

The great recession that the “financial” collapse of 2008 set off did not lead to any successful transformative reform of capitalism. While it led to enough pain to crack the bourgeois aspirational appeal and to create openings for socialist politics,<sup>1</sup> those politics nowhere broke through the hegemony of the capitalist order. The challenge that COVID-19 and the uprising against police brutalities, working together, currently represent for the reproduction of that hegemony may be of a different order. They have arguably precipitated a general crisis of civil and political society potentially more dangerous to bourgeois and capitalist hegemony than any typical economic crisis, even a protracted one, would by itself be able to generate. The popular sentiment they have spawned is perhaps best captured by the expression “the right to existence,”<sup>2</sup> typical of the rallying cries with which the popular masses have historically sustained revolutionary moments.

Coming out of a confluence of predictable sparks and within the time of dangerous political impasse (teetering, at the edge of landscapes of inequality and insecurity, between savagery and despair) in which the neoliberal regime

of accumulation finds itself in relation to the Trump presidency, the crisis has emerged as an existential threat. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the existential terror of a racist policing apparatus, which is easily visible at work over diverse racial and ethnic territories; not coincidentally, clear similarities have been popularly recognized between that terror and the terror that COVID-19 (in both its conditions and effects) has differentially imposed along lines of

class and gender (but also of age and sexuality). The condensation of varied forms and modes of inequality and injustice into the systemic existential threat felt by some—and sympathized with by many—is what generates the revolutionary potential of the moment. Since the 1950s, the political landscape has increasingly taken the form of traditional class struggles and increasingly the form of social-movement (citizenship) struggles engaged in what could be called a dia-

lectic of separation and solidarity. This condensation that we are witnessing, into a recognized condition of systemic terror, has now created the most intense moment of potential revolutionary transcendence of that dialectic since the 1960s. Understood in these terms (of admittedly Hegelian flavor), the revolutionary potential of the moment has perhaps emerged most clearly in the United States. It has, however, remarkable

## The Right to Existence

*Antonio Callari*

<sup>1</sup> Occupy and the Sanders movement in the United States; Syriza in Greece; Podemos in Spain; Corbyn in the UK; and, in a global-order context, the Arab Spring.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the expression from Soboul (1980).

global resonances that are poised to feed into a great chorus of anger and despair, with global revolutionary potential, following the prospective states of widening and deepening poverty, including famine, across the world. Whether this potential is realized (in varied intensities and national and global configurations) will depend on if and how the “right to existence” will come to assert itself over the right (i.e., the logic) of capital.

Revolutionary prospects emerge more clearly if we consider that we are now in the midst and not at the end of a *long duré* of crisis and struggles. The life-threatening conditions the capitalist regime of accumulation has created are not likely to be adequately addressed in any timely manner. On the one side, capitalist ruling circles, if not as ideologically and socially and politically

secure as they were prior to 2008, are far from being dethroned, and they will work to limit whatever reforms that will have to be made to types and terms of reform unlikely to eliminate the patterns of insecurity and exclusion that have brought civil society to this latest boiling point. On the other side, even if the intensity of underlying terror-inducing conditions were to be attenuated, the sense of need for a revolutionary transformation of society and economy is likely to be reenergized by the depth and differential impact of the great global ecological crisis already visible on the horizon. Certainly, we have long shed an episteme of historical

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inevitability. But, given these *long duré* prospects, we can still say with confidence that our crisis period (2008 to 2030–40, depending on the eruption date of the climatic crisis) does place the bourgeois-capitalist mode of humanity on the chess board, reasonably anticipating that a need for an epochal transformation will impress itself on the consciousness of humanity with increasing clarity through the crisis.

The specific question for this essay is how Marxism can see itself as a force for such an epochal transformation, through the evolution of this crisis. Together, COVID-19 and the explosion of pent-up anger at murderous police brutality have gashed through the bourgeois dermis deeply enough that all but the most recalcitrant of the ruling circles have acknowledged the systemic nature of the precarity of life for at

least some, even linking it to general sensitivities about “inequality” that the great recession had already begun to generate. Of course, by itself, this acknowledgement will not lead to radically transformative policies, and possibly not even any reformist policies with teeth: the ruling circles have long practiced the art of changing some surface relationships, when the times require it, so as to forestall fundamental change.<sup>3</sup> But, as we also know, the ruling classes do not get to determine the course of history on their own. The longer the insecurities of life endure, and the greater the resulting increase of affective (anger, despair, mistrust, etc.) balances, the more

