

ANNE FAIRCHILD POMEROY

PROCESS, DIALECTICS,
AND THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

Marx and Whitehead

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SUNY series in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences
Lenore Langsdorf, editor

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Process, Dialectics, and the Critique of Capitalism

Anne Fairchild Pomeroy

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*For Irene who taught me about creativity
For Ruth who taught me about justice
For Edith who taught me about care*

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of works by Karl Marx

C, I	<i>Capital: A Critique of Political Economy</i> , volume 1
C, II	<i>Capital: A Critique of Political Economy</i> , volume 2
C, III	<i>Capital: A Critique of Political Economy</i> , volume 3
CM	<i>Communist Manifesto</i> (with Friedrich Engels)
CW	<i>Collected Works</i>
EPM	<i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844</i>
G	<i>Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy</i>
GI	<i>German Ideology</i>
POP	<i>Poverty of Philosophy</i>

Abbreviations of works by Alfred North Whitehead

AI	<i>Adventures of Ideas</i>
MT	<i>Modes of Thought</i>
PR	<i>Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology</i>
RM	<i>Religion in the Making</i>
S	<i>Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect</i>
SMW	<i>Science and the Modern World</i>

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INTRODUCTION

This is an attempt to read Marx through a very specific lens—that of process thought. In some ways, this book would serve as an excellent introduction to Marx's critique of capitalism although, to be quite honest, it should serve as more of a reintroduction. I intend to return to what I consider to be the basics of Marx's position and to enhance the understanding of those basics through a novel approach. While much of the ground covered will be familiar to Marxists, the added language of process is meant to provoke reconsideration and development. A space is opened up by this approach which will suggest that the perennial debates in Marxism may require thorough reconsideration. Many of those debates are simply undercut by this analysis and "melt into air." Likewise, for those familiar with Whiteheadian process philosophy, this project is meant to imply a radical politics emerging from taking that philosophy seriously. We must start here. If we do not get the basics right, then the foundation of our understanding will be faulty and this would be the greatest misfortune because nothing is more essential at present than an adequate understanding of the basics of the critique of capitalism. Such understanding, I argue, constitutes class consciousness and class consciousness is the basis of our future. In service of presenting this foundation clearly and systematically, I have often had to curtail my own articulation of the results of the approach for specific problems, but the implications should be obvious to the astute reader.

I do not believe that I am breaking any radically new ground herein. Many theorists have read Marx in the way I have but what is new is that I have sought to give that reading a solid philosophical foundation and thus to repudiate the positions of those who take Marx to be a mere materialist or historical determinist, of those who would engage in critiques of Marx's economics based on a-temporal models, of those who believe that new historical manifestations of the presence and operation of capitalism in any way change the fundamental correctness of Marx's critique, and, finally, of those who neglect to see in the practice of capitalism anything other than the grossest violation of the human essence. Our current form of social relations is not triumph but tragedy, except as it may present the conditions for what will lie beyond it. May this work aid in coaxing our understanding of those conditions—the understanding of ourselves and of our potential.

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Finally, boundless gratitude goes to my comrade, Peter Amato.

PART ONE

Creativity

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: MARX AND WHITEHEAD

A clash of doctrines is not a disaster—it is an opportunity.
—Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*

There is no doubt that, at the outset, this appears a most curious undertaking. What would motivate anyone to venture a union as unlikely as that between Marx and Whitehead? What can possibly be gained by linking a process metaphysics to a critique of capitalism? Providing at least some preliminary answers to these questions will be the task of this chapter. It will be the case, of course, that only the completed project can serve as a final answer, that the developed union of these positions will stand as its own reason. And so, if the answers given here in this preliminary justification do not wholly satisfy, I beg indulgence and patience. I see what follows as a pathway. Only one completing the journey can judge whether it was worthwhile.

