

Gérard Bensussan

University Marc Bloch of Strasbourg II, France

Marx and the exit of philosophy

I will start with the question that formed the entry-point of my recent little book on Marx¹. Is it still worth reading or re-reading Marx? Where and how can one grasp this thought after the ordeal of its ‘failure’ (a ‘failure’ designated by its very name and signified in the tragic reality of a historical movement)? Doesn’t this ‘failure’ of ‘Marxism’ remove the necessity of thinking with other thinkers and of thinking otherwise, that is, of re-orienting Marx’s own thought in the light of disaster and after the collapse of so-called Marxism? Hasn’t its ‘failure’ definitively ruined all possibilities of thinking Marx’s thought for our time, and for us (to use Hegel’s words, how can the relationship with the great thoughts that have preceded us be regulated/governed)? My reading/re-reading of Marx has been impelled by a different prospective. It was mainly concerned with interrogating *failed* thought and taking the measure of its ‘failure’, insofar as it would be worth more philosophically than the ‘success’ and ‘victory’, as Heidegger said of Schelling. It

¹ G. Bensussan, *Marx le sortant*, Paris, Hermann, 2007.

was concerned the re-traversing the extreme difficulties that Marx himself encountered in his thinking. According to a retroactive and theoretically sterile interpretation, these difficulties are less the measure or proof of 'failure' than the promise of a life for Marxist thought which doesn't let itself be exhausted by the historic avatar of Marxism and its determinate applications (which doesn't mean that this history has nothing to teach us).

These methodological preconditions of inquiry thus compel one to enter Marx by repositioning us at the beginning of his path, if we consider that this beginning does not cease to trace its course along the whole route/trajectory, in a structured, singular and interminable way.

This beginning, which has no end, is constituted by a vast zone of turbulence and ruptures. This is 'young Marx' in the Althusserian cartography of the 'cut' and the accidents of terrain which organize this turbulence and these ruptures. Going there obliges us to hold onto it quite a while after its dated localization, following a modality wholly different from chronology, biography or 'epistemology'. Entering Marx through this route first of all obliges us to treat his thought like a great German Metaphysics. Or like a great German anti-metaphysics, which comes to the same thing, but a different same thing. There is no paradox here if we stand by the Heideggerian axiom stated in *The Letter on Humanism*: 'the inversion of a metaphysical proposition remains a metaphysical proposition' – which Althusser

has remembered perfectly in his reading of Marx, since he has made it his guiding thread in his restatement of Marxism. It is now left for us to ask whether Marxian inversion, whose thematisation is so insistent that it impels in good part the explicit *anti-metaphysics* of the author of *Capital*, brings up purely and simply what we have just determined as an axiom – and that structurally, fundamentally affects, the whole history of philosophy in the complex succession of ruptures, inversions, of interwoven refutations that make up its thread and its content.

If the conditions of intelligibility of Marx's thought--which are, at the same time, its theoretical conditions of possibility -- are kept in this zone of the tempest of 'youth', we have then approach Marx as a great metaphysical, post-metaphysical, or even anti-metaphysical thinker. In other words, we have to read him within the inscription of the German, essentially Hegelian, tradition of idealism. This 'within' is obviously an 'against'. We are dealing here with the whole question of the *Ausgang*, of *issue* which is at stake in this dislocation. In the preface to his 1888 pamphlet, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of the classic German philosophy*, Engels practically made it the emblem of the retrospective exposé of Marxist anti-metaphysics. Returning expressly to Marx by citing his exact words, in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859 ("we resolved to work out in common the opposition of our view to the ideological view of German philosophy, in fact, to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience.

The resolve was carried out in the form of a criticism of post-Hegelian philosophy.”), Engels is willing to propose it forty years after a ‘brief and coherent’ recapitulation, and to present what was once ‘our relation to Hegel’s philosophy, our exit/issue from and our separation with it’. This exit /issue/ (*Ausgang*) which records the end (*Ausgang*) of philosophy is a figure that determines Marx’s entire course, even when he believes he is finished with the end, or has departed the departure point, having left it forever. Besides, to follow Engels himself, we can’t see how this movement of departure, of a Marx leaving Metaphysics behind but always under the threat of being left by it, would not be able to involve continuously reading or re-reading the elements, concepts and plans that he passes on to the readers and the enactors of his thought.

