

Minding the Gap: Marxian Reflections on the Transition from Capitalism to Postcapitalism

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Abstract: Building on contemporary debates over the past several decades in Marxist and post-Marxist theory regarding the relationship between capitalism and postcapitalism, this essay will explore the enduring relevance of Marx's treatment of this issue in some of his most significant, though increasingly less contemporarily engaged with texts (as *Capital [Vols. 1-3]* and the *Grundrisse* take pride of place). Here, I look toward the middle and early period of Marx's oeuvre to pull out the most important statements and insights regarding the relationship between capitalism and postcapitalism, focusing on *The German Ideology*, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and *The Communist Manifesto* in order to offer reflections on how Marx's work, 200 years since his birth, offer the contemporary and future left guidance on "minding the gap" between capitalism and postcapitalism as we live, work, and struggle still deeply ensconced within the confines of the decadent capitalist mode of production. Combing close-reading of key relevant texts in Marx's oeuvre with reflective commentary on how Marx's work can speak to the contemporary conjuncture, this paper offers a synthetic commentary on how leftists, both scholars and activists, should approach the question of the relationship between radical praxis within capitalism and the character of potential postcapitalisms that may emerge. This essay is loosely organised around three crucial questions: (1) What can we learn from Marx's discussions on the historical transition and the overall radical intellectual project of dialectical materialism that can assist us in understanding the transition from capitalism to a democratic, egalitarian postcapitalism (i.e., socialism/communism), specifically concerning complexity and time? (2) How does contemporary capitalism reproduce itself social-psychologically (i.e., ideologically) and what are the implications of that for a postcapitalist transformation? (3) What is/are the role(s) of revolutionaries in dealing with the first two questions?

Keywords: Karl Marx, postcapitalism, social psychology, revolutionary change, dialectics, political struggle

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1. Introduction: Marx and "the Gap"

The debates about the enduring relevance of the working class to radical and revolutionary politics and transformational change more generally rage on in the pages of the most popular left publications such as *Jacobin*, *Dissent*, *Salvage*, *Monthly Review*, and *New Politics*, as well as more academic journals like *New Left Review*, *Historical Materialism*, *Socialist Register*, and *Catalyst*, through the work, past and present, of scholars as wide ranging as Vivek Chibber, Ernesto Laclau, Andre Gorz, Chantal Mouffe, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, Étienne Balibar, Fredric Jameson, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and David Harvey and countless others. The question of

whether the specificities of economic exploitation or other kinds of identity-based oppressions, not necessarily disconnected from a broader system of economic exploitation, are more likely to serve as the most radical basis from which revolutionary subjectivity (understood both subjectively and objectively) could or will spring forth, endures at the paramount concern for contemporary scholars and left activists. Post-(structural) Marxists like J.K. Gibson-Graham leave us questioning whether capitalism as Marx (and Engels) presented it to us can still be understood as a universal(ising) paradigm from which we can understand the contemporary conjuncture. It is my hope here that by returning to some of the hallmark texts of Marx's oeuvre that new insights can be gleaned for our moment, and the moments that follow over the next century, that could better inform our solidaristic orientation towards the present and near- and long-term future – putting aside, but informed by – the debates around identity politics, the working class, and the ostensibly universality of capitalism as a functionally monolithic system.

In the spirit of the aforementioned authors, and many others, the reflective, synthetic “readings” offered here will not attempt to parse Marx's original meaning or intent (nor even to offer some original contextualisation of certain ideas within his broader body of work – though some of this is inherent to make sense of any individual insights). Instead, what I present here will be propositions and guidance drawn from and through Marx's (and in some places Marx's and Engels') works applied in our moment, 200 years since Marx's birth.

This counsel for our times drawn from and through Marx will certainly not be individually original or novel readings, interpretations, or applications of Marx, but the hope here is that by looking back, with critical eyes, conditioned by our historical context, this short essay will be able to combine these reflections in a unique way that will spark further discussion and interest in the continuing importance and value of Marx's most significant works around the relationship between radical praxis within capitalism and the character of potential postcapitalisms that may emerge through these hopefully last, decadent years of capitalism. Absent a single or cohesive redress of all of the fundamental issues related to the “gap” between capitalism and postcapitalism in Marx's work, this short reflective essay will present the various pieces of a response, without deigning to suggest they offer a non-contradictory vision. In that vein, this essay will be loosely organized around three interrelated questions: (1) What can we learn from Marx's discussions on the historical transition and the radical intellectual-activist project of dialectical materialism that can assist us in understanding the transition from capitalism to a democratic, egalitarian postcapitalism (i.e., socialism/communism)? (2) How does contemporary capitalism reproduce itself social-psychologically (i.e., ideologically) and what are the implications of that for a postcapitalist transformation? (3) What is/are the role(s) of revolutionaries in dealing with the first two questions?

