

MARX AND POLITICS: REDEFINING THE POLITICAL FIELD THROUGH MARX'S LENS. GUEST EDITORS' PREFACE

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ABSTRACT

This issue aims to contribute to current debates by re-engaging with Marx's politically embedded critique, ranging from his early works to later ones. The *Introduction* highlights the challenges and relevance of revisiting Marx's conception of politics, despite the decline of Marxian categories in academic and public discourse, where they have largely been replaced by frameworks centred on individual or collective identity and distributive justice. The Marxian critique, however, retains its significance by highlighting the role of social relations of production and class struggle in shaping political structures and conflicts.

KEYWORDS

Marx, Politics, State, Capital, Class.

More than in the case of other “classical” authors, questioning Marx's conceptualization of politics entails an exercise in abstraction. It involves transferring into the realm of theory an articulation of thought that arose not only from the need to grasp its own era in concepts, but also from a practical impulse to transform it in a revolutionary direction. Moreover, undertaking this task in the 21st century means engaging with a set of categories and perspectives that now possess limited cultural or academic resonance and have largely disappeared from public discourse.

The public sphere in Western liberal democracies may acknowledge “varieties of capitalism”, but keeps well away from the notion of capital as a social relation.

Similarly, it recognizes, alongside the epidermal centrality of identity-based issues, the persistence of conflicts of interest, though these are typically framed as problems of injustice and inequality (or, more cautiously, of its excess), and addressed through a normative horizon of equity pursued via distributive measures.

As for the political realm (including the State, government, will-formation processes, bureaucracy, the military, and other “apparatuses”), few analysts would avow an insight relying on its close connection with economic relations of production and tendencies – a frequent trait of Marxist theories of the State, regardless of their instrumentalist, functionalist or structuralist orientation, and independent of their endorsement of the base/superstructure scheme, or their detachment from it. Nor is the State conceived as a combination of powers that (net of the worn-out cliché of the “executive committee of the bourgeoisie”) allows the multiplicity of capitals to achieve a fundamental “class” unification, particularly in cyclically recurring periods when competitive dynamics and aggregate profit shares are threatened by economic and social crises. Moreover, apart from its ongoing legitimacy in the neutral sociological sense, class has largely ceased to be part of theoretical toolboxes and of political activist repertoires, replaced by a focus on isolated individuals and proliferating identities: if “society does not exist”, classes do not exist *a fortiori*.

What is at stake with Marx’s insights on politics is not only the theory and practice of class struggle (both as an economic conflict and as a conflict over laws and constitutions) and of revolution, but also the nature and function of the State, and the relations between states.

In this last regard, within a world now largely unified under the predominance of capitalist relations, the current public discourse presents a global political landscape divided into a dichotomy between the field of liberal democracies and that of “autocracies” (or, seen from the opposite side, between the “collective West” and “the rest” of the world committed to liberating itself from the long-term effects of colonial domination). The relevance of the Marxian perspective lies not in removing the differences between political systems (as is evident, for example, in Marx’s concrete political positions with regard to the German democratic bourgeoisie and the oppressive Prussian State), but rather in reasserting the primacy of the analytical criterion of social relations of production and economic laws of tendency, against the ideological polarization between new blocs and the uncritical ratification of their existence, which often acts as an unexamined premise of geopolitical “discourse”.

This journal issue does not aim to cover the full spectrum (itself far from exhaustive) of themes and problems we have briefly outlined, but it nonetheless seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate around several important lines of inquiry. Marxian thought has always been, for the most part, politically “embedded”, both in its origins and in its aims. This is evident, first and foremost, in the body of works and interventions that can be categorized as a “critique of politics”: the cri-

tique of the Hegelian framework of public law, the critique of universalism and of purely political emancipation, the conception of history as a process driven by class struggle, the analysis of political events – particularly in France – and the critique of the political programs of workers' associations and parties. Secondly, this political dimension is reflected in the theoretical content of the critique of political economy across its different stages of development. In the early period, the proletariat – conceived as the social subject most intensely and comprehensively affected by the alienation inherent in modern forms of socialization – is identified as the revolutionary subject. In the later, or so-called “mature,” phase, class conflict is shown to be inscribed within the fundamental categories of political economy and within the very dynamics of capital's production and reproduction.

The contributions of this issue seek to deploy these multi-directional orientations exploring the domain of politics within Marx's thought. The result is a complex weave of threads which illuminate it according to different viewpoints and investigate the different vectors that emerge in his work.