Reading Marx ‘in-against’ or ‘beyond-within’ (Derrida) the history of metaphysics in its Classical Idealist moment is, thus, to try to trace back the manner and the exercise via which the resources of the metaphysical tradition, where Marx inscribes himself by the very movement of exscribing/unsubscribing himself, are presented to him as exhausted. How can we understand, at the same time, this declarative *topos* (philosophy doesn’t work anymore!) and this active-inaugural Event (we need to finish it!) of the exit? There is an extraordinary and unprecedented novelty in Marx in this gesture of the definitive revocation of all the philosophies of the abstract universal. At a stroke, the entire Western metaphysical

past, seems absolutely jettisoned. The philosophy of consciousness and subjectivity is mercilessly unmasked as the space of all illusions, and the mirror of all inversions, as 'ideology'. Everything happens as if something new were being radically invented, something never before seen, in those few years up to the *German Ideology*, the famous text of 1845-46, to which both Marx and Engels refer in the double passage mentioned earlier, where the exit is wagered, announced and executed. The exit, from that point on, is consummated against others who would [ie would aspire to] exit, the Bauers, Stirners, Feuerbachs amongst others, who missed their exit, not because they remained slightly weaker epigones of the great idealist tradition, but because, without knowing it, they embodied its living proof/truth, each in a different, unequal way. Reading or re-reading so-called texts of his youth, we are contemplating the portrait of a young philosopher as an exterminating angel, striking down philosophy, finishing it off with the coup de grace (the *Ausgang* as an end), and assigning it to a new port (the *Ausgang* as an outlet or an issue). And he does this with an extraordinary speculative-anti-speculative vigour. *The theses on Feuerbach* are in this respect exemplary with their condensed rigour, flawless acuity, jubilant concision – as if, fundamentally, the venerable brotherhood of philosophers from Ionia to Jena, mocked by Rosenzweig, could be eliminated in three pages of a schoolboy's jotter, [even if it means temporarily speaking its *language* in order to be heard by some

incorrigible enthusiasts. We might straightaway note that this question of idiom/language and translateability always govern the approach of Marxist textuality, since it comes back to the question of how philosophy might *pass* to its Other or to its Elsewhere. How can one speak theoretically without speculative erring? Must we translate, transfer, transport or instead install ourselves without delay in this language which would invent itself by pulling “its poetry from the future”? Isn’t the concept, even when transformed, the fiercest enemy of the “revolution”? This connection, that is to say the way Marx linguistically relates these structural moments to each other, is often the occasion of trouble: there is philosophy, and of the ‘worst’ kind, where it is least expected, at the turn of such a page in *Capital*, for example, and there is economy in the reputedly philosophising texts written before 1845-46. This is the reason why the traditional ‘divisions’ of Marx’s thought are criticisable and have been rightly criticised. They go back to the pre-suppositions of ‘Marxist’ tradition, that is to say Kautskyist and Leninist, of the ‘three sources’ – and prevent the gesture of ‘exit’ establishing this very tradition. If in Marx’s work there exists a ‘philosophical’ corpus distinct from the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ corpus, then there is obviously no longer a need to pose the question of the ‘settling of accounts’, of the ‘separation’ and the ‘*Ausgang*’. We can admit at once that there is a philosophy of Marx without having the need to question the locations in which it is effected and the conditions of its possibility

