

## Preface

### Marx at the Chicken Shack<sup>1</sup>

#### READ MARX!

Lee Gregovich's injunction has been rattling around my brain for more than half a century. A good friend of my dad, he was, I suppose, my "red godfather." His family, like many others from the Dalmatian coast, had emigrated to the copper mines of the American Southwest before the First World War. There they were embroiled in epic labor conflicts. Lee told rousing stories about his days as an IWW paper boy, selling the *Industrial Worker* in saloons and cathouses, and then watching as his father and 1,300 other striking miners, mostly Mexican and south Slav, were arrested by Phelps-Dodge vigilantes, put in manure-floored cattle cars, and "deported" to a bleak stretch of desert in New Mexico. In the 1930s he became active in the Cooks Union in San Diego and joined the Communist Party. The House Committee on Un-American Activities brought its inquisition to San Diego in 1954 and Lee was subpoenaed and then blacklisted by employers. He finally found a job cooking at the Chicken Shack, an old-style roadhouse near the picturesque mountain town of Julian.

When my father had a catastrophic heart attack in my junior year, I quit high school for a semester to drive a delivery truck for my uncle's wholesale meat company. The Chicken Shack was our most distant customer and once every week or so, after delivering to country restaurants with names like the Lariat and the Lazy J, I'd scuttle up the long road to Julian. On such days Lee

and I had a ritual. After the order had been put in the walk-in, he'd pour me a small glass of red wine, we'd talk briefly about my dad's health or the Civil Rights movement (he was proud that I had become active in San Diego CORE), then, as I got up to leave, he'd slap me on the back and say, "Read Marx!" (I've always liked telling this story and was not surprised when a garbled version of it, insinuating that Lee was a mysterious Soviet agent, appeared in my FBI file.)

Lee himself, like millions of other rank-and-file socialists and communists, had read little or no Marx. *Wage, Labor and Capital*, perhaps, and certainly some Lenin, whose *The Teachings of Karl Marx* was a popular substitute for reading the old man himself. Most ordinary readers, however, cowered in face of that Everest of theory, *Capital*. The few who attempted it usually fell into one of the early crevasses of the first chapter and never returned for a second try. This only added, of course, to the mystique of Marx's genius and the prestige of party intellectuals who claimed to have reached the summit. A study of workers' libraries in Wilhelmine Germany found that serious proletarian readers were especially interested in Darwinism and materialist interpretations of natural history, not the critique of political economy. Kautsky's *Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* was "more borrowed than actually read."<sup>2</sup> In 1936, the Menshevik authors of *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*—a biography that admirably focused on the thinker as revolutionist—estimated that "perhaps one socialist in a thousand has ever read any of Marx's economic writings, and of a thousand anti-Marxists not even one."<sup>3</sup>

Little had changed when I joined the Southern California Communist Party in 1968 in solidarity with their stand against the Russian suppression of the Prague Spring. I was flabbergasted that new members' political education consisted solely of reading Julius Fucik's *Notes from the Gallows*—the stirring last testament of a young Czech Communist executed in 1943, but hardly an introduction to Marxism. My own knowledge was limited to the *Paris Notebooks* and bits of *The German Ideology*, recommended in a popular book that I had read on Marx and alienation. The only member of the L.A. Party, young or old, who seemed to have a serious understanding of Marx, and indeed was reading the *Werke* in German, was newly recruited Angela Davis, and she was fighting too many important battles to have time to tutor the rest of us.

What made Marx a stranger to Marxist movements, however, was not simply the difficulty of certain key works and passages, but a series of other

obstacles. Where to begin, for example? If you began at the beginning with dialectics, you had to endure Hegel scowling at you while you became increasingly befuddled—at least, that was my experience while trying to digest Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* during lunch and supper breaks at work. I was delighted years later to discover an epigram in which the young Marx registered his own frustration with the Master and his interpreters:

“On Hegel”

Words I teach all mixed up into a devilish muddle,  
Anyone may think just what he chooses to think;  
Each may for himself suck wisdom’s nourishing nectar;  
Now you know all, since I’ve said plenty of nothing to you!<sup>4</sup>

If you gave G. W. F. a detour, you might discover, with the aid of interpretations by the Marxist Humanists then in vogue, the inspiring Marx of the Paris and Brussels years. (*The Holy Family* [1845], however, never made my reading list since the only person that I’ve ever known who read it was on acid at the time.) But then, once you thought that you had learned to walk, Althusser came along and the Young Marx suddenly became the Wrong Marx.

