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IT IS GETTING DARKER AROUND THE CENTRAL SUN OF FREEDOM

Capital, translation and the re-feudalization of capitalism*

by Boris Buden

> *As in the universe each planet, while turning on its own axis, moves around the sun, so in the system of freedom each of its worlds, while turning on its own axis, revolves around the central sun of freedom.*
> Karl Marx, 'Debates on Freedom of the Press', Supplement to the Rheinische Zeitung, 1842

At the end of his introduction to the edition of the Communist Manifesto published by Penguin Classics in 2011, Marshall Berman tells a story he heard from the eminent theorist of international relations Hans Morgenthau, who emigrated from Nazi Germany in 1937. Morgenthau's father, who was at the beginning of the twentieth century a doctor in a working-class neighbourhood in the city of Coburg in Bavaria, was often asked by his patients – mostly miners who were dying of tuberculosis and whom he couldn't help – to bring them the Manifesto. Their last request was to be buried with Marx and Engels's famous book – instead of the Bible. A grave is not the best place for a book to survive. But it is, beyond doubt, a good starting point for research into manifold forms of its afterlife. This is why we would do well to imagine Karl Marx's Das Kapital in its original shape, in German, the language in which it was originally written, together with its //136/ideal readers, the German-speaking working class, being buried together in a grave. In this picture, a return to the original is possible only as an act of commemoration. One takes any round number of years and creates a memory event. Yet even the megalomania of today's powerful memory culture has its limits. Not all that is historically dead can be culturally kept alive. This is one more reason to approach Karl Marx's Das Kapital from the perspective of its historical death. So, instead of commemorating its former life, let us turn our attention to the often contra-dictory historical and linguistic conjunctures in which it has found its afterlife.

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Freedom as a freedom from Marx

Almost a century after Hans Morgenthau's father helped his dying patients to take Marx and Engels's books with them to the grave, new people were celebrating getting finally rid of their writings. Speaking in the same text of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Berman writes: '[A]t the end of the twentieth century, there were plenty of ex-citizens of Communist police states who felt that life without Marx was liberation.'[1] This, however, shall not surprise us if we remember that Marx's writings, together with other texts belonging to the corpus of so-called Marxist–Leninist literature, were in these places for decades canonized as dogma and, as such, ideologically supportive of the local dictatorial regimes. Berman calls it a disaster – a disaster for Karl Marx's texts and their true readers. This is why those readers also embraced the fall of historical communism as liberation. It was only in a life without Marx that his texts could be read freely again.

//137/The question is, however, who are these true readers of Marx? Berman leaves no doubt: 'Intellectuals all over the world have welcomed this end-of-the century crash as a fortunate fall.'[2] If Berman is right, it was precisely the historical defeat of Marx's ideas that has saved them for posterity. Moreover, it seems that only after the history and the people who were making it had abandoned Marx's concepts and trashed his arguments could these reappear in their original theoretical innocence, as if miraculously purified of the dirt of historical praxis. The transformation resembles some sort of post-historical sublimation of Marxism, in which the whole realm of history retroactively appears as a foreign, hostile land for Karl Marx's original ideas, a quasi-dialectical moment of their alienation from which they have now recovered, restoring themselves in their genuine ahistorical authenticity. Finally, how are we to think of Berman's 'intellectuals all over the world'? Are they really Marx's genuine readers? Was he not rather writing for a different audience, those 'workers of the world' whom he and Engels addressed explicitly at the end of the Manifesto? In fact, Berman makes no significant distinction between them. Already in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* he quoted Marx's words from the Manifesto on the historical achievement of the modern bourgeoisie, which 'has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured

[1] Marshall Berman, 'Tearing Away the Veils: The Communist Manifesto', www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/tearing-away-the-veils-the-communist-manifesto.
[2] Ebd.

and looked up to in reverent awe. It has converted the doctor, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers.'[3]

As far as capitalism puts both intellectuals and workers into the same wage-relation, they also share a common class and historical position. This is why Berman can see in today's intellectuals of the world //138/the rightful heirs to the emancipatory legacy of the historical workers' movements, those proletarians who once had nothing to lose but their chains.

