

The Many Deaths of Mr. Marx

Or, What Left Historians Might Contribute to Debates About the “Crisis of Marxism”*

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In the ‘90s, leftists became quite accustomed to hearing about the death of Marx. Over and over, the news was repeated: Marx is dead; it is time to bury him. Marx and Marxism are both finished. Those who thought otherwise were advised, again and again, to look at the irrefutable evidence: the collapse, in chaos and confusion, of the first revolutionary workers’ state; turmoil and disillusionment in socialist parties claiming direct descent from Marx but unable to adapt his theories to a globalizing modern world; the retreat of a once-proud Marxist culture in the universities, where one could in the nineties take entire courses on the “Dissolution of Marxism.”

So much for the 1890s. Could there be some instructive lessons, a century later, for us?

Two Contemporary Versions of the “Death of Marx”

The human being Karl Marx died once, on 14 March 1883. On the other hand, “Marx” — that word which evokes of a century of socialist hopes and dreams, achievements and failures, the Enlight-

* This is a review of Ronald Aronson, *After Marxism* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1995) and Frank E. Manuel, *A Requiem for Karl Marx* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995). Parenthetical page references to these books refer to these editions. A version of this article was presented in March, 1996, to the Frank H. Underhill Graduate Students’ Colloquium at Carleton University. My thanks to the Colloquium for comments and encouragement.

enment and its proletarian critique — has died many times. Indeed, the ritual of the “death of Marx” has been a recurrent aspect of liberal bourgeois culture, so much so that one begins to imagine that were there not a Marx for each new generation of liberals to finish off, it would be necessary for them to invent him. “Marx” is liberalism’s indispensable Other, the monster who must be, in the interests of the mental health of each new corn-fed, rosy-cheeked bourgeois generation, declared dead and buried. In our nineties, in seminar-rooms and lecture-halls throughout the west, the good news is proclaimed: the monster is no more, and liberals, as the inheritors of the earth and custodians of western culture, may once again celebrate the “end of history.”

Future anthropologists may some day exhaustively study this fascinating tradition, to establish the features common to Deaths of Marx as they have been enacted across time and space. The comparative study of the ritual would inevitably require a sensitivity to the particular experience of “Marx” that needs must be declared finished: obviously countries ruled until recently by geriatric kleptocracies and state capitalist bureaucracies that once sought a semblance of legitimacy by invoking Marx’s name will feature a rather different ritual than those countries where the name of Marx has been traditionally associated with the democratic workers’ movement and the radical left. Much work remains to be done in investigating this invented liberal tradition. Even so, one can with some confidence map out some of the background and intrinsic features of the ritual. Five major “Deaths of Marx” have occurred since 1883. That of the turn of the century — 1890-1914 — is in many ways still the “classic,” and focused on the alleged failure of Marx’s economic predictions and class analysis: it produced such significant works as Böhm-Bawerk’s *Karl Marx and the Close of his System*, and such major rejoinders as Hilferding’s *Finance Capital*. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Deaths of Marx (in the 1920s, late 1940s-early 1950s, and the 1970s) have often taken the form of attacks on the Soviet myth-symbol complex, all of whose features were conveniently if improbably traced back to defects in Marx himself. In their absoluteness of judgement and

atmosphere of high political melodrama, such rituals often resembled nothing so much as the Orthodox Marxolatry they declared null and void, although in fairness one should note that some of the major works (notably *The God That Failed* of 1949) succeeded in developing much subtler personal narratives of enslavement, autocritique and redemption.

One may also generalize about the formal choices that confront all who seek to stage a Death of Marx. No performance of the ritual can attain much plausibility without the development of a vivid and simple narrative about the not-so-dear departed. Reservations about *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacies, worries about the over-extended use of the trope of personification, reluctance to reduce entire centuries to one-word slogans: all these must be set aside. Marx = Marxism = Marxism-Leninism = Communism = Socialism = Stalinism: through these bold equations, one constructs a negative image of Marxism that precisely mirrors the Communist Parties' own narratives of continuous Marxist history. Both detractors and defenders of the "Marx" whose (theoretical) existence is at stake agree that there was once "a" Marxist tradition, founded jointly by Marx and Engels, unified by the philosophy of dialectical materialism and by a science of social evolution called historical materialism, whose most important historical upshot was the Bolshevik Revolution and the world Communist movement. Both sides come to invest heavily in a common mythology, a common narrative of significant events, and in a shared canon of major works and thinkers. Both assume the existence of a total and unitary "Marxism" that once aspired to answer all the major questions of a struggling humanity. Both hypostatize and oversimplify — falsify, to put it baldly — dynamic and heterogeneous ways of thinking and being through which complex human beings have related the future possibility of freedom with the past and present realities of necessity through a relationship with "Marx."

One may also generalize about the *forms* through which the Death of Marx is enacted, of which two, Farce and Tragedy, have been overwhelmingly significant in recent times. Fortunately for today's busy intellectuals, there are well-tested recipes to follow for

both forms. If one is concerned to produce a Farce one searches for high-brow inspiration in *The Illusion of the Epoch* or in Leszek Kolakowski's three-volume denunciatory history, and for more gripping, low-end fare in the large and varied anti-Marx productions of the Cold War. Good primary materials also lie near to hand — the Marx/Engels Correspondence is in this respect a heaven-sent treasure trove, which can be turned to virtually any hostile purpose. Such a diversity of resources allows for a wide choice of tone: older-but-wiser regret (“Alas, we survey the ruins of yet another grandiose Victorian synthesis”), retroactive prophetic indignation (“In these intemperate comments of the seventeen-year-old Marx we can clearly see the outlines of the totalitarianism to come”), and so on. If the point of the Farce is to dramatize the childish foolishness of Marx and the Marxists, the point of the Tragedy — which is greatly preferred by those who were at one point Marxists themselves — is to develop a narrative in which the Promise of Youth is betrayed by the Opportunism of Old Age. It was ever thus, one murmurs to oneself as one views the film of this sad decline: youthful romantic idealism inevitably betrayed by the seediness of politics.

The symbolic props used in the ritual have shown remarkable consistency. The grave must be desecrated, and then desecrated again; the body symbolically exhumed and mutilated, its wounds exposed and derided; the madman's texts torn to pieces. Nothing, *nothing* can be left of this space in our culture. It must be declared void and finished, empty and pathetic: the ritual has no meaning unless Marx-as-Prometheus is not only bound to his rock, but thoroughly eviscerated. In the clear, fresh morning of liberalism, Marxism can be presented as a nightmare, whose sole value resides in the warning its sorry record sends to young people, who may as yet still be unaware, competing frantically for McJobs, that this is the best of all possible liberal worlds. Today, in the seminar-halls and lecture-halls and academic conferences, redolent with the incense of the neo-liberal dispensation, one wheels the bleeding monster back on the stage, aglow with his perverted hopes and his demented dreams, only to demonstrate how securely he is now

bound by his chains. What better way to prepare young minds for the inevitability and goodness of the liberal world they will inherit?

It's been done, as we say in the 1990s. The point of a political ritual, however, is that it must be done again and again and again. It must combine continuity with change. The forms must be followed, but they must also be refreshed with new twists. To retain the attention of the audience, God should not Fail in exactly the same way decade after decade. The present-day Death of Marx is in a sense a reworking of old Cold War and conventional liberal material; perhaps it goes further, however, in declaring not just its hostility to "Marx" but to any principle of hope, to any conceivable left.

Of the making of Death-of-Marx books there is no end; assimilating just those published recently in English would demand years of one's life. Here we focus on two typical productions out of the scores which were published in 1995 alone — Frank E. Manuel's *A Requiem for Karl Marx* and Ronald Aronson's *After Marxism*.

Frank Manuel's Requiem is mistitled. One does not expect, when attending a requiem mass, to confront the wheezing voice of the county coroner, hooting with delight over the many probable causes of the old reprobate's death. *Anatomy of a Madman* might more appropriately convey the flavour of the book. Manuel-as-coroner wields his scalpel with a cold and vigorous relish. In Manuel's account, Marx, a bizarre prophet who launched a strange and terrible faith, is virtually a monster. How farcical and preposterous that this disease-ridden body should have once seemed so alive, that only in recent times have the departed's ideas become "historical relics"!(vii)

And the coroner has no trouble explaining the etiology of this case. Marx's fatal disease was self-hatred. Manuel's "Alien of Trier" passes from his stormy, conflicted youth to his miserable, cantankerous old age, haunted by a Jewishness he can neither renounce nor embrace. For Marx were reserved the subtle torments and rages of the closet. In "Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession," the seventeen-year-old Marx's reflections on his future, Manuel finds an "outlandish" "Judeo-Lutheran

rhetoric.”(10) Not only that: in the teenager’s noble aspirations, he discerns the self-pity, the romanticism, the throttled struggle between mind and body that was to poison Marx and Marxism for years to come.

The youth could in the abstract depict the war between the spiritual and the physical elements in his being, and give utterance to the dread that if he did not resolve this conflict in the soul he would be defeated by the turbulence of existence. But if he overcame his inner turmoil he would emerge a hero, indomitable; burdens could not bend him and he would enjoy a bliss that was no shriveled egotistical delight, but a happiness that would be shed upon millions. His fame would be everlasting and when he died his ashes would be moistened with the hot tears of noble men ...

The image of mourners shedding copious tears over the ashes of their hero can be read in psychological terms. In the course of almost five decades Marx embellished with scientific decorations this adolescent dream of himself as the savior of humanity. He grasped whatever came along: the science of economics in the English mode, the analysis of social relations in French class terms, the philosophic system of Hegel with its concept of stages in a dialectical development, and the Diderot-Hegel idea of alienation. He would denounce revolutionaries led astray by the quick solution of a coup d’état and would deride rival utopian visionaries after having read and sometimes assimilated them. But in retrospect he remained loyal, after a fashion, to the self-imposed mandate of his gymnasium essay.(12)

Duly protecting himself with the obscure qualifying clause “after a fashion,” Manuel is still suggesting here that in the seventeen-year-old’s inevitably rather youthful reflections on life, the world and everything, we can glimpse the psychic — perhaps even psychotic — motivation behind *Capital*.¹ Marx, riven with self-contempt, and despising his Jewishness, fiercely rejecting his mother, was already, at the tender age of seventeen, a Man Pos-

1 Of all the many efforts to efface any distinctions between Marx pre- and post-1848, this must be the most audacious of them all.

essed, an incipient megalomaniac. Incapable of love, tormented by suspicion and contempt, misanthropic: throughout his life Karl would bitterly renounce the collectivities into which he had been born. And what better evidence of this inner turbulence could there be than his body, erupting in explosions of carbuncles and furuncles? Were not such symptoms — along with Marx’s gastro-intestinal and liver ailments — all understandable as the “overt physiological manifestations of a submerged psychic pain”?(17) The undisclosed burdens of closeted Jewishness: that is a large part of Marx’s, even Communism’s,² story. Marx’s refusal to compartmentalize himself (which led to his “personal affairs” falling “into chaos”), his unwillingness “to perform the basic tasks of earning his daily bread,” and his readiness to sacrifice, on the “altar of the revolution,” his “wife, his children, his own elementary well-being,”(64) even his tardiness in completing *Capital*, can all be traced back (in part) to this same essential psychic disturbance. In fact, even Marx’s subsequent turn to the “fantasy” of leading the proletariat to victory can be seen as his salvation from his “festering wounds of ... self-loathing.”(121) Not to mention his adulterous relationship, his constipation, his two decades of carbuncles (erupting, the author takes care to tell us, not without a coroner’s prurient malice, even on his penis!): all can be read as indications of a man

- 2 After all, Manuel points out, even Lenin’s maternal grandfather was a converted Jew. And Jewish Bolsheviks, he goes on to argue, must shoulder some of the blame for rekindling anti-semitism in Eastern Europe: “As the Russians pushed back the German tide after Stalingrad and reoccupied border lands, Jewish communists in the train of the Soviet army inflamed the enmity of native ethnic groups, rekindling endemic antisemitism, a hatred that outlived the extermination of millions of Jews, in which Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Poles, Belorussians, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and sundry other ethnic agglomerations in the region were often implicated. The schizophrenic behavior toward Jews in communist regimes or in freshly minted ex-communist regimes calls to mind Marx’s incapacity to cope with his Jewish identity. Jewish communist and ex-communist leaders in Central and Eastern Europe, well into the present, have not been cleansed of their racial stigma any more than Karl Marx when he was baptized.”(152-153) Such contentious ethnic generalizations are characteristic of the entire book.

at war with himself, with his body, with his Jewishness, with his fate.

It was from this snakepit of twisted hate, throttled fury, frustrated drives *and* carbuncles that Marxism would emerge, itself contorted, alien, distorted, blind: in its own way, another kind of Monster. The hand of “rootless, godless Karl”(16) weighed like a nightmare upon his benighted followers, seduced as they were by a crackpot fantasy of social redemption through proletarian revolution. Largely because of Karl’s inability to deal with his Jewishness, his followers were unable to come to terms with nationalism and ethnicity. How could they, when all they could rely upon was the figure of their founding father, this “wandering Jew” who “failed to appreciate the tenacious hold of ethnicity in modern Europe,” whose “psychic economy” had been devastated by his status as a baptised Jew without a country?(16) And the entire theoretical edifice of Marx may in some sense be plausibly attributed to this psychic storm: “the self-hate of Marx, who lived in constant denial of being a Jew, when turned outward was transformed into a universal rage against the existing order of society, and bred a utopian fantasy of redemption.”(21) In the “Marxist fantasy-construct of the productive system, the more the individual impoverishes himself physically and psychically, the more manifest the omnipotence of the machine-god becomes.”(24) And because Marx spawned a fantasy of social redemption in which the individual counted for nothing, it is legitimate to couple his name “with the bloodthirsty tyrants who tortured and executed millions while mouthing his shibboleths,” for these regimes “derived their justification from the idea that the individual was of no moment in the period before the dawn of true human history, the coming age of unalienated labor ...”(238-239)

Manuel’s version of the Death of Marx is undoubtedly a Farce, but (as suits an end-of-millennium sensibility) a Farce that should be staged at the height of a thunderstorm. One thinks perhaps of a neo-conservative remake of *Frankenstein*, in which the Faustian mad scientist tampers with the laws, not this time of nature, but of budgetary restraint, Free Trade, and other sacred tenets of liberal

political economy. Like a mad scientist, Marx (joined by his “alter ego” Engels, an Igor-like figure in Manuel’s narrative) would turn to the “rock bed of science” as an anchor for his “dream of freedom:” he was pursuing the dream of a type of social knowledge “subject to laws as mathematically demonstrable as Newton’s.”(62) Darwin too would play a decisive role, both in introducing a new brutality to the Marxist vision and in revealing to Marx and Engels that nature proceeded along a dialectical path: “their theory of the development of economic systems was in harmony with the Darwinian depiction of the origin of species in a struggle for existence.”(103) But could the Man of Science ever really escape the “man of rage”(18) who lurked in the deep recesses of his soul? This pathological Marx schemes, bullies, tyrannizes. He ekes out a life in the shadow world of cabals and conspiracies, in which he masters the techniques of dirty party politics. Perhaps, Manuel remarks, this vicious legacy of *realpolitik* was even more important to the Tragedy of Marxism than Marx’s economic theory:

The major religions have reserved their bloodiest reprisals in this world and threats of the cruelest torments in the next for doctrinal deviationists from the messianic leader’s well-marked course, though their differences may be hardly discernible or seem trivial in other periods. The little deceptions that Marx might pull when he was engrossed in the intrigues of the First International were inflated into life-and-death struggles when enacted on the expanded Muscovite stage after the Bolshevik Revolution. His vehemence against opponents endured in the political speech of communist leaders, dressed up in ideological wrappers, after they became heads of state. There is an unbroken continuum between the émigré cannibalism of the 1850s in London and the triumphant Moscovite revolution devouring its children seventy years later.(99-100)

For Manuel, it is a measure of the Monster’s strangeness that he remained oblivious to the richness and intricacy of the British liberal culture all around him, even as he sat pursuing his strange dreams in the British Museum. The eyes of Manuel’s Marx were fixed not upon Gladstone but upon the bigger picture of social

evolution. In his emergent view, capitalist evolution could be interpreted as a clashing interplay of three social collectives: “the men of the land; the men of capital; and the men of labor.” Yet a “moral argument” intruded into this analysis: “the men of labor receive in return for their work an unfair share, a pittance so small that it hardly provides for their bare subsistence. Their wages are determined by an iron law that keeps them forever on the verge of starvation.”(126) Marx’s “myth of the class struggle” — the “monomania ... to which he sacrificed the well-being of his wife and children”(142) — would become “one of the most tenacious illusions Marxist thought has bequeathed to the twentieth century.”(139) Those caught in the grip of this deadly illusion would disparage the natural ties of ethnicity and nationalism. Not for them warm and personal ties of family, kinship and *ethnie* — they were imprisoned by the cold logic of an abstract internationalism: “What could be more remote and impersonal than an all-embracing Comintern, a communist international?” asks Manuel. “What is more individual, specific, particular than an ethnic commitment, love of the land of one’s birth, nostalgia for the smell and taste of mother’s food, for the familiar turns and twists of a folk dance or a folk song, for the magical resonance of a native tongue?”(148) On the one side, then, we have a Frankenstein-like utopianism, whose “ineradicable signature” was “total technology,”(175) and on the other we have the smell and taste of mother’s food. Even a jaded connoisseur of Death-of-Marx books can only admire the daring simplicity and force of this compelling and sophisticated binary opposition between *The Total Machine* and *Mom’s Home Cooking*.