With few exceptions, however, the Marx of the Rue Elm and other seminars was disembodied from the “man and fighter.” The works most infused with the passion of the barricades, the extraordinary political analyses of the 1848–50 cycle, were usually ignored by the philosophers. In my unsuccessful autodidact years, Marx seemed either emulsified in incompatible doctrines imposed by party ideologists (Diamat, for instance) or hidden away in mysterious untranslated manuscripts. In addition, it was almost impossible to gain an overview of the *oeuvre* since the publication of the English version of the collected works was still years in the future. Martin Nicolaus’s translation of the legendary *Grundrisse* in 1973—a milestone of the New Left Review/Penguin Books collaboration—considerably leveled the playing field for non-German readers, but it also added 900 pages of required study to the several thousand pages of the four volumes of *Capital*.

That same year, after losing a coveted niche in the trucking industry, I started UCLA as an adult freshman, attracted by rumors of a high-powered seminar on *Capital* led by Bob Brenner in the History Department. Brenner and his gang (Richard Smith, Jan Breidenbach, Maria Ramos, and others)

were reading *Capital* in the context of debates within British Marxism on agrarian class struggles and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Later the seminar moved on to crisis theory and twentieth-century economic history. It was an exhilarating experience and gave me the intellectual confidence to pursue my own agenda of eclectic interests in political economy, labor history, and urban ecology. Apart from Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* and Michael Löwy's *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, both indispensable, I lost interest in Marx studies as it turned from the modes-of-production debate to intensely microscopic battles over the value form, the transformation problem, and the role of Hegelian logic in *Capital*. "Theory" in general, as it became disconnected from real-life battles and big historical questions alike, seemed to take a monstrously obscurantist turn toward the end of the century. I could never imagine Lee Gregovich imploring anyone to "read Jameson, read Derrida," much less to wade through the morass of *Empire*.

#### SURFING THE COLLECTED WORKS

Over the years my Marxism became rusty, to say the least. But there comes a time when every old student must decide whether or not to renew their driver's license. And reading Daniel Bensaïd's *Marx for Our Times*, a spectacularly imaginative reinterpretation that breaks free of talmudic chains, whetted my appetite for a fresh look at the "non-linear Marx" that Bensaïd proposes.<sup>5</sup> Retirement from teaching, then a long illness finally gave me the leisure to browse through the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* now in English and, in a pirated version, available for free online.<sup>6</sup> Amongst recent writers who have made brilliant use of the *Collected Works* are John Bellamy Foster, the editor of *Monthly Review*, who has carefully reconstructed Marx's powerful ecological critique of capitalism—a new and exciting topic, particularly in light of later socialism's fetishism of large-scale agriculture; and Erica Benner, whose invaluable recovery of Marx's usually misrepresented views on nationalism is discussed in [Chapter 2](#) ("Marx's Lost Theory"). And the mother lode has hardly been mined out: for example, Marx and Engels's hundreds of pages of acerbic commentaries on the deep games of nineteenth-century European politics, especially the geopolitical

chess match between the British and Russian empires, clearly warrant a major new interpretation. Likewise, it would be illuminating to compare his theoretical writings on political economy with his concrete analyses of contemporary economic crises such as 1857 and 1866, topics usually assigned to the footnotes. More generally, I suspect, “Marx on the conjuncture” should become the new slogan of Marxologists.

The panoramic view of the *oeuvre* now available also makes it easier to recognize the blind spots and misdirections in the collaboration of Marx and Engels. The former, for instance, never wrote *a single word* about cities, and his passionate interests in ethnography, geology, and mathematics were never matched by a comparable concern with geography (later the forte of anarchists such as Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin). He was relatively untraveled, and only at the very end of his life, desperately sick and seeking the sun, did he venture outside Western Europe. His letters from Algiers, praising the culture and dignity of the Arabs, indicated his capacity to transcend Eurocentric categories and revel in the newness of other worlds. (Alas, if only he hadn’t been so wracked by illness and family tragedy.) The United States was another paradox. Its protean future was often on his mind—he was after all a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*—and he and Engels worked mightily to win support for Lincoln and Emancipation within the British labor movement. Yet, despite having read Tocqueville, he never focused on the unique features of its political system, especially the impact of early white-manhood suffrage on the development of its labor movement.