However, there is something the intellectuals of the world still have to lose: the freedom that Berman has implicitly ascribed to their social role and that makes it possible for them to detach themselves from historical praxis and encounter 'directly' the authentic world of Marx's ideas. But this type of freedom does not look like something new. Indeed, it unavoidably evokes an old idea of public reason, or more precisely Immanuel Kant's concept of the freedom to make public use of one's reason, as opposed to its private use.[4] In fact, it is today in direct contradiction to the commonsensical differentiation of public and private. For Kant, those who, for instance, work in what we call the public sector are restricted in their use of reason by the mechanism for which they work – that is, by the will of the government. So they cannot argue freely, because they must obey. However, if they regard themselves at the same time as members of the whole community, or of a society of world citizens, and in the role of scholars address the general public, they will nevertheless be able to use their reason freely – that is, publicly.

This might explain why Berman and all genuine readers of Karl Marx have welcomed 'a life without Marx' brought about by the crash of 1989. In Kant's sense, it liberated Marx's writings from their private use – by, for instance, those apparatchiks of an official Marxism, also known as Marxologues, who were not able to read Marx and discuss his ideas freely because they had to obey their totalitarian masters, the Party and the state. In other words, the post-1989 liberation of Marx's writings might be understood as a sort of reappropriation by public reason. It has //139/liberated Marx as author, who is now finally free – to address, as a scholar (Gelehrter), 'the intellectuals of the world', or, in Kant's parlance, the society of world citizens (Weltbürgergesellschaft).

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[3] Marshal Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 115. He uses the same quotation in 'Tearing Away the Veils: The Communist Manifesto', explicitly identifying intellectuals with workers 1. Marshall Berman, 'Tearing Away the Veils: The Communist Manifesto', www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/tearing-away-the-veils-the-communist-manifesto.

[4] See Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"', in Kant: Political Writings, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. H.S. Reiss, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 54–61.

Let us put aside the question of whether Karl Marx was ever a scholar. How can we identify the figure of the world intellectual? Is it a member of the cognitive elite of today's society of world citizens? One who actually belongs to this intellectual community? If it is a cosmopolitan community, is it also a universal one? And, after all, which language does this elite speak? Will it read Karl Marx's works in the language in which they were originally written? It is not difficult to recognize in Berman's notion of 'the intellectuals of the world' an older intellectual figure, which, in fact, still echoes in Kant's notion of Weltbürgergesellschaft – the so-called 'republic of letters': an international community of scholars of which Kant, for instance, was a typical member. It emerged at the time of the Renaissance, and as a new historical form of intellectual exchange it prepared and finally made possible the Age of Enlightenment.[5]

As is well known, the original language of the Republic of Letters was Latin. It was actually called Respublica Literaria or Respublica Literarum. Later in the seventeenth century it switched mostly to French. Finally, Kant wrote his works in German, following the example of the brightest minds of the Renaissance who abandoned Latin for their respective vernaculars, early prototypes of a new figure of the scholar: a bourgeois vernacular intellectual. Such was Marx too. He wrote his works in German in a time when the old Republic of Letters had already developed into something qualitatively different – both in a social and in a political sense – namely, what Habermas later termed 'the bourgeois public sphere' (der bürgerlichen Öffentlichkeit). Thus was //140/the old Latin Republic of Letters subsequently nationalized, or, more precisely, territorialized within the borders of a new political institution of a modern world and emerging capitalism, the bourgeois nation-state, in which the old vernaculars were finally tamed and disciplined (German Romantics would say gebildet, meaning educated and civilized) into national languages.

Marx lived in London but he wrote Das Kapital in German. If he lived today in Berlin, he would, for sure, write his main work in English – so that Berman's 'intellectuals of the world' could understand him.

[5] See Dirk van Miert, 'What Was the Republic of Letters? A brief Introduction to a Long History (1417–2008)', Groniek 204 (February/March 2016), pp. 269–86.

Through the veil of translation

We take it for granted that most if not all relevant discussions on Marx's Capital and the topics raised by the book take place today in English. As far as these discussions refer to the text itself, they rely on a translation, not on the original text in German. This circumstance, however, has been naturalized today to the point that it goes completely unnoticed. We think and talk about Marx in English as though he thought and wrote about our world in the same language. But he did not. And this can sometimes become an issue.