after the rupture, no longer wondering of what its “praxis” in the Althusserian sense, might consist of -- that is, its exercise as *renunciation from the concept*, its actuality without possibility. Now, this question of Marx’s philosophy is determined by the effectiveness of its ‘separation’ from the speculative tradition. A philosopher Marx, even a Marx philosophizing anew and on new objects, would be a Marx who has exited, perhaps without even knowing it – and there is a perfectly possible scenography of the exit and of the end. But we need to begin by at least taking seriously an exiting Marx/a Marx exiting from philosophy. It turns out that the elsewhere of philosophy, the issue and the other place on which Marx built for over thirty years, was explicitly named by him: the *critique of political economy*. This title, whatever its probable limits are, combines in a single theoretical perspective and designation philosophy, economy and politics. It does not so much name a unity than a project that may be constructed in the disruption of its moments, and not in organic-dialectic process which would join together the three famous ‘sources’, towards a new absolute knowledge of the Social and Historical. Things are not disposed in this way in Marx, as we need to be endlessly reminded. There is nothing like a dialectical materialism, or even a general ontology of the social being, nothing like a re-founded philosophy after the signified leave-taking from metaphysics. For Marx, to settle his accounts with philosophy means to settle his own accounts and to leave them behind for once and for all, to finish with

Hegel, Hegelianism and bad German sophistication. This is what Marx says and does. Such notably self-conscious radicalism and overturning carry with it here the seismic movement inflicted on the philosophical ground, obliging Marx to cast himself away, far from the desolation, toward another continent. In the years following the grand departure, it is no longer a question of doing philosophy -- in any possible way. The critique of political economy is henceforth the subject of a fierce theoretical appropriation, the subject of a multiform investigation. However this effort, deployed well away from metaphysics, continually leaves the way open for a sort of Marxian philosophical *habitus* that he shelters in its own momentum and that seems irresistible. Marx constantly re-philosophizes. This doesn't mean that he purely and simply relapses into what he thought himself indemnified against. But these resurrections, these gaps, this language that has become foreign and that comes back as a maternal tongue, no longer held in contempt, but cherished in proportion to the oblivion it has been raised to, forcefully questions the status of a persistence, the effectiveness of a rupture and the epistemological consistency of the site of construction the "critique of political economy". I will give only one of a myriad possible examples. In a letter addressed to Engels from the 14th of January 1858, Marx explains to his friend that he has just finished re-reading *The Science of Logic* and that this re-encounter is of great use to him for his writing of *Capital*, from the material of the *Grundrisse*, and particularly for his

“method of elaboration of the subject”. Does this methodological, epistemological and theoretical rehabilitation of a “demystified” Hegel, mean the return to the claims of and even the very possibility of philosophy (in the same letter, Marx evokes his desire to write one day a Dialectics “in two or three sheets of printed matter”)? It is worth spending some time on this question, not at all for reasons of (somewhat vain) a Marxist science but because it determines a whole series of crucial points that have been stumbling points of Marxism and also grounds of its failure. When dealing with the question of the “exit”, we can hardly sever or engage the evaluation of the Marxian revolution that the “exit” inaugurates without coming back precisely to the dialectics and contradiction on one side, and alienation on the other. These concepts perfectly support each other, and I wondered in my book, why the first complex – dialectics and contradiction – is continually maintained by Marx whereas alienation is abandoned and how this difference can be sustained and thought out by him. The theoretical solidarity of these concepts come to him from Hegel who proposes to think of alienation or extraneousness or exteriorisation only because of the movement of dialectical re-appropriation that follows, that is, the movement of the Spirit. The Spirit can neither retract into pure self-consciousness in its own interiority, nor can it lose itself in the non-being of difference, which is not it. This is summarised, if we can put it like this, in what Hegel calls « the movement of itself » (*Phenomenology of*

Mind; Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807)), from *Selbst* that alienates itself, objectivises itself, in order better to suppress the difference between oneself and oneself, between objectivity and content.

The way that Marx treats these conceptual devices of dialectics, of contradiction, of alienation and the revocation of the latter, the maintenance or the transformation of dialectics and contradiction, are decisive grounds for understanding the question of Marx's relationship to idealism -- from which he exits. The ambiguity of the French verb that indicates the gesture of *Ausgang* precisely demonstrates its complexity. *Sortir de* means to come from an indelible origin, a matrix of thought that one leaves behind while still bearing the original imprint. *Sortir de* is to break with and interrupt an influence, a continuity, a *filiation*, but it is also to remain marked by what one has broken with. It means also to come from something. Why is dialectics not abandoned to the language of rational speculation of Hegelianism, as alienation was? Can contradiction -- that Marxists have always explained with a disconcerting naivety as the heart of Marx's theory -- escape its logical statute and qualify "with no other form of proceedings" real movements?