There can be no question that Marx saw far beyond the horizon of his century and that *Capital*, as the *Economist* (which Marx read faithfully) pointed out a few years back, remains startlingly contemporary even in the age of Walmart and Google. But in other cases Marx’s vision was limited by the anomalous character of his chronological niche: arguably the most peaceful period of European history in a thousand years. Colonial interventions aside, liberal London-centered capitalism did not seem *structurally* to require large-scale inter-state warfare as a condition of its reproduction or as the inevitable result of its contradictions. He died, of course, before the new imperialism of the late 1880s and 1890s led to zero-sum conflicts amongst the major powers for shares of the world market. Nor could Marx, even after the massacre of the Communards, have possibly foreseen the horrific price that counter-revolution in the next century, including Thermidorean Stalinism, would exact from rank-and-file

anarchists, socialists, and communists: at least 7–8 million dead.<sup>7</sup> Since the youngest and most politically conscious tended always to be in the front lines, these repeated decimations of the vanguard entailed incalculable consequences—ones that have been almost entirely ignored by historians.

Likewise, all signs in Marx's day pointed to the continued erosion of belief and the secularization of industrial society. After the early writings, religion was quite understandably not a topic on his agenda. By the end of the century, however, the trends reversed, and political Catholicism, along a spectrum from embryonic Christian Democracy to the *Zentrum* to fascism, became the main competitor with socialism/communism in much of Europe, and the major obstacle to left electoral majorities in the 1910s–20s and 1950s–70s. This surprising Catholic resurgence, almost a second counter-reformation, owed much to the spread of Mariolatry and the church's aggressive appeal to proletarian mothers. The patriarchal character of the workers' movement, which Marx and Engels never challenged, made it blind to the forces at work. Despite a household full of strong, radical women, including three daughters who became prominent revolutionists in their own right, Marx never wavered as *pater familias*, and the movements built in his name, as Barbara Taylor and others have pointed out, actually registered a retrogression from the striking feminism of many utopian socialist sects.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, between Flora Tristan and Clara Zetkin, no woman was able to claim leadership in any of the major labor or socialist formations.

The point, even if initially difficult to swallow, is that socialists, if incomparably armored by Marx's critique of capitalism, also have something to learn from the critique of Marx and his Victorian extrapolations. I say "critique of Marx" rather than "critics of Marx" since, even in the case of those who were noble revolutionary figures in their own right, such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, the mischaracterizations of Marx's ideas were quite fantastic (as were his calumnies against them). The cult of Marx, preceded in the German workers' movement by the cult of Lassalle, justly honored a life of almost sacrificial dedication to human liberation, but otherwise did what all cults do—it petrified his living thoughts and critical method. He, of course, was aware of this danger, which is why he famously said of Jules Guesde and his "orthodox Marxist" wing of the French Workers Party: "Ce qu'il y a de certain c'est que moi, je ne suis pas marxiste" ("What is certain is that [if they are Marxists] I myself am not a Marxist"). How many more times would he have had to say that in the twentieth century?

## THE CHAPTERS

In the epilogue to my 2006 book *Planet of Slums*, I asked: To what extent does the informal proletariat, the most rapidly growing global class, possess that most potent of Marxist talismans, “historical agency”? Although I was not aware of it at the time, Eric Hobsbawm had asked exactly the same question in an interview given in 1995. (He is quoted at the beginning of the next chapter.) Neoliberal globalization over the last generation has recharged the meaning of the “wretched of the earth.” Hobsbawm’s “gray area of the informal economy” has expanded by almost 1 billion people since his interview, and we should probably subsume the “informal proletariat” within a broader category that includes all of those who eke out survival by day labor, “micro-entrepreneurship,” and subsistence crime; who toil unprotected by laws, unions, or job contracts; who work outside of socialized complexes such as factories, hospitals, schools, ports, and the like; or simply wander lost in the desert of structural unemployment. There are three crucial questions: (1) What are the possibilities for class consciousness in these informal or peripheral sectors of economies? (2) How can movements, say, of slum-dwellers, the technologically deskilled, or the unemployed find power resources—equivalent, for example, to the ability of formal workers to shut down large units of production—that might allow them to struggle successfully for social transformation? and (3) What kinds of united action are possible between traditional working-class organization and the diverse humanity of the “gray area”? However, in thinking about a sequel to *Planet of Slums*, based on comparative histories and case studies of contemporary activism in the informal economy, I realized that I first needed to clarify how “agency” was construed in the era of classical socialism—that is to say, from Marx’s lifetime down to the isolation of the young Soviet state after 1921.