We are left with an overwhelmingly negative image (softened only somewhat in the *Requiem’s* concluding pages, when the author tries to say something nice about socialist humanism) of a damaged man whose personal psychic and bodily torments became the nightmare of the world. In the details of Marx and Engels politicking in the First International, we can trace the origins of the Gulag:

What Marx and Engels bequeathed is the spirit of authoritarian rule, which manifested itself in peremptory purges of the deviationists who dared to defy the leader. His manner of manipulating the instruments of political destruction against foes and former comrades reveals a naked Marx, his body covered with carbuncles, driven by a lust for absolute power as consuming as his passion for system-building. Perhaps the excruciating carbuncles directed his *praxis* more often than the abstract theory of his economic and philosophical writings ... The tendency of sufferers to strike out against presumed enemies is common enough; the same force that fueled the creation of his juggernaut against the bourgeoisie could be mustered against rivals in the working-class movement. (208-209)

As for Marxist theory, it would survive only on “apology and propaganda.”(228)

The coroner concludes his autopsy, and yet — in the best traditions of *Gremlins*, Part One (or was it Part Two?) — we leave Manuel’s *Requiem* with a lingering doubt. Is the monster gone for good? Or has it mutated, leaving a million monsters, “Marxist particles”(vii) that may have dissolved into “the spiritual atmosphere of our times and bonded with so many alien bodies that it is impossible to identify and isolate them?”(vii) One awaits the sequel: *Marx Part II. Children of the Damned. Coming Soon to a University Press Near You ...*

In going from Manuel’s *Requiem* to Aronson’s *After Marxism* — a post-modern remake of the 1949 confessional classic *The God That Failed* — we move from Farce to Tragedy. Aronson’s book has a very different, first-person, “I was there” feel to it. As is required by this form, we hear a great deal about the sufferings of the young Aronson — his arduous search for “life’s meaning”(12) — and of his miraculous deliverance from this travail, which came when he was “converted” to Marxism (at Brandeis, November, 1962). The light came on, and this modern-day St. Paul was suddenly flooded by it, overcome by the presence of a theory with “stunning explanatory, ethical, and inspirational power. It allowed me to share in a sense of collective might and right, of acting with and for all humanity, beginning with the oppressed and exploited. It drew me into a larger ‘we’; it allowed us to think that were

grasping the world's central structures and evils, to act with the sense that history was with us and we with it.”(9) Suddenly, in the eyes of the new convert, *everything* could be seen anew in light of the new revelation.

This single way of seeing and living the world very suddenly provided what I had been looking for in northern California and before: a philosophical perspective; a way of giving coherence to human history; an explanation for inequality, privilege, and other social evils ... ; an understanding of the fundamental social evils and the path to overcome them; a vision of a meaningful future; a sense of belonging to the community of those who pursued this; an explanation for my sense of being an outsider in the middle-class world that awaited me; and a direction for my own life. Marxism helped shape and focus my beliefs about people and about history; it simultaneously explained the feeling that something was wrong and that humans were at bottom cooperative, rational, and equal, and it allowed me to project these feelings into a history to be deciphered not only as a story of human and technical development, but of oppression and uneven progress in overcoming it. My new sense of coherence, of understanding, of purpose, of being part of the new world in the making was dazzling.(13)

Paul on the Road to Damascus was lukewarm by comparison. And Aronson, like Paul, would hang in there through thick or thin, at least right down to 1992. “I believed in history with a capital ‘H,’ as grasped by theory with a capital ‘T.’ As long as various justifications for this faith could be found in reality, Marxism gave me hope.”(38) *I believed*: the perpetual cry of the disillusioned acolyte, glancing back wonderingly at the fervour of his former faith.

For Aronson, the Marxism he has lost used to be a *complete world-view*, not just a specific socio-economic analysis. It included “an entire outlook, including a philosophical anthropology, an ethics, a philosophy of history, and a theory of truth”(41) — a veritable intellectual Walmart. Marxism’s truth as a “transformative historical force” was validated by reality — the theory came alive in “class movements, in major political parties, in social revolutions, in national movements, in socialist states, and as inspiration of radical movements.”(42-43) At the very heart of the

faith was Marx's core vision: that of "the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom," that of human beings exercising "lordship over nature for the first time," and hence becoming "fully human for the first time." (93) Erase this vision, this sense of human beings moving conclusively beyond the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, and you erase Marxism altogether. Notwithstanding the survival of remnants of this once-great faith, this is in fact what has occurred in the late-twentieth century. Having failed the test of history, Marxism has been erased as an effective force within it.

Far more than Manuel's *Requiem*, Aronson's is the book that really merits that solemn title. It is permeated with a profound sense of loss, "mourning," "shock" over the "end of Marxism." (vii) Now is a time, Aronson writes, of "being on our own" — and this is an "unthinkable affliction," an "utter loss of bearings, an orphan's state." Suddenly we, members of "Marxism's last generation," find ourselves outside "the reassuring but confining parameters of an obsolescent holistic, teleological, and synthetic unity." Confounded and dismayed, "surprised and shocked by the sweeping and demoralizing effects of the disintegration of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union," (1) we find ourselves no longer even able to say, "I am no longer a Marxist," because even that would imply that there was a continuing Marxism. Whatever the theoretical elements of Marxism that linger on, the living heart of the *project* that Marxists worked and died for has stopped beating. Evaluated according to its own lights, as a "movement of societal transformation," as a *project* that brought together a certain philosophy of history informed by a specific ethical outlook, an analysis of societal dynamics based on the centrality of class and the economy, an understanding of how capitalism functions, a partisanship on the side of a particular social class, the proletariat; and with a revolutionary vision of that class achieving power and then abolishing all classes — judged according to whether it is capable of meeting these criteria, Marxism is finished. (3) Marxism in this full sense was a *unity* of "several dimensions, levels, and elements, beginning with theory and practice; and that as such it is

a *project* of social transformation,” but it is precisely as “unity and project that Marxism has ended.”(45) No prophecy, no eschatology, no Marxism — at least not in the full sense, as a “powerful, compelling vision,” whose

genius and historic force lies [sic] precisely in the fact that it is a single coherent theoretical and practical project. In one narrative it has given us the meaning of human history, the essence of human strivings, the roots of the most fundamental of moral conflicts, a vision of the solution unfolding in our midst, a clear sense of which side is right and which wrong, and the path we ourselves should choose. Social science, economics, philosophy of history, ethics, ontology, as well as political theory all culminate in revolutionary practice. Marxism as we know it is this holistic project, unimaginable without prophecy and mythmaking, *a priori* projection and eschatology, careful scientific study of actual trends, and rigorous analysis of social reality.(52)

Marxism’s *essence* resides in its being a “theoretical-practical project of social transformation,” and in its focus on “the liberation of the working class as its central goal and as the key to human emancipation.”(140) Lose these, and you lose the “Marxist identity” altogether.(140)

And it is this identity, according to Aronson, that “we” *have* unmistakably lost. Judged according to its own demanding criterion — a unity of theory and practice focused on the liberation of the proletariat and humankind’s ascent to the realm of freedom — Marxism has conclusively failed. Having “become a theory without a practice and, increasingly, lacking a social base oriented toward a possible Marxist project, Marxism has fallen victim to history’s most withering judgment. Its time has passed.”(40) “Well over one hundred years after Marx’s death, three generations after the high tide of the great European socialist movements, two generations after the first Marxist revolution, a generation after Marxism’s zenith as a worldwide call to arms, we are in a position to draw some conclusions. The facts are not with Marxism; history has been rendering a judgment.”(43) And now that “Marxism is over, in its place stands — nothing.”(9)

When did we lose “it”? According to Aronson, Marxism was hegemonic on the left for a century after its adoption by the German SPD in 1891. A continuous historical wave swept Marxism forward. So mighty was this wave that “all radical thought and action between 1891 and 1991 took place within the field Marxism shaped and defined.”(84) Until recent days, “... Marxism enjoyed unchallenged hegemony on the Left, proclaiming itself the answer to humanity’s problems.”(124) As long as it was “spreading in the world and being adapted to a variety of conditions,” Marxism remained “very much alive.”(68) And yet, it also remained very much a product of the “early modern world,” virtually illiterate about if not hostile to the territory of subjectivity as mapped by Freud, (104) curiously pre-modern in tabooing the discussion of certain questions, waiting impassively for the proletarian revolution that never came. In all these ways, Marxism demonstrated an unforgivable “obtuseness and passivity.”(104) Marxism implicitly refused the challenge of modernity — the Enlightenment insistence that human beings are *on their own* — and in this sense it was less than fully modern. Marxism “counsels waiting for an end (or a beginning) of history, and expecting not just a better world but a resolution of the most fundamental of human conflicts.”(121) Its habit of appealing to authority, its fondness for reductive simplicity, marked Marxism as pre- or early-modern: “Marxism places us in a modern world that is in constant flux and transformation, but with the key questions answered, our values already decided, ends posited, and historical processes unfolding toward their conclusion.”(122) So, confronted by feminism (along with other social movements) Marxists were cruelly and suddenly assaulted after the 1960s by the brute fact of their own relativity: their hegemony on the left was abruptly undermined, and they were forced to scramble, “amidst the general din, to be heard by whomever will listen.”(124) Marxism no longer seemed to be *the* answer, only the illumination of important (but not necessarily key) dimensions of the human situation.(135)

Fatally diminished by its own relativity, “marxism” may survive — but it will be a lower-case, “weak” Marxism. What had

once been a unity, with its own “view of history, its peculiar moral vision, its promise of redemption, its claim that all of these are justified scientifically — and the holistic unity among them,” is deprived of its “customary unifying force, emotional power, scope and sweep. It is hard to imagine workers being willing to lay down their lives for ‘weak, restricted historical materialism.’”(158) The Fall of the Soviet Union, erasing the Marxists’ last, lingering hopes, “closes the eyes of the Marxian project.”(69) And so, we are “on our own,” without our “holistic theory,” without being directed “by an authority,” without the “faith” that “our actions for a better world [will] join a larger current destined to become an overwhelming force.”(4) We are experiencing “the end of a happy childhood vision that united all aspects of life into a single, coherent outlook able to answer emotional, social, ethical, and world-historical questions, as well as claiming to guide revolutionary political practice.”(4) Like the orator at a funeral, Aronson comes back again and again to the total finality, the awesome dimensions of this Death. We are on our own. And now it is Over. Over. Over.

If Manuel’s “Death of Marx” constructs the image of an almost satanic madman, the founder of a bloodthirsty cult, Aronson’s “Death of Marx” describes the collapse of a faith as total and hermetic as that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses — a debacle that leaves dazed and uncomprehending followers to wander a desolate world. And if Manuel’s “Death of Marx” puts one in mind of Dr. Frankenstein, tragi-farcically begetting monsters when he only *meant* to help humanity (“If only,” one cannot help but murmur to oneself, “if only such genius had been put to good instead of evil!”), Aronson’s “Death of Marx” reminds one vividly of the closing scenes of the film version of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. After a time of childlike innocence in a comfortable home (Mandalay’s a *mite* Victorian, but the all-encompassing world-view is wonderful) we find — after nightmarish hours of creepy anomalies, flashing storms, and other tense moments — that our sense of childlike innocence was misplaced. Gradually it sinks in: this Marxist Mandalay is Doomed. Fade from a shot of the mansion aflame, its towers crumbling, its gargoyles crashing to the ground, its once

secure inhabitants wandering, as dazed as so many suddenly dis-fellowshipped Witnesses, against the blood-red sky. On our own ... on our own ... on our own

Inventing the “Death of Marx”

Now, these are both likely to be widely-read, even influential books: eloquent, well-turned-out, topical, brought to the market with good production values. One can learn a lot from both of them, some of it even accurate. One can also learn many things that are not so accurate, and even more things about the ways in which the contemporary “Death of Marx” is taking shape.

Both books work with fine old traditional anti-Marxist materials, although to different effects. Manuel’s *Requiem* would simply not work without his heavy-handed psychologizing: what makes the “Alien of Trier” so monstrous, so “Other,” is his hatred of himself as a Jew. This is a well-established tack to take in constructing a “Death of Marx”: not only is Marx discredited as a pathetic closet case, a Jew who cannot admit his own identity and therefore pours out his venom on other Jews, but so are all the Marxists, whose alleged antisemitism makes them little different than Nazis. The republishing of Marx’s writings on the Jewish Question at the height of the Cold War was not an accident: this has traditionally been rich territory for anti-Marxism.

Impressionable readers should be forewarned, however, that Manuel is reworking and drastically oversimplifying an extensive literature on Marx’s Jewishness, some of it focused specifically on whether or not Marx was a textbook case of Jewish *Selbsthass* or self-hatred. This is the strongest theme in the *Requiem*, and one area in which the autopsy undoubtedly has exposed a real problem. It is also a topic on which Manuel’s crude sloganeering can be effectively contrasted with the more responsible and scholarly treatments which he neglects to cite.

Marx’s writings do not provide us with many directly useful insights into identities and problems not related to class: for a

complex grasp of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, only a fool would rely mainly on the writings of Marx. This point has been made a thousand times. Still, within limits Manuel plays a useful role in alerting extremely unsophisticated readers to something problematical about much mid-nineteenth century Marxian thought — the tendency to resort to unproblematized, essentialized and often abusive characterizations of ethnic and cultural groups (from Africans to Danes to the mercilessly patronized English), a trait that makes so many pages of the Marx-Engels *Correspondence* a treasure-trove for debunkers and critics. No heroic feats of “contextualization” can remove the crude ethnic essentializing of many pages of the Marx/Engels correspondence and of Marx’s other writings. In particular, the ironic and hostile attitude toward Judaism in the two articles Marx published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* under a general heading, ‘On the Jewish Question’ (generally forgotten for much of the nineteenth century, the focus of great deal of critical attention since, especially in the Cold War) have been justifiably condemned. Writing on this issue has been going on for eighty years, some of which has made a signal contribution not only to Marxology but to our understanding of European social history and the position of Jews within it: Julius Carlebach’s balanced and critical *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* is perhaps the outstanding example.