These appear to be unsettled times indeed. The globalization of capitalism is well underway. International trade agreements and loans to developing nations have opened the doors of the global economy and yet protests have raged in Prague, Seattle, Quebec, and Genoa. New York's World Trade Towers were reduced to rubble and the security of this nation's capital has been breached, thousands have lost their lives. A new war has been declared on the United States; a new war has been declared on terrorism. We must wonder, we must ask—where do we stand? Recently some intellectuals have declared the end of history while others decry the injustice of the New World Order. It should not seem strange to find that, the recent expansion and development of capitalism and its concurrent public scrutiny, have led to some considerable discourse regarding the theories of Karl Marx. Word seems to have emerged from conservative, liberal, and radical camps alike: Marx is more relevant than ever.¹ But who is this Marx who is so relevant? Often we find that it is not the critical or revolutionary Marx. In this regard, a 1997

article by John Cassidy in *The New Yorker* magazine entitled, "The Return of Karl Marx," is most enlightening.² Cassidy, himself a Wall Street broker, praised Marx for his analysis of the functioning, operation, and trajectory of capitalism and for his recognition of the importance of economics as a social force. The irony is obvious—somehow I doubt that Mr. Cassidy's appreciation for the accuracy of Marx's analysis has led him to quit his lucrative job in order to join the worker's struggle. In fact, in the final analysis, his article rejected Marx's analysis of the source of surplus value in capitalism. So, how is it possible for someone who is and remains thoroughly ensconced in the world of financial capital to simultaneously discuss the relevance of Karl Marx? Ironically enough, this same tendency to separate the theoretical from the revolutionary Marx is seen in Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida, however, wants to keep the radical spirit of Marx alive while jettisoning the theoretical analysis of the economics. But, how can anyone seriously treating Marx's works separate the economic analysis and the revolutionary critique? Yet, as these examples show, it is done and that it is done signals that something may be very wrong in our understanding of Marx.

Oddly enough, I believe that Marxists themselves are at least partly and perhaps mostly responsible for the division between the theoretical and revolutionary Marx in public discourse. My direct and indirect engagements with various Marxist writers and thinkers over years past have been highly fruitful and yet I have, all too often, left these encounters with a rather subtle sense of emptiness. I have repeatedly had the feeling that something was missing, that an aspect of vital import was, for the most part, being omitted. I have heard a great deal of complex, nuanced, precise analyses of the structure and content of the political-economic critique, which has seemed partially or wholly accurate enough, yet strangely lifeless in a way that Marx's work never was. I could find in these analyses none of the fire, little of the sheer amazement and anger at the irrationality and inhumanity of the capitalist system, practically none of the disgust and fury that resonates throughout Marx's writings. Had we grown complacent? Where, I wondered, was the outrage expressed in statements like, "Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (C, I, 926). Discussions remained theoretically potent but affectively empty and, because of that emptiness, often took on the form of mere academic quibbling about who had the proper "formula." The body of the material was present but the heart and soul quite absent. Did this mean that the economic analysis was not the heart of Marx's critique? Why did the discussion of the economic critique appear so often in a barren form? And why did it not appear this way for Marx himself?

On the other hand, some Marxists have emphasized, often to the exclusion of the economic analysis, the idealistic or humanistic aspects of Marx's

thought. And, as will be familiar to anyone versed in the Marxian corpus, this debate played out in myriad variations regarding the division between the early, humanistic writings and late, political-economic writings, discussion on justice versus interest, religious versus atheistic Marxism, and so on. Whitehead says that the history of philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. We might say the same for the history of Marxism. We still hash out the old problem of the one and the many, form and content in these new guises. Yet, for Marx himself, the idealist and materialist aspects of the critique belonged together as a whole. The *Grundrisse* alone provides ample evidence that the earlier theory of alienation and the later economic critique are part and parcel of the same programmatic. These notebooks, written in 1857–1858, well after Marx’s purported break with his early “humanistic” theory of alienation, contain numerous references to that self-same theory, discussing again the alienation of labor from its products and act of production, from the natural world, from self and others, from species life, but this time as the emergent result of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the *Grundrisse* seriously calls into question any interpretation claiming a radical break between Marx’s work in political economy and his earlier work in alienation, and strongly supports the claim that Marx had therein developed “his theory of alienation as political economy.”³

Further, the essential link between the historically specific critique of the capitalist mode of production and the existential alienation that it produces is intended even in the early writings. The very first statement in the section on alienated labor in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* is quite clear in this regard:

We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presuppose private property, the separation of labor, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land—likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc. On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity, and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities. (EPM, 69)

It is from this point that the discussion of alienation begins. In other words, we start with capitalist social relations, they are presupposed, and this condition of estrangement is their result. Thus, Marx situates the analysis of the condition of alienation within the material conditions of the capitalist economy, which very conditions are the subject of analysis in both the *Grundrisse* and the three volumes of *Capital*. It indeed seems that in the early writings Marx is uncovering the fundamental problematic existential outcome of the capitalist form of political economy and, in the later writings, elucidating the

structure that leads both into and out of that outcome. Thus, he moves from the general result to the specific conditions that produce that result; alienation is a philosophical ontological problem, a condition of estrangement from forms of relatedness proper to human life, but it is simultaneously one that is produced as a specific historical/material form of social relations.