Although everyone agrees that proletarian agency is at the very core of revolutionary doctrine, one searches in vain for any expanded definition, much less canonical treatment. For this reason, **Chapter 1** adopts an indirect strategy: a parallel reading of Marx’s *Collected Works* and dozens of studies of European and U.S. Labor history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The goal has been to find accounts of how *class capacities* and consciousness arose on the principal terrains of social conflict; in the socialized factory and the battles within it for dignity and wages; through sometimes invisible struggles over the labor process; out of the battles of

working-class families against landlordism and the high cost of living; from crusades for universal suffrage and against war; in campaigns of solidarity with workers and political prisoners in other countries; and in movements to build alternative socialist and anarchist cultures in the very heart of industrial capitalism. The result, presented as a series of theses, is something like a historical sociology of how the Western working classes acquired consciousness and power. A persistent theme that emerges from these case studies is that class capacity on larger scales arises conjuncturally, as activists reconciled both in practice and in theory different partial demands and interests. In other words, it was precisely at the confluence of struggles (wages and suffrage; neighborhood and factory; industrial and agricultural, and so on)—and sometimes intra-class antagonisms (skilled versus semi-skilled)—that the creative work of organizing became most important and radically transformative. Historical agency, in other words, derived from the capacity to unite and strategically synthesize the entire universe of proletarian grievances and aspirations as presented in specific conjunctures and crises. And, it is necessary to add, to respond successfully to the innovations of employers' offensives and counter-revolutions.

Years ago, Robin Blackburn made the surprising claim that the “real originality of Marx and Engels was in the field of politics, not in economics or philosophy.” I would amend this to say “both in politics and economics.”<sup>9</sup> **Chapter 2**, “Marx’s Lost Theory,” influenced by Erica Benner’s work on the politics of nationalism in Marx, argues that Marx’s requiem for the failed revolution in France (*The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Class Struggles in France*) stands second only to *Capital* as an intellectual achievement; moreover, it is one grounded completely in the urgency of revolutionary activism. Marx, so to speak, opens up the engine compartment of contemporary events to reveal what Antonio Labriola would later call the “inner social gearing” of economic interests, as well as the autonomous role of the executive state, in a situation where no class was able to form a political majority or lead the way out of the national crisis. The French essays, heralds of a materialist theory of politics, explore a middle landscape, usually unrecognized by Marx interpreters, where “secondary class struggles” over taxes, credit, and money are typically the immediate organizers of the political field. They are also the relays whereby global economic forces often influence political conflict and differential class capacities. (The theory of hegemony, in other words, starts here, with the underlying-interest structure



of politics, which is doubly determined by the relations of production, at least in the long run, and the artful activity of leaders, organizers, and brokers.) In any future revolution, Marx argued, the workers' movement must be adept at addressing all forms of exploitation (such as over-taxation of the peasantry and the credit squeeze on small business) and, in the event of a foreign intervention—which he saw almost as a precondition for proletarian hegemony—to lead resistance in the name of the *nation*. These essays, finally, signaled a radical innovation: the retrospective “balance-sheet” method of strategic critique at which Lenin and Trotsky would become so masterful.

**Chapter 3** focuses on Marx's critic, Kropotkin, who in his scientific persona instigated a great international debate on climate change. The prince, of course, was the most congenial and charming of late-Victorian anarchists, at least as encountered in the parlors of London's middle-class radicals and savants, usually hand in hand with his stunningly beautiful daughter Sophia. But the Okhrana, which kept him perpetually under surveillance, regarded this turncoat noble and former explorer as one of the world's most dangerous revolutionists. His intellectual interests, like those of Marx and Engels, were omnivorous; but whereas Marx admired scientists from afar, Kropotkin was one: an outstanding physical geographer whose explorations of Manchuria and the Amur watershed rank in importance and daring with those of contemporaries such as John Wesley Powell and Ferdinand Hayden in the American West. Although he wrote frequently for *Nature* in later years, and his book *Mutual Aid* brilliantly anticipated the “symbiotic turn” in modern biology, his major scientific work on glacial geology and the recession of the ice sheets (the first installment finished in a dungeon) has never been translated, and has only recently been republished in Russian.