Before delving into these three interrelated groups of questions, it is important to frame the purpose of these categories more clearly. Marx is without a doubt one of the most, if not the most, original and insightful critical analyst of capitalism who ever lived. And though many treat Marx's project as a scientific endeavour (a claim I remain agnostic about), Marx's project was undoubtedly a political project against capitalism, aimed at aiding the building of a humane, democratic future for humanity – and our planet more generally beyond capitalism. It is this political project that motivates my reflections here. And while it is a cliché to say that Marx was disinterested in writing recipes for the kitchens of the future, the presentation here will focus on the Marxian insights that may better assist us, the academic and activist left, in having a

viable opportunity to make our own recipes in the kitchens of the future (or at least sketch some floor plans and work orders for the foundations for those kitchens of the future, so maybe our children or grandchildren can be the chefs of those kitchens) (Fraser 2016, 38).

As Marx reminds us in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*:

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. (Marx 1978d, 529)

2. The Dialectics of Transition

In order to better appreciate the complexities of any transition from capitalism to socialism, it is important to reemphasise the dialectical quality of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and how this bears on the hopefully eventual transition from capitalism to an egalitarian postcapitalism. In *The German Ideology*, Marx describes how the feudal trade guilds came about through the need for artisans to organize against the “robber nobility”, to orchestrate collective marketplaces, to accommodate “the growing competition of the escaped serfs swarming into the rising towns” (Marx 1978b, 153). From this, in a much more complicated and historically diverse and messy process, the bourgeoisie emerged as an increasingly coherent class position at odds with the dominant feudal relations of production ruled by the aristocracy – the lords.

The overall project of historical or dialectical materialism, it could be argued, is fundamentally about this question of transition – of “minding the gap”. “[Materialism] does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice; and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism [...] but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history” (Ibid., 164). But to say that criticism is not the driving force is not to say that it does not play an important role in the service of revolution (otherwise, Marx’s entire oeuvre would be the most egregious performative contradiction in the history of human civilisation).

Capitalism also did not come into existence everywhere overnight. There are even still places – not many mind you – on Earth that remain untouched by primitive accumulation (and capital accumulation). This is not to diminish the total(ising) power of capital, but rather to remind ourselves that though we must rush things, there is a certain degree to which we cannot rush revolutionary change. Marx never gives us a real sense of how long a revolution takes, or how fast it should proceed. It is unclear if Marx even thought such a determination was one that any person or group of revolutionaries could decide. Embracing the dialectical contradictions of capitalism, as they relate to the struggle for socialism, could very well mean that revolution, the fight to transform life – rooted in the relations of production – and the consciousness it determines might just be a multigenerational project taking place over decades, if not a century or more. We know that people, especially well-conditioned adults, do not tend to change quickly. That fact, combined with the lack of any consistent predictive ability to determine the precise social interpretation and reaction towards the next crisis of capitalism (which there will be repeated iterations of for the duration of the capitalist mode of production), we can merely do our best to organise our conscious-

ness-raising projects in preparation, to shape the narrative of those forthcoming crises. We can certainly do this, but the effects of these efforts may well take a lifetime or more.

There are important implications of this insight, some of which are well-captured in the political-strategic orientation of the quarterly *Salvage* headed by Rosie Warren and China Miéville among others. The project of *Salvage* aims to defend hope against unearned optimism; they see pessimism, radically-oriented and realistically deployed, as the armour to protect hope for when the left actually deserves and needs it most. The practical outcome of this pessimistic hope is that it prevents expectations in any one moment or around any one project or candidate (e.g., Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn) from getting too high – and then when the basically inevitable happens (inevitable at least at this particular moment of capitalism) and the revolution is not immediately on the horizon after either a tempered success or complete failure, people are disillusioned, lose the (false) hope they had, and lose any functional semblance of faith in the struggle (i.e., there is a huge risk of demobilisation, especially among younger and greener activists). This is the practical implication of the above comments on time: if we do not take time seriously, and accept in a critical, contingent way, that we cannot rush or force revolution (which is not the same as not organising and acting in pre-emptively revolutionary ways – especially as they relate to making things better in the short-term in a way that doesn't make revolutionary transformation more difficult and consciousness-raising more generally), we could indeed do damage to the long-term possibilities for transformational change towards an egalitarian postcapitalism. It is worth again quoting Marx at length here:

And if these material elements of a complete revolution are not present (namely, on the one hand the existing productive forces, on the other the formation of a revolutionary mass, which revolts not only against the separate conditions of society up till then, but against the very “productive life” till then, the “total activity” on which it was based), then, as far as practical development is concerned it is absolutely immaterial whether the idea of this revolution has been expressed a hundred times already, as the history of communism proves. (Marx 1978b, 165).

