – to understand the new protagonists of late imperialism, and to intervene politically in the more unequal and more poorly combined than ever development of the planet.

- There is a pressing need to think through the century from the angle of discontinuous space-time that is socially produced, and to conceptualize a specifically political temporality – of non-contemporaneity and *contretemps* – instead of lazily thinking about history according to the linear chronological categories of “post” and “pre” (e.g. post-capitalism, post-communism, and so on).

- There is a pressing need to think about what constitutes genuine progress from the angle of development (or of “growing over” in Trotsky’s terminology) – as opposed to that of accumulation and the “growth without development” that Lefebvre rightly criticized in his time.

- Finally, the thawing out of the Cold War and the complex interaction of numerous conflicts have forced people to step out of the binary logic of “camps” under the state hegemony of a motherland (including that of really non-existing socialism), and to reintroduce the excluded third as a way of finding one’s strategic bearings in conflicts such as those we have seen in the Balkans and the Persian Gulf.

If this actuality of dialectical thought is borne out, sooner or later we should expect (and be glad for) the publication of a “Black Book of the Dialectic”, akin to the Black Book of Communism and Black Book of Psychoanalysis that have come out in recent years. It would mean that antagonistic polarization has not been neutralized or dissolved into an “opposition not of contradiction but of correlation.” It would be a setback for fetishism of the *fait accompli* and the way it ousts the possible in favour of an impoverished reality. It would mean that the “philosophy of no”, the work of

negation, the view of the totality, and the unpredictable “leaps” that Lenin extols in his marginal notes to Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*, have not been definitively brought to heel.

For it is Revolution itself that is the ultimate target of these attacks on the dialectic. The Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Lenin: *a Study on the Unity of his Thought* (1924) understood this well. Of course, these works were written at the heart of the storm – during years of crisis, which are usually a time of dialectical intensity.

**5. In the 1990s, it was widely argued that the contradiction between labour and capital was no longer the main conflict in contemporary societies. Do you agree with this idea?**

There are many ways to look at this question. The widely held view you describe was often grounded in an interpretation of sociological changes, and in the observation that developed countries have seen a relative decline of the share of the industrial proletariat within the active population. This decline is real (in France, this share has dropped from 33 to 25 percent), but we’re still talking about 25 percent of the active population; and globally the urban proletariat has actually grown in size.

The impression of a decline or even disappearance of the proletariat is often fed by a restrictive and sometimes workerist definition of social classes on the basis of classificatory sociological categories. For Marx, however, it wasn’t a matter of a positivist sociology of classes but of a dynamic social relationship – since classes only exist in struggle. If you look at the relationship to property in the means of production, the form and level of wages from employment, and location within the social division of labour, the large majority of workers in the so-called tertiary sector (including an ever greater number of women) are proletarians according to the initial meaning that Marx applied to the term. In 1848, the Paris proletariat discussed in *The Class Struggles in France* was not industrial but engaged in something more along the lines of studio-type craftwork. One can therefore easily mistake a weakening of class organization and consciousness (a consequence of political and social defeats) for an irreversible decline of class struggle. That said, we have to focus on the obstacles that now exist to working-class organization and consciousness: the privatization and individualization of social life; flexibility of work; individualization of work time and forms of payment; the pressure of unemployment and job insecurity; dispersal of industry and changes in the organization of production, to name a few.

Still, the capital/labour relationship is a central one within contemporary societies. On the other hand, I wouldn’t use the term “main conflict” since it tends to reduce the other contradictions to a “secondary” place. Rather, there are a series of contradictions that do not fall within the province of the same temporality (the same historical scale), but which are closely intertwined (or “overdetermined” by the prevailing logic of capital, to borrow a term from Althusser’s lexicon): gender (or sex) relations; the relationship between nature and human society; and the relationship between the individual and the collective. The real problem is one of linking these contradictions together.

Why do trade unions, feminist movements, environmental groups and cultural movements converge so spontaneously at the Social Forums? It’s because the overarching unifying force for all these different contradictions is Capital itself – and the generalized commodification that permeates the totality of social relations. But this convergence must be carried out in a way that respects the specificity of the different movements.