<sup>3</sup> See *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958).

the likelihood that popular forces, in whatever combinations of organized and spontaneous actions into which they coalesce through the *long duré* of the crisis, will push beyond the limits of the existing social formation—revolutionary consciousnesses are always baked by the heat of *repeated* moments of crisis and instability. What kind of history (i.e., transformations, more or less radical) is produced by crises has always and everywhere been a conjunctural result of varied economic-and-cultural conditions and political interventions. Marxism has always seen itself as a force (along a spectrum ranging from the real to the aspirational) for shaping these conditions and interventions toward socio-communism. So I now turn to how we might see Marxism playing a role in this *long duré* crisis of *our time*.

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Marx himself worked toward such an intervention *in his time*, moving to strengthen a political force capable of effecting an epochal transformation. His intellectual biography may therefore hold some still useful guideposts as we consider a Marxist intervention in our times of crisis.

Marx never produced a thorough analysis of the political: his contribution was thorough, analytically; powerfully suggestive, ideologically; but only fragmentary, politically. But rather than diminishing the importance of “the political” for Marx, this absence of a thorough analysis on his part has a positive value for us, serving as a sign of the *undecidability* of the political: it is the space of a “real” (in the Lacanian sense) to which the legacy of Marxism must forever return, never to resolve it. That is, the terms of the political can-

not be analytically *defined* (given *finite* parameters) if the “real”<sup>4</sup> is to have its effects (i.e., keeping alive the possibility of a traversal from a crisis-ridden mode of existence to a new mode of being).

For Marx, the “real” agents who could cut through the veneer of bourgeois moral, juridical, and economic forms were “workers.”<sup>5</sup> I will turn later to a particular aspect of the powerful analytical framework through which Marx (and others after him) conceptualized the role of labor in the processes of capitalist surplus-value production while conceptualizing workers as agents of revolution. Here, two meta-analytical observations seem specifically valuable for reflecting on the relationship of Marxism to the crisis of these our times.

The first observation is that Marx—and this is well known—came to the centrality of workers *before analytically producing it*. He came to it from his (and Engels’s) observations of “worker” struggles (both artisans and waged workers, Lyon silk producers and Silesian workers, each in their own precarity). The analysis of the relations and processes of surplus-value production and distribution remains powerful and indeed constitutive of Marxism. But it is important to take some distance from that analysis, its compelling force notwithstanding, in order to remember another equally constitutive element of Marxism: namely, the *primacy of activity (activism) over the concept*; a primacy we know by the term “materialism” (in whatever version, dialectical or aleatory, we might use the term); a primacy reaffirmed, time and again at moments of socialist revolution, in the history of Marxism.

<sup>4</sup> The “real” is where that which is repressed or foreclosed—as, e.g., the relations of production are unacknowledged in bourgeois economics—continues to operate.

<sup>5</sup> Workers as producers of surplus value—in the form, that is, in which Marx described them in those parts of *Capital* dedicated to an analysis of the labor process and the objective condition of expanded reproduction, and not in the form of simple sellers of “labor” in which bourgeois ideology presents them.

The second observation is that Marx made agents of historical transformation of *workers* by virtue of their function as representatives of *humanity*. I do not mean to suggest any kind of return to a Marxism as Humanism here, certainly not in the terms in which that formation has come to be criticized (a Marxism grounded in any abstract, ideological/philosophical concept of humanity; e.g., Althusser 1970). The function of workers as representatives of humanity is what Marx and Engels (1998) produced in the 1848 *Manifesto*,<sup>6</sup> where they formulated workers as agents of an epochal transformation on the basis of the dialectical contradiction of their *condition of absolute dispossession* in a regime that had culturally and juridically boxed humanity into property relations—a formulation that, nota bene, Marx never found necessary to dispute or even qualify in his later writings. Why, we may ask, did the beyond-humanism Marx so link the working class to the fate of humanity? The answer to this question is not that he slipped back into the 1844 zone. It is rather that he and Engels needed this formulation in order to enact a concept of epochal struggle that they had already, even if only broadly, presented in the post-“break” *German Ideology* of 1846: namely, that modes of production change through the political leadership of a class capable of ideologically/philosophically position-

<sup>6</sup> After Marx’s (1964) “break” from the humanism of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

ing itself culturally as a better representative of the interests of humanity as a whole (Marx and Engels 1970).