It was German Marxist Wolfgang Fritz Haug who recently spoke out about the trouble with the English translations of Das Kapital.[6] As an example he took one of today's most influential commentaries on Marx's major work, David Harvey's Companion to Marx's Capital.[7] Haug, who himself published a similar commentary,[8] argues, in short, that Harvey's interpretation //141/of Marx's text lacks accuracy and leads to misunderstanding of some of the most important concepts of Marx's theory. The reason: Harvey does not read German. In other words, Harvey's Companion does not follow Marx's own text but rather an English version of it handed down by Ben Fowkes – his English translation of the first volume of Das Kapital, which first appeared in 1976. The shifts of meaning that have arisen from this translation have, according to Haug, at certain points significantly influenced Harvey's interpretation of Marx's Capital and subsequently erected 'an epistemological barrier' for today's international left, constantly undermining their revived efforts to deepen the analysis of contemporary capitalism through rereadings of Marx's classical texts.[9]

One of the most striking examples of such shifts of meaning Haug detects is Fowkes often ignoring Marx's differentiation between the German adjectives stofflich, dinglich, sachlich and materiell.[10] Fowkes renders them all as 'material', which results in a series of misinterpretations that are, according to Haug, 'fatal for

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[6] Wolfgang Fritz Haug, 'On the Need for a New English Translation of Marx's Capital', Socialism and Democracy, vol. 31, no. 1 (March 2017), pp. 60–86.
[7] David Harvey, A Companion to Marx's Capital, London and New York: Verso, 2010.
[8] Vorlesungen zur Einführung ins 'Kapital' (Introductory Lectures on 'Capital') was first published in 1974. In fact, Haug and Harvey were not only born in the same year, 1935, but also both began to give courses on Marx's Capital in the same year, 1971, not only for students but also for unionized workers.

[9] Haug, 'On the Need', p. 63
[10] Stofflich means 'stuff-like' and is for Marx the antonym of the socio-historical form-determination; dinglich might be approximately translated as 'thing-like' and Marx opposes it to the relational and processual; sachlich also means 'thing-like', but Marx uses it as the antonym of 'personal'; and materiell translates as 'material'. Ibid., pp. 75–6

materialist thought'.[11] The consequence is, as he concludes, that the international left today gets 'a Marx bereft of his materialism, and an historical materialism without historical materiality'.[12]

This applies concretely to Harvey's interpretation of Capital. Here, as Haug shows, Fowkes's translation of Marx's expression dinglich as 'material' leads Harvey to conclude – reasoning by way of opposition – that 'unreified' (unverdinglichte) social relations are for Marx objective but nevertheless 'immaterial'. So, he argues, one cannot sensuously apprehend them; in Harvey's own words, 'you cannot actually see, touch or feel social relations directly'.[13]

//142/This has further consequences for Harvey's understanding of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Here, Fowkes translates Marx's well-known designation of commodities as sinnlich übersinnliche oder gesellschaftliche Dinge[14] as 'sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social'. While Marx's original notion more accurately translated as 'sensuous-supra- sensuous or social' keeps both 'sensuous' and 'supra-sensuous' together. Despite – or, to put it more precisely, because of – the contradiction in meaning, Fowkes separates them and so facilitates Harvey's understanding of Marx's concept of the social as something supra-sensible; that is, something immaterial, yet still in a way objective. When this gets applied concretely to the concept of commodity fetishism – Marx's explanation of how a social relation between humans themselves assumes in a commodity the fantastic form of a relation between things – it becomes in Harvey's interpretation 'an absence of an immediate producers–consumers relation that is effected by the market exchange of things'.[15] To illustrate the meaning of the fetish character of commodity form, he uses the example of a person who goes into a supermarket to buy a head of lettuce. To do this, one has to put down a certain sum of money. The material relation between the money and the lettuce expresses in fact a social relation because the price is socially determined. And here Harvey concludes: 'Hidden within this market exchange of things is a relation between you, the consumer, and the direct producers – those who laboured to produce the lettuce.'[16] So, as Haug states, Harvey reduces the concept of commodity fetishism to a lack of knowledge about the relations between consumers and producers. This ends in Harvey establishing a //143/causal relation between globalization and

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[11] Ebd. 75.
[12] Ebd. 63.
[13] Ibid., pp. 63, 76. The quotation from Harvey's Companion: ibid., p. 33. Haug, on the contrary, argues that social relations, however, can be empirically and also sensuously observed; ibid., p. 76.
[14] 23/86
[15] Haug 80
[16] Harvey 39

fetishism: '[I]n highly complicated systems of exchange it is impossible to know anything about the labour or the labourers, which is why fetishism is inevitable in the world market.'[17]