According to Carlebach, it seems likely that Marx went through four phases in his relationship to Jews and Judaism:

In the first, as a young radical, he wrote the essays ‘On the Jewish Question’, in which he shows himself to be aggressively hostile. The second period, in which the conception of historical materialism matured, is more balanced. The money-worshipping Jew is displaced by the Jew as an essential element in the emergence and promotion of early capitalism, as he is depicted in the Holy Family. The third, in which he is wholly dedicated and devoted to the analysis of and commitment to class struggle, is the period in which the Jewish bankers and financiers become the prime targets of his hostility. In the final period, to the ageing, scholarly, somewhat withdrawn Marx, Jews have ceased to be of interest or consequence; the author of *Capital* has virtually nothing to say on

them and the events and developments concerning them at that time evoked no response from him.³

Insofar as the second of Marx's two essays on the Jewish question ("Die Fähigkeit") is concerned, it engaged in a denigration of Jewish religion and people; the first essay ("Die Judenfrage") contained in nuce many ideas that were later to become substantive elements of Marx's work, and its arguments with respect to Jews were extended to Christians and to religiously inclined persons in general. Both essays are often interpreted as critiques of commercialism. David McLellan notes Marx's extended pun (playing on the dual significance in German of 'Judentum' as both Judaism and commerce) which Marx deploys at the expense of Bruno Bauer, and remarks upon the irony that Marx relied to a great extent on the writings of Moses Hess, who is remembered as an important founding figure of Zionism.⁴ Carlebach underlines the fact that Marx in the second essay did not content himself with an analysis of 'the social significance' of Judaism, but went beyond even Feuerbach and Bauer in making contemptuous and ill-informed comments on Jewish religion and history. (172-173) Nonetheless, it would be a gross misreading, in Carlebach's view, to take Marx's argument for the "abolition" of Judaism (one which will resurface in *The Holy Family*) as a justification for genocide:

... it might be appropriate to look at Marx's call for the 'abolition' of Judaism, a concept which has disturbed many Jewish writers and which may also have been seen as a justification for some of the vicious attacks on Jews, Judaism and even Zionism. The Moscow translation of the *Holy Family* uses the term 'abolish' for Marx's 'auflösen,' i.e. to dissolve. This faulty translation may certainly have given rise to some of the anxiety felt in English-speaking countries. The real problem, however, is a conceptual

- 3 Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London, Henley and Boston 1978), 356-7. Subsequent parenthetical page references to this book refer to this edition.
- 4 David McClellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (London 1973), 86.

one. Marx did not mean to provide ‘a warrant for genocide.’ He was trying to reduce Judaism, which he equated with the ‘money system’, into an abstract ‘principle’ in civil society that would have no function and therefore no place in a communist society. The abstract nature of his argument can best be illustrated by Marx’s concept of ‘labour.’ Like religion, including Judaism, ‘labour is free in all civilised countries.’ This freedom is ‘free competition of the workers among themselves.’ But in the society of the future, ‘it is not a matter of freeing labour but of abolishing it’. Whether Marx is right about this is a different matter; what concerns us here is that Marx was determined to elevate Judaism into an abstract element like labour and that he no more intended personal harm to individual Jews by calling for the dissolution of Judaism than he would have wanted workers to be attacked when he called for the abolition of labour.(178)

This is hardly a case for holding up “On the Jewish Question” as a shining example of socialist thought. Post-orthodox “Marxists” (as I will later go on to define them) are not cult-members required to uphold every word of the Master. In these articles, Marx displayed an almost complete lack of knowledge of Jews and Judaism; flesh-and-blood people, and the real class and spiritual complexities of Judaism (with its many strongly anti-capitalist threads) were misleadingly reduced to abstract socio-economic categories. As Carlebach notes:

... it is worth noting that the Jews Marx knew or knew of, quite apart from his rabbinic ancestors and relatives, were quite unlike the ‘Jew’ of Marx’s essays, e.g. Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Börne, Heine, Eduard Gans, Dagobert Oppenheim, Moses Hess. Nor did Marx make the slightest attempt at finding an empirical basis for his ‘real Jew.’ Instead, he took the descriptions of his intellectual predecessors from Kant to Bauer as absolutely authentic images of Jews and Judaism, leaving us with the inescapable conclusion that Karl Marx — the man who had just completed a brilliant critique of Hegel, who had shown convincingly that Hegel had erred because he had deduced real life from abstract ideas, because he had failed to look for an empirical reality exactly as it was — that same Marx was guilty of precisely the same methodological error when it came to analysing Judaism. So that his accusation regarding Hegel’s ‘mystifications’ must in our context also be applied to Marx.(151-2)

This methodological flaw was all the more glaring since, in Marx's memory of their significance, these particular essays were aimed precisely against the ideological mysticism of "Hegelian and generally all speculative philosophy." (324)

Insofar as religion figures in Marx's critique, Marx's real interest was not *atheism* but the way religion affects human relationships and their associated values. The political emancipation of the Jews (which Marx supported) is no different, at this level of abstraction, than the political emancipation of the Christian or any other religious person: it consists of "the emancipation of the state from Judaism, Christianity and religion in general." (164) Although Marx's review articles are highly vulnerable to empirical and logical critique — "As a general rule we can say that the more a person knows about Jews and Judaism the less likely he is to take the Marxian analysis of Judaism seriously, no matter whether he be Jew or Gentile, even if he is himself a Marxist" (280) — in themselves they cannot be responsibly used in the ways both twentieth-century anti-Marxists and anti-semites have used them.

Although it is neither possible or relevant, in Carlebach's view, to say whether or not Marx was, as an individual, anti-semitic, "on the whole the evidence is against such an assumption." (357) As far as the hypothesis that Marx was a self-hating Jew is concerned, Carlebach is unconvinced. In what sense, he asks, was Marx a Jew?

It might be useful for our considerations to see what aspects of this we can firmly exclude. Marx was not a Jew in any religious, national or cultural sense. He knew nothing about Judaism and showed no interest in the subject. Nor did he 'inherit' any rabbinic or talmudic qualities or properties. These are acquired skills, no more transmitted by birth than a knowledge of philosophy or geology would be. To treat Marx's Jewish origin as a property would mean descending to the level of the racial obsessions of the Nazis, who managed to dig up something like 125,000 hapless (and loyal and faithful) Germans who, because they had Jewish ancestors, were presumed to have Jewish qualities. (320)

There was, Carlebach argues, no personal "Judaism" for Marx to "live down" or "transcend," and it is not meaningful to argue in terms of an apparent "quintessence of Jewish life and intellect"

acting within him.(321) Marx was simply a Jew by “descent” and by “common consent” — and the meagre evidence suggests that while he never unequivocally celebrated his ancestry or evidenced much concern over fellow Jews, he was also never concerned to deny it. Marx’s stance toward his ethnic background was “typical of his general reluctance and even refusal to allow his personal characteristics to intrude into his life’s task.”(323) There is, in Carlebach’s view, ample evidence of “blockage” on questions affecting Jews: Marx (in sharp contrast with his daughter, whose own claim to be Jewish was itself not in keeping with orthodox doctrine) even remained seemingly indifferent to the emergence of a Jewish proletariat, not to mention nineteenth-century pogroms. But there is no evidence “that Marx ever had the slightest interest in whether or not an associate was Jewish or of Jewish origin. He loved and hated those around him with indiscriminate fervour...”(342) And there is “no real evidence for self-hatred.”(340) Carlebach’s scrupulous and scholarly study, written from a non-Marxist perspective, set a new scholarly standard for its judicious and sensitive handling of a highly contentious issue.

And this is precisely what this issue does *not* receive at the hands of Manuel, who never cites Carlebach’s careful work. Manuel has *no* new evidence of Marx’s alleged “self-hatred,” *nothing definite* on Karl’s alleged “repression of the plain fact of his Jewish origins”(15) or his “painful struggle with the nature of his Jewish stock”(16) — yet without firm evidence of this allegedly foundational trauma, Manuel’s stress on the “devastating consequences for his ... psychic economy”(16) remains a psychohistorical guess. Were the carbuncles really evidence of Marx’s struggle against his “indelible Jewish coloration”(18) or were they the consequences of a skin infection? How can we in the 1990s know? And what does it matter?

“The Jew who would not come out of the closet is a stereotype of the modern world. The body’s vengeance for the cover-up has assumed many forms:”(19) so says Manuel. But much modern scholarship on the construction of ethnic and national identities disputes the contention that there are “plain facts,” such as “indel-

ible coloration”(!) which can be simply “read off” the surface of the body to establish a fixed ethnic or racial identity. Treating identity as a genetically-transmitted property can place a writer in highly disreputable company, as Carlebach pointedly reminded us. And Manuel on this question also slips into the most naive, ahistorical presentism. Can we be sure that, in Marx’s own mind, there ever was a “closet”? Might it not be problematical to read twentieth-century ideals of being true to one’s “ethnic identity” back into a quite different period, on the assumption that, for example, Marx — a person who, perhaps above all else, identified most with *European* culture and *Enlightenment* tradition of universalism — could only make “one correct reading” of who he really was? And isn’t there a huge logical problem involved in reading Marx as though his writings were a major stimulus of an Eastern European anti-semitism that long antedated him? Is it not simply inaccurate to suggest either Marxist silence on the question of ethnicity and nationalism — one could cite a dozen pre-1914 titles on this question — or to imply that there ever was in fact *one* Marxist position? Before we go overboard in praising the warm pleasures of national belonging — one recalls Manuel’s evocation of the “love of the land of one’s birth, nostalgia for the smell and taste of mother’s food,” etc., all set against that monstrous polar opposite, the cold, anonymous logic of the International — should we not also recall the other less heart-warming aspects of European nationalism, such as ethnic cleansing and antisemitism, against which so many Marxist internationalists have struggled for decades? And, to be prosaic for a moment, is it not simply grossly irresponsible, on a question of this sensitivity and importance, to place such emphasis on Marx’s supposed self-hatred without a shred of new, direct evidence (apart, that is, from a psychohistorical over-reading of the carbuncles)? Manuel is playing an old Cold War tune here, and he plays it badly: the charged rhetoric fails to hide the complete absence of any new factual evidence.

Manuel’s presentism, superficiality and over-the-top polemical zeal on the Jewish issue are typical of his *Requiem* as a whole. Again and again we are reminded that, in Marx’s and Engels’s

mid-nineteenth-century political activities we can discern the nascent outlines of twentieth-century totalitarianism. In the squabbles and factional maneuvering within the First International, for example, we can see intimations of the Gulag:

When the men of thirty — Marx and Engels in 1848-1849 — grew older, disingenuousness assumed a grim mask. In later generations such petty disputes became tribal battles and minor differences ballooned into wars of principle over which men slaughtered one another. The lackadaisical Prussian and Austrian police who submitted reports on the conduct of Karl Marx were a puny cohort in the annals of world revolution; in the twentieth century such functions devolved upon agents of the mammoth Soviet security system, who were far more zealous. Police techniques are readily passed across geographic and ideological boundaries and are transmitted to posterity. They know no fatherland, as victims and punishers learn from each other. Marx was not an innovator in revolutionary cruelty, nor was he a martyr of capitalist agents; but after the appearance of Darwin he came to consider violence an ineradicable aspect of the human condition, the struggle for existence. Social Darwinism thus had its Marxist cloak.(74)

This is an amazing passage in so many ways, from its off-the-wall attribution to Darwin and Marx of a theory of human violence that does scant justice to either scientist, to its astonishing attempt to draw some causal connection between the essentially bloodless quarrels within the First International and the horrors of twentieth-century repression. Perhaps its most remarkable feature, however, is the deft way that the Prussian and Austrian police spies somehow, through the magic of rhetoric, ambiguously come to be ancestors of Marxist police states! Or we could underline the superficiality of his view, contrary to almost all the best recent Marx-scholarship, that there were no significant differences between Marx and Engels. (Here Manuel is echoing— and this is no surprise — the “truths” of the very Orthodox Marxism he is concerned to attack).

And how surprising it is to “learn,” from a book published by Harvard University Press no less, that Marx was a defender of that

“iron law of wages,” when (as all readers of *Capital* Vol.1 will probably remember) Lassalle’s supposed “law” was precisely the target of his attack! That an august university press would be associated with a blunder this elementary suggests the abysmal level of scholarship and ideological conformity of a liberalism that has grown complacent and soft-toothed in the temporary absence of strong, rigorous Marxist criticism.

Manuel’s central protagonist is little more than a Marx reduced to the sum of his symptoms. The naive reader, persuaded by Manuel that Marx was uninfluenced by British politics, would never guess that he was deeply knowledgeable about British liberalism, followed Gladstone’s career with a particularly sharp eye, and had immersed himself in the world of British political economy. The same reader, horrified by the sharp image drawn by Manuel of Marx’s brutal indifference to individuals, his alleged “Social Darwinism,” and the indelible imprint on his thought of the idea of “total technology,” would never guess that many more responsible interpreters of Marx’s political thought think that Marx’s primary concern was with the liberation of individual energies and creativity in a society in which material needs were satisfied and in which hierarchies of class were no longer functional. (And it is quite wrong to see Darwin as the sole or even the most important “evolutionary” thinker who influenced Marx). One might in fact more clearly discern in Manuel’s own book the erasure of the individual: in this case, the individual Marx, a complex human being who was capable of great loves as well as great hates and who devoted himself to the cause of human emancipation according to his lights. The coroner allows the corpse no words. Manuel’s *Requiem*, with its carbuncular interpretation, sets a new standard for the ahistorical over-reading of biographical evidence. When Marx and Engels jockey for position in the First International, they are anticipating the Gulag; when Marx writes privately to run down a rival, he is paving the way for the suppression of the freedom of speech; when Marx allegedly experiences inner conflict over his Jewishness, he is paving the way for twentieth-century socialist mishandling of the nationalist question. This is, in short, a gro-

tesque book on the subject: undoubtedly not the last or the worst we shall receive as part of the contemporary Death of Marx. .

Although a Tragedy rather than a Farce, Aronson's *After Marxism* shares with Manuel's *Requiem* this same marked tendency to *personification*: the tendency to endow both "Marxism" and "history" with the attributes of human beings. We, as "Marxism's last generation," have been "assigned by history the unenviable task of burying it;"(1) the dissolution of the Soviet Union "closes the eyes" of the Marxist project; (69) the "Left" is in a "profound state of denial," and confronts, like a person bereaved, the terrible shock of death, the burden of orphanhood: "Marxism is over, and we are on our own."(1) No longer will we enjoy a comforting sense of holism, not longer can we look for direction from an authority: for now we are without that which once "explained, guided, justified and consoled."(9) "We" have lost our "happy childhood vision."(4) "History" has pronounced its "most withering judgment."(40) And so on, *ad infinitum*.

As many working historians can attest (and as Marx himself observed in his polemics on Hegel), the trope of personification when applied to History-with-a-capital-H often signals a conceptual confusion: by attributing agency, purpose and identity to such abstractions as "the Enlightenment," "Reason" or indeed "History," one runs the risk of homogenizing the past and flattening our understanding of it. Aronson's account is full of such moments.

In Aronson's mind, the "Marxism" of the past — which he problematically but unhesitatingly seems to equate with Marxism-Leninism *tout court* — once attained an almost divine completeness, agency, and purpose. Aronson sets the admission requirements for "Real Marxism" as high as possible. Something is not Marxism if it is not a *project* unified by a philosophy of history with a specific ethical outlook, with an analysis of societal dynamics based on the centrality of class and the economy, with an understanding of capitalism, with partisanship on the side of the proletariat, with a revolutionary vision of that class achieving power and abolishing classes. A "Marxism" that does not, through this holistic approach, provide us with inner certainty, that does not

guarantee us that Marxism will move humanity to its true end, the realm of freedom, is not *really* Marxism. It is a pale reflection of the One True Faith, a pathetic and self-doubting remnant of a once-proud and all-inclusive fundamentalism.

In Aronson's book, we seem to be in the presence of a potent myth-symbol complex, complete with a founding father, heroic moments, sacred landscapes, and so on, that recalls the classic devices of nationalism.⁵ Aronson creates a vivid image of a "Marxism" affording the security, certainty and happiness of childhood: a faith to which he himself was "converted." Now "history" has unceremoniously deprogrammed him, and the scales have fallen from his eyes. Agreeing with many people who are constructing today's "Death of Marxism," Aronson believes that without the master-figure of "Marx-the-father" and the master-narrative of "Marxism-the-truth-faith," only disjointed remnants will remain of a once holistic philosophy. This is plainly an Edenic notion of a lost Marxist faith, a mythical treatment of a far more ambiguous reality. And since myth-symbol complexes operate on a level that is largely impervious to empirical or rational challenge, Aronson's elegy is, like the Dialectical Materialism from which it has borrowed so heavily and uncritically, largely beyond the reach of any process of empirical verification.

However, insofar as Aronson's book is also meant to be an historical reflection on actual events, which it purports to describe accurately, its mythic construction of the "History of Marxism" can be brought into relationship with historical evidence. It is outlandish, for example, to argue that "all radical thought and action between 1891 and 1991 took place within the field Marxism shaped and defined,"(84) or to argue that (in roughly this same period) "Marxism enjoyed unchallenged hegemony on the Left ..."(124) One need only think of Marx's incessant struggles with Anarchists in the mid-nineteenth century, and with the overshadowing of Marxian social and economic analysis by Keynesian

5 See especially A.D.Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford 1986).

Liberalism and by the non-Marxist wings of Social Democracy in the twentieth to reject this highly romanticized and nostalgic view of “the tradition’s” past. Where outside the Soviet bloc did people calling themselves “Marxists” exercise political hegemony in the twentieth century?⁶ Where was this unequivocally the case even on “the left”? Aronson wonders if workers of the future will be willing to lay down their lives for a “weak, restricted historical materialism,” (158) but surely the implication — that they once actually did die for “historical materialism” — naively equates the theoretical system with the complex political and social movements which accessed it. How many workers *ever* actually died for *historical materialism* (rather than for their class, comrades, or their country)?

And once this false nostalgia for a happy childhood of Marxian hegemony — this unquestioned Faith of our Fathers — is undermined, so is much of Aronson’s ensuing account of the Faith’s Collapse. If since the mid-nineteenth century Marx’s ways of looking at things have enjoyed neither universal acceptance nor power, if Marxists from the 1890s on were already heavily engaged in intensive and fundamental debates with each other and with non-Marxists, it is a little difficult to accept the plausibility of an account that suggests that, suddenly in the 1970s with the rise of North American feminism, Marxists faced a sudden and unprecedented challenge to their belief-systems.⁷ After turn-of-the-century Revisionism, the splits over the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, the split between Stalin and Trotsky, the pre- and post-1968 debates between New Leftists and various sorts of Marxist-Leninists — who but a man on the moon could have imagined that one could speak of “a” unified tradition in the 1970s,

6 One could even, of course, raise questions about the actual strength of “Marxist” hegemony in countries ostensibly governed by Communist Parties claiming direct descent from Marx.