From his fieldwork in Siberia and Scandinavia he made a number of deductions about climate change that were popularized decades later in a 1904 article in the *Geographical Journal*. The significance of this article, and the chief topic of **Chapter 3**, is that Kropotkin was the first scientist to identify *natural* climate change as a major driver of human history. This might not seem terribly original, but in fact it was. In contrast to the current reign of denialism in the White House, educated opinion in the nineteenth century widely embraced the idea that human activity, especially deforestation and industrial pollution, was changing the climate in ways that might threaten agriculture, or even human survival. What was missing until

Kropotkin was any observationally grounded case for important cyclical or secular trends in natural climate processes, and evidence that they had shaped history in consequential ways. In his *Geographical Journal* piece he argued that the ending of the Ice Age was a still ongoing process, and that the resulting effects of progressive desiccation were visible across Eurasia and had produced a series of catastrophic events, including the episodic onslaughts of Asian nomads upon Europe.

Unfortunately, his research became immediately annexed to the debate about a “dying civilization” on Mars, as revealed by the elaborate system of “canals” supposedly observed on the Red Planet. Percival Lowell, the most zealous proponent of these canals, wrote a book claiming that Mars merely rehearsed the future of the Earth, citing Kropotkin and others on the progressive aridification of Eurasia. But Kropotkin’s real Frankenstein monster, shocked to life by the *Geographical Journal* debate, was the American geographer and former missionary Ellsworth Huntington, a tireless self-promoter, who reinterpreted linear desiccation as a natural cycle, the famous “Pulse of Asia.” Huntington’s belief in climatic determination, whether of civilizations’ rise and fall, or simply of human moods, soon morphed into a bizarre racial theory of history, poisoning the well for research on historical climates for almost two generations.

When I wrote [Chapter 4](#), “Who Will Build the Ark?,” debate about the “Anthropocene,” a proposed geological epoch without previous analogue, defined by the biogeochemical impacts of industrial capitalism, was still largely confined to earth science circles. Since then the term has expanded at meme speed to encompass not only these debates but virtually everything else. A quick perusal of recent and forthcoming books under the heading “Anthropocene” reveals titles like *World Politics in ...; Learning to Die in ...; Love in ...; Bats in ...; Virtue in ...; Poetry in ...; Hope and Grief in ...; Coral Reefs in...*; and so on. The Anthropocene, in other words, has morphed far beyond the original parameters of earth-system processes and stratigraphical markers to become post-modernism’s successor in the double sense of a vast and at times meaningless blanket thrown over everything novel and a permit for wild and undisciplined speculations about “post-natural” ontologies. Radical critics have justifiably focused on the false universals conflated in promiscuous discussions of the Anthropocene: “Man as geological agent” (instead of capitalism); “the threat to human survival” (the rich will assuredly survive; the existential threat is to the poor majority);

“the human fossil fuel footprint” (“What did you say, kemosabe?”); and so on.

“Ark” is an argument with myself. In the first half, I make the case for pessimism: there is no historical precedent or rational-actor logic that would lead rich countries (or classes) to repay their “ecological debts” to the poor countries that will suffer the greater part of the catastrophic consequences of rich countries’ historic emissions. Likewise, the chaos of the Anthropocene is indissolubly linked to the broader civilizational crisis of capitalism. A large portion of the labor-power of the planet, for example, needs to be devoted to the unmet housing and environmental needs of poor cities and their adaptation to extreme climate events. But global capitalism is no longer a job machine; quite the contrary, the fastest-growing social classes on earth are the unemployed and the informally employed. There is no realistic scenario in which market forces would mobilize this vast reservoir of labor to meet the challenge of the Anthropocene, nor is there any likelihood of adopting the kind of policies that would accommodate the human migrations necessitated by mega-droughts and rising sea levels. That would require a revolution from below of a scope far beyond anything imagined by Marx and Engels.

In the second half of “Ark,” I focus on the false choice defined by environmentalists who argue that there is no hope of reconciling a universally high standard of living with the requirements of sustainability. If capitalist urbanization is in so many ways the chief problem, responsible for the majority of emissions, groundwater deficits, and major pollutant flows, I propose the city as its own possible solution. We must transform private into public affluence with a zero carbon footprint. There is no planetary shortage of “carrying capacity” if we are willing to make democratic public space, rather than modular, private consumption, the engine of sustainable equality. We need to ignite our imaginations by rediscovering those extraordinary discussions—and in some cases concrete experiments—in utopian urbanism that shaped socialist and anarchist thinking between the 1880s and the early 1930s. The *alter monde* that we all believe is the only possible alternative to the new Dark Ages requires us to dream old dreams anew.