Now, we know that for about a century the narrative of worker agency was incredibly powerful as a condition for resistance to and transgression against capitalism. But we are also cognizant that the terms this narrative set up for resisting capitalism and creating socialism became problematic in the twentieth century:

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in the West, as capitalism moved both to colonize the consciousness of swaths of the working classes and to normalize—extending antecedents Polanyi (2001) had presciently outlined in the 1940s—a biopolitical management of the conditions (upstream) and stresses (downstream) of the processes of capitalist accumulation; in the area of “really existing socialism”—the USSR and its Eastern European satel-

lites, but also socialist formations elsewhere—as socialist instincts and hopes were replaced by social forms that, designed to “manage” the economic logic Marx had described in *Capital*, ended up instead mostly reproducing it; and elsewhere, too, as old forms of dependency were reproduced and new ones created through continuing savage global processes of primitive and capitalist accumulation.

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movements and socialist movements connected to them, bourgeois interests and inclinations have pursued the accumulation of capital effectively—though not, of course, without stresses and contradictions—and have overcome forms of resistance relatively easily with prophylactic and policing actions at both the national and international levels. Even when announced under a banner of socialism, the resistance has, in the West, often only arced back to capitalist welfare-state forms of governance. The birth of a more radical socialist project—local worker cooperatives in articulation with other forms of cooperatives, experiments in social ecology and anarcho-communalism, forms of mutual aid and solidarity economies, experiments in planning from below as well as revisiting the potential for planning from above in the age of artificial intelligence—seems to me to be still in an embryonic form—still in need, that is, of the *synergistic maturation* necessary to eventuate the birth of a new epoch.

And we? Since the 1970s, we have been trying to understand, not so much the nature and logic of the more or less brutal processes of dispossession and accumulation we have witnessed, for the *broad* outlines of that nature and that logic were already familiar to Marxist theory, but more so how to harness more effective forms of resistance to and transcendence of these processes.

Might the *long duré* crisis of these *our* times not contain within it (evidence of) the elements for such more effective forms of resistance and for a maturation of the embryonic state of a new grand socialist project? If so, how might a Marx-

ist practice of theory help visualize and concretize those elements?

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Here, recall the two elements of historical materialism I introduced above: namely, the idea of the primacy of activity over the concept and the idea that the contention for political leadership in matters of epochal transformation requires ideas *standing for* the interests of humanity. In line with these two elements, we can ask whether the activism that our *long duré* crisis is energizing might be forming *ideas* that have the potential of expressing the force of humanity (i.e., activist masses as representatives of humanity) to break through the limits of capitalist value relations and propel us into a new mode of life.<sup>7</sup>

Our crisis presents itself immediately as a set of violations of a *right to existence*. Transgressing ideologically accepted norms of justice and generating mass popular movements of anger and protest, the crisis thus presents itself as a failure of the biopolitical conditions of life under the aegis of professed bourgeois rights: even establishment media figures are asking whether the promises of equality can be kept, whether the skepticism of the masses and their embrace of street power might be not only understandable but *also necessary*. It would certainly be problematic to overestimate the revolutionary potential of the moment's demand for the right to existence: even if the demand raises questions about capitalism, we know the strength of the bourgeois project to *contain* popular aspirations within certain juridical and cultural boundaries (e.g., equality of opportunities). But it would be

<sup>7</sup> Marx (1970) identified “theory” itself as constituting a “material force” when it grips the masses.

equally problematic to underestimate the revolutionary potential of the moment.

The transformative potential of the crisis is clearly visible in the widening popular understanding of the *systemic* ways in which the inequalities of capitalism undermine the right to existence of “some” (a violation of the ideologically powerful promise of an “all”) and in the resultant requests for *systemic change* encompassing all realms of life, *including class or class-proximate dimension of the economy*. It is true that this

moment thus situates itself primarily in the arena of social movements and citizenship-rights struggles rather than in the arena of the traditional class struggle, and that the struggle remains open to maneuvers of absorption within the bourgeois imagination (equal opportunity, personal responsibility, etc). But, as we know, worker struggles have themselves not been immune to bour-

geois strategies of absorption. It is also the case, *and this is the crucial point to consider*, that the very evolution of capitalism (from a formation in which the *rule of capital* imposed itself immediately at the point of production to a formation in which the *rule of the bourgeoisie* came to take the form of a state managing the biopolitical conditions of the processes of capital accumulation) has, for a long time now, worked to diffuse the operation of the class struggle from points of production to spheres of citizenship. Citizenship

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struggles can thus now be seen more directly as forms of the class struggle against the rule of capital than they could earlier (e.g., Brown 2015). Taking many forms, more radical in some cases (e.g., Italian *operaismo*, radical feminism, black Marxism) and less so in others (liberal versions of feminism and civil rights), this diffusion of struggles has arguably become a *defining* characteristic of bourgeois societies (capitalist social formations) after World War II. Even in their character as social-movement struggles,

the struggles of our day can thus be understood as struggles at the front line of an always latent epochal confrontation between capitalism and socialism and, thus, as containing within them the elements of the class struggle understood in terms of such a confrontation (which is how Marx understood it to the end of his life).