7 What is even more puzzling about the “Loss of Innocence” tone to Aronson’s account is that, as early as 1966, he himself (as editor of *Studies on the Left*) was calling for a “post-Marxian” analysis of American capitalism.(19)

providing the Marxist faithful with all the certainties and reassurances of a secular religion? Moreover, since the 1890s, Marxists have borrowed heavily from other conceptual frameworks — such as evolutionary biology and genetics, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Aronson is almost unbelievably inaccurate when he claims that a general problem of twentieth-century Marxists has been their hidebound resistance to psychoanalysis. What of Frankfurt Marxism? Louis Althusser? A hundred others? Marx and Freud married and divorced so many times in the 1960s and 1970s that one began to think they had invented some odd new form of posthumous serial monogamy.

For many, probably most, western leftists of the 1960s and 1970s, there simply was no “happy childhood vision” to lose. For most radicals and socialists, the creative energies unleashed by the Bolshevik Revolution, if they were still flowing, did so outside the “Marxist mainstream” defined by the Communist Parties. Even within those who might be said to be “orthodox” proponents of historical and dialectical materialism and vanguard politics, one found dissension and diversity throughout the period: Communists continued to defend the Soviet Union, even after Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968; Trotskyists contested the legitimacy of the Soviet leadership (some saw in it a degenerate bureaucracy and others a state-capitalist class); Maoists upheld the seemingly more participatory model of the cultural revolution — all these were differences in Marxist “ways of seeing” the political world that had repercussions on the local level. Outside these Marxist-Leninist spheres, there were many independent-minded Marxists — people who, having read about the purge trials and slave labour camps, were disinclined to identify with Stalin and his successors, and who also often critiqued the entire concept of the “vanguard party.” And there were probably even more “New Leftists” whose relationship with Marxist traditions was even more amorphous and subtle. One brings up these surely very familiar features of twentieth-century left history to emphasize how far removed many of these people were from the innocent Marxists of Aronson’s imagination. For many, perhaps most, of the leftists of the 1960s and

1970s, the notion of a “continuous wave” of triumphant Marxism sweeping the planet from 1891 to the present day was a museum piece from the old days: one spoke more often in 1968 of “obsolete communism” and the “left-wing alternative.”⁸ There was a great deal of utopianism abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. Not much of it found expression in the “official” voice of Marxism, the Marxist-Leninist parties.

What is very strange about this book, then, is that its description of Marxists as the secular equivalents of Jehovah’s Witnesses, isolated by their dogmatic faith from the real world, simply doesn’t connect with the experiences of most Marxists in the west since the 1940s. How did this obvious misinterpretation arise? One suspects that, in this case, Aronson, seeking to write the 1990s version of *The God That Failed*, didn’t work hard enough to update the classic for the 1990s. This would have been a fine Cold War book: the *I Believed* tone of deceived innocence echoes that adopted by a hundred accounts of the day.⁹ But in the 1990s it all seems ... vaguely comical. One wants to care as Aronson relates his struggle for tenure with the same fervour and attention to detail that is used to describe the struggles of the veterans of the Spanish Civil War and the CIO organizing drives — but somehow they don’t quite seem the same. As so many Communist Party members (and red-diaper babies) have explained, the cohesive subculture of the interwar Communists, made all the more insular by the severity of Cold War persecution, did bear some resemblance to a beleaguered community of faith. One can argue that, for some of these people, Stalinism and the Cold War destroyed what had been a clearcut sense of the righteous “us” versus an unrighteous (or heretical) “them,” a moment of disillusionment and confusion that was eloquently captured by *The God That Failed*. What seems far less

8 See Gabriel Cohn-Bendit and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (Harmondsworth 1969), for a classic text.

9 For an intriguing insight into this literature, see J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit* (New York 1958), Ch. 9, who however maintains a discrete silence on the question of the role of police spies.

clear is that same narrative strategies and staging devices that worked so well in 1949 can be recycled in 1994. Aronson has not adapted the “Death of Marx” form to the requirements of the age. Anyone who still mistook Communism for God after 1956 was suffering from something more serious than myopia. He’s playing a different and more interesting tune, but like Manuel, Aronson seems to be mangling an old Cold War melody. It does not ring true. If Aronson convinces his readers that he was ever as credulous and wide-eyed as he wants us to believe — a Perpetual Youth, who saw in Marxism the Answer To Everything — they might also begin to doubt his credibility as any sort of guide to a period in which, he seemingly avers, “Marxism is the Answer To Nothing.”

As a post-Marxist, Aronson upholds the same Orthodox Marxist myth of a unilinear socialist history that he believed as a “True Believer.” There was one continuous history of Marxism, the One Big Science of the One Big Socialist Movement. In Aronson’s profoundly Hegelian treatment of “the tradition” (which abstracts from the movement of history only that which confirms his essentialized Idea of Marx) we rarely encounter descriptions of flesh-and-blood people or specific historical moments (the small matter of Stalinism receives remarkably short shrift). We get no sense of the enormous diversity of people around the globe who, in a multiplicity of contexts, have woven (and continue to weave) Marxist ideas and strategies into their movements of resistance. The introduction of such complexity would have spoiled the book, and in two respects. First, it would have detracted from the tragic simplicity of this tale of Decline and Fall by introducing distracting counter-currents and complications, and by undermining one of its key theses: that only in recent years have Marxists been forced to confront the truth of their own relativity vis-à-vis other forces on the left. Second, it would have rendered far less plausible the rhetoric of apocalypse through which Aronson has constructed this particular “postmodern” Death of Marx. It would have prompted us to think outside Aronson’s favoured either/or frame of reference (Marxism is either hegemonic on the Left — or it is merely a politically inert collection of theories without bearing on political

practice) and think more subtly and less reductively about the diversity of ways in which people in struggle against capitalism and the liberal order have woven Marx's ideas into their theoretico-political practice throughout the twentieth century, inside and outside a range of left parties and social movements.

Aronson's compelling, totalizing but (on examination) vacuous verdict — "In its place stands — nothing" — is more a statement about his own respect for the diversity of emancipatory struggles than a realistic assessment of the present moment. Is the overriding "fact" Marxism's "practical failure"? Only if we follow the orthodox equation of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism, not if we take into consideration the indispensable and enormous contribution of Marxists, in all their diversity, to mitigating oppressive social relations of many kinds. Simply to label this experience a "failure" is to misunderstand and trivialize its complexity. Are we, in the wake of Marx's death, now on our own? Yes, just as the many and diverse Marxisms and Marxists have been "on their own" since 1883. But no, if this means a claim that the problems and answers essayed by Marx have been definitively superseded: for as long as capitalism persists, the phenomena named by Marx (class, capital, the state) and articulated theoretically within the Marxist problematic are also likely to persist — as are large groups of people who have reason to want a different way of doing things, and may well have urgent material and political reasons for objecting to the premature abandonment of any Marxist *praxis*. Even if the abolition of a thoroughly demonized "Marx" seems attractive for some of them in the short term, in the long term the issues associated with this word and with this vision are likely to return even if under a different name. Under conditions of postmodern totalitarian liberalism, the problem-set identified by Marx will not readily vanish — in fact, the waning of the welfare state will eliminate one of the primary buffers separating the majority of people from the violence and chaos of the labour market and its attendant class conflicts.

For Aronson, Marxist Faith was in its Golden Age both continuous and indivisible: he demonstrates no sense of the divide between the Marxian and Engelsian approaches. Thus he places at the exact

centre of the one true Marxism (and misleadingly attributes to “Marx”) Engels’s reading of the concept of the kingdom of freedom. This blunder could not be more revealing. For Engels, the kingdom of freedom denotes a future in which human beings, having mastered the secrets of dialectical materialism, attain lordship over nature for the first time. For Aronson, without this “eschatological starting point,” without a teleological notion of the “realm of freedom” as an actual time and place in which true human essence is *finally* realized, Marxism as *praxis* is finished.

If so, it was already finished in Marx’s own time. The “Marx” of the third volume of *Capital* was, on this reading, himself the first “post-Marxist” — for here Marx dissociates himself precisely from this crudely “technological” and teleological reading of what socialism and the “realm of freedom” will entail.

The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.¹⁰

The distinction could not be sharper. We move from the finalism and teleology of the Engelsian vision (which could, especially in

10 Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. David Fernbach, Vol. 3 (New York 1981), 958-9.

its subsequent development in Soviet hands, indeed bear some resemblance to the “total technology” that Manuel informs us was the “ineradicable signature” of the entire Marxist tradition) to a complex and humane realism. We move from a totalizing model of absolute domination to a far more nuanced concept of the rational regulation of human interaction with the natural world. Above all — and most damagingly for Aronson — we move from a unilinear narrative with a simple happy technological ending, to an open vision of people expressing what is best in their human nature (which here can hardly be a static essence) by winning new solidarities (and constructing new “natures”) through their coexistence with an external world that provides both opportunities and material limits. Marx’s transcendental yet this-worldly vision is at once ethical, realist and historical.

In words such as these, with their powerful echoes of Kant, Marx himself utterly contradicts the notion — so often encountered in the most brain-dead End-of-Marxism tracts — of an equation of Marxism and Dialectical Materialism. The passage also reveals as utterly erroneous the attribution to Marx of an “ungrounded utopianism” and the equally frequent misattribution to him of a simple-mindedly positivist division between “facts” and “values.” How many times have we heard that Marx’s eschatology implies a scientific guarantee that humanity is bound for a happy ending?¹¹ And how can that be reconciled with the resolute realism of this quotation: it is evident from Marx’s own description of the land of freedom that *we never get there*. Yet even though this is the case, even though freedom can then only consist in the associated producers governing the human interaction with nature in a rational way, “bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power,” there is still a point — in fact it is *the* point of everything a Marxist does or says in theory and politics — in

11 As Leszek Kolakowski puts it in *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 3. *The Breakdown* (Oxford 1981), “Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just round the corner.”(526)

holding up a higher ideal of freedom, a *true realm of freedom*, which begins beyond anything which could ever feasibly be achieved by humanity on earth. Both connected to the earth (for the realm of necessity is both its logical precondition and its material basis) and removed from the earth (for it could *never* characterize any mode of production on earth), the realm of freedom is then a construction of an ethical state implicit in human interaction. Marx here presents us with a vista of human beings struggling toward an infinite horizon of freedom as a manifestation of their humanity: he affirms a deontological ethic of freedom, even a freedom which, although it cannot be realized on earth, is nonetheless held before us as a regulatory ideal. *And it is this ideal, in fact, which emerges not just as the great conclusion to his analysis of capitalism, but is also the precondition of every word of all three volumes of his masterpiece.* We glimpse this realm of freedom in concrete projects — when for example we join together in communities of people’s struggle against a totalitarian neo-liberalism which, today, threatens to force upon every aspect of social life the iron, homogeneous, total logic of the market. But in these struggles we only approximate the transcendental project which remains *both* our reality *and* something forever beyond our experience — a measure of “a full experience of this real life without its negative aspects.”¹² This pivotal passage from Marx offers us no final closure, no happy ending to the human story for which all sacrifices may be justified — but it does uphold an ideal of associated producers, i.e., human *individuals*, whose very individuality is indissociably *social*, achieving purpose and solidarity in their struggle against the blind violence of nature and of the liberal capitalist order. For Aronson,

12 Franz J. Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y. 1986), 52-57. As Gareth Stedman Jones reminds us, one of Engels’s major “achievements” was to posit “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom,” which kingdom was theorized in terms of domination over the laws of nature and history. Gareth Stedman Jones, “Engels and the History of Marxism,” in Eric J. Hobsbawm, ed., *The History of Marxism*, Vol. I, *Marxism in Marx’s Day* (Bloomington 1982), 324.

to be a Marxist is by definition to act in the certain and secure belief that the proletariat would usher in the realm of freedom. On this occasion, as on so many others, it would appear that Marx himself, in his central work, fails Aronson's rather abstract and ahistorical test of who may or may not call themselves "Marxists"!

One concludes a review of Manuel and Aronson with two reflections. One is that the present-day Death of Marx is not yet quite at the point of producing great or even good polemics. This seems to be one area in which the writers of substandard books enjoy a sellers' market: strike an apocalyptic tone, do a jig on the old man's grave, and you're in business. This seems the only explanation of the appearance of volumes so riddled with the wildest speculations, factual errors and simple-minded generalizations. Neither of these books is in the running for the Böhm-Bawerk Award for the best performance in a Death of Marx in the '90s.

The second reflection is that historically-minded Marxists have much to contribute to the Left at the time of a generalized "Death of Marx." They have much to say, no doubt, as Marxists, but much of what they should contribute should be influenced by their identification with empirical, stick-in-the-mud, can-you-really-demonstrate this? history. Left historians have to interrupt this vast anti-Marxist rhetorical flow to insist upon certain standards of fairness, accuracy, balance and clarity in historical re-enactments of the Death of Marx. Contrary to certain nominalist extremists on the fringes of poststructuralism, things actually did happen in the past, and some of the stories that represent those happenings are better than others. Human beings have evolved some fallible but valuable ways of finding out which stories are which. Part of the left historian's job in this context is to identify what aspects of a narrative are subject to any empirical controls. A work of fiction — or a work of confession, as is much of Aronson — may well be generally beyond the reach of any empirical control: but this *should* tell us something about the ways in which such an account should be received and discussed. An account which claims to be factual, on the other hand, subjects itself, at least in most modern cultures, to different tests and a different set of confirmation/disconfirmation

procedures. When these checks don't work out (as in the case of Manuel's claim that Marx was a proponent of the iron law of wages, which any reader can check against the text of Marx's *Capital*), we have reason to question the argument more generally. To the extent that we can agree that things happened in the past, and that some stories about those things are better than others — precisely to that extent do historians, who often have a more detailed and more skeptical sense of that past, have their own voice to add to the high-theoretical debates about the supposed Death of Marx.

In the midst of the exalted rhetoric that so often accompanies a Death of Marx — the “last man!” “we are on our own!” etc. etc. — perhaps the historically-minded socialist should take on the unromantic but necessary persona of the gumshoe detective, disrupting this flow of apocalyptic rhetoric with a few dumb, down-to-earth, obstinate, inelegant, stupidly empirical, philosophically naive questions. Most of the contemporary Death of Marx discussions flunk the most elementary tests of historical investigation: they are, in essence, historical garbage. They tend to be painfully monocausal and presentist, teleological, devoid of human complexity, and last (but by no means least) exceedingly tedious. When all around us are acclaiming these works as masterworks, wherein one may encounter the Voice of Postmodern Prophecy, one useful role historically-minded socialists can play is that of the child who remarks that the Emperor is in fact theoretically and empirically threadbare, even when he is dancing so fashionable a jig on the Grave at Highgate.

One can suggest another unpopular role historically-minded socialists ought to take up: that of pointing out to people who seem completely impressed by the earth-shattering novelty of their post-Marxian pronouncements that they themselves are often simply reworking a long tradition. One influential 1980s account of the “Crisis of Marxism” assiduously tracked back the system's troubles back to 1851-2. (Even by industry standards, so ambitious a backwards projection of “The Crisis of Marxism” seemed counter-

factual, since it held that the “system” had entered its crisis before *Capital* had been written — even before the word “Marxist” had entered into general currency.)¹³ In any event, this “crisis” did not lead to a “Death.” The first *general* Death of Marx seems to have taken place over the years from 1890-1914. In Berlin in 1896, Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk brought out *Zum Abschluss des Marx'schen Systems* — which was translated (somewhat misleadingly) as *Karl Marx and the Close of His System*.¹⁴ This critique, inspired by the marginalist revolution in economics (that massive conservative “deconstruction” of the earlier classical paradigm, with its emphasis on change at the margin, uncertainty, contingency, variability, “surfaces”) was seen by many as striking a deathblow not just against Marxian economics, with its “depth-model” of value, but also against Marx’s entire vision of history. It was in the 1890s, Russell Jacoby reminds us, that one found the first university-course on the decomposition of Marxism.¹⁵ In 1900 the phrase “the crisis of Marxism” had already become so hackneyed that one

- 13 In Alvin W. Gouldner’s once highly influential *The Two Marxisms* (1980), which is incidentally a textbook case of the perils and pitfalls of rigid dichotomization in this field, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (written between December 1851 and March 1852) is represented as a text in which Marx’s system is haunted by a “nightmare Marxism,” an anarchic counter-logic that demonstrated the independence of the state, its domination of the classes, and the difficulty of establishing a correspondence between economics and politics. The mid-nineteenth-century Marx as imagined by Gouldner is, if not fatally ill, at the very least somewhat crisis-ridden: he “careens back and forth” desperately seeking to place his account within the rigid two-class framework he is sworn to uphold (Gouldner, 382). Curious, one might think, that Marx chose to republish this supposedly crisis-ridden text more than 15 years later.
- 14 Paul Sweezy has made the point that the English translation of Böhm-Bawerk’s title makes it sound more funeral than he probably intended — “On the Conclusion of the Marxian System” might have better conveyed the Böhm-Bawerk’s intentions, which were to assess the work of Marx in the light of the recent publication of the third and concluding volume of *Capital*. See Paul Sweezy’s introduction to Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, *Karl Marx and the Close of His System* and Rudolf Hiflerding, *Böhm-Bawerk’s Criticism of Marx* (London 1975 [1949]).
- 15 Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge 1981), 55.

