

Marx and the Invention of Post-capitalist Politics

Adriano Codato

Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), Brazil

(Pogrebinschi, Thamy. 2009. *O enigma do político.*

Marx contra a política moderna. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira)

A book that, with remarkable erudition, addresses politics and State in the immense theoretical work of Marx does not need many justifications nowadays.

If in the 1980s and 1990s Marxism was to philosophy, ideology and the official social science a definitely lost continent, the extraordinary volume of scholarly meetings, specialized publications, critiques and renewed translations of Marx's works over the last ten years only confirm the rising interest in this theory, at least in Brazil (Boito Jr. and Motta 2010). Thamy Pogrebinschi's book is part of this new wave and is eloquent testimony that the old social division of scientific labor, which split and hierarchically categorized the academic community in "producers of theory" (the French, British, Germans, Americans) and "consumers of theory" (the Latin-Americans), makes increasingly less sense.¹

Only that now this consistent and resolute university Marxism does not reign alone in the national intellectual scene as was the case during the glorious period between the late 1950s and the late 1970s (Ridenti 2010). Instead, it has to face strong competitors, in Brazil and abroad, as for example, an increasingly more methodologically sophisticated Political Science, an academically institutionalized Sociology and, especially, a Political Philosophy relentlessly posing ever more difficult questions that cannot be ignored, theoretically and empirically. These questions range from multiculturalism to feminism; from egalitarianism

to libertarianism; from the politics of recognition to communicative action; from a theory of justice to the new democratic forms of participation and deliberation. That is why it is not only impossible but useless to counter all these subjects merely with some ideological manias that excited generations of Marxists throughout the 20th century: the triumphalism of the October revolution, the apocalyptical pessimism of the Critical Theory, the optimism in face of the counter-hegemonic strategies, confidence in Eurocommunism, and the renewal of the western communist parties.

Thamy Pogrebinschi's essay on the "enigma of the political" in Marx's thought seems to build precisely on the current stage of contemporary Political Theory and, in particular, on the Democratic Theory, to propose a much more ambitious question: once the social revolution is accomplished and the modern State and its representative and governance institutions have been superseded, how should, according to Marx himself, politics be in the communist society? (p. 18-19). The answer that will arise thereof, Thamy believes, "may allow a change of perspective in the way political theory is conceived of and done today" (p. 22). After all, Marx would have known, since his first writings, how to foresee problems and anticipate the solutions for the contemporary crisis of political representation (p. 259).

To think like Marx thought of politics after the end of politics is to reflect upon what the political should be. In the philosophical language that the author borrows from the young Marx, to discover the Marxian formula for the organization of men in the society of the future is to try to say which would ultimately be the *essence of the political* – that is, the essence of that world where the State is no longer separated from society and where society does not know alienation, contradiction, and domination. The whole discussion is hinged on a host of hypothesized norms, strewn across the entire theoretical work produced by Marx, the essay patiently attempts to rebuild.

This project imposes two tasks upon the commentary on Marx that must be conducted concomitantly, something which is also a source of great complications: in order to reveal which would be the post-capitalist political structures and how they would function it is necessary, at the same time, to discover the *categories* that, drawing on Marx himself, would make it possible to think of such structures. Or, for another: if the notions of modern State, civil society, class, "real, active men" (the expression employed by Marx and Engels in *The German ideology*), and domination work adequately in the Marxian theoretical discourse on pre-communist societies, in order to understand the communist society it is necessary to think in radically new terms. It is necessary to think in terms of community, association, individual, human essence, and emancipation. In such a world, modern politics would be replaced by "true democracy". Thus, in place of State authority, there would be self-determination; in place of political representation by professional politicians, self-government; and in place of bureaucratic despotism, autogestion. Read

like that, the book's goal is, at first sight, to discuss the institutional genesis and concrete functioning of the political structures of a social world redeemed by the Revolution. But it is not exactly like that. The author warns the reader that at the core of her analysis is the *concept* of democracy. Not the really existing (capitalist) democracy, nor the potentially attainable (communist) democracy. Engels himself emphasized that, in discussing such matters, "We are not talking about the *things* which belong to the nineteenth century, and which are bad and ephemeral, but about categories which are eternal and which existed before 'the mountains were brought forth' [...]" (p. 209). This is, in short, the *essence* of democracy. And theorizing about it is theorizing about what the political proper *should be* in the post-capitalist society.