For Haug, however, the fetishism that is intrinsic to the world of commodities, of money and of capital has nothing to do with the difference between the national market and the world market. It has nothing to do with the 'subjective ignorance' of the consumers 'about that labour or the labourers' either. Moreover, a relation of consumption is for Haug not at all at the core of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Rather, it is about a relation among producers, a relation of production. In fetishism, the ability of the products as commodities to make themselves autonomous expresses itself in relation to those who have produced them. Commodity fetishism is about the powerlessness of the producers vis-à-vis the life of their own products. One does not have fully to agree with Wolfgang Fritz Haug when it comes to the extent and gravity of misinterpretations that are generated by the shifts in meaning that almost unavoidably take place when a text is translated into another language. He probably exaggerates when he argues that some of these shifts, as in the case of Ben Fowkes's English translation of Marx's Das Kapital, are 'fatal for materialist thought' and will prevent the international left today from revisiting Karl Marx's genuine materialism. It may even be that the shortcomings of this translation's contribution to our contemporary interpretation of Marx's thought is on a much smaller scale than alleged by Haug. But the German Marxist definitely has a point. Even more so when it comes to his general assessment of the linguistic preconditions of current Marxist debates, as well as the warnings he makes in this regard.

//144/What has essentially reframed the way we read Marx and discuss his ideas today is the emergence of English as the global lingua franca. It is the language of transnational high-tech capitalism as much as of international Marxism. This, according to Haug, 'puts a heavy responsibility on Anglophone Marxist scholars, since their version of Marxian texts have acquired a referential priority for most students from all over the world'.[18] It is for this reason that Haug expects them to pay more attention to the English translations of Marx's texts with which they work so as to neutralize the shifts in meaning that have arisen from them. When it comes to Das Kapital, for Haug there is no doubt that a new English translation of Marx's major work is needed, one that would satisfy the criteria of a critical edition. If this does not happen, even Marx's thoughts in their original language, German, will not be spared distortions in meaning. This is precisely what happened in the

[17] Harvey, A Companion, pp. 39–40
[18] Haug, 60

German translation of David Harvey's Companion. It has transmitted into German Harvey's analysis based on Fowkes's English translations and mixed it with original quotations from Marx. The result, as Haug writes, 'borders on linguistic money-laundering'.[19] This is a further level of complication: the linguistic alienations of Marx's thought that took place in the English translations of Das Kapital have now been reimported, resulting in the linguistic alienation of Marx's thoughts in his own native language.

A Marxist who cannot speak English is no Marxist

There is a certain resentment that can be clearly felt in Haug's critique of English translations of Das Kapital. At stake is, however, much more than the personal disappointment of a German Marxist whose own commentaries on Marx's work – based on and written in the original language of the book //145/ have been pushed aside, even within his own language, by the interpretations of an international author who does not even understand German. Rather it is the resentment of the language itself that speaks out of Haug's critique, not his personal injury. German, once the language of the highest literary and cultural values of modern philosophy, and thanks to Marx's writings the language par excellence of the critique of capitalism, is today only a shadow of its former glory.

The historical erosion that has affected not only German but many national languages today has its name: re- vernacularization. At stake is a retrograde process in which a distinctive and fully formed national and cultural language falls back into the condition of a vernacular from which it had raised itself since the sixteenth century. Concretely, in its European environment as well as within its own territory, German has been increasingly pushed back from higher discourses of science, politics and business and forced to retreat onto the level of everyday life and less important discourses. 'German is today a disappearing, little language (like Breton or Occitan), because its speakers don't attach any importance to the preservation of German in higher discourses', one German philosopher of language comments bitterly on the degeneration of his mother tongue.[20] Of course, there is no doubt about what has pushed German 'into cultural insignificance'[21] today. It is another, more powerful language, English as the new lingua franca of the globalizing world. As a result, in Europe and elsewhere, we are witnessing today the emergence of a

[19] Ibid., 62
[20] Jürgen Trabant, Globalesisch oder was? Ein Plädoyer für Europas Sprachen, Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2014, p. 92.
[21] Ebd. 192

new cultural and linguistic condition that might be described as a sort of 'a neo-medieval diglossia – high: English/low: other languages'.[22] This new/old linguistic condition might be also defined in terms of Pierre //146/Bourdieu's understanding of linguistic competence as capital.[23] While English speakers possess ever-growing transnational linguistic capital, the speakers of German, or of some other once powerful national languages, like French for instance, are nowadays increasingly losing it. In Bourdieu's sense one might say that a new form of linguistically generated class division emerges today on a global scale.

Some see this development as a historical loss, a further decline in linguistic and cultural diversity. Others welcome the transformation as a progressive move towards a global linguistic harmony. Both, however, seem to agree that this development is irreversible. The old forms of linguistic practice that still shape the picture of the global world as a cluster of nation-states and their respective cultures and languages are crumbling before our eyes. One can, of course, endlessly speculate about still unforeseeable cultural, cognitive, economic and political consequences of this development, but it is clear already that there are more and more things that can no longer be said in the old national languages because certain discourses are available only in English. There is no doubt that this is also the case with contemporary Marxism.