Polish Marxist entitled his 1900 article on the question, “The So-Called Crisis of Marxism.”¹⁶ Even in this crowded vista of debunkers, O.D.Skelton’s *Socialism: A Critical Analysis* (which might have been more appropriately titled “A Critical Demolition”) stands out for its cogency, its seemingly irrefutable evidence of socialism’s final demise, and its uncanny anticipation — in 1911 — of many of the themes of post-Marxism. There is little in Aronson that was not said, with more verve and style, by O.D.Skelton, Ph.D, in 1911. The poststructuralist debunkers of Marx are, in many respects, simply adding footnotes to Skelton’s liberal narrative of socialism’s decline and fall. Like so many others, before and since, in 1911 Skelton believed he had fired the silver bullet which would still this monster forever.¹⁷ And since those days of the first major Death of Marx, as Fredric Jameson has remarked, “crises of Marxism” have arrived as punctually as transformations and crises in Marxism’s object of study: the capitalist system.¹⁸

Marxism has rarely (perhaps never?) *not* been in crisis. From a longer perspective — the one that historians are *supposed* to bring to such questions — it would seem that as many times as an

16 This article by Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz was published in *Przegląd filozoficzny*; see Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 2. *The Golden Age* (Oxford 1981), 208.

17 As Skelton argues, in an interesting anticipation of Aronson and so much postmodern discussion of Marx, what had once been a unified, solid movement was now — i.e., in 1911 — casting about desperately for other ways of justifying itself philosophically: Hegel had been set aside, and the socialists were gravitating to “Darwinian norms of thinking,” with their tendential mechanicism and nihilism, and — as if in compensation — also to the wispy dreams of the idealists, trying to base the appeal of socialism “once more on eternal justice and the rights of man, to raise the cry of ‘Back to Kant’ and deduce the collectivist commonwealth from the needs of human personality. The materialistic conception of history is qualified into colorlessness, the class struggle more and more retired into the background. The value and surplus value theories are abandoned or their importance minimized, the doctrine of increasing misery repudiated, the inevitable march of concentration and centralization confronted by unconforming fact. Slowly but surely the Marxian theory is disintegrating.”(176)

18 Fredric Jameson, “Actually Existing Marxism,” in Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, eds., *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (New York and London 1996), 21.

impatient coroner has signed a death certificate for Marx, it has been necessary to retract it. The 1890s? Certainly a time of tremendous crisis, dissolution, difficulty — but also a time of the founding of the great Western European socialist parties, of revolutionary movements, of significant works in Marxist theory (on finance capital, imperialism, ethics, epistemology, the question of nationality): what some saw as “crisis,” Leszek Kolakowski would describe (no less dangerously: but it fit his own particular unilinear narrative of decline-and-fall) as a “Golden Age.”¹⁹ The 1920s? Indeed a time of division; also the time of Gramsci, the beginnings of Marxian cultural studies, critical theory, indeed almost all the conceptual and theoretical work which went to make “Western Marxism” the most powerful intellectual tradition on the left in the twentieth century. The 1930s? A time in which so many Marxists traded in their theory of value for underconsumptionism; also a time when Marxists were organizing unions and building massive political movements. The 1940s/1950s? Indeed a dark age, but also years of the Communist Party Historians Group in Britain (arguably the most creative and influential group of Marxist historians ever seen in the west), of the della Volpeans in Italy and Henri Lefebvre in France and of Stalingrad, a victory for Marx and for humanity. The 1960s/1970s? A time in which one formed *Capital* reading groups, aligned New Left grassroots organizing with Marxian notions of class politics, when radical “political economy” started to undermine the drugged and servile Keynesian consensus, when big labour movements (even in North America) started to adopt Marxist programs, when Marxists proliferated on campuses, when the New Left rediscovered the Young Marx In short, Marx has often died, but in countless venues he has also kept coming back: each “crisis” described as “fatal” (either in hope or in despair) seemed, in hindsight, to also mark a regeneration or a new direction. Historians who have imaginatively re-experienced

19 Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution. 2. The Golden Age* (Oxford 1981).

at least four previous major “Deaths of Marx” since the nineteenth century may usefully provide a degree of skeptical balance (and demand higher standards of theoretical and empirical work) when confronted with the fifth. One recalls that *de omnibus dubitandum* — a provocation to put one’s received impressions and ideas in permanent crisis — was Marx’s favourite motto: a detail that is revealingly and necessarily absent from both Manuel’s and Aronson’s accounts of the secular religion they have mistakenly described as “Marxism.”

The “Death of Marx” as a Rhetorical Construction

Aronson and Manuel have now served their primary purpose in this essay: as illustrations of some problems common to many “Death of Marx” discussions. It may be useful, however, to generalize beyond these specific examples to achieve a more rigorous understanding of the working of the trope *in general*. “Deaths of Marx” seem to have certain formal attributes; examining them will help us appreciate more clearly how the trope functions within a bourgeois ideological ensemble. The comparative study of Deaths of Marx is in its infancy, of course,²⁰ and here we can only suggest some potentially useful unifying themes for such work. Nonetheless, one can suggest that anyone staging a Death of Marx must bear in mind five critical elements.

Personification

The first of these is deceptively obvious: it is the trope of personification. What is obvious (but so obvious that it is easy to forget it)

20 One obvious complication: those “crises of Marxism” that occurred when the Communist Party actually was a major force of attraction or repulsion for many Marxists (c.1921-1948 in much of North America) obviously had a greater tendency to equate Communism with Marxism than those that were staged before or afterwards.

is that all of this talk of the “Death of Marx” (and much of the talk of the “Collapse of Marxism”) comfortably speaks of complex traditions, institutions and ideas as though they were human individuals. Manuel’s point, for example, throughout *Requiem for Marx* is to argue that Marxism was the personification of Marx: after a fashion (as Manuel so likes to say), Marx’s carbuncles became the movement’s calamities. A central element in each of the five major “Deaths of Marx” that have been staged in the west from the late nineteenth century to today has been a highly personalized concern to *violate* the space and body of “Marx,” to *kill* and *mutilate* Marx, to topple his statue, to dance (figuratively or otherwise) on the old man’s grave. (This business of dancing on the grave seems to strike a special chord in the bourgeois heart).²¹ Manuel’s carbuncular theory of Marxism is only the most recent of a many colourful attempts to reduce the history of the movement to the details of Marx’s personal and intellectual history.²²

- 21 Aronson places on his cover a photograph of his two-year-old daughter sporting on the grave of Marx, unaware perhaps that he is thereby echoing the Fabians, who also used the figure of dancing on the prostrate body of Marx (albeit more wittily and less literally). See Lisanne Radice, *Beatrice and Sidney Webb: Fabian Socialists* (London 1984), who reports on Sidney Webb’s participations c.1884 in meetings of the Hampstead Historical Society (which had initially been known as the Karl Marx Society), which attracted many of the “leading radicals and socialists of the day”: “The initial meetings of the club began with the reading of *Capital*, followed by argument and rejection of its author ... The determined group of seekers after truth found little in Marx’s writings with which they could agree. Professor Edgeworth, the Cambridge economist who led the discussion at the first meeting, was so contemptuous that he reduced his audience to silence. ‘In despair, he appealed to me. I rushed in and the rest of the evening was a kind of Scottish reel *à deux*, Edgeworth and I gaily dancing on the unfortunate K.M. trampling him remorselessly under foot’, Sidney [Webb] wrote to the absent [George Bernard] Shaw.”(53-54) My thanks to Bob Shenton for this reference.
- 22 Leszek Kolakowski, for example, aggressively “reads into” Marx’s epistemology the notion that the working class is the possessor of objective truth; this then can be seen as an anticipation of the principle that ‘Stalin is always right.’ See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 3 (Oxford 1981), 4. A minor quibble: exactly where does Marx say that the proletariat is always in possession of objective truth, or “always right”?

More interesting, and more pervasive, is the treatment of Marxism itself as though it were a person. Marxism is supplied with a birth-date, a period of stormy adolescence, a time of maturity, a "Golden Age," and finally (but of course!) a descent into senility, madness, ruin and death. Virtually every Death of Marx is concerned to describe the biography of the movement whose demise is now at issue: it must construct a continuous narrative about the subject it constructs. Repeatedly, one uses "Marxism" as the subject of a sentence: "Marxism answered ... ," "Marxism taught ... ," "Marxism failed to realize ... ," and, of course, "Marxism confronted the specter of its own dissolution."

Homogeneity

Secondly, and following on from this, the one ailment which this personified "Marxism" does *not* suffer from is multiple personality syndrome. No, there is an essential, integral *homogeneity* to Marxism, a *solid and essential Marxist identity*, constant through time and space, whose contemporary dissolution is now at issue in the "Death of Marx." Marx, "the Marxists," and "Marxism" are all effortlessly equated; and this unified if fictional subject is in turn discussed as though it were a homogeneous, continuous, well-integrated personality: "the Marxist movement," "historical materialism," "Communism," and so on and so forth. Since the Marxist identity is (or was) a stable and unitary essence, it follows that Marx and Engels, however separate and distinct in their actual nineteenth-century lives, and notwithstanding their personal atheism, have attained a posthumous union of souls worthy of the most Catholic of marriages. Note that this unification of Marx and Engels is just not a theme of "anti-Marxists": many Orthodox Marxists (or orthodox post-Marxists like Aronson) also have a substantial investment in a version of Marxism that is fundamentally similar in its emphasis on a singular Marxist subject in history,

in which the hearts of the two “founding fathers” beat as one.²³ Enormous amounts of intellectual time and energy have gone into the construction of a narrative of continuous Marxist history, a flawlessly coherent, homogeneous, “sealed” tradition extending from the mid-nineteenth century to today.

Marx as a Philosopher and Marxism as a “totalizing philosophy”

And what this tradition entailed — to cite the third element — was in essence a *new philosophical system*, totalizing in its ambitions, cosmic in its claims. This is what gives so many “Deaths of Marx” their melodramatic atmosphere: what is at stake here is not some political and theoretical problems experienced by specific people solving concrete historical problems, but the catastrophic collapse of a theoretical universe, the ruination of a great integrated belief-system that had once explained everything from the “cell to socialism,”²⁴ the reduction of a once mighty secular religion to the status of a tiny sect. This is Aronson’s theme, when he imagines the early modern universe of Marxism to have been spellbindingly unified by a “single, powerful, unified outlook.”(231) Herein lies the pathos, the drama, and the morbid excitement that all Marxists should be experiencing today, as they confront the world alone, “bereft of their credo and their faith.”(Manuel, vii) Members of a once mighty world religion, continuing Marxists are now left to tend the fires of their recurringly fallible God in ever-dwindling numbers: the modern Zoroastrians.

- 23 Curiously, however, in anti-Marxist polemics, this union of souls usually works only to Marx’s discredit: when, on the other hand, Engels was the better half — as the elderly Engels truly was when he warned the socialist movement against the perils of pandering to anti-semitism (see Carlebach, Ch. 12) — *his* stance is not treated as being definitional of “the tradition.”
- 24 To cite Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London 1972), 26.

“Absolute finality”

Fourth, a sense of complete closure (this is a *Death*, after all) must obviously attend every and all “Death of Marx.” How this effect is to be achieved will vary from producer to producer, but there can be no variation as to the end desired: a sense of there being no loose ends, no straggling subplots, no nagging medical-ethics questions about when life ends and death begins: here (as in so much of this propagandistic writing) we are in the realm of *either/or*. The trope itself declares the question settled. Whenever one stages a “Death of Marx,” the emphasis must be on there being virtually *nothing* left.²⁵ This is an *all-or-nothing proposition*. In this implacable binary logic, one either believes that Marx is *alive* or *dead*.²⁶

The producer of a noteworthy Death of Marx is well-advised to consult a *Handbook of Gothic Effects* in order to set the proper tone. To date, the present holder of the Stephen King award for graphic “post-” imagery in relating a Death of Marx is Stanley Aronowitz, who in *The Crisis of Historical Materialism* depicted Marxism as a “patient lying on an operating table whose blood spurts from all pores. The carcass, emptied of its living substance, is inert.”²⁷ This not only succeeds in conveying a grotesque and vivid image of *absolute finality* — not just dead, but really, *really* dead — but also in suggesting the inhuman, monstrous quality of the deceased object in question (which is not even a human corpse, but merely a *carcass*).

25 True, some “post-Marxists” will claim that in surviving Marx, they have also inherited all his earthly estates. Let us simply remark here that there are reasons for this reading of Marx’s will to be contested.

26 Representations of Marxists as the vampiric un-dead have been to date disappointingly underdeveloped. They could do very well in today’s cultural marketplace.

27 Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory* (Minneapolis 1981 [1990]), 73. A niggling, “Bernard Woolley” question: would a patient spurting blood from every *pore* lie long on anybody’s operating table? Does blood in fact *spurt* from pores?

In addition to gothic imagery, another useful resource for a Death of Marx is irony. A selective appropriation of historical detail will help convey the obsolete *datedness* of Marx, and will help in the depiction of him as the last of the utopian socialists (or, conversely, the first and most mechanical of the general systems theorists). An even more popular move in our postmodern period is to link Marx with that distant and vaguely-defined phenomenon known as “the Enlightenment.” One has been told in scores of recent books on postmodernity, for example, that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the “modernity” of which Marx was the early diagnostician, and the “postmodernity” in which we now live, characterized as it is by (inter alia) an intense skepticism towards all grand narratives (and those of Marx most of all): Marx’s world is separated by an unbridgeable divide from ours. This makes the “finality” of Marx’s demise all the more conclusive. As we read in Manuel: “On January 9, 1883, Jenny Longuet died, and two months later, on March 14, Marx himself was dead — a blood vessel had burst. In the same year Nietzsche published *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.”(226) Q.E.D.: Marx obviously belongs to a vanished, pre-Nietzschean, Enlightenment age.

Unilinear textual reference

Finally, the trope subtly naturalizes a way of thinking about the vast network of texts and practices that commonly go under the name of “Marxism.” Either by referring simply to “Marx,” or by personifying a homogeneously conceived “Marxism,” these performances invite us to think that these texts and practices can be read in only one way. The difficulty that Marx contradicted himself, that Engels and Marx disagreed with each other, that Marx and the “Marxists” often did not see eye to eye, and that Marxists have spent much of the past century honing their arguments with each other, etc.etc., can be rhetorically handled by the time-honoured devices of essentialism. Such binaries as revolutionary/evolutionary, dialectical/vulgar, critical/scientific, Hegelian/non-Hegelian, can all be put into good service as ways of distinguishing the “real”

from the “false” Marx and the “good” from the “bad” Marxists.²⁸ Criteria of significance are imposed through which one separates the “important” from the “unimportant” figures, those who stand closest to the core of the tradition from those who are farthest removed, the historic peoples from the non-historic peoples, and so on. One admits into the canon of true Marxism only those who pass certain tests. True Marxism then in turn comes to be defined as the interpretation of “Marx” characteristic of “true Marxists.”

The manifest circularity of this procedure is useful not just for Orthodox Marxists, constructing their roll-calls of the great figures in “the tradition”; it is also most serviceable for those who are keen to declare Marxist traditions over and done with. Although Jean Jaurès may well have considered he was working within what he took to be the Marxist tradition, for example, he can be excluded at the outset from the pantheon on the grounds that he was insufficiently Engelsian and totalizing to merit the name “Marxist.”²⁹ This belief that Marxist texts may be treated as manifestations of a single stable essence, and that they can be read in only one legitimate way, is characteristic of virtually all the major renditions of

- 28 In *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge 1981), Russell Jacoby said this of the rhetoric of “orthodox Marxists”: “Against the dirty words — romanticism, subjectivism, aestheticism, utopianism — the clean ones are invoked — science, objectivity, rigor, structure. Here the final, almost psychological, contours of orthodox Marxism come into view.” (35) A good point, but one wonders if his own dualistic rendering of the tradition — in which the “unorthodox Marxists” retrieved “the substance of Marx ...” (33) — i.e., his supposedly unadulterated Hegelianism — is any the less circular or question-begging.
- 29 Leszek Kolakowski, for example, while for some reason finding room in his massive survey for a great many hitherto obscure Poles, excludes Jaurès from the canon because Jaurès did not read Marx’s texts appropriately: he did not treat Marxism “as a self-sufficient and all-embracing system from which the interpretation of all social phenomena could be deduced, still less a metaphysical key to the universe, explaining its every feature, and providing moral and practical guidance as to how it should be changed.” (*Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 2 (Oxford 1981), 114). Arguments such as these make Kolakowski’s massive survey of Marxism something like a infinitely tedious, three-volume, 1524-page exercise in tautology — and a mirror image of the Dialectical Materialism he wants to overthrow.

the “Crisis of Marxism,” both pro- and anti-Marxist, anti- and postmodernist.