The awkwardness of any reader of Marx in face of this singular passage is not unjustified. Eternal categories? Essences? Yet, doesn't this insistence on reading Marx on the basis of concepts rather than of the "things" of the real social world betray the very spirit of the theory? A theory, after all, that has always insisted on denouncing the illusion of the natural, the eternal, and the universal? The operation of converting Marx into a "political philosopher" has its setbacks eventually. As Thamy makes Marx talk about what should be (and not about what is), she seems to subvert the foundational principle that is at the root of the Marxian judgment itself: the social conditions of the possibility of the possible world.

The book is organized into four considerably long chapters, each one addressing the theme of the organization of ideal power— and not the traditional theme of the taking over of real power – on one hand. The first chapter discusses the end of the State; the second, the society resulting thereof (the "real community"); the third, its peculiar mode of political organization; and the fourth chapter, the scope of the political for Marx: human emancipation. Within the limits of this review I intend to comment only on the question of the new form of political coordination of the human community or that which Marx, Engels, and Lenin later on will designate as "true democracy", by opposition to the really existing democracy in the West in the 19th century.

The *enigma of the political* builds on three controversial assumptions established by the author: *i*) that Marx's work is a coherent system of ideas (that is, assumptions, theses, concepts) and the division that was established between a "young Marx" and a "mature Marx" (Althusser 1965) is extravagant and arbitrary (as indeed was held, among others, by Cerroni (1973)); *ii*) that it is necessary to get rid of the Marxist tradition (its epigones, its aficionados, and its interpreters) in order to be able to have access to the true sense of the Marxian text (along with Althusser (1965); Rubel (1974); Preve (1984) etc.); and *iii*) that the guiding thread in Marx's work is not the fundamental contradiction between Capital and Labor (that is, his Political Economy), or between productive forces and relations of production (his Philosophy of History), but the opposition between State and

Civil Society, such as approached in his critique of Hegel. It is this opposition that provides the cornerstones for his Political Philosophy and allows us, by connecting the two ends of his work, to decipher him. Marx's entire theoretical, political and ideological forty-year-long journey only led him to the starting point: the radical democrat (Saes 1994) would be hiding in the revolutionary socialist, just like the boy in the man. Hence the strategic interest of the first writings for an accurate understanding (along the same line adopted by Colletti (1969a; 1969b), for example). And, it is assumed, to evaluate the dimension of his actual contribution.

These three points call for a brief commentary. It is not the case of recuperating herein the problems implicated in the history of the theoretical formation of Marx's thought and its canonical periodization. Several critics have already drawn attention to the misguided understanding that postulates, as Althusser (1999, 9) postulated, the existence of a "radical" difference between the texts written before *The German ideology*, still captive of philosophy and, especially, of Hegel's German idealism and Feuerbach's idealist materialism, and the machinery of scientific concepts, like mode of production, relations of production, productive forces, and so on, employed in *The capital*. The existence or not of an "epistemological rupture" (Althusser 1965, 25) between the two Marxs is a dispute that would take us too far. Still, if Thamy would rather not reintroduce this discussion and division, it would at least be necessary to demonstrate more than the existence of a "strong relation" between the earlier and the later texts written by Marx, lest we forcefully identify, behind the same words, the same ideas.² Even though Marx resorted, in a book like *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, to the same terms employed in the pamphlets of the *New Rhine Gazette* ("State", "civil society"), both their sense and function in this theoretical discourse are at the moment of the drafting of the essay on the coup against Bonaparte, fundamentally different.³ We might say, as indeed the author himself did in his Preface to the *Critique of political economy*, that the more adjusted terms from now on to explain the social world should be "superstructure" and "infrastructure"; and that between these two elements there is no *opposition*, as argued in his critical review of Hegel's philosophy of right, but a concrete *interconnection*; and, finally, that it is the interconnecting principles of this social totality (determination, discrepancy, correspondence, conditioning) that allow us both to distinguish the distinct historical modes of production and to explain their forms of reproduction and transformation.⁴