So, what Berman calls 'life without Marx' is in fact a life without Marx in German and in many of the historical transla- tions of his works that were once made from German. It is a life without Marx who addresses a national public sphere, the readers on all its strata, in their own language, from the heroic figure of the bourgeois intellectual to the members of a national working class. They are those who have been, according to Berman, liberated from Marx by the collapse of historical //147/communism. For all of them Marx is now dumb. He speaks a language they do not understand.[24]

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[22] Ebd.

[23] See, for instance, Jürgen Gerhards, From Babel to Brussels: European Integration and the Importance of Transnational Linguistic Capital, trans. Maureen Metzger, Berlin Studies on the Sociology of Europe (BSSE), no. 28, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2012; www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/38916/ssoar-2012-gerhards-From_Babel_to_Brussels_European.pdf?sequence=1; accessed March 2018.

[24] This circumstance implies a curious correlation between English-language skills and an affinity for Marxist ideas. The more people in a community who are in command of English, the more potential Marxists there are among them. The chance that Karl Marx's Capital will be read in the Netherlands, where 87.6 per cent of the population speak English, is much higher than in Bulgaria where this number drops to 15.4 per cent. Ibid., p. 17.

On the other side, there are Marshall Berman's 'intellectuals of the world', for whom a 'life without Marx' has paradoxically brought him back. It is for them, his only genuine addressees today, that Marx was liberated, so that they can freely read his writings and discuss his ideas; as far as they speak English, of course – which they actually do, for it is obviously their own language, the mother tongue of today's international community of scholars. Shortly after the fall of historical communism, which made possible the global expansion not only of capitalism but also of contemporary art, an artist from Croatia, Mladen Stilinović, made his famous comment on the new linguistic condition brought about by the historical transformation: 'An artist who cannot speak English is no artist.' This applies equally to Karl Marx and his ideas after 1989: a Marxist who cannot speak English is no Marxist.

Wolfgang Fritz Haug is fully aware of this. Although he shows how the inability to read Marx's writings in the original language generates misinterpretations and misunderstandings, he does not expect future Marxists to learn German. He knows very well that *Das Kapital* in its original language is already dead. All we can do is make and canonize the best possible English translation of the book, following the example set by the translations of the greatest works of classical philosophy: 'It might well be that Marx, for the generations to come, will play a role similar to that of Aristotle, since both laid the groundwork for a new civilizational paradigm.[25]

//148/The comparison to Aristotle is quite telling. It is in fact completely in line with Berman's vision of a post-1989 liberation of Marx, which implies a sort of post-historical sublimation of his thoughts, their ascension from the contingency of historical praxis into a world of eternal cognitive values. But is it in line with these thoughts themselves, with their intentional adherence to this same historical praxis? One who wants a critique of capitalism to be canonized as a civilizational paradigm has, in fact, already admitted the defeat of that critique.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to imagine future generations of Marxist scholars reading and discussing Marx's writings in their ultimate English translations, a sort of critical English edition of his magnum opus made by a team of the best linguistic experts as well as other specialists in philosophy, economy and history. The picture truly evokes the famous 'recovery of Aristotle': the Latin translations of his works made from Greek or Arabic during the Middle Ages. If Aristotle was in fact finally canonized – and at the same time rediscovered – only through the translations of his works into Latin, why should this not be possible for Marx? It might well be that only a canonization of his works in their English translations will recover and

[25] Haug, l.c. 61

preserve them for posterity. The idea sounds quite plausible, but before we enthusiastically welcome it as a definitive solution to the problem of saving and reviving the Marxist critique of capitalism for the generations to come we should ask ourselves one more question: how has it come about that we today, a century and a half after the first publication of *Das Kapital*, look into the future of its ideas from a perspective that is in fact centuries older than the book itself? Could it be that our visions for the twenty-first century rely on an intellectual and sociolinguistic paradigm from the Middle Ages?