A Critique of the Figures of “Death”

Even if they are alerted to these themes, socialists who think primarily of Marx as an historian and economist, and of Marxism primarily as the politically-motivated and theoretically-informed empirical critique of liberal political economy and social relations, will not find it easy to win a hearing in an age that has construed Marx as a Philosopher and his theory as a Total System. In the twentieth century, philosophy departments in particular took up the “interpretation of Marx”; philosophers and critical theorists now figure in the front ranks of those orchestrating Marx’s most recent death. If, as we have noted, Marx is customarily now thought of as a philosopher, it may seem like *lèse majesté* for a non-philosopher to raise doubts about how this high theoretical event is being managed. We are the audience, watching the Death from the back rows.

Left historians should refuse to be cowed. They could begin by questioning the extent to which Marx *ever* belonged in the philosophy departments. Many of Marx’s writings and actions were those of the engaged historian: only if tortured can *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Capital* be turned into exercises in high theory rather than works of political and economic history. Insofar as one implication of the contemporary postmodern Death of Marx will be to discourage the use by activists and others of such important concepts as “class”, “capital,” and the “capitalist system,” and to demoralize historians who have in the past felt they had a role to play in contributing to the discourse of the left, it is imperative that left historians enter the debate. It is all the more important that we do so when, as is so often the case, we find the theorists of postmodern post-Marxism making specific points about the history of Marxist traditions which, according to the conventional criteria of historical investigation, are predicated on gross falsifications and

distortions. In this spirit, one presumes now to revisit the “themes” we have just mentioned as characteristic of Deaths of Marx and redescribe them all as “historical fallacies.”

The fallacy of personification

Let us deal first with the “fallacy of personification.” It is because Marx-the-person is thought to have been directly reflected in Marxism-the-movement that so much energy has been poured into developing this figure as a hero or an anti-hero. It is then a short step to personifying the entire “Marxist tradition.”

Treating whole states, countries, intellectual networks, cultural traditions, etc., as though they were living and breathing entities endowed with agency is often an indication of lazy and/or manipulative thinking. “The United States voted for the Democrats in 1992” may seem an innocent way of putting things. (In fact, we know that the “United States,” being a country of many millions, did not “vote” for anybody: only some adult Americans cast ballots, and only some of those voted for the Democrats: the conventional shorthand brushes past these complications). But if we go on to talk about the “decision of the American people” and to develop the argument that the policies ensuing after 1992 represented their will, we have passed beyond a short-hand usage to a full-blown apology for the democratic credentials of the American political system. We have lost sight of the many debates and fissures within the United States that made the election decision of 1992 something less than a reflection of the active and considered will of the majority of Americans.

Exactly the same empirical objection applies to attributions of personhood to a complex, theoretico-practical tradition like Marxism. It is often a kind of category mistake. By essentializing Marxism, and then by attributing to this personified essence the sole legitimate right to speak posthumously for “Marx”, one is engaged in the business of myth-symbol construction, and not in the empirical investigation of history. Here Aronson provides us with the starkest examples. In his imagined history of Marxism, in

which one even bestows a “happy childhood” upon this abstraction, there was a time when Marxism was hegemonic on the left: hence the sadness, shock and horror of all true Marxists when, in the 1970s, they were suddenly confronted (via feminism) with the brutal fact of their own *relative* truths. On this point — which is so crucial to the setting of the elegiac, how-the-mighty-have-fallen tone of his volume, Aronson is simply in error. Anyone who looks at the Marx-Engels correspondence will remember how much time Marx spent on out-maneuvering the other tendencies in the First International (and also the care he took, as a Gramscian *avant la lettre*, to draft its documents so as provide a platform on which various tendencies could at least coexist); in major European labour movements down to the 1930s, Anarchists and not Marxists predominated; after the Bernstein split, and even more after the Bolshevik Revolution, Marxists found rivals in other Marxists. Even if we buy into Aronson’s implicit equation Marxism = Marxism-Leninism, the notion of a “happy childhood” seems untenable. For many Marxists, the Revolutions of 1989, besides vindicating the notion that class struggle can move mountains, also created a new terrain, admittedly very contested and problematical, for new activism. There was, and is, no one “Marxist” position on this moment of “childhood’s loss.”

The fallacy of essential homogeneity

This leads quite readily into a discussion of the second fallacy: that of essential homogeneity. The easy equation of Marxism with socialism and with Communism, and the tendency to brush past evidence of the extraordinary diversity of Marxist opinion on most subjects³⁰ leads both detractors and supporters of “Marx” into

30 One notes Fredric Jameson’s comment in his important essay “Actually Existing Marxism,” “The end of the Soviet State has been the occasion for celebrations of the ‘death of Marxism’ in quarters not particularly scrupulous about distinguishing Marxism itself as a mode of thought and analysis, socialism as a political and societal aim and vision, and Communism as a

grossly oversimplified positions. Leszek Kolakowski and Ronald Aronson, not united on many issues, would at least agree that there was at work in Marxism one deeply-unified, cohesive outlook.

At very high levels of generalization — such as those commonly required in polemics — it may still be useful to write as though, when we use the word “Marxist,” we know just what is meant, regardless of the context. But as soon as one enters into the historical specifics, the case for homogeneity starts to fall apart. There were many voices within the texts of Marx: there were echoes of Kant, Hegel, Saint-Simon; there was the messianic voice of the prophet and the cool voice of the scientist: attempts to restore order by constructing a “Young” and a “Mature Marx,” the latter separated by a Althusserian *coupure épistémologique* from the former, have foundered on the incontestable persistence of such undeniably crucial concepts as the “realm of freedom” in the third volume of *Capital*. The habit of assigning only one voice to this vast corpus of writings is a highly misleading characteristic both of Marxism’s supporters (with many “western Marxists” insisting, for instance, on seeing Marx as little more than an updated version of Hegel) and of its postmodern critics.

Nor does the fallacy of homogeneity stop there. Part of the recovery of Marx that went on in the 1960s and 1970s entailed a

historical movement. The event has clearly enough left its mark on all three of these dimensions ...”(14) Jacques Derrida, characteristically, presses the point about a plurality of Marxist voices much further in his *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London 1994): “Rather than uniformity, one names ... the necessary *disjunction* of Marx’s languages, their non-contemporaneity with themselves. That they are ‘disjoined,’ and first of all in Marx himself, must neither be denied, reduced, nor even deplored. What one must constantly come back to, ... is an irreducible heterogeneity, an internal untranslatability in some way. It does not necessarily signify theoretical weakness or inconsistency. The lack of a system is not a fault there. On the contrary, heterogeneity opens things up, it lets itself be opened up by the very effraction of that which unfurls, comes, and remains to come — singularly from the other. There would be neither injunction nor promise without this disjunction.”(33)

wholesale reconsideration of the Marx/Engels relationship.³¹ The orthodox position has generally been that Marx and Engels worked so closely together that one can almost say they shared the same brain: hence the logic of publishing their collected works together. (That Engels's *Anti-Duhring* played an enormous role in the development of Plekhanov's and Stalin's Dialectical Materialism is of significance here; the *Dialectics of Nature*, based on Engels's unfinished notes on the materialist conception of history and developments in the natural sciences, was published posthumously in Moscow in 1920). At the other extreme, one found the New Left stereotype of Engels as Marx's Evil Twin, the positivist perverter of the Sacred Text. There were distortions involved in either case. It would nonetheless seem difficult to deny, following Lucio Colletti and Z.A.Jordan, that Engels's cosmic naturalism in the *Dialectics of Nature* was concerned with very different themes than those reflected in Marx's *Capital*.³² And with regard to one absolutely essential idea — that is, the “realm of freedom” as the “limit ideal” of the socialist movement — Marx and Engels clearly did not say the same thing. The Marx/Engels relationship thus does not lend itself very easily to the gross oversimplifications characteristic of the “Death of Marx” discussion. However, it is simply a historical error to argue — as both essentialist Marxists and their post-Marxist detractors often do — that on all subjects they saw things the same way.³³

31 See, for instance, Irving M. Zeitlin, *Marxism: A Re-Examination* (New York 1967), for one influential text of the time.

32 See especially Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (London 1979), and Z.A.Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism: A Philosophical and Sociological Analysis* (New York 1967), a book that has aged remarkably well.

33 See Terrell Carver, *Marx & Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Bloomington 1983) for a judicious account based on a careful examination of the pertinent texts. Carver notes that the younger Engels undoubtedly influenced Marx's turn to political economy; however, Engels's move, in the 1850s, “from Marx's view of science as an *activity* important in technology and industry, to seeing its importance for socialists in terms of a *system* of knowledge, incorporating the causal laws of physical science and taking them as a model for a covertly academic study of history, ‘thought’ and, somewhat

Because Marx never encountered Dialectical Materialism, which was cut from Engelsian cloth by Plekhanov, we do not know what he would have made of it. Because Marx was never a member of a Communist Party, we do not know what he would have thought of one. It is obviously tendentious and ahistorical to tax Marx for holding the views of people he had never met or for supporting arguments and conceptual frameworks he never had the opportunity to ponder. Such exercises swiftly degenerate into true-by-definition games of historical filiation: elaborate exercises in the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. The same criticism applies to the aggressive tidying-up of Marxist traditions in accordance with some neatly dichotomous categorization. To conclude in the absence of evidence that the emergence of the Communist and social democratic parties marginalized all the other “Marxist” approaches is wholly unwarranted and has led to the unwise neglect of the many “Third Force” Marxists who argued for positions that were outside the “mainstream” parties of the left.

Is “Marxism” dead? “Marxism” cannot die because “Marxism” was never alive. It was never a single entity endowed with life. Are today’s intellectuals betraying “Marxism”? The question only makes sense if “Marxism” was like a religion (with its own internal criteria of truth, proceeding ultimately from faith) or like a person (one imagines “Marxism” waiting tearfully by the phone for a call from a faithless lover). “Marxism,” as a clearly-defined unitary and cohesive tradition, never existed. There never was “a” Marxist ontology, “a” Marxist epistemology, “a” Marxist ethics. What did

implausibly, current politics”(157) represented a distinct departure from Marx’s thought. With respect to the later flowering of Engels’s quest for a full-blown comprehensive, and comprehensively valid *Weltanschauung*, Carver remarks: “... anything further from Marx’s investigative, rigorous and independent approach to the politics of capitalist society is difficult to imagine. While the drift in Engels’s career is now apparent to us, because of our knowledge of his manuscripts and of works written after 1883, this material was largely unknown (and most of it was *certainly* unknown) to Marx. Hence the view that he consented tacitly to Engels’s system-building and to its tenets cannot be sustained.”(157) See also the same author’s *Engels* (Oxford 1981).

exist were Marx's writings and the many Marxisms organized by people inspired, in innumerable ways, by those writings, and often claiming sole access to the one true interpretation of Marx. In attempting to construct a usable definition of Marxism today, one might say at most that "Marxism" denotes not adherence to a certain philosophy nor devotion to a method; it does not entail loyalty to a political practice, nor membership in a particular type of party. It is simply a way of crafting political and cultural praxis in the present by mobilizing certain key determinate abstractions to establish a relationship between the ideal of the future (the realm of socialist freedom) and the reality of the past (the realm of necessity). As a relationship rather than a thing, Marxism cannot then be defined in terms of mastery of certain theories or adherence to certain positions. It was neither encapsulated in final form in Russian Dialectical Materialism, nor is it conclusively buried with the waning of that particular school. "Marxism" cannot be buried once and for all because it never existed, not in the reified or personified sense in which it would make sense to lament (or celebrate) its alleged passing or to contemplate covering it with earth. Every generation of radicals and socialists, confronting the legacy of Marx along with that of so many other socialist writers, weaves elements of that legacy into a new pattern. Every left generation has had to mourn (as well as celebrate) its past and reconstitute its present. Our own generation is no exception. Reports of the "Death of Marx" are not only greatly exaggerated, but wholly misconceived: by a sleight of hand, they evade the point-by-point refutation of the determinate abstractions through which Marx conceptualized and contextualized the "capitalist system."

The fallacy of "totalizing" Marxism

This is related to the drive to transform "Marx" into a philosopher and the deeply ingrained notion that a "Marxism" worthy of the name must aspire to be an integrated philosophical system: a philosophy of history that interprets the totality of humanity's

experiences. Again and again, throughout the contemporary Death of Marx, one reads that Marx was a philosopher. This is precisely how Leszek Kolakowski began his three-volume, compendious demonstration of the stupidity of Marx and all Marxists: “Karl Marx was a German philosopher ...”³⁴ This statement, tendentious in at least two respects, was an ominous sign of the historiographical disaster to follow.

One may simply remark that Karl Marx was *not* a German philosopher in any straightforward sense. One could even say that, at various times, he sharply rejected both terms of this description, by renouncing his citizenship and by declaring war on the speculative metaphysics and ethics that most of his contemporaries would have identified as intrinsic to “philosophy.”³⁵ The twentieth-century drive to “round out” Marx’s work by adding to it the books he never wrote — *Karl Marx’s Guide to Epistemology, My Thoughts about Ethics*, etc.etc. — or to radicalize to the point of absurdity the extent to which he was influenced by contemporaneous philosophical currents (as in claims that Marx’s social ontology reflected his supposed lifelong adherence to Hegelianism) suggests not actual analytical deficiencies within Marx’s thought but the curiously high status still assigned to abstract philosophical speculation in the liberal academy.³⁶ Preoccupation with Marxism as a “philosophy”

34 Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 1. *The Founders* (Oxford 1981), 1.

35 He is not conventionally ranked among the major philosophers, and he himself felt that philosophy (like much of religion) was ultimately mystificatory. The twentieth-century attempt to make Marx over into a philosopher has been mainly characterized by diversity, confusion and, insofar as it aimed at constructing a generally accepted “Marxist Philosophy,” futility. It seems to have been driven more by an academic Marxist quest for respectability than by something in Marx’s texts themselves.

36 As Jacques Derrida pertinently remarks, it may be that the “return of Marx” will be eased if he is presented merely as a philosopher: “If one listens closely, one already hears whispered: ‘Marx, you see, was despite everything a philosopher like any other; what is more [and one can say this now that so many Marxists have fallen silent], he was a *great-philosopher* who deserves to figure on the list of those works we assign for study and from which he

has distorted even the work of so fine an historian as Perry Anderson, whose peculiar emphasis on a roll-call of philosophers preordained much of the tone and direction of his provocative *Considerations on Western Marxism*.³⁷ It seems both more respectful of the complexity in Marx and more realistic in the face of the historical evidence to say that, like most working political economists and historians, Marx largely assumed a realist posture in his discussion of society, did not think it of fundamental importance to develop a full-blown philosophical system, and had some interesting but somewhat inconsistent things to say about underlying philosophical issues in texts which are generally more focused on specific questions of political economy, history, and socialist strategy. As Jonathan Rée remarks, “The common belief that there must be a special, if elusive, Marxist brand of philosophy is ... a long way from being self-evident.”³⁸

has been banned for too long. He doesn't belong to the communists, to the Marxists, to the parties, he ought to figure within our great canon of Western political philosophy ...” (*Specters of Marx*, 32)

- 37 As Perry Anderson observes, “Western Marxism as a whole ... paradoxically inverted the trajectory of Marx's own development itself. Where the founder of historical materialism moved progressively from philosophy to politics and then economics, as the central terrain of his thought, the successors of the tradition that emerged after 1920 increasingly turned back from economics and politics to philosophy — abandoning direct engagement with what had been the great concerns of the mature Marx, nearly as completely as he had abandoned direct pursuit of the discursive issues of his youth.” (52) Yet this “finding” seems vulnerable to the criticism that this supposed “twentieth century philosophical turn,” although it undoubtedly did occur, was also contributed to and given an exaggerated emphasis by the logic of Anderson's own politics of canon-formation, both in this volume and for a time in *New Left Review*.
- 38 Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900-1940* (Oxford 1984), 3. Fredric Jameson, “Actually Existing Marxism,” in Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, eds., *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (New York and London 1996), 14-70, in essence agrees: “What is Marxism? Or if you prefer, what is Marxism not? It is not, in particular, a nineteenth-century philosophy, as some people (from Foucault to Kolakowski) have suggested Marxism is not in that sense a philosophy at all; it designates itself, with characteristic clumsiness, as a ‘unity-of-theory-and-practice’ (and if you knew what that was, it would be clear that it shares this peculiar structure with Freudianism). But it may be

One could therefore argue (and in good, high-powered, “philosophical” company) that Marx was not a philosopher, Marxism lacks the resources to be a philosophy, and the contemporary crisis of Marxism cannot be understood, let alone resolved, through a discussion that gives pride of place to philosophers and philosophical issues.³⁹ The point of continuing in dialogue with “Marx” is not

clearest to say that it can best be thought of as a *problematic* : that is to say, it can be identified, not by specific positions (whether of a political, economic or philosophical type), but rather by the allegiance to a specific complex of problems, whose formulations are always in movement and in historic rearrangement and restructuring, along with their object of study (capitalism itself). One can therefore just as easily say that what is productive in the Marxian problematic is its capacity to generate new problems (as we will observe it to do in the most recent encounter, with late capitalism); nor can the various dogmatisms historically associated with it be traced to any particular fatal flaw in that problem-field, although it is clear that Marxists have not been any freer of the effects of intellectual reification than anyone else, and have, for example, consistently thought that base-and-superstructure was a solution and a concept, rather than a problem and a dilemma, just as they have persistently assumed that something called ‘materialism’ was a philosophical or ontological position, rather than the general sign for an operation which we might term de-idealization, an operation both interminable in Freud’s classic sense and also unrealizable on any permanent basis and for any durable length of time (inasmuch as it is idealism which is the most comfortable assumption for everyday human thought).”(19-20)

- 39 On this point one might cite Fredric Jameson once again, this time from his brilliant *Late Marxism. Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York 1990). Jameson argues: “‘To be a Marxist’ necessarily includes the belief that Marxism is somehow a science: that is to say, an axiomatic, an organon, a body of distinctive knowledges and procedures (about which, were we to develop the argument, one would also want to say that it has a distinctive status as a discourse, which is not that of philosophy or of other kinds of writing.) ... The various Marxisms — for there are many of them, and famously incompatible with one another — are just that: the local ideologies of Marxian science in history and in concrete historical situations, which set not merely their priorities but also their limits. To say, then, that the Marxism of Lenin, or of Che, or of Althusser, or of Brecht (or indeed of Perry Anderson or of Eagleton, not to speak of myself), is *ideological* now simply means, in the critical sense of the term, that each one is situation-specific to the point of encompassing the class determinations and cultural and national horizons of its proponents (horizons which include, among other things, the development of a working class politics in the period in question).”(6)

to rescue a “philosophical system,” but to preserve and develop conceptual tools that may be important for people’s struggle in solidarity against capitalism and the liberal order. Philosophers have interpreted the world, Marx said in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: but the point is to change it. The subject-position from which this famous saying can be received without undue epistemological strain would not appear to be that of the “philosopher” but that of the “activist.”