3. Social Psychology between Capitalism and Postcapitalism

Marx tells us in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living (Marx 1978e, 595).

If we are to find a single guiding thought on how the left should “mind the gap” it must take this oft-quoted passage with the utmost seriousness. Let us first think about why this question is relevant to begin with. Does Marx not imply, if not directly state, that it is the material base of society that determines the social psychology of the people in that society (i.e., that life determines consciousness)? Therefore, if the relations of production are significantly altered or there are novel developments in the means of production that radically alter the reproduction of society, social psychology (or collective consciousness). Against the facile base-superstructure determinism that Marx

is so often caricatured with, it would be impossible for Marx to theorise radical change (G.A. Cohen's slightly more nuanced technological determinism notwithstanding). However, this is quite obviously not the case. People within capitalism oppose capitalism, and according to Marx they organise themselves due to contradictions that emerge within the mode of production and the relations of production more specifically. Cohen is not wrong that these changes and contradictions *can* be rooted in technological developments, but there are far more and deeper forms of contradiction that *can* produce the disjunction between the base and superstructural reinforcement of the relations of production within capitalism (Harvey 2014). Those working within the Marxist tradition throughout the twentieth-century, Erich Fromm being the most significant, explored the specifically psycho-social dimensions of the contradictions of capitalism.

Marx begins here by telling us how the worker within capitalism "becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities" (Marx 1978a, 70). Human beings, the workers who reproduce the fundamental elements of society, are reduced to the equivalent of the commodities they produce and even occasionally buy for themselves (an extension of this analysis has been complicatedly but importantly extended to the household and unremunerated care work by feminist-inspired Marxists in the form of social reproduction theory [see Bhattacharya 2017]).

In *The German Ideology*, Marx rearticulates this understanding in a broader sense of the relationship between material production and ideology: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men [sic], the language of real life [...] Men [sic] are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these. [...] Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Marx 1978b, 154-155). This is Marxian materialism. Not that ideas and consciousness are irrelevant or unimportant, but simply that they are fundamentally conditioned by materiality, specifically as it relates to the material relations of production – and the reproduction of life more broadly. Marx does provide some guidance on how this relationship works, but it is not precise, consistent, or universal. The relationship between life and consciousness, besides the axiom that life determines consciousness, is a complex interplay of diverse forces that cannot be a priori theorised.

For the left this means understanding how factors as wide-ranging as class position, industry sector, gender, race, what television channels your parents watched, what articles and memes your friends share on social media could interact to affect the development of revolutionary consciousness. While it is obvious that Marx did not discuss in any of his writings the attendant ideological impact of television or social media, nowhere does he say that *only* production and class matter. He could have said this. And while there are undoubtedly examples scholars and critics could pull out that imply a kind of class-material reductionism, from the early to the late/mature Marx, the relationship between materiality and ideology (and the psycho-social factors interpenetrating the two porous categories) is taken seriously (the often convoluted protestations of an otherwise excellent theorist of ideology like Louis Althusser notwithstanding). The question that Marx leaves un(der)addressed is: what other dimensions of "life" that determine consciousness, besides material reproduction, matter? I submit that this repeatedly unclarified space, whether intentional or not, is absolutely consistent with contemporary (non-liberal) conceptions of intersectionality (especially those theorised and represented by Angela Y. Davis and Keeanga-

Yamahtta Taylor). It is the materially-based, but not simplistically determined, social processes whereby life determines consciousness where a more humble revolutionary left should focus. This will mean never abandoning the pride of place of workers, but more intentionally appreciating and adapting our strategies and tactics to the complex processes that produce various forms of consciousness. After all, the premise of intersectionality is that by dealing more complexly with the racialised, gendered aspects of work, we will be better suited to make radical progress.