Carol Gould captures the point well, seeing the whole of Marx's work as a "radical transformation of traditional philosophy . . . accomplished by means of Marx's striking synthesis of systematic philosophy and social theory"⁴ and she reconstructs this synthesis in the form of a social ontology that "provides a single foundation both for his analysis of capitalism and of other social forms, and for his theory of being human—of the nature of human activity, its alienated forms and the possibilities that may be realized by this activity."⁵

But what does this mean for the development of Marxism? I regret to say that, as far as I can tell from current discussion, Gould's work seems to have meant little. The same debates rage unabated. The sides are staked out and the parties rarely move. They merely take on new forms with the passing years. There are certainly exceptions, but they are, I fear, few and far between. Even Jürgen Habermas, the self-proclaimed "last Marxist," has difficulty seeing a clear connection between the levels of economic and social production.

Marx does move at the two analytical levels of 'system' and 'lifeworld,' but their separation is not really presupposed in his basic economic concepts . . . the interconnection between the two types of theoretical *statements* could be explained . . . only if it is assumed that there is a logical (in the Hegelian sense) connection between the development of the system and the structural transformation of the lifeworld.⁶

Habermas claims that Marx's distinction between the two levels remains merely formal and semantic and that, in order to forge a real link between the formal analysis of the economic system and its application to the lifeworld, "it would have been necessary to engage in empirical investigations of real abstraction, that is, of the transformation of concrete into abstract labor."⁷ As much as I disagree with a great deal of Habermas's reading of Marx's work, particularly with his interpretations of the labor theory of value, I must admit to understanding and supporting his demand for a formal, logical, and especially, a real connection between the political economy and the form of life it produces.

Gould correctly indicates that Marx has undertaken "a radical transformation of traditional philosophy" but we seem still to be catching up to this transformation.⁸ Sartre diagnoses the difficulty as follows:

Marx's originality lies in the fact that, in opposition to Hegel, he demonstrated that History is *in development*, that Being is *irreducible to Knowledge*, and, also, that he preserved the dialectical movement both in Being and in Knowledge. He was correct, *practically*. But having failed to *re-think the dialectic*, Marxists have played the Positivist game.⁹

What Marx himself left unspoken and undeveloped or underdeveloped has understandably been the source of great consternation, much debate, and egregious errors by Marxists and, finally, is the impetus behind my assertion that the critique of capitalism needs to be grounded in an adequate dialectical metaphysics. Marx cannot have understood "economic" in the one-sided and truncated form that it takes within a capitalist mode of production but rather as a historical expression of the way in which human life produces itself. There must be an ontological significance to the economics that is not merely an accidental result but is its essential nature and, for this to be the case, economic production has to be directly expressible as ontological production. But such expression would require an ontological/metaphysical groundwork within which economics and ontology could be understood as coterminous or at least concomitant notions. This underlying foundation can, I believe, be found in Whitehead's process philosophy.

Now, as capitalism reaches into new labor markets, as it ensconces itself ever more deeply in dependent peripheral nations, as NAFTA and GAAT loosen the legal fetters that bound the progress of its globalization in the past, as we contemplate implementing the MAI to further liberate "trade," as the "project for a new American century" is underway in The Middle East, now more than ever, if we are going to turn to Marx at all, we need to get Marx right. This improbable alliance of Marx and Whitehead may well constitute my desperate measure for what I consider to be a time of desperate need to see Marx aright, to understand the absolute inseparability of the economic analysis from the radical critique. It is my attempt to prepare and present a framework for re-vision, to develop a deeper understanding of dialectics and dialectical being, to allow that understanding to inform our analyses and critiques of our capitalist form of social relations and our visions beyond those relations.

Sometimes, our ways of seeing become too well worn, too familiar, and we see no more. Sometimes, therefore, we need new ways of seeing. William James suggests in "The Sentiment of Rationality" that philosophers "desire to attain a conception of the frame of things which shall on the whole be more rational."¹⁰ My work here constitutes a frame for the Marxist critique of capitalism which is, I believe, more rational—both in terms of its consistency with the whole of Marx's works and in terms of an appropriate unfolding of

the philosophical implications of that work. It is more rational in the pragmatic sense of that term. Through this rational frame I hope to spur creative advance and perhaps even to lure feeling, to open a new door into the continuing work of critique and construction.