The philosophers who conscripted Marx sought a “true” or “consistent” philosophical Marx; having reconstructed him as this figure, they then constructed a canon of “good” and “bad” Marxists depending on how closely thinkers adhered to what they took to be the unitary “Founders’ Path.”⁴⁰ Of particular significance in the West was a reading of Marx that argued his inalienable Hegelianism: indeed, as one major interpreter has argued, Hegel’s social ontology quite simply persisted in the work of Marx, who really did not have that much new foundational work to do.⁴¹ And since we are speaking of a totally self-sufficient Marxian philosophical system, with its own epistemology and ontology and ethics, its own discourse of proof and mode of investigation, then we can ascribe all the achievements (and now the limitations) of various Marxists either to the “philosophy,” or to their inability to live up to the potential of “Marx” in his pure, unadulterated form.

But if Marx was not a philosopher in this sense, but a political economist, historian, and political theorist, the attempt to read into him a total philosophy of history (let alone a dialectics of nature) is wholly misguided. If this is so, if Marx did not create his own distinctive philosophy, then narratives that dwell on departures from what is sometimes called “the founders’ path” are also often

40 For a good historical work marred by over-reliance on the metaphor of a Founders’ Path, see Mark Pittinger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison, Wis. 1993).

41 Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Duckworth, 1985); see also Joseph McCarney, *Social Theory and the Crisis of Marxism* (London and New York 1990).

based on a series of misconceptions (the two supposed founders were not the same people, possessed two quite separate and unequal brains, disagreed with each other over basic issues, and did not have any special gift of prophecy which enabled them to blaze a sure and certain path) and oversimplifications (there was never “one path,” nor was there ever just one logic of inference from a given theory, whether classical English political economy or Darwinism). Narratives that depict a radical Hegelian Marx betrayed by late nineteenth-century positivist/evolutionist interpreters suffer from the same tendency to oversimplify on the basis of inadequate knowledge: they often assume a clean slate subsequently sullied by the vulgar popularizers. Bourgeois civilization played some cruel tricks on Marx, but none crueller, one suspects, than to make this fierce critic of philosophy a hostage of the philosophy departments.

The fallacy of teleology and finality

In their role as snakes at the high theorists’ garden party, left historians need not immerse themselves in the enormous late-twentieth-century literature critical of teleology and master narratives. (It is amusing to note, as Gregory Elliott has pointed out, that the postmodern Death of Marx flouts its own protocols in that it calls upon a metanarrative to pronounce the end of all metanarratives).⁴²

42 “The reconfiguration of avant-garde Anglophone theory leaves much of the Left intelligentsia caroling the virtues of a meretricious miscellany that would shake all metaphysics (Marxism included) to the superflux, while leaving material structures intact (therewith replicating metaphysics in the very gesture of repudiating it). The intrinsic problem with this sub-Maoism of the signifier is that it flouts its own protocols. It employs reason as an instrument of illumination to denounce reason as an arm of oppression. It deploys a metanarrative — and one of the tallest, if not the greatest, stories ever told — to deliver metanarrative its quietus. It constructs an expressive social totality, the entirety of whose phenomena would be exfoliations of the postmodern essence. Disposing of history historically, of theory theoretically, of ethics ethically, of politics politically, this intellectual recidivism drafts its own indictment: *de te fabula magna narratur*.” Gregory Elliott, “Intimations of Mortality: On Historical Communism and the ‘End of History,’” in Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener,

Rather than beginning with the high-theoretical reasons for incredulity towards metanarratives, left historians might be better off asking down-to-earth and pragmatic questions. One may ask at any contemporary performance of the Death of Marx: when you stage these funerals, sing these off-key requiems, and otherwise pronounce so authoritatively about the Marx-free future of the liberal order, how do you know? Historical inevitability — the inexorable working out of factors over and above the historical process — has long been a bugbear of historians, for reasons that bear little resemblance to the ruminations of high theorists. Historians need evidence before they will believe in “inevitability,” and the historicist habit of writing about the future as though it could already be known as an object of “history” strikes most of us as being a bit spurious. It is important to know about the past, but this knowledge does not give us certain grounds for predicting the future. The tone of much Death of Marx discussion assumes precisely this historicist sense of certainty: it argues that the future has been glimpsed, and Marx is not part of it.

Is it not a trifle presumptuous to pretend to pronounce such a verdict, almost invariably reached in the North Atlantic intellectual world, for an entire planet? And doesn't this show a rather innocent and ahistorical credulity towards a master narrative, especially considering the number of earlier occasions on which Marx's final demise has been proclaimed? Does it not seem obvious that the many lingering illnesses, fatal crises, and gruesome deaths that Marx has undergone since his actual death in 1883, must have also entailed a no-less-impressive number of miraculous recoveries and sensational resurrections? One sometimes wonders, in fact, whether the extraordinary violence and rage which post- and anti-Marxists visit on Marx — to the point of mocking his actual

grave-site — is not motivated, in part, by their fear that the silver bullet has yet to find its mark.⁴³

If we construct “Marxism” narrowly, equating it with Marxism-Leninism and with the Communist Parties, and adopt the perspective of Cold War *realpolitik* — how many governments, what percentage of the world’s population, how many books in print, etc. — no doubt the ostensible post-1989 “decline” has been rapid. If we construct “Marxism” less narrowly, and ask how many people today use “Marx-like” questions to probe the structures under which they live, how many are skeptical about the merely formal freedoms of a liberal order, how broadly and with what degree of sophistication Marxist positions (or, in the case of people such as Foucault and Derrida, “Marx-like” positions) are in currency — our sense of “decline” may well be quite different. And if we look not just at the formal, self-proclaimed “Marxist” movements, but those which draw their inspiration from Marx’s notion of the realm of freedom, within a broad diversity of traditions, including those of religion — we may in fact wish to revise quite radically any sense of a unilinear post-1970 narrative of the “Death of Marx.” (It is highly suggestive how little most surveys on “Western Marxism” have to say about Liberation Theology, the theoretical expression of what was perhaps the largest twentieth-century Marxist mass

43 As Ernest Mandel remarks: “A thousand books and magazine and newspaper articles are proclaiming, ‘Marx is dead,’ and ‘Marxism is dead.’ ... One does not see hundreds of medical doctors gathering day after day at the cemetery, to prove that a given casket contains a corpse. In fact, if the uninterrupted assault proves anything, it is that Marx and Marxism are alive and kicking.” Ernest Mandel, “The Relevance of Marxist Theory for Understanding the Present World Crisis,” in Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, eds., *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Confronting the New World Order*, 445. One could also note substantial critiques of the notion that postmodernism is separated by an epistemological chasm from “modernity”: for one important discussion of the enduring significance of Kant on either side of this supposed divide, see Kimberly Hutchings, *Kant, Critique and Politics* (London and New York 1996). An implication she does not draw, but could be drawn, is that attempts to “date” Marx by assigning him to the Enlightenment underestimate the influence on almost all major postmodern thinkers of a Kantian project of critique that can also be found in Marx.

movement in the western hemisphere). Could it be that the “Death of Marx” is a phenomenon that is far more apparent within the North American academic hothouse than outside it?

The fallacy of unilinear textual inference

Finally, there is the theme of unilinear textual inference: the belief that Marx’s writings sustain only one legitimate line of argument. For all that so much of the present Death of Marx is being staged by intellectuals who have been strongly influenced by post-structuralism, much of this discussion still seems predicated on the naïve assumption that Marx’s texts are the transparent and stable reflection of its author’s intentions, which were then received in the same way over vast stretches of space and time by his many readers. Yet the “fixity” of this curiously naïve interpretation of how Marxism emerged and has been interpreted over time is surely open to question. When contemporary critical theorists discuss Marx (and his supposed “essentialism,” “class reductionism,” “Eurocentrism,” and so on), they blatantly contradict the often subtle and interesting insights they have developed into the creativity of the reader and the intricacies of his or her reception of specific texts (and of a tradition of texts). For all their attacks on reductionism, they reduce Marx to an economic essence; for all their critiques of master-narratives, they produce a grand narrative in which they emerge as those who “come after” Marx. In the poststructuralist, post-Marxist metanarrative of the Death of Marx, one allows Marx only *one* voice: and this is generally an easily dismissible voice: the stentorian voice of dialectical materialism, of scientific certainty, of an overbearing master narrative that offers an unbelievably iron-clad guarantee of a Socialism that is “objectively” part of our future and which will resolve all of humanity’s problems. This, we have been told again and again in the present Death of Marx, both by detractors and proponents, is the vital, progressive, scientific nucleus of all Marxism, its irreplaceable essence. In comparison with this realist, ontological, scientific argument for socialism — the dialectical outcome of the objective contradictions of the capitalist system — everything else pales to insignificance.

This is the founders' path: and there is only one of them. Both rigidly orthodox back-to-basics Marxists and the producers of today's Death of Marx can agree on that: as indeed they can agree on so many, many things.

Now, it is simply a matter of historical record that some of the most knowledgeable and discerning Marxists have thought otherwise. They have even "misread" those passages that seemingly offer the most unequivocal, "scientific" methodology and the most ironclad guarantees of the socialist future to come. (A classic case, by no means exceptional, is Gramsci's inspired "misreading" of the base-and-superstructure model as outlined in Marx's 1859 Preface). A tried-and-true method for dealing with such an obvious objection is simply to proclaim all such people as mistaken or, through the over-polemicized use of a rather dated "history-of-ideas" approach to intellectual history, to tie all such "misinterpreters" to an ancient heresy. Such canon-construction has the effect of winning the point by *fiat*, but not by sustained historical argument.

Against these pro- and post-Marxist claims to have mastered Marxism's true essence, which mirror each other in their reductionism and aridity, the left historian can perform an invaluable role by insistently refusing the high-theorists' short cuts and by the detailed reconstruction of the complexities and heterogeneity of past Marxisms. Confronted with such over-generalized abstractions as the "Socialism of the Second International" or "the Enlightenment" or "the Founders' Path," he or she can ask: which specific thinkers, which texts, which positions?

Left History and the Reconstruction of the Socialist Project

The point of such theoretical and empirical interventions on the part of left historians would not be to make the lives of philosophical post-Marxists more difficult than they already are. It would be, rather, to insert a different, more historically-grounded perspective

into the now urgent discussions about the reconstitution of the “left.”

The “remaking-of-the-left” books are as numerous as those of the *Death of Marx*; a thorough evaluation of them would lie far beyond the parameters of this article. I merely want to underline the extent to which, positioned by a kind of pseudo-philosophical, high-theoretical limbo, these discussions so rarely engage with the political and economic realities of a capitalist system in crisis or with the empirical specificities of the history of the socialist movement. We hear a great deal about how to rethink the socialist project by way of a rereading of Spinoza’s texts on democracy, and not a whole lot on how to imagine a socialist steel mill or a radical position on unemployment. Socialism, we are implicitly told will be reconstituted by combining John Stuart Mill with Carl Schmitt, or by declaring war on all “essentialisms”; the left’s path out of the void lies in embracing radical pluralism, liberal democracy, “civil society,” community ... This ahistorical idealism simply reinvents, over and over again, the limitations and contradictions of a utopianism grounded only on philosophical texts.

The role of the left historian in this discussion — and obviously one can assume only that the left historian will be interested in it, and not how he or she will line up on any particular issue — should not be that of being the intimidated and unreflecting consumer of High Theory. It should be that of the person who remembers the dynamic complexity of the historical process and the extent to which “theory” of any sort can inform, but never replace, determinate investigation. Confronted by a passage such as this from Chantal Mouffe: “The problem of democratic politics is how to transform an antagonism into an ‘agonism’, and how to defuse that hostility that is very present, so that it is made compatible with democratic institutions,”⁴⁴ the left-historian might well choose to

44 “On the Itineraries of Democracy: An Interview with Chantal Mouffe,” *Studies in Political Economy* 49 (Spring 1996), 131-148. For a fuller, if not exactly clearer, exposition of the sublimities of radical liberal democracy, see Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism*,

engage Mouffe's position *not* by following her headlong into the dismal obscurities of the inimitable Carl Schmitt, but rather by asking for historical specifics. Given what has been learned about social historical processes — and historians do know, in fact, a lot more than we used to — what agents would this process require? What agents would likely oppose it? What property relations have historically limited this venerable drive for “true democracy”? What exactly are “democratic institutions”? What are the social correlates of “hostility”?

The likely persistence of capitalist social relations means that movements for “radical democracy” will either rediscover the problems Marx explored in depth or doom themselves to an amiable, uplifting, terminally vague cloud-nine existence, in which the merits of “liberal values” are praised in the abstract, without any historically specific understanding of how “liberal politics” has been experienced by subaltern classes in ways that have drastically qualified the extent to which such values have any bearing on day-to-day experiences. The left historian's call for more historical specificity is not necessarily a preliminary to the unreflecting rejection of “radical democracy”: it is merely a challenge to its theorists to engage with history, to become less hermetic in their discourse, and to engage, if not with “Marx,” then at least with the general socialist problematic. If some people in the age of “radical democracy” are still going to be working for other people who have the right to expropriate and invest the profits derived from their workers' labour, how can we position all these people, in any way other than merely formally, in positions of democratic equality? To such Marx-type questions, Marx-type answers deserve a hearing, even if — as can be readily conceded — they address neither all the causes of inequality, nor all the pressing issues that will be involved in any people's struggle to transform the liberal order into a new democracy.⁴⁵

Citizenship, Community (London and New York 1992).

45 Of the many “balance-sheets” being drawn up today of what is living and

The postmodern “Death of Marx” has often proceeded by means of an attack on the centrality of class, and an assertion of the value and dignity — at times even the primacy — of struggles that proceed according to a different logic. Yet another tidy dichotomy — between the old and new social movements — can be brought into play to bring “Marxists” and other activists into conflict: a final reason for declaring Marx dead, then, is that he no longer speaks to feminists, gays, environmentalists, and a host of other “new social movements.” The possibilities of useless polemic here are infinite: one need merely scour the Marx/Engels correspondence for sexist references, the record of “actually existing socialisms” for environmental degradation, the platforms of past ultraleft grouplets on homosexuality to reap a rich harvest of incriminating material. Such anti-Marxist polemics often assume that, because “Marxism” denotes a unitary movement united by certain key texts and positions, to grasp even a small part means grasping the whole;⁴⁶ moreover, because “Marxism” is inherently aligned only

dead in the Marxist tradition, I have found that of Antonio Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today,” in Saree Makdissi, Cesare Casarino and Rebecca E. Karl, *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (London and New York 1996), 149-180 to be particularly helpful and close to the “post-orthodox Marxist” line of argument I can only hint at here. Of particular interest is his attempt to periodize the “historical limits” of the law of value and the close links between his “ontology of living labor” and the realm of freedom. Such work is a striking indication that much of what has been described as the “Death of Marx” should also be seen as “Marx’s Rebirth.” For a stimulating, down-to-earth defence of the continuing relevance of socialism, see Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (London and New York 1994).