Indeed. The German critic of the re-vernacularization of
his language already mentioned explicitly argues that this new//149/ sociolinguistic and cultural condition in which we live today 're-sembles the Europe of the Middle Ages' and that it clearly has a 'neo-medieval' character. If this is really the case, then we cannot ignore the question that the brightest minds of the Middle Ages asked themselves: are the vernaculars spoken outside of their Latin- or Arabic-speaking community of scholars really of no use? Is it possible to think of the sublime ideas of philosophy or to write poetry in the languages of hoi polloi? We know their answer, which is a good reason to repeat their question – looking back into 150 years of the dramatic life of Marx's Das Kapital: is there anything worth remembering from the dozens of its translations into the once proud national languages that, in the meantime, history has rendered vernaculars again?[26]26 Should we really leave to oblivion all the afterlives the book found in these languages, its so many difficult and often painful rebirths in all the various translations? Is there really nothing we can learn from the different linguistic and cultural versions of the book, from the ingenious solutions or, often, embarrassing failures of its translators and the fatal misinterpretations as well as heuristic insights these translations once generated? Let us take just one example, the Serbo-Croatian translation of Das Kapital. It was accomplished at the beginning of the 1930s in jail by a team of imprisoned communists, led by a Jewish painter and art critic sentenced to twenty years for membership of the illegal Communist Party. His main assistant in the common work on the translation was a young member of the terrorist organization 'Red Justice', sentenced for his participation in the assassination of the minister of the interior. Some ten years later the translators, or at least those of them who survived

//150/ the local white terror, Stalin's purges and the Spanish Civil War, were in the Bosnian mountains, commanding a partisan army with whom they soon won the

[26] In the first hundred years of its existence the book was translated into forty-three languages. See 'Der Weg des "Kapitals" – 220 Ausgaben in 43 Sprachen', in Karl Marx. Das Kapital 1867–1967, Special Issue 2, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1967, pp. 86–8

war – to make use of their Marx translations in living social praxis: in failed collectivization and successful industrialization; in the name of Stalin and the Comintern, as well as against them; to suppress bourgeois culture but also to promote modern art and architecture; to build a welfare society based on workers' self-management and at the same time to reintroduce a market economy and integrate it into the financial and political institutions of the emerging transnational capitalism; to arm the people and to promote world peace; to tame national movements as well as to support anticolonial struggles. This story together with many similar ones, hiding a huge historical experience once generated by various translations of Marx's writings, seems to have sunk today into the new vernacular darkness.[27] While it is true that life without Marx, as it has emerged after 1989, has in fact brought back his writings to his readers, it has at the same time deprived them of a wide variety of lives that Marx's writings had once found in the multitude of their translations across the world. At the end, one seems to be left with a single option: to support the international community of Marxist scholars in their search for a perfect English translation of Marx and Engels's works. This, too, is a consequence of the historical turn of 1989.

//151/ *The free and equal individual: a transitional monodrama*

What actually happened in 1989? It seems that there is today almost no disagreement about it: a democratic revolution that, following the ideals of the greatest emancipatory events of world history, liberated East European masses from the yoke of communist totalitarianism. In short, it was all about freedom. After 1989 people who had been previously subjected to various forms of repression, above all by an alienated one-party state and its ideology, were finally free – to speak out in the public sphere, to form political parties and choose their representatives in free elections, to exercise their religious beliefs, to pursue their economic interests or to move wherever they want to. If we are to believe Berman, after 1989 even Karl Marx went through a double liberation: a life freed from Marx

[27] The fact that work on new translations of Das Kapital in other languages has continued – or rather resumed – does not contradict this diagnosis. However philologically improved and historically updated, they share the fate of their languages and the cultures of their respective societies being inexorably swallowed by an even more widespread vernacular darkness. There was recently (2013) a new – the third – translation of Das Kapital published in Slovenian, a language spoken by fewer than 2 million people. Yet, at the same time, what is known worldwide as the 'Slovenian School' of philosophy and cultural theory, including Marxism, does not imply the use of the Slovenian language. The works of its authors are exclusively written in English. And, as far as they refer to Marx, they necessarily rely on English translations of his writings.