The other proposition calling for a commentary is that advocated by Thamy concerning the "incompatibility of all political and ideological Marxism with the teachings of Marx", to speak as Maximilien Rubel. This stance has the advantage and the disadvantage of sparing Thamy from debating a key theme – what politics would be like in the communist world – with the vast literature that Marxists and *Marxologists* have produced in that regard. Yet, that is not

exactly what we read in this enticing book. Not only does Thamy correct formulations based on misguided translations of fundamental terms for Marx and advances new interpretations of read and reread passages from which she extracts a political moral which is quite different from conventional communist orthodoxy, but also she actually chooses two interlocutors to dialogue with: Abensour (1998) and Avineri (1968). It is in relation to their formulations (at times against them, others, in favor) that she will explain how Marx actually thought of the political organization of a classless society, its virtues and foundations. According to Thamy Pogrebinschi, and this is her main thesis, this is the angle that should be favored if one wishes to unravel *the enigma of the political* in the Marxian work.

A long time ago Norberto Bobbio drew the Marxists' attention to the exaggerated importance they assigned to the "famous, at times, too famous, indications that Marx extracted from the Commune [of Paris] and which had the fortune of being exalted (but never attenuated) by Lenin" (Bobbio 1979, 31). The indelible effect thereof was to rid them of the obligation of predicting and thinking, effectively, the shape and functioning of political institutions under socialism ("dictatorship of the proletariat") and under the society without State (communism) (Bobbio 1983). Actually, continues Bobbio (1979, 31), "Marx had no intention of providing prescriptions with those few formulas [about the experience of the Paris Commune] for the future and only the abuse of the principle of authority [...] transformed five or six theses into a Public Law treatise".⁵

The enigma of the political does not fall into that trap. This is not about evoking the famous five or six theses, nor is it about evoking what Engels, Kautsky, Rosa, Lenin, and others said. Thamy Pogrebinschi reconstructs, with all the confidence that a sound knowledge of Marx's various writings on the subject enables, his set of *political principles* regarding the political form that would succeed the dictatorship of the proletariat. But what are the characteristics of this true democracy? Thamy lists a dozen distinctive features of this peculiar form of life which has (or intends to have) the capacity to solve the paradoxes of "modern" (i.e., capitalist) politics.⁶

True democracy, the paradigm of all forms of government, would abolish the separation ("alienation") between man and political structure. It would not be the outcome of juridical fiction (the "social contract" as a product of "individual wills"), but a real expression of "the people's lives", based on the activity of real human beings and not on abstract subjects of rights. Hence the difficulty in capturing its final form in a fixed set of political institutions – and, therefore, the difficulty of the Marxists in coming up with the ideal prescription for the ideal political regime. Rather, true democracy would presuppose a set of social precepts: those who manage the community politically would be the same ones working in it productively, the social division of labor would have disappeared, work itself would not be commanded by necessity, human action would have to be the very expression of freedom,

each one's development would lead to the other's development and the development of all, to the development of the community.

That accomplished, "popular sovereignty" (that is, the constituent power formalized in a Constitutional Charter, another legal fiction) would give place to community self-determination, "active citizenship" of sorts, where all is political or, for another, where there are no individual, personal, private activities but, rather, public roles, functions, insofar as all the social practices of the individuals ultimately concern the collective management of the community, the administration of things ordinary. As in classical democracy, the political participation of men would be associated with their social existence.