The worker – in a manner not wholly dissimilar from the bourgeoisie – is conditioned by greed and avarice (Marx 1978a, 71). The capitalist is a carnivorous beast and as a result of the broader logic and functioning of capitalism “man [sic] (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions [...] and in his [sic] human functions he [sic] no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal” (Ibid., 74). The difference between the manner in which the non-capitalists and capitalists are conditioned is that even without the psycho-social penetration of the psychology of the subjects of the capitalist class, the logic of their class position demands that they behave according to greed and avarice regardless. Workers, while they are subjected to the materially-rooted, ideologically justified and normalised pressures of the mentality of capitalism, they also experience the contradictions between the ideology of capitalism (e.g., freedom, choice, generational improvements, hard work, etc.) – though certainly not with any consistent awareness or acknowledgment or vision of an alternative society with any degree of consistency.

The potentiality remains, despite the workers being reduced the most wretched of commodities, and the attendant alienation they experience. It is this alienation, in addition to the ideological narratives, examples of which are mentioned above, that are the fundamental psycho-social elements of capitalism that prevent the workers from more actively working for the radical change their subject position supposedly has them destined for. So we are left with an analysis where the structures of capitalism produce the objective conditions for both the revolution of the working class and the objective (subjectively-experienced) psycho-social effects that undermine that capacity or opportunity to collective resistance and radical restructuring of society. What then could be the intervening force that could in the course of human history push us in one direction over another (though clearly we are already experiencing the victory of the latter category of revolution-destabilising effects)?

4. The Revolutionary Subject(s) Between Capitalism and Postcapitalism

There are two important books that have come out recently aiming to explore the transition from capitalism to postcapitalism, which are both, in somewhat different veins, rooted in the ostensibly revolutionary potential of emergent political-economic developments in information technologies. While there is much to appreciate in Paul Mason’s *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015) and Nick Srnicek’s and Alex Williams’ *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015) regarding how our worlds are changing and the potential effects of digital evolution and automation technologies can have (in addition to the necessary critiques of Third Way liberalism, neoliberalism, and even [especially in Srnicek and Williams] of the fetishization of localism and horizontalism on the far left), what is most important to my discussion here are the two, interrelated differences between these two books’ arguments.

First, the books differ in how they approach what I would refer to as the teleological question. For Mason, information technology produces material conditions that more or less (and perhaps unironically in his view) go on to produce, as if it is a kind

of political automation, the radical resistances that will push our planet beyond capitalism. *Inventing the Future* makes no such implication. As Fuchs (2016) prefigures in his critique of Mason, for Srnicek and Williams, radical progress is absolutely not an automatic (or automated!) outcome of technological evolution; it is a product of counterhegemonic struggle.

This leads to the second key difference between how these two very readable books approach their theorisations of the transition from capitalism to postcapitalism: whether there is a need to mobilise a coherent democratic, egalitarian vision to animate and connect oppositional forces aiming to build a more just global political economy. For Mason, while he certainly provides excellent progressive policy proposals like universal basic income (an agenda item also advocated for by Srnicek and Williams), his answer is unclear. Given Mason's position on the teleological question, it is not surprising that, despite his attempt to articulate a coherent answer through his "Project Zero", the role of building and struggling over an alternative counterhegemonic political programme in his work is ambiguous at best (Mason 2015, Chapter 10).

For Srnicek and Williams, the answer is fundamentally the opposite – and vociferously so. Struggle over, and the demands constitutive of, such an alternative ideological system must be the sine qua non of an emancipatory transition from capitalism to postcapitalism. Srnicek and Williams argue that the possibility that the forces of capital will be victorious in the evolving forms of class warfare and struggle that comprise capitalism in the ongoing twenty-first century must not be underestimated. In fact, *contra* Mason, *Inventing the Future* asserts this is precisely where our current trajectory will take us, if a radically democratic alternative is not forcefully demanded and successfully empowered. The differences in these texts is even clear from their titles: Mason's is a "guide to our future" – a future that is apparently going to happen – but for Srnicek and Williams, if we're going to have a future worth living for most people on the planet, it will need to be invented.

Lest we stray too far from Marx on the occasion of celebrating his enduring relevance on the 200th anniversary of his birth, these two distinctions, put up against an important similarity between these two books, the decentering of the working class as the inherent revolutionary subject of history, is where we now turn.