Thus, the use of Whitehead's metaphysical system for this fundamental project on Marx is not gratuitous or arbitrary; it is, I will show, the most adequate articulation of a metaphysical vision which provides the deep connection between the ontological and economic spheres. Process philosophy will help to expose aspects of the critique hitherto suppressed, neglected, or misread, it will explicate and provide the solid foundations necessary to ground the ontological statements made by Marx throughout his writings, it will link these to the critique of political economy, and it will allow the critique to reach effectively into the present reality of capitalism and into the projective envisionment of a socialist future. Therefore, implicit in my work here will be a suggestion that process philosophy, if it is to remain honest to its own claims, is, or should be, economically, politically, and what amounts to the same thing, socially radical.¹¹

I should note that the concentration in this project on the ontological features in Marx's work by no means suggests that the analyses of capitalist economics (in the strict sense of that term) are secondary or unimportant. In fact, it should be obvious from what I have said above that they are inextricably linked, and this point should become even more clear as I proceed. The beating heart of the economic analysis and critique in *Capital* will be ontological and coming to the critique of capitalism though its ontological roots is intended to make such critique even more urgent. It is intended to provide the "reason" behind the necessity of continued vigilant struggle in the demystification of the inner workings of capitalist economics as it twists and turns through its various historical manifestations and local and national and international postures; but also to stand as a warning that we never forget why we undertake such work, why we quibble about the formulae, why we struggle over the proper articulation of a possible socialist future: "No actual entity, then no reason" (PR, 19). The demystification of the form of economic production is an ontological uncovering: *alethia*.

REGARDING METAPHYSICS

But can one really fruitfully combine the work of two thinkers who seem to be so fundamentally different? Marx certainly appears to be the vehement and violent critic of his, and our, times while Whitehead is a gentle and calm exponent of a relational world in process. Marx fixes his attention on the material conditions of a particular socioeconomic reality while Whitehead soars in the realm of generalizable metaphysical propositions. Marx is the out-

spoken critic of metaphysical abstractions but Whitehead is the metaphysician par excellence.

I am motivated in part by precisely these contrasts because they focus our attention on what is not articulated or, perhaps, inadequately articulated in each system. Marx needs Whitehead to ground his claims regarding the proper ethos and telos of human life and its productive-processive interaction with, for, and as a part of the world as a relational unity; Whitehead needs Marx to focus on the destructive aspects of capitalism as a form of world productive-process. To begin with, however, we must ask how accurate the characterizations above truly are. Is Marx simply and, more important, solely the critic of metaphysical thinking? Is Whitehead simply and solely the abstractive metaphysician?

Let us begin with Marx. The *Poverty of Philosophy* contains a particularly clear articulation of his critique of metaphysical thinking. His attack is primarily directed at Proudhon, who, he says, has a particularly bad habit of divorcing categories from their historical situatedness or simply failing to see that they are historically situated. And, because Proudhon ignores historical context in this manner, he takes the further step of transhistoricizing those selfsame categories. In this manner, in the manner of crude metaphysicians, he abstracts the categories of political economy from the real individuals and real practices and real relations. One can certainly understand why such a move would so distress Marx. If one fails to see that the categories of political economy arise out of historical practice, then one will simultaneously fail to see, or outright deny, the possibility that the system in which these categories are manifest can be overcome in practice.

It is, Marx insists, relations of production that constitute our social relations and produce the ideas and categories of these social relations. Because relations of production are dependent on the productive forces (the material conditions of such relations), the categories are “historical and transitory products.” There is, in fact, continual movement. “There is nothing immutable but the abstraction of the movement—*mors immortalis*” (POP, 119). But here, of course, is the only general statement made possible by Marx’s dialectics.¹²

A parallel critique is launched against the classical political economists (Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, Say, and J.S. Mill, for example). The error of these thinkers is the ontologizing, naturalizing, transhistoricizing of the conditions specific to capitalism. Their tendency is to project the relations of capitalism onto all past forms of social production. The exemplary statement of this position occurs in the Robinson Crusoe example as recounted in volume one of *Capital* wherein Robinson, all alone on his island, isolated from all social contact, initiates all the activities productive of the elements of capital: labor,

value, exchange value, and so forth. According to the political economists, the human being is naturally a capitalistic animal. Nothing, according to Marx, could be more absurd, for “[a]ll Robinson’s products were exclusively the result of his own personal labour and they were therefore directly objects of utility for him personally” (C, I, 171). There are, for Robinson, no relations of production, no social production, therefore no possible determination of the exchange-value of either labor or commodities, hence no capitalism.