In this new world, self-government would replace political representation, mandate, and mediation, since there would exist a kind of "synchronicity and completeness of the relation between the parts and the whole" (p. 230). The best image to represent this fantasy would be that of the orchestra without the conductor. Each musician would tune her/his instrument in harmony with the other instruments and the correct pitch and tempo would be defined by the whole as a whole. Thus, the adequate category to envisage the functioning of this peculiar democracy should not be decision or deliberation, but interaction. Government itself is no longer a political question (entailing thus power, prestige, hierarchy and domination), but rather a mere administrative question, depending on the workers' cooperative's management model.

Even without explicitly formulating a theory of the future form of government, Marx provides some indications of the political institutions of this true democracy. Or of what should not exist as political institution. As political and social power cannot be separated from the community, transferred to a representative, and is much less monopolized by some, the very legislative function would have to be carried out by all (a different problem, as can be seen, from the imperative mandate, valid for the transition period, not for communism). Therefore, there would be no need for suffrage, nor would there exist professional politicians, political parties, and a Legislative Branch, an institution specializing in the task of filtering interests and drafting bills. Indeed, there would not even be the traditional separation between legislative and executive work, since those who legislate must also test in practice the efficacy of the legislation.

In sum, true democracy for Marx, according to Thamy Pogrebinschi, is neither a form of State, nor a form of government, much less a system of government. True democracy is the rejection of all the forms, principles and institutions of liberal democracy and, specifically, the rejection, and not merely the correction, of its deadlocks – a lack of representativeness of the elected, lack of enthusiasm of the voters, irrelevance of the parliaments, the arrogance of the Executive Branch and its bureaucracy, decadence of the role of the political parties as spheres for political socialization. Instead of all that,

Marx bets on a radical, direct, active and profoundly humane democracy, since it is tied to the practices and experiences that constitute true human beings, as redeemed from exploitation, alienation, and domination.

What should we make of all this? When one bears in mind the historical memory of totalitarianisms, fanaticisms grounded in purported general wills or even less solemn, though equally troubling, problems as, for example, the inevitable tendency toward an oligarchy of partisan organizations (Michels), the dilemmas of collective participation and of mobilization (Olson) or even the inevitable transformation of traditional forms of political socialization (Manin), Marx's political imagination seems to have solved all that still needs solving.⁷

It is rather far-fetched to hold that Marx's fantasies about politics in the communist society enable us to solve the problems and deadlocks of the Democratic Theory, especially the dilemma of representation (the question regarding the control over elected representatives, the problem of the development of merely corporatist concerns by the caste of professional representatives, the contradiction between the aspiration of professional politicians to be representatives of the general interest and their reality as advocates of private interests, and so forth). Nonetheless, one of the great merits of Thamy Pogrebinschi's book is to establish a new boundary for mainstream Political Theory, or rather, a new set of themes and a huge constraint with which it is necessary at least to dialogue. After all, if we accept (at least as an intellectual exercise) the Marxian critique of the fiction of the very principle of representation in the liberal society, about the inefficacy of suffrage and the impossibility of capitalist democracy to promote "true democracy", then the whole contemporary debate about guaranteeing political rights to minorities, about the need to promote ever more "participation" of stakeholders in public decisionmaking or about the value of free, rational, and critical communication between men loses great part of its sense. As summarized by Thamy, the Marxian lesson is: there is no improving liberal democracy without questioning the normative assumptions and institutional mechanisms on which this political form is founded. Thus, more (liberal) democracy is more of the same: a medicine that runs the risk of worsening the patient's situation. Moral: to disregard Marx is absolutely not advantageous to any political scientist.