Only history will answer if the struggles for the right

to existence that we are now witnessing will be contained within or be able to transgress the limits of the bourgeois order. But history is made on the ground. How might Marxism see itself as a part of this history making? How might it produce a unity from the powerful energy and personality of the current struggles, even in their social-movement form, both with the healthy parts of the socialist vision it has crucially sustained historically and with the newly embryonic (see above) form of a grand socialist proj-

ect? Can Marxism’s analytic apparatus speak to the current struggles for the right to existence on their own terms, giving them *its* own energies while drawing from *theirs* in the process of forging a common (socialist) struggle against forms of injustice and inhumanity?

I want to argue that, if Marxism can be a force in unity with the activists of the day, it will not be via any explanation of what class is or how class works, which rests on analytical categories that were appropriate for the period of industrial capitalism, when struggles were carried out at the point of production. It will not be via any designation of the forms of identity and struggle (gender, race, sexuality, and environment, primarily, but others too) around which the social movements are organized as “conditions” of the class process that it continues to conceptualize in terms appropriate to workers’ struggles around surplus-value production: the rhetoric of “conditions” continues to make gender and race (and other) practices and identities secondary and to devalue their socialist revolutionary potential. If Marxism can be a force in the struggles of the current (*long duré*) crisis, this will have to instead be via the development of an analytical framework that, even as it coalesces around processes of surplus value, speaks *directly and organically* (and not only *methodologically*) to the identities and struggles of social movements—much as it spoke directly and organically to the identities and struggles of “workers” during the time of industrial capitalism. *This revision of its analytical apparatus, then, is what Marxism has to produce today.* In producing this revision, it would only be doing what Marx did close to two centuries ago in the face of the processes and struggles of

the capitalism of his times, or what other Marxists did a century ago (e.g., Hilferding on finance capital, or Lenin on the schema of reproduction) in the face of the (different) processes and struggles they were seeing in their times.

The analytical framework Marx (1977) himself produced was that of *Capital’s* volume I (volumes 2 and 3 bear the imprints of developments and movements after Marx). There Marx laid out the *logic* of commodity relations and extended this logic into processes of surplus value, and he then, in the section on primitive accumulation, traced out the *historical* conditions whereby workers—agents who, although they could *juridically* function as independent producers/buyers/sellers of commodities—had become *actually* dispossessed and reduced to mere sellers of “labor power.”<sup>8</sup> In *Capital*, then, both analytically and historically, the question of exploitation became (as was the question of socialism to become) a matter of the *ownership* (or lack thereof) of the means of production. It is true that the theoretical apparatus of *Capital* has been, in some ways, qualified and extended considerably; Resnick and Wolff (1987) in particular have made a powerful case for separating the question of surplus value from the question of ownership (and from other questions as well, such as the question of power). Yet the conceptual value apparatus through which the workings of capitalism are laid out remains—even in the nonessentialist philosophical framework in which Resnick and Wolff have embedded it—marked by (and thus cannot but carry the traces of) the historical conditions of the property or propertylessness of *Capital’s* fully juridically enabled commodity producers.

<sup>8</sup> N.b., that none of *Capital’s* analyses are possible without the presumption of full and unimpeded juridical property rights of commodity buyers and sellers.

Can this conceptual apparatus—which all by itself, and *in the terms in which it was first developed*, served the struggle for socialism so well during the times of industrial capitalism—can it serve the struggle for socialism just as well in the period of the biopolitical rule of capital? The answer is that it does not. And I think that it cannot without revisions deeper than the ones already introduced to date.