has recovered Marx freed for the intellectuals of the world. There are, however, other interpretations of this historical event, told in the languages and histories that have meanwhile descended into an ever-deepening vernacular oblivion, some of which especially highlight the role the intellectuals played in this event. Looking retrospectively at how the so-called democratic revolution in the former communist East actually unfolded, we may broadly differentiate three stages in which the historical change was brought about.[28] The first democratic breakthrough was achieved on the level of what in orthodox Marxism was called the superstructure. The awakening democratic forces, or, to use a typical and until recently widely used metaphor of Western propaganda, 'the freedom-loving people', successfully occupied the sphere of consciousness. In this struggle, fought mostly in the field of culture, intellectuals assumed the leading role. It was their ideas //152/and values that won hegemony over civil society in opposition to and often in open confrontation with the official ideology of the one-party state. However, without having first secured the dominant position in the sphere of civil society, the democratic forces would never have been able to carry on the struggle to the second stage, the seizure of political power, which is generally mistaken for the event itself. Indeed, the dramatic pictures of the popular uprising, of crowds tearing down the Berlin Wall, jingling keys on Wenceslas Square in Prague or storming the Central Committee building in Bucharest, evoked memories of the genuine revolutions of the past that once changed the world's history. Spectacular or not, this was, nevertheless, the moment when the democratic forces, still inspired and often led by prominent intellectuals, appropriated the state and occupied the political sphere of their societies. And while the whole world was still celebrating the final victory of freedom, the new political elite turned the state into its political instrument and immediately used it to change property and production relations. This was the third and final stage of the historical turn of 1989 – the restoration of capitalism. This third phase, which had in fact the historical form of the primitive accumulation of capital – concretely the privatization of the means of production – implied and was facilitated by a massive use of violence, both structural and open. This is generally excluded from the grand narrative of the democratic revolution; not only because it reveals the ugly side of the glorious historical event. There is one more reason why this story remains untold and why in 1989 and its aftermath everybody was talking about democracy yet hardly anyone mentioned capitalism. At stake is an ideological construct that has totalized the whole event: the abstract figure of the so-called free and equal individual. It

[28] Rastko Močnik, Spisi o suvremenom kapitalizmu [Essays on Contemporary Capitalism], trans. Srećko Pulig, Zagreb: Arkzin 2010, p. 263.

originally belonged to the political sphere of bourgeois, capitalist society, yet in the former system of actually //153/existing socialism this figure was banned from the political life of the state. Nevertheless, it reappeared in a place where it essentially does not belong as such, in the sphere of civil society. Recalling the young Marx's critique of the limits of bourgeois political emancipation, inspired by Hegel and epitomized in the concept of the bourgeois Homo duplex, one might say that in the struggle for freedom under the conditions of the oneparty system the abstract political figure of citoyen moved over to the realm of its non-political doppelgänger, the bourgeois. Here, on the stage of civil society, behind the backs of the party-state, the abstract political figure of citoyen performed a sort of monodrama, disguised in the costume of a living fleshand-blood person. It was best personified in the image of an anti-communist dissident heroically fighting for human rights. Finally, when in 1989 the masses in Wenceslas Square chanted to Václav Havel, one of the most prominent of all the Eastern bloc dissidents: Havel na hrad – 'Havel to the Castle', which was traditionally the seat of state power – the drama was over. In the figure of a recovered bourgeois Homo duplex political freedom was finally re-established. Havel, now a statesman, went to the Castle, while Havel, a playwright, a husband, a fan of Velvet Underground, stayed in downtown Prague, among his fellow citizens in the theatres, beer gardens and intellectual salons of the city. Neither, it seemed, had anything to do with the restoration of capitalism. One talked of a 'transition to democracy' instead. But the historical monodrama of the free and equal individual's victorious struggle against communist dictatorship has produced yet another ideological effect. It has made us forget the immanent opposition to the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. At stake is a left critique of what its proponents mostly called 'Stalinism'. Regardless of whether they challenged the dogmas of official Marxism–Leninism or clashed with the party over the repressive practice of their implementation, they never //154/crossed the floor to the other side. The left critics of historical communism were never anti-communists. Rather, they remained at all times within the horizon opened up by the emancipatory promise of Marx's critique of capitalism, sharing its highlights, shortcomings and contradictions, and taking active part in the theoretical disputes and dramatic political conflicts that accompanied the communist movement from its very beginning – for which they often paid dearly. Nevertheless, their critique was truly immanent in the sense that it appeared, time and again, at all levels of the system and all stages of its development without having ever established a unified frontline against the communist cause as such. This also applied to the bourgeois concept of political freedom, or more concretely to individual freedoms and rights. Consistently committed to the progressive legacy of the bourgeois revolutions, the left critics of state socialism defended them often