These interrogations and all the ones deriving from them allowed us to approach a type of checking gesture of exit, even a sinking into the redoubtable theoretical pretences. Nevertheless, in the way that Marx constantly tries to pull away from his place of provenance, the exit, more a continuous effort than a discontinuity

signified by a cut, produces remarkable effects, breakthroughs, unsealed gaps which Marx practises as plural *exits*, which he presents as *excesses*, exoduses of knowledge and overgrowths exteriority. I will pick out three of them in particular: *the revolution* as an excess of content over each sentence/phrase that thematises revolution (these are Marx's words on «the poetry of the future» in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* [second month of French Republican Calendar]); *the analytics* of social forms, the only effective figure of the very improbable Marxian “materialism”, like the excess of the form and of the force over each “contradiction”, over all dialectical negativity; the *excess-value* or surplus-value, as an excess over all circulatory logic of the auto-increase in the value of capital and the auto-elucidation of the concept.

It is the gesture of the *Ausgang*, then, that we have to question when we want to understand Marx's “relationship” to philosophy. First of all because it is decisive in its enterprise which it commands. Then because it seems determining for whomever makes the effort to think about Marxian thought and to try to know what to hold to as far as what it might instruct or ‘de-instruct’ today. I have questioned it through three angles, or rather, by giving close consideration to three very precise elements:

1. The *exit* never ceases to over-signify itself as an interruption of all Dialectics; even if Dialectics is re-conducted under a so-called « materialist » form;

2. In its singular reality, the exit gives itself over a brief and crucial moment in the revocation of “alienation”;

3. The gesture of “sortir/exiting” turns out to be in the unregulated conflict that it does not cease to transport between a (logical) negativity and a (real) positivity.

To summarize my argument, I will recapitulate it under three theses in which one should not be misled by the negative enunciation because it is well and truly a matter of the dis-discovery of a new possibility of thinking:

-- There is no materialism in Marx but an analytics of economic, social and historical forms, a thought of efficiency of form too, that is to say of its positivity.

-- There is no politics in Marx, but a thought, taken to its own limit, of a revolutionary excess over all politics, an infinite revolutionary excess.

-- There is no critique of political economy except at the extreme point--that makes it possible --of excess value as excess over all critique of political economy, as a creation from nothing, wrenched from the logic of capital -- without which there can be no “critique” of capitalism, but the always-already indefinite re-conduction of its own revolution, of its strength of power to revolutionise all links.

As I see it, it is not a question of deciding between a position *pro* or *contra* Marx and Marxism, and not even, fundamentally, of making a decision about what is alive or dead in a work that no theoretical accounting can reduce to a kind of

balance sheet or reckoning, by which the work is judged invalid or still exploitable. The final balance that Marx transmits to us is an uncertain one. This is what we need to grasp while asking ourselves if we can find there some “matter to think”. Marx still needs to be read, that is to say re-read, if we want to try to understand whether he still impels further writing and why this might be. It is not a question of reading him as a master— from now on there will be no mastery or authority. And he should not be read, as we hear it said, as a classic, on a par with Aristotle and Hegel. Marx’s text, Marx’s *texts* escape both these competing and interdependent regulations. They can seem to lend themselves to such readings, exemplarily so here and there, but only in order to slip away elsewhere. Marx writes in the way that one reads, with ups and downs, and he writes notebooks—books of notes. Every reading of Marx binds us, in abyssal depth, to Marx as a reader – from Hegel, Feuerbach, Smith and Ricardo, to these readings that we must read in order to read him. As a consequence, reading Marx is an endless project— *this* is the balance sheet that we inherit from him.

Aberdeen, 20 February 2008