The critiques are quite similar. Bourgeois political economy refuses to acknowledge the historically specific character of the material conditions, social relations, and categories of capitalism. The mistake is one of classifying the concrete as abstract, whether in origin or outcome. In committing this error, capitalism is naturalized: so it is, so has it always been, so shall it always be. This is the danger of crude metaphysical thinking for Marx. It bears a striking resemblance to Whitehead’s first formulation of the notion of misplaced concreteness in *Process and Reality*; which neglects “the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought” (PR, 7–8). Or, as he says more succinctly in *Science and the Modern World*, “it is merely the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete” (SMW, 51), and this, of course, can take place in one of two ways: either by concretizing the abstract, as Whitehead claims occurs in the formulation of simple location, or by abstracting the concrete as is, according to Marx, the case with Hegel, the classical political economists, and French socialists. Marx’s critique is that Proudhon, Ricardo, and others mistakenly classify that which is concrete, specific, historically produced in a given form of social relations as abstract, universal, and trans-historical. Of course it will, in the final analysis be not at all surprising that the articulations of philosophy, economics, or socialism emerging from within capitalism, which Marx classifies as ideological and mystifying, should exemplify misplaced concreteness because such misplaced concreteness lies at the heart of capitalism’s form of social relations. But this discussion can only be fully presented later.

Now, given that Marx indeed engages this critical stance toward abstract ontologizing of historically specific conditions, are we then to conclude that he is opposed to all general ontological or metaphysical formulations? We need to ask whether it is possible for metaphysical thinking to avoid committing such misplacement of its abstractions. Did Marx think it possible?

Marx is no mere critic of metaphysical thinking; he is its reformer. But such reformation needs considerable clarification and development. So, the question becomes: Is there any metaphysics that meets the conditions required by his re-vision? It is my claim that the implicit ontology that would

meet such conditions can be explicitly found in a process metaphysics. But this leads to our second preliminary question: Is Whitehead simply and solely the metaphysician? Is his metaphysical position the kind of trans-historical, abstract, philosophical meta-ideology that Marx so vehemently denounces in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* or the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* or *The German Ideology*? Because, if it is, it should rightly be disqualified for use in this project.

Marx's critique is specifically aimed at metatheorizing that either abstracts the concrete or concretizes the abstract in such a way as to yield a merely one-sided position. He specifically denounces any philosophical, socioeconomic, or political formulations that advocate idealizing or trans-historicizing the historically specific. Therefore, for any metaphysical conception to be acceptable it would have to meet two interrelated conditions: (1) it would have to proceed from the real, historically specific empirical condition; (2) it would have to admit that the generalizations obtained from such an empirical starting point could not be abstractly universalized into trans-historical claims.¹³ In other words, to be justifiably used in conjunction with Marx's work, we would need to find a metaphysics that declares a pragmatic connection to its own specific historical/material epoch, that admits of the fallibility emergent from its own empirical origins, and therein, can unite with the very specific, situated dialectical material/historical critique of social, political, and economic relations.

Whitehead's process metaphysics meets the first of such conditions by expressing primary dependence upon real, material facts of experience. In the first chapter of *Process and Reality* Whitehead says,

Our datum is the actual world, including ourselves; and this actual world spreads itself for observation in the guise of the topic of our immediate experience. The elucidation of immediate experience is the sole justification for any thought; and the starting point for thought is the analytic observation of components of our experience. (PR, 4)

Metaphysics is nothing but the description of generalities which apply to all the details of *practice*. (Italics mine) (PR, 13)

These statements are of the utmost importance. For Whitehead, as for Marx, abstraction and generalization are permitted only on the condition that they proceed from an observation of empirical reality (see, G, 85 and GI, 42, 46–48). Ideology, as an exemplification of misplaced concreteness, is the inevitable result of an inversion of a project's genesis—of believing that you have access to that which you do not. This is not to say that we have no access to metaphysics, to generalizable claims as to the nature of reality, but