Translated by Robert Stuart

Notes

- 1 Boito Jr. and Motta (2010) list over ten books that have been published since 2000 only on Marx's theoretical work: Boito *et al.* (2000); Naves (2000); Ranieri (2001); Fausto (2002); Benoit and Antunes (2009); Giannotti (2002); Romero (2005); Sampaio and Frederico (2006); Chasin (2009); Frederico (2009); Magalhães (2009); Paulo (2010). The list could be more extensive if we included, building on a random sample, the works of Teixeira and Frederico (2010); Netto (2011); Ranieri (2011); Saad Filho (2011); Trindade (2011) and Codato and Perissinotto (2011).
- 2 When we consider the problem of politics and the State, says Thamy, “even though some concepts were formulated as enigmas in texts written in 1843 and 1844” (namely, the *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right*, *On the Jewish question* and the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*), “the solution they contain can only be fully understood by examining texts dating to 1871 [*The civil war in France*] and 1875 [*Critique of the Gotha Programme*]” (p. 25).
- 3 Actually we may say that the use of these words has a purely descriptive sense (Luporini 1979, 91-102) and, to a large extent, anachronistic (Colliot-Thélène 1984).
- 4 One of the main theses defended by Marx in *The eighteenth brumaire* is that there is a necessary relation of *correspondence* between the political and the social, more precisely, between the capitalist State and the capitalist economy. This correspondence is historical and is instrumental to the reproduction of the mode of social domination.
- 5 The answer by Atilio Borón to Bobbio's censorship is yet further evidence of the Marxists' “incurable defect” (Bobbio 1979): to invoke the principle of authority instead of argumentation and demonstration: “To assume that authors of the stature of Engels, Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci, Mao, among so many others, were incapable of enriching [...] the theoretical legacy of the founder of Marxism in the domain of politics – or to provide some new ideas in case Marx had not produced anything at all on this terrain – is no more than a symptom of how deeply rooted certain anti-Marxist prejudices are in political philosophy and in social sciences as a whole, and against which not even a superior talent like that of Bobbio was adequately immune” (Borón 2007).
- 6 A peculiarity of Thamy Pogrebinschi's theorizing that should not be overlooked is the revealing replacement of the word ‘capitalism’ (with all it describes in Marx) by the word ‘modernity’ and its variations: in place of the ‘capitalist State’ or ‘bourgeois State’, the ‘modern State’ (Weberian) formula; instead of ‘capitalist ideology’, ‘modern political imaginary’; and so forth. At a certain point Thamy Pogrebinschi herself judges it necessary to recall that “I had always taken it for granted the assumption that the [Marxian] critique of the modern State is identified with the critique of capital” (p. 262). That said, the author seeks to interconnect certain notions. For example, State and political representation would be capitalism-derived political forms (p. 263). However, at least in my reading, the necessary interplay between political and economic forces is not demonstrated, as well as how the latter are indispensable for understanding the former – at least for a *materialistic* interpretation of social history.
- 7 In this regard, it is at least curious that Thamy Pogrebinschi, always so perceptive of the latent sense and of the potentiality both critical and revealing of Marx's sentences, has not discussed the “solutions” that he presents to the *practical* problems of exercising “true democracy”. In his analyses of Bakunin's book *Statism and anarchy*, Marx anticipates, in an imaginary dialogue between both, which would be Bakunin's main objections to the democracy defended by the

communists. It is worth citing a passage of this hypothetical discussion. Readers should take their own conclusions. Speaking about the political desires of the supporters of the socialist movement, Bakunin would have said, still according to Marx, (Bakunin) “So the [practical; included by Adriano Codato] result is: conduction of the great majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say... (Marx) Where? (Bakunin) ...will be made up of workers. Certainly, with the permission of the old workers, who, nonetheless, no sooner have they become representatives or rulers of the people, are no longer workers. ... (Marx) Just like a factory owner today is no longer a capitalist once he becomes a municipal councilor... (Bakunin) and despise, from the height of the State, the whole ordinary world of the workers. They will no longer represent the people, but rather themselves and their bids for the people’s government. Anyone who may doubt this knows nothing about human nature”. (p. 236)