While much can and has been said here about the centrality of the working class in Marx's theorisation of the transition between capitalism and postcapitalism (i.e., communism), when thinking about the formulation of radical, revolutionary subject(tivitie)s it is crucial to keep in mind Marx's justifications for the centrality of the working class. They don't have the most to lose (this would be the bourgeoisie). They don't have the most to gain (the lumpenproletariat would). The proletariat is theorised as the transhistorical revolutionary subject (the subject-object of history), because, yes in addition to having a lot to gain, it is their place in the relations of production and the relationship that enables among the class members themselves. The workers work together on a daily basis for hours on end. They are also directly responsible for the material reproduction of all of the classes, including both the working class and the capitalist class. Without the labour of the proletariat society would come to a crashing halt. This is the radical power of the proletariat. Only in a world economy rooted in luxury could a consumer, non-class-based approach to revolutionary action be even remotely viable, and then consumer resistance (i.e., boycotts, sit-ins, and the like) is only likely to be disruptively reformist, as opposed to transformative.

"In order to abolish the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is completely sufficient. It takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property"

(Marx 1978a, 99). While this is an important lesson for all academic leftists, who all too often elide this fact, this statement does not give much direction as to the mechanism through which communist action should proceed. We can accept that a broad conception of the working class is the most likely entity to perform this world-historical actions, but even that does not tell us much about *how* they are supposed to conduct such action.

The (Communist) Party is typically the form and mechanism through which the working class is supposed to exercise its world-historical project.

The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement. (Marx 1978c, 499)

Beyond thinking more broadly about the conceptualisation of the working class (Marx's treatment is typically narrowly confined to the industrial proletariat), despite the increasing proletarianisation of world labour, given the importance of the site of economic production, whether the (products of) labour is (are) physical or immaterial, the latter of which has been an important focus of the work of Hardt and Negri and Jodi Dean especially, certainly a broader conception of the working class is possible. Beyond this, we should think to Marx's use of the Party as an intervening mechanism (here again Jodi Dean's most recent work on the relationship between crowds and the Party is useful, see Dean 2012; 2016). For Marx, the Party is the intervening mechanism. The Party, beyond any rigidly vanguardist interpretation, is composed of those people who've reached a certain level of consciousness regarding the heinousness of capitalism and the desperate world-historical need for a just alternative.

The Party in the twenty-first century is a pedagogical tool as well. It is the practice run (in both senses of the word practice, both as a lower stakes experiments and the process of exercising an already learned skill set – like in the different meaning of football practice and a medical practice). The Party, a group of organised, committed individuals in solidarity, practicing democracy of discussion and unity of action intervenes psycho-socially. They have a social-revolutionary therapeutic role to play. Against the hyper-individualised self-help soothsaying of contemporary psychotherapy, the Party is a radical therapeutic entity that helps the psychologically sick members of the sick system of capitalism properly recognise the systemic basis for their illness (and before that, the recognition of the experience of exploitation, oppression, and alienation as illnesses). The Party is participatory pedagogy and therapy (with the goals of ending the need for radical pedagogy and therapy in the senses that they are needed within capitalism). This is one of the key silences in Marx's key texts. To get to this interpretation, one needs to read a bit between the lines to view the function of the Party – the specificity of which is woefully undertheorised in Marx's work.

Marx, especially in the *Communist Manifesto*, articulates an organic leadership relationship between (and most importantly, among) the Party and the working class, the purported revolutionary subject of history. This relationship needs to be problematised, perhaps more than it already had needed to be, given the impending possibility of automation-driven unemployment. Capitalism is an extremely adaptable and malleable mode of production. While there is always a chance that such fears of mass unemployment are exaggerated, as they have often been throughout the history of capitalism, it is speculated that around 40% of all jobs could be automated by

the middle of the twenty-first century (Frase 2016, 3-9). If this is even close to true, the employed working class as the revolutionary subject of history, the one meant to bridge the gap, to drive the transition from capitalism to socialism, would cease to operate within the relations of production as Marx described. The possibility, again, however exaggerated, combined with the on-going changes to the character of, increasingly digital, labour should give us pause against the more orthodox Marxist impulse to put all of our cards in the hands of a narrowly-defined working class – or in any vaguely defined vanguard or party. While the alternative options for a revolutionary subject would then remain much more complicated, the complexity is no reason to ignore the Marxian demand that we “mind the gap” between capitalism and post-capitalism beginning with the material-ideological conditions as they are, in addition to maintaining belief in the practical strategic value of radical political party organisation as part of an effective class struggle aiming to successfully “mind the gap.” Just as capital(ism) is a relation, is a movement, so too is communism. “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premise now in existence” (Marx 1978b, 162).