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Intellectuals associated with the social movements that have been at the forefront of activism have done much work to expand the conceptual horizon framing the operation of capitalism beyond that of agents juridically constituted as commodity owners (buyers and sellers). Both within leftist feminism (e.g., Silvia Federici 2014) and black Marxism (e.g., Cedric Robinson 2000), much work has been done to rethink the historical conditions of *primitive accumulation* as not only the conditions of property and propertylessness of juridically constituted commodity producers but also, *and more broadly and deeply*, as conditions for inclusion in or exclusion from the very realm of juridical ownership in itself. We thus now understand better that, while the process of primitive accumulation worked to cleave the right of the product of labor from juridically free but actually dispossessed producers, it also

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included elements that either limited the juridical “value” claims of some producers (as in the case of women’s work) or negated these claims altogether (as in the case of the work of slaves). Along with changing the historical narrative of the formation of capitalism, this work has enriched the historiography of related aspects of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> It has consequently enriched our vision of socialism (beyond the idea of a planned economy and toward weaving forms of solidarity and community economies into the quilt of socialism—e.g., Gordon Nembhard 2014) and thus also our understanding of the social forces and human drives on which to draw in reenergizing that vision of socialism (e.g., Davis 1983; Kelley 1996).

But, while the work of reconfiguring historical conditions of primitive accumulation in a way that can link Marxism to social-movement forms of struggle in the age of biopolitics has thus been done (a gift of the social movements to Marxism), the work of reconfiguring the character of value relations along those same lines has, I think, lagged (Marxism, that is, has not yet returned the gift). It is indeed a great advance over traditional Marxism that the analyses of processes of surplus extraction and distributions have been extended to include sites (both class and non-class) other than sites of capitalist surplus-value production and distribution. But, to the degree

<sup>9</sup> E.g., the analysis of the influence of slave-labor practices on the shaping of capitalist labor practices (Roediger 2017).



that these analyses have only applied the traditional conceptualization of “value” as labor time, as inherited from traditional Marxism, they reproduce, in the epistemic subtext that sustains them, the conception of industrial capitalism and of the class struggle (with only agents inscribed in the juridical norms of property and propertylessness) that Marx produced for the activist workers of his times. As we have seen, this epistemic subtext excludes from the imagination of historical agency those who were, and continue to be, precluded<sup>10</sup> from a full recognition of their juridical rights in the regime(s) of the bourgeoisie.

It is thus only when and if it reconceptualizes its analytical apparatus to embed constitutively its value categories in processes of repression or foreclosures of rights and identities (as opposed to simply applying its given categories to the cases of such identities) that Marxism will be able to enter into dialogue with the movements that are today at the forefront of the struggle for epochal transformations and work to shape a common socialist vision. Can Marxism perform the reconceptualization that the form of struggle in the age of the biopolitical rule of capital requires? If what is true for “mankind” (namely, that it presents itself only with problems it can solve) is also true for Marxism, then this is a task Marxism *can* (and must) solve.

I conclude by suggesting a hypothesis about how Marxism can restructure its discourse *on value* so as to be able to contribute to the right-to-existence struggle that social movements have been waging, insofar as they can be struggles for socialism: by using the concep-

tual apparatus of Lacanian analysis<sup>11</sup> in order to *rethink the value* processes of capitalism in terms that *map* the repressions and foreclosures of some as elements in constitution of (and not simply conditions of) the regime of the idea of value with which the bourgeoisie has played its cards in history. That mapping could serve not only to enrich the critical analysis of the rhetoric of value but also to reset the terms of economic-theory analyses of money-value-price relations. The outcome will be a deontologizing of labor values, a rejection of the universal rationality that bourgeois thought assigned to *its* calculation of value, and an understanding of the constitution of the regime of value, including its quantitative accounting, as a condensation of the conditions of repression and foreclosure through which capitalism was born and works, as well as of the conditions of exploitation at the point of production that capitalism set up and works to enforce and reproduce. Then it would be possible to visualize (and be energized by) a condensation of social movements and socialist struggles. For the right to existence.

*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

*Antonio Callari is an economist at Franklin and Marshall College. He has written on Marxian economics and on intellectual history as it pertains to economics, Marxism, and critical social theory. He has also engaged, practically and theoretically, in community activism on issues of poverty and economic justice.*

<sup>11</sup> Adopting it where appropriate, as has been done in, e.g., Madra and Özseltçuk (2005) and Tomšič (2015), but also transforming it where necessary—much as Marx did with the apparatus of classical political economy.

<sup>10</sup> By virtue of patriarchy or race, or in relation to the status of “land” as an object of possession that pertains to the form of foreclosure particular to native populations in settler societies, as discussed in, e.g., Coulthard (2014).

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