Moreover, there is an element of ideological struggle in this question. One can agree with sociologists like Bourdieu when they say that social relations are not simply captured from their natural state but built through representations; nevertheless, these representations still have to be based on something real. There are solid arguments – both theoretical and practical ones – for

representing social life in class terms. It's actually quite striking that while people often wonder about the existence of the proletariat, they never have such doubts when it comes to the existence of employers and the bourgeoisie. One need only examine the distribution of profits and economic rents to prove that the latter do indeed exist! There is a clear issue involved in this insistence on the actuality of class struggle: it is a matter of building solidarity across differences of race, nation, religion and so on. An upsurge of tribal and ethnic strife, religious wars and communal conflict awaits those who now elect to banish class struggle from their approach to the major problems of our time. Indeed, that gigantic step backwards is already underway in today's world. The internationalization of class struggle is really the material (and not purely moral) foundation of internationalism as a response of the oppressed to market-driven globalization.

## **6. What are the points of convergence that you see today between Marxist theory and mass social movements?**

I believe that at its core (the "critique of political economy" and of capital accumulation) Marxist theory remains the most effective tool for tackling free-market globalization and its consequences. As I've already said, its relevance or actuality is that of Capital itself. In fact, most social movements are inspired by Marxist theory, whether they are aware of this or not. In his time, the historian Fernand Braudel pointed out the degree to which the critical categories of Marxism have permeated our knowledge of the contemporary world, even among its detractors. In 1993 — not exactly a favourable time for Marxist theory! — the philosopher Jacques Derrida summarized the ongoing relevance of Marxism with the following formulation: "No future without Marx." With, against or beyond — but not "without"! Marxist theory alone is not enough for gaining an understanding of contemporary society, but it is a mandatory component of any such effort. The paradox is that free-market ideologues who say that Marx is a "corpse" — outmoded, obsolete and dated — can do no better instead than suggest a return to the classical economists and the political philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and to Tocqueville. Marx was indeed a product of his times; he shared a number of its illusions in science and progress. But given the nature of the object whose critique he undertook — capital accumulation and its logic — he transcended his time and anticipated our own. It is in this way that he remains our contemporary — far younger and far more stimulating than all those pseudo-innovations that become obsolete the day after they appear.

## **7. What is your opinion on today's broader socialist movements and the fact that, unlike political parties, they seem better placed to foster struggles against capitalism? What do you think about the future of parties as such, and as components for building an international organization?**

We have to come to an agreement on what is meant by "broader socialist movements". We are probably at the very beginning of a theoretical and practical rebuilding of movements for emancipation, following a century of terrible tragedies and defeats. To some extent, it sometimes feels that we are restarting from scratch. A party like the Workers Party in Brazil (PT) — born at the beginning of the 1980s at the time of the fall of the military dictatorship, and a product of the rapid industrialization of the 1970s — was at the time analogous to the large party of German Social Democracy before World War One. It had the same mass character and its ideological diversity was comparable. But we are at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century now and there will be no getting around the lasting effects of the 20<sup>th</sup>. In less than a quarter century, the PT went through a process of accelerated bureaucratization and became trapped in the contemporary period's mesh of contradictions, the economic and political relationship of forces, and Latin America's place within the reorganization of imperialist domination, among other things.

When it comes to organizing resistance and oppositional struggles, social movements initially appear to be more effective and concrete than party-type organizations. Their emergence signals the



beginning of a new phase of experiences, without which nothing would be possible. However, Marx criticized his contemporaries for their “political illusion” – which amounted to the belief that securing civil and democratic freedoms was the ultimate in human emancipation. In the same way, today we are faced with a “social illusion” that takes for granted the absence of a political alternative and condemns us to an eternity of resistance to free-market capitalism. This is the “left” version of “the end of history”. Yet the crisis of capitalism is so profound — and the threat it poses to the future of humanity and the planet so grave — that there is an urgent need for an alternative equal to the stakes involved.

Here we hit on questions of political project and strategy — and of the forces involved in pursuing such matters as a specific endeavour. Either we seriously fight for such an alternative, or we settle for putting pressure on existing social-liberal forces and “rebalancing” Left forces that are less and less left-wing. The latter approach is a recipe for piling demoralization on top of demoralization. Building a real alternative requires patience, conviction, and firmness without sectarianism. Without these things, we will be crippled by pointless ventures undertaken in the name of realism — and by repeated disappointment. It will be a long haul, since the slope we have to climb back up is steep and treacherous.