Bibliographical References

- Abensour, Miguel. 1998. *A democracia contra o Estado: Marx e o momento maquiaveliano*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG.
- Althusser, Louis. 1965. *Pour Marx*. Paris: F. Maspero.
- _____. 1999. A querela do humanismo. *Crítica Marxista*, no. 9.
- Avineri, Shlomo. 1968. *The social and political thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benoit, Alcides Hector, and Jader Antunes. 2009. *Crise: o movimento dialético do conceito de crise em O capital de Marx*. São Paulo: Tykhe.
- Bobbio, Norberto. 1979. “Existe uma doutrina marxista do Estado?”. In *O marxismo e o Estado*, N. Bobbio et al. Rio de Janeiro: Graal.
- _____. 1983. *Qual socialismo? Debate sobre uma alternativa*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Boito Jr., Armando, and Luiz Eduardo Motta. 2010. Marx in Brazil. *Socialism and Democracy*, 24 (3): 155-60.
- Boito Jr., Armando, Caio Navarro de Toledo, Jesus Ranieri, and Patrícia Vieira Trópia, org. 2000. *A obra teórica de Marx – atualidade, problemas e interpretações*. São Paulo: Xamã.
- Borón, Atilio A. 2007. “Teoria política marxista ou teoria marxista da política”. In *A teoria marxista hoje. Problemas e perspectivas*, ed. Javier Amadeo and Sabrina Gonzalez. Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO).
- Cerroni, Umberto. 1973. *Teoria política e socialismo*. Roma: Riuniti.
- Chasin Jose. 2009. *Marx: estatuto ontológico e resolução metodológica*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Codato, Adriano, and Renato Perissinotto. 2011. *Marxismo como ciência social*. Curitiba: Editora UFPR.
- Colletti, Lucio. 1969a. *Ideologia e società*. Bari: Laterza.
- _____. 1969b. *Il marxismo e Hegel: Materialismo dialettico e irrazionalismo*. Bari: Laterza.

- Colliot-Thélène, Catherine. 1984. Le materialisme historique a aussi une histoire. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no. 55: 15-21.
- Fausto, Ruy. 2002. *Marx: lógica e política. Tomo III: Investigação para uma reconstituição do sentido da dialética*. São Paulo: Editora 34.
- Frederico, Celso. 2009. *O jovem Marx: 1843-1844 – As origens da ontologia do ser social*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
- Giannotti, José Arthur. 2002. *Certa herança marxista*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras.
- Luporini, Cesare. 1979. “Le Politique et l’Étatique: une ou deux critiques?”. In *Marx et sa critique de la politique*, Étienne Balibar, Cesare Luporini and André Tosel. Paris: Maspero.
- Magalhães, Fernando. 2009. *10 lições sobre Marx*. Rio de Janeiro: Vozes.
- Naves, Marcio Bilharinho. 2000. *Marx: ciência e revolução*. São Paulo/Campinas: Moderna/ Editora da Unicamp.
- Netto, José Paulo. 2011. *Introdução ao estudo do método de Marx*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
- Paulo, João Antonio de. 2010. *O ensaio geral: Marx e a crítica da economia política (1857-1858)*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.
- Preve, Costanzo. 1984. *La filosofia imperfecta. Una proposta di ricostruzioni del marxismo contemporaneo*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Ranieri, Jesus. 2001. *A câmara escura. Alienação e estranhamento em Marx*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- _____. 2011. *Trabalho e dialética. Hegel, Marx e a teoria social do devir*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Ridenti, Marcelo. 2010. *Brasilidade revolucionária: um século de cultura e política*. São Paulo: Unesp.
- Romero, Daniel. 2005. *Marx e a técnica: um estudo dos manuscritos de 1861-1863*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
- Rubel, Maximilien. 1974. *Marx critique du marxisme*. Paris: Payot.
- Saad Filho, Alfredo. 2011. *O valor de Marx*. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp.
- Saes, Décio. 1994. Do Marx de 1843-1844 ao Marx das obras históricas: duas concepções distintas de Estado. In *Estado e democracia: ensaios teóricos*, Décio Saes. Campinas: IFCH/UNICAMP.
- Sampaio, Benedicto Arthur, and Celso Frederico. 2006. *Dialética e materialismo: Marx entre Hegel e Feurbach*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ.
- Teixeira, Francisco, and Celso Frederico. 2010. *Marx, Weber e o marxismo weberiano*. São Paulo: Cortez.
- Trindade, José Damião de Lima. 2011. *Os direitos humanos na perspectiva de Marx/Engels*. São Paulo: Alfaomega.