- 46 For a typical recent polemic, see Simon Edge, *With Friends Like These ... Marxism and Gay Politics* (London 1995), in which “Marxism” turns out to be rather narrowly identified with certain forces within British Trotskyism. This brief polemic against a certain vanguardist style of Marxist politics makes a valid point, but curiously it does so by way of lending credence to an outdated and hyperfunctionalized Marxian approach to the history of sexuality. Post-orthodox Marxists embrace (and would generally extend) the argument that groups whose oppression results not only from the direct experience of capitalist social relations but also from a multiplicity of other causes should organize independently around issues of particular concern to them. Once this is done, however, there will remain a vast range of issues —

with the “old” working-class movement, its interest in or for the new social movements can only be opportunistic and marginal. Marxism is simply part of the old world of class reductionism and essentialism that is to be rejected. For their part, some Marxist-Leninists have obligingly played their assigned part by developing absurdly overly-functionalized and reductionist accounts of non-class identities and oppressions that confirmed beyond doubt the extent to which “non-classical” movements were quite correct in thinking them intellectually bankrupt.

However, were this debate ever to recover from the disease of thinking in essences, new possibilities of a non-recriminatory and constructive interaction between “Marxism” and social movements emerge. The unreal, highly abstract “struggles” that have been waged from time to time — Marxism vs. Feminism, Marxism vs. Deep Ecology, Marxism vs. Gay Liberation, etc. — only make sense if Marx was a Philosopher and Marxism is a unitary Philosophy: if we are dealing here with a cosmic and holistic worldview whose success or failure can be measured according to whether or not it provides a universal key to history and to the project of human emancipation. Having failed, in the apocalyptic (postmodern) interpretation, to function as such a universal key (and this is indeed — and inevitably — the case), Marxism is thus held to have failed at everything: and Marxists are advised to retreat to the position of helpful fixers. They might on occasion murmur the odd discrete word of encouragement to the members of the new social movements, but their general role is that of Superseded Bad Examples, whose history is one long series of insensitivities and incomprehensions. Subordinated to the people at the front of the bus, to all the

from budget cuts to police violence — that can best be understood and approached through a wider range of theoretical approaches (including Marxist political economy and cultural theory) and institutional alignments (including, perhaps, some interesting new democratic forms of socialist parties). None of this requires acceptance of economistic “ultimate explanations” of the oppression in question nor the drawing up of “hierarchies of oppression” (a wholly futile and divisive exercise, given the absence of any commonly accepted units of measurement).

new social movements more capable of providing partial theorizations of social totality for the benefit of their particular constituencies, Marxists come to be seen as merely specific (or more accurately “service”) intellectuals in a polycentric, multi-hued, richly textured movement. Thus Marxists, heirs to a failed total philosophy, are simply one (not particularly significant) group among many in the new politics of identity. And in the new identity politics, class as a focus of identity is increasingly categorized as less significant than race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or ability status: we have all been told, so many times and in so many ways, to bid farewell to a dwindling working class, no longer the agent of social transformation and therefore no longer very interesting for leftists.

This conceptualization of the “new politics” in “new times” works to some extent if Aronson was right — if in fact Marxism is most accurately represented as a failed total philosophy, with its own epistemology and ethics and discourse of proof, whose dwindling ranks of devotees are left with the task of winning an audience among largely indifferent identity activists, and if indeed the world working class represents an ever-shrinking and more passive force. But if Marxism is best not seen as such a total philosophy, but as a set of insights and methods, a way of formulating issues and approaches, that has often proved generally useful for a wide range of people interested in exploring capitalist social realities, then this across-the-board polemical dismissal is far more guilty of “totalizing” and “essentialism” than the target against which it is aimed. It would then be more plausible to see “Marxism” not so much as a movement competing with other movements on the political landscape, and more as a complex vocabulary and framework of resistance, available as a resource to all the movements — labour, feminist, environmentalist, gay and lesbian — contesting the terms of their existence within a liberal capitalist order. And it is to the extent that this is in fact the case — that Marxist critics of neo-liberalism and globalization can help virtually all people in struggle to get a handle on their situation and find words and ways to resist it — that Marxism is likely to experience a twenty-first-century

renaissance. New social movements, insofar as they choose to remain in touch with the realities of capitalism as a system, may well find that they need such pivotal Marx concepts as commodity fetishism, capitalism, class struggle, the capitalist system: not because they wish to be “orthodox,” but because, as long as capitalism persists, such concepts (along with others) allow them to get a real purchase on the social context within which they seek to function.

They will also find, through trial and error, and contrary to what is now a large library of Farewell-to-the-working class books, that in our society, the active support of the working-class movement is often the *sine qua non* of an effective people’s struggle. From this perspective, it is a categorical mistake to argue that, for example, feminism or environmentalism have replaced Marxism, for the referents of these various movements and theories are quite different. (It is quite possible to be, and one could even argue logically necessary to be, a neo-Marxist feminist environmentalist). Certain of the new social movements, already heavily reliant on Marxian ideas and themes, will develop these more fully to the extent that their members formulate capitalist social relations as something their lived experience of life tells them are oppressive and potentially replaceable. And to attain any effect against such a system in its entirety, they will necessarily create from below a system of alliances among various movements to achieve common objectives. That is how a respectfully reconstructed and re-thought Marxism will help influence and reshape movements that critique, even if only implicitly, capitalist social relations.

It is difficult to see how anyone who wants to analyze the fascinating anomaly of disproportionate corporate power within an ostensibly egalitarian liberal order, whether a gay activist tracking the corporate profits derived from the AIDS crisis, or the feminist wondering why single mothers can’t find affordable housing, or the environmentalist investigating why no corporations or governments seem to be very motivated to do anything about global warming can avoid asking Marx-type questions and wrestling with Marx-type answers, even if in ways more inclusive and less econo-

mistic than was the case in earlier class-specific Marxisms. This does not mean that such movements and activists should dissolve the identities and the specific traditions they have fought so hard to develop since the 1960s; it merely means that, under conditions of a persisting capitalist system, all movements of people's struggle may have much more in common than they realize. Unless Marx was completely wrong, and conditions of social and political inequality vanish under capitalism, the kinds of analysis he undertook of class power will always be of direct interest to people who want to explain and change the world around them.⁴⁷ Marxist hypotheses are probably going to be of continuing interest to radical movements of all kinds because Marx was likely right in thinking that there are intractable conflicting forces and tendencies in capitalism, and new liberals and Keynesians wrong in thinking that such forces could be permanently overcome by the general welfare state.

There is also within this reading of Marx a dynamic integrating categorical imperative — precisely the principle which underlies the entire edifice of *Capital*, from start to finish: the realm of freedom; and an integrating methodology, determinate abstraction; and many widely shared and empirically solid hypotheses that have been shown to be useful to anybody who wants to understand the liberal capitalist world: the labour theory of value, the theory of class formation and class conflict, the theory of commodity fetishism, to name but three. Post-orthodox Marxists would modestly claim to inherit all the useful tools of political economy that have

47 As Stephen Bronner has observed, the erosion of socialism as the envisaged end-point of social evolution — what he terms the “collapse of teleology” — does not mean that many of the determinate abstractions of the Marxist tradition are in any sense invalidated. It “does not necessarily imply that Marx’s ‘labor theory of value’ is simply worthless, that the rate of profit cannot fall, that capitalism has resolved its crisis character, that a simple integration or ‘embourgeoisement’ of the working class has taken place, or even that a society has been ushered into existence which makes the question of class irrelevant.” Bronner, *Socialism Unbound* (New York and London 1990), 147-148. Here he might have usefully distinguished “socialism” from the “realm of freedom.”

allowed Marxists to develop a good general understanding of local events in particular times; they would less modestly place all such findings of political economy under the sign of the realm of freedom, with its inescapable corollary that the means justify the ends. This post-orthodox Marxism would hold that many determinate abstractions drawn from the Marxist tradition have been shown to be relatively effective as testable and interesting hypotheses and generalizations within carefully defined conditions.⁴⁸ And although it is obvious that the resources of the Marxist traditions are available for many uses and abuses, and are at least relatively autonomous from any politico-ethical intention — consider academic Marxism, in which the tools of class analysis often have had so little to do with any actual political praxis — post-orthodox Marxists would nonetheless hold that many of these analytical tools are (even and perhaps especially under conditions of postmodernity) actually indispensable for the resistance movements of subaltern classes and groups, who will succeed only to the extent that they develop an inclusive vision that goes beyond their particular constituency to address the problem of the “social.” And it is “pragmatic” not in epistemology — for within these conditions it is held that contingent and time-bound but nonetheless actual truths, i.e., something much more than the pragmatists’ widely-shared hunches, may be known — but only in the sense that it views the point of theory as providing us with conceptual tools enabling

48 But, if logico-historical analysis starts to point to internal contradictions and empirical disconfirmation, there is no reason to remain wedded to any determinate abstractions, even the ones commonly seen as central to “Marxism,” simply because we find them in Marx. None of the determinate abstractions is sacrosanct. (The only exception to this rule is the Marxian categorical imperative, the “realm of freedom.”) Attempts to make the tendency of the rate of profit to fall the keystone of the “system” are, in my opinion, good examples of theoretical constructs which are vulnerable to exactly this kind of logical and empirical testing: we need to ask if this supposed tendency satisfies the basic criterion of a determinate abstraction, or if it was constructed and now operates according to a very different logic (viz., logical atomism) — one which perhaps predisposes it to function as an essentialist rather than as a determinate abstraction.

us to illuminate the specific historical problems characteristic of a capitalist order. Theory is no longer seen as imparting deep truths, in the manner of a religion; rather, it just helps us refine our arguments and be a little bit clearer about the way we define the historical problems that are the principal focus of post-orthodox Marxism. We cannot predict beforehand which of the many ideas of Marx, or of the many Marxist traditions, will figure prominently in resistance movements of the future, although those methods and insights that have, over time, been found useful are likely candidates to be considered by such movements. How theory is activated politically (that is, how it becomes “real” in any full historical sense) cannot be determined in advance. However, because politico-ethical values can be derived from Marx’s transcendental projection of a realm of freedom, post-orthodox Marxists can also offer “the left” something more more than a set of questions and hypotheses: they also bring with them a consistent non-relativist transcendental ethical standard. Marxism is construed by post-orthodox Marxists as a limited but powerful this-worldly vocabulary with some useful things to say to people living in capitalist societies about the ways in which “freedom” could be made into a “real ideal.”

Once it is no longer expected to explain the origins of the universe and the destiny of humanity, Marx’s specific method of investigation — a counter-evolutionary, backwards-working, “genealogical” method of exploring socio-economic phenomena by examining their conditions of possibility, with the aim of forming “determinate abstractions” to capture both a phenomenon’s historical uniqueness and its socio-historical typicality — emerges not just as a method for exploring the capitalist system but as one of the most powerful conceptual tools ever evolved in social science.⁴⁹

49 As Lucio Colletti has explained, this involves “... an approach which can encompass the *differences* presented by one object or *species* with respect to all the others — for example, bourgeois society as against feudal society — and which does not, therefore, arrive at the *generic*, idealist notion of society ‘in general,’ but rather hangs on to this determinate society, this particular

Once the theory of value is understood in its specific historic context (that of the period of manufacture and the first period of the industrial revolution), it becomes possible to develop a more holistic understanding of late capitalism (and retain the labour theory of value as an irreplaceable resource for the ethical critique of this system). Once the Marxist concept of the working class is no longer given an unconvincing and ethically dubious “functional” reading (i.e., “we should support the working class because only the working class can overthrow the system”), it re-emerges as an entirely valid emphasis: no longer bearing some abstract, ahistorical and unprovable “mission,” the working class (along with other subaltern classes) still has a powerful claim to the attention of all radicals, because class realities are overwhelmingly important for most human beings and loom as large as other sources of identification (such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, region or sexual orientation); moreover, no realm of freedom worthy of the name could possibly be based on the generalized class exploitation and oppression typical of capitalism.⁵⁰ Once such concepts as

object in question. (The need for a method which does not give us abstractions, but facts). On the other hand, however, the individual fact, in its unique, absolute singularity, is as generic as the abstract genus. Hence the need for a non-empiricist method which is also — as well as fact — abstraction, and does not preclude the specific *identity*, the *species*, and hence that typicality by which each object is what it is precisely because it is an expression of its ‘class.’ On one side, therefore, the need for observation-induction; in this respect an object or process is inconceivable if it is not this particular process, this particular *nature*. Yet on the other side, the need for hypothesis-deduction, i.e. a particular process or phenomenon is inconceivable for us if it is not itself a *model* or typical phenomenon.” Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, 8.

- 50 The utilitarian-functional argument (viz., socialists must concentrate on the working class because only the working class can overthrow the system) treats the working class “externally,” as though “it” were truly an object in the mechanism; if carried into practice, this theorization of workers as means rather than as ends violates the categorical imperative of the realm of freedom. So does so much Marxist philosophizing about working-class consciousness and “mission,” which, in knowing in advance what “real” working-class consciousness should be, and in regarding living beings as important primarily because collectively they embody Reason or some other abstraction rather than because they are ends in themselves, seriously violates the ethical

social labour, social formation, and mode of production are freed from having to disclose the social universe's "innermost secrets," they can all be "de-essentialized" without robbing them of their analytical force. Once Marxists are released from the burden of having to pretend to have a scientific explanation for the universe, once socialists in general have shaken off the weight of cosmic evolutionism, they are also liberated from the necessity of atheism: Marxists as Marxists would have no need to take any position on religious issues, because such issues lie far outside the real competence of the Marxist tradition. In fact (and this has already occurred in Liberation Theology) the methods and insights of Marx may work most commendably when integrated into a religious anti-capitalist ethic.⁵¹ The collapse of Dialectical Materialism and of the general project of Marxism as a total philosophy of social evolution is really only a "catastrophe" for us if we, having failed to outgrow

requirements of a theory of history. (It also leads to an arrogant style of history-writing impervious to normal tests of evidence: there is no way a claim that the "working class" bears a historical mission can be confirmed or disconfirmed).

- 51 That is to say, since the realm of freedom in Marx is so clearly a transcendental concept, it is apparent that the differences between Marxist and radical Christian thought, both of which are inspired by timeless and universal ideals, the realm of freedom in the one case and Christ's kingdom to come in the other, is not as wide a gap as that, say, between Marxist and utilitarian /positivist/ neo-liberal thought (with its vulgar denial of any possible world other than this one, and its brutal contempt for any concept of transcendence). Both serious Marxist analysis and serious Christian critiques of the cultural effects of the liberal order and capitalism will arrive at the same position of unremitting criticism. From both perspectives, the contemporary neo-liberal conflation of freedom and necessity will be seen as an undermining of hope: indeed as a nihilistic, market-driven, world-destroying and ultimately totalitarian cultural program. The rather superficial comments of the young Marx on the subject of religion are one thing, but one learns more about his mature viewpoint of the realm of the spirit from the pages of his *magnum opus* in which this youthful analysis is simultaneously preserved, cancelled and decisively superseded. One could even say that his analysis of commodity fetishism, which requires the realm of freedom as its premise, undermines at one stroke virtually all the unnecessary and counterproductive arguments Marxists used to feel they had to make on behalf of atheism.

the yearning for a “total system,” allow ourselves to be persuaded by Aronson that once upon a time the ideas of Marx actually did provide a total philosophy of life.

A decade and a half into the present Death of Marx, left historians — at least those who retain a relationship with “Marx” — have a useful role to play in demanding a degree of historical accuracy, specificity and complexity from the philosophers and high theorists who have thusfar dominated the staging of this international symbolic event. As the welfare state is compelled to shrink, as people freeze in ever-greater numbers on the winter streets, as the women’s shelters close and the food banks run dry, as we deal with the systemic and brutal violence of an intensified poverty, as we confront in every budget and every issue of the daily newspaper the face of class hatred, the utopian notion of a postmodern proliferation of free identities within a context of radical democracy seems a trifle premature. As social movements, new, old, and middle-aged, wrestle with the implications of the global development of what it still seems useful to call “the capitalist system,” they will discover how much they still require the ethical and political resources of a century of socialist struggle, and of a century of Marxist thought. The revival of Marxism may well be exactly what Manuel fears: the revival of a thousand Marxisms. In the ‘90s one became quite accustomed to hearing about the Death of Marx. But one expects that in the twenty-first century, Marx will still be a word to conjure with, not as the signifier of an essence or a “philosophy of history,” but as a set of questions and hypotheses for the people in struggle against capitalism and the neo-liberal order.