By analyzing the 1841 *Exzerpte* written during his work for the dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus and devoted to Leibniz, Hume, Spinoza and Rosenkranz, Giuseppe Cospito highlights how Marx's historical-philosophical approach is articulated from its very beginning according to an excavation which is also an orientation toward his specific problems and issues. It results in a *montage* which sets the framework of its analysis of both the categories of his intellectual environment and the contradictions of his present time. The critique of politics of Marx's first works as well as his mature critique of political economy would be difficult to understand out of this historical-philosophical backdrop. As it is very well known, Marx's focus on the problem of politics and emancipation could be located at the very beginning of his work and raises from a deep – and increasingly critical – confrontation with the so-called young Hegelian, with Hegel himself, but also with the directions opened up from the revolutions of the last decades of Eighteenth Century – above all, the French revolution. Marx's critique of politics, which both shows the abstractness of such theoretical positions and highlights a new meaning of critique itself, questioning deeply the endurance of modern political forms in front of their own immanent task: the realization of freedom. As Stefano Petrucciani remarks very clearly in his contribution, Marx unveils the alienated trait of both representative political democracy and money-based economy, but also analyses the limits of the universalizing discourse of humans and citizen rights, showing how both are fractured from the very modern divide between political and social sphere. Therefore, politics becomes an “open question” – as Panagiotis Sotiris understands it –, because it refers both to the traditional modern idea of right and State as the place of universalizing rationalisation, which is criticised by Marx, and to a renovated practice of politisation, both associative and conflictual, which arises within the experimental and creative instances of class struggles within capitalistic world.

Therefore, within Marx's framework, rather than being raised trans-historically, the issue of politics is strictly related with the analysis of the contradictions of modern world understood as the universe dominated by capitalistic mode of production. The emancipative traits of political practice are related to the specific mediations through which capital intersects both the structure of juridical sphere and raises its own antagonisms. The shift from the traditional semantics of politics comes to light precisely in the way in which Marx gradually leaves aside the idea of law as an expression of universality focusing on the specific antagonisms that contribute to build it. Accordingly, as Maurizio Ricciardi shows focusing on the becoming of Marx's concept of law, the intertwinement between juridical lexicon and the analysis of the relation of capital opens up a renovated framework within which understanding the relationship between economical and political sphere in modern society. The level of economic structure cannot be understood as that world lacking of conflicts depicted by political economic, precisely because its own law of motion does not realize autonomously. Rather, according to Marx's investigation, capital deploys tendencies which are immanently contradictory and exposed to the risk of crisis and to the effects of class struggles. Political dimension, thus, is deeply inscribed into economic field, although these struggles cannot be simply understood as resistances to capital. As highlighted by Guido Starosta, their emancipative potential could be located, within Marx's mature critique of political economy, only by grasping clearly the power of subsumption of capital itself and the necessity of class struggles to the reproduction of capital.

This articulated framework, which entails a renovated consideration of politics freed from the limits of abstraction of bourgeois and liberal approach, is developed within Marx's works through a rigorous, even though multifocal, analysis which implies both the understanding of the logical categories of capitalistic mode of production in its relation with political forms and a critical historical gaze able to inspect the concrete transformations of his own era. As Marco Vanzulli clarifies considering Marx's interpretation of the model of democracy displayed by Commune Paris, redefining the relationship between "politics" and "economics" toward a socialist orientation demands also to inspect the complex historical dynamics of the present time, removing the veil of their social necessary appearance of isolation. In this framework, specific political configurations become a potential tool to imagine new revolutionary strategies and working class political organisation, as emphasized by Jean Quétier through the analysis of the unpublished letter of Marx to Jules Guesde (10 May 1879). Accordingly, the later Marx does not only focus on the intertwining of political forces, national organizations and institutions, but also on the way in which they are related and seek to rule economical tendencies and financial crises. Far from resulting in an abstract and deterministic interpretation of history, as remarked by Michele Prospero, the relation between crisis and revolution arises also from the deep "empirical-analytical" inquiry that Marx carries on also through the collection of journal extracts, reports, data. This

“empirical” material allows Marx, as shown by Chiara De Cosmo, to define concretely the practical possibilities of a socialist revolution.

Outlining these multifocal directions, this issue seeks both to shed light on the extent of Marx's conceptualization of politics and to offer new theoretical tools to address even the contradictions of our time. It aims also to pinpoint a model of theory able to keep firm a moment which seems to be left aside from contemporary political, sociological and economical approaches: that of a critique which is also a transformative understanding of the present.