Taking all of the above discussion together, we remain with the more precise question of how to deal with “the gap.” The importance of this gap is expressed quite clearly by Marx:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men [sic] on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found a new society. (Ibid., 193)

Radicals on the left, especially over the past several decades have become increasingly interested in localised dialectical opportunities for moving beyond capitalism from within capitalism as the possible (or a possible) resolution to “the gap” – what has been referred to as prefigurative political experimentation. Marx does not say very much in his most noteworthy texts, but there is a key passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Program* that is very much important as we think about the relationship between our radical activities within capitalism and the character of the postcapitalism that emerges (including whether that humane postcapitalism successfully emerges in the first place). Marx states:

That the workers desire to establish the conditions for co-operative production on a social scale, and first of all on a national scale in their own country, only means that they are working to revolutionise the present conditions of production, and it has nothing in common with the foundations of co-operative societies with state aid. But as far as the present co-operative societies are concerned, they are of value *only* in so far as they are the independent creations of the workers and not protégés either of the government or of the bourgeois. (Marx 1978e, 536-537)

The question of how to organise effective resistance into the future is one of crucial import to the left. In many ways, one’s relative treatment of or position on prefigura-

tive politics (local or “folk” politics, as Srnicek and Williams [2015] describe it) likely has to do with the degree to which one is influenced more by the Marxist or anarchist traditions (though this is not always true – see Gibson-Graham for a good example of a more or less Marxist approach that is embedded with prefigurative political formulations). Still, Marxists have yet to develop a consistent or coherent approach to the relationship between local, radical, prefigurative experiments that do not themselves offer any serious threat to the global capitalist order but are nonetheless important symbolic resistances to the current system as well as representing authentic experiments in democratic governance and organization (regardless of the degree of horizontalism).

At their best, local prefigurative political enterprises can begin – or be part of a larger movement – to challenge the psycho-social conditions of capitalism, if still often failing to challenge the global structures and logic of capital. Prefigurative experiments such as cooperatives, which erode the distinction between worker, owner, and consumer, offer the opportunity to organise against the hyper-individualisation, hyper-competitiveness, and hyper-possessiveness associated with (late) capitalism. They offer the potential for worker-owner-consumers to learn and practice the democratic cooperative, solidarity-building skills that are not only central to any effective class struggle within capitalism, but the extent to which they are developed and passed along will also undoubtedly be central to shaping the quality and character of whatever iteration of postcapitalism that emerges. It seems dubious to assume that even if the global structures of capitalism were to implode on themselves, without the development within the late stages of capitalism of alternative ways of being and acting collectively with one another, that people who have been deeply ideologically conditioned by capitalism, would be able to effectively build a democratic, egalitarian postcapitalism on the fly. At their best, and this is to say that many on-going attempts at prefigurative politics fail in this respect, they do have a radical potential so long as they are aimed at building a global movement against capitalism towards a more just alternative – by workers and against the State and the bourgeoisie. Thus, as the above quote from Marx from the *Critique of the Gotha Program* indicates, we should be sceptical of, and critical towards, prefigurative political practices driven by (petit) bourgeois liberals that aim for collaborative relationships with existing State formations and those that are not democratically organised by workers themselves.

5. Conclusion

I hope the takeaway of this reflection essay marking the 200 year anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth is that we need to appreciate, understand, and critically struggle with the relationship between the materially-rooted ideologically instantiated psycho-social conditions of capitalism and the kind of postcapitalism that we want and are able to achieve. This is not an entirely – perhaps not even mostly – explicable relationship, but the value of the question itself, of the relationship itself, might just be the sine qua non of revolutionary transformation which results in a future worth struggling for – a democratic, egalitarian postcapitalism; for Marx, this postcapitalist society was always a communist society. While Marx’s major texts may not be able to provide a clear resolution to the specificity of the relationship between the psycho-social conditions of capitalism and the world-historical development of communism in the twenty-first century, his work does provide us with the unambiguous capacity to think, act, and solidaristically struggle through our own potential resolutions to this question. No other thinker in the history of modern or contemporary thought (at least not one who themselves is/was not indebted to Marx) provides today’s left with a more significant

legacy, not just as a founding figure, but remaining an animating lens through which we can get a better focus on more effective strategies for radical resistance and revolutionary transformation.

We must not only mind the gap; we must act in the gap in such a way that is self- and collectively transformational just as we aim for the transformation of our relations of production and consumption.

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