Regarding the rebuilding of an international movement, this is an even bigger question. Some compare today’s alter-global movement (with its global and continental social forums) to the early days of the First International – a fairly loose gathering of trade unions, social movements and political currents. There is indeed some of that. And one positive side of capitalist globalization is that it encourages an international convergence of movements (just as the World Fairs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided the opportunity for the meetings out of which the First International was born). But there is a difference. Here again we can see the lasting effects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the political divisions and currents produced by that experience will not vanish overnight. We can’t just hit the reboot switch. This is why convergences and gatherings like the Forums are positive and necessary. No one can predict what will come out of them. That will depend on struggles and political experiences currently in progress – as in Latin America or the Middle East. This initial rebuilding phase is far from over. There are further openings for this process in Asia and Africa. But the condition for, and proof of, the movement’s maturity will be in its capacity to maintain unity in action and even to grow further still, without imposing limits or censorship on necessary political debate. It is clear that an initial phase of resistance – what I call a “utopian moment” by analogy with the nascent socialist movement of the 1830s and 1840s – is now drawing to a close.

The phrase “change the world without taking power” sparked a degree of interest (especially in Latin America, but not only there), but very quickly fell out of favour. That’s because the task today is to take power in order to change the world. In Latin America, it is hard to imagine holding a Social Forum that avoids questions of political orientation and refuses to draw a comparative balance sheet of the Brazilian, Venezuelan, Bolivian and Cuban (!) experiences. And it is hard to imagine a European Social Forum not discussing the need for a European alternative to the free-market and imperialist European Union.

As such, there is nothing contradictory about contributing to these broad gatherings while defending the memory and project of a political current with its own history and organizational structures. On the contrary: such an approach is a perfect complement to movements uniting different forces – and is a pre-condition for achieving clarity and respect within them. Currents that try to conceal their political identity in public are always the most manipulative ones. If what a French philosopher said about there being no clean slates in politics – and about “always starting again from the middle” — is true, then we should always be in a position to embrace new developments without losing the thread of lessons learned.

## **8. Can Marxist philosophy exist within the bourgeois university? Can you tell us about your experience in this regard? How can the bourgeoisie tolerate the presence of Marxists within the university – one of its ideological apparatuses?**

It's a matter of the relationship of forces in society. The educational field is not a closed space cut off from social contradictions. Indeed, this is one of the dangers of an analysis based on the "ideological apparatuses of the state"; it gives the impression that these are mere cogs in the state machinery of bourgeois domination. In fact, schools and universities play a dual role - reproduction of the prevailing social order, to be sure; but also the transmission and creation of knowledge. These institutions are therefore steeped in the relationship of forces. Before and after 1968, Marxism was quite influential in French universities (even though we shouldn't exaggerate things and imagine that there was a "golden age" of Marxism in France). There was real space for freedom of instruction and pedagogical experimentation. Such relative gains are not irreversible. Indeed, since the free-market counter-offensive of the 1980s, academic normalcy and pedagogical order have largely been restored. This can be seen in curricula, methods of assessment and university budget management. But some space remains. For example, I am entirely free to set my course of instruction each year. This year, I am once again teaching a course on reading *Capital* (I hadn't done so for 15 years); I have another course on global war and the permanent state of exception; and another on philosophies of globalization and international law. The problem is that the "Marxist generation" of the 1960s (this is a simplification because it was never more than a sizeable minority) is on its way out; the younger generations have learned critical thinking through Foucault, Bourdieu and Deleuze - which is fine, except that there are fewer and fewer people around to pass on the Marxist heritage.

It's obvious that the relative freedom existing in the universities depends directly on the social relationship of forces beyond their walls. As soon as things change for the worse in the broader society and the social movement suffers defeats, you can feel the effects in the universities. But this is a fight that has to be waged inside and outside the university, because it is also possible to create unofficial channels of popular and movement-based education.

**Daniel Bensaïd**

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**P.S.**

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\* Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2010) was one of France's most prominent Marxist philosophers and wrote extensively on that and other subjects. He was for many years a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International) and subsequently of the NPA. He was also a member of the central leadership of the Fourth International, particularly following developments in Latin America - notably in Brazil - in the 1970s-90s.