as vehemently as the anti-communist opposition. This was especially the case when it came to freedom of expression, in whose defence the left frequently called in the support of Marx himself, particularly his early writings on the freedom of the press. In one of these texts the young Marx speaks of freedom through the metaphor of the solar system: 'each of its worlds, while turning on its own axis, revolves only around the central sun of freedom'.[29] Following this metaphor, we might say that the left critics of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were well aware of where the light of political freedom historically comes from – from the figure of the free and equal individual born in the bourgeois revolution – but they never turned //155/ themselves into followers of the sun cult. Rather, they focused on the solar system of freedom as a whole. In fact, many of the left critics of Marxist orthodoxy and its repressive praxis still read Marx in German, which is why they knew nothing of what we call today 'civil society'. Instead, they discussed and dealt with a different concept, the one that Marx borrowed from Hegel and that reads in the German original bürgerliche Gesellschaft, which the better English translations call 'bourgeois society'.[30] This is what is actually meant by Marx's solar system of freedom and its various worlds each turning on its own particular axis of freedom: freedom of trade, of property, of conscience, of the press, and so on. Together they inform this historically new sphere of society that emerged with capitalism and the bourgeois class, a sphere where individuals are torn apart by competing private interests and class inequalities that are generated by the relations of production; divided by their isolated family lives and the different roles they play; separated by their various religious beliefs and the various civil associations they form, and so on. While all these worlds revolve around the abstract figure of the free individual, there are no equal individuals and there is no unity among them within the system itself. However, this is possible in another sphere, that of the state. Here was another figure at home, a purely political being, both free and equal to all others, yet existing only as a mere abstraction totally alienated from the real life of bourgeois society. A historical sublation of this alienation, whose economic roots Marx thoroughly analysed in Capital – and not a recovery of bourgeois political freedoms – was the real challenge for the Marxist left. It never turned its back on the solar system of bourgeois freedom but rather insisted on the expansion of

[29] ‚die Zentralsonne der Freiheit'; in Karl Marx, 'Die Verhandlungen des 6. Rheinischen Landtags rheinischen Landtags. Erster Artikel. Debatten über Preßfreiheit und Publikation der Landständischen Verhandlungen', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Werke, vol. 1, Berlin/GDR: Dietz Verlag, 1978, pp. 69–70. Translated as 'Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. First Article. Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Collected Works, vol. 1, Lawrence & Wishart, e-book, pp. 173–4

[30] Though often it is rather translated as 'civil society', as in the above-mentioned text.

political emancipation into the worlds revolving around its //156/centre, above all into the world of production relations.[31] The left critics of state socialism wanted each of these worlds to emanate the same light as the sun itself. In other words, they wanted both abstract figures of the bourgeois political system – citoyen and bourgeois – to collapse into a free and equal individual of flesh and blood who, liberated equally from exploitation in the sphere of production and from the alienated state, takes responsibility in working collectives as much as it makes decisions in public affairs – in short, who is present throughout the whole sphere of what was once called bourgeois society. This, however, turned out to be just another leftist utopia. Yet the right seems to have been more successful in a similar effort. Human, all too human. As is well known, the historical erosion and final breakdown of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe coincided with the neoliberal transformation of modern capitalism. In this process the abstract figure of the free individual seems also to have played a significant role. As Rastko Močnik argues, the crucial step in the epochal breakthrough made by neoliberalism was precisely 'exporting' this figure from the political sphere of the state, where it originally belonged, into the very core of civil society.[32] This, however, has not been done, as dreamt of and tried by the communist left, to expand political freedom and equality into the entire realm of bourgeois society, including, nota bene, the sphere of production, but rather to impose the relations of capitalist domination upon a space of social life that was traditionally of no interest to the classical bourgeois state. This is why it was spared from its direct control and domination: //157/the space of different lifestyles, world-views, religious beliefs, uses of leisure time, fashion, status, family relations, and so on. It is in this way that the entire sphere of civil society became the ideological apparatus of the capitalist state. This is one of the crucial facts that, as Močnik writes, determines the contemporary epoch: 'Relations deriving from the rule of capital invade a sphere which, according to the ideal model of capitalism, should be "free from" i.e. "indifferent to" it.'[33] However, the problem is that such an ideal model has never been realized in historical praxis. On the one hand, so-called pre-capitalist or non-capitalist forms of production and exploitation have never been an element foreign to the capitalist mode of production, but rather its functional component, which capitalism incorporates and exploits for the production of value. This is especially true in the case of the accumulation of capital, which Rosa Luxemburg explicitly defines as 'a kind of metabolism between capitalist economy and those pre-capitalist methods of

[31] This was precisely the case with the Yugoslav self-management project.
[32] Here I follow the arguments developed by Rastko Močnik in the essay 'Utopizam s onu stranu utopizma' ['Utopianism Beyond Utopianism'], in Spisi o suvremenom kapitalizmu, pp. 260–84.
[33] l.c. 265

production'.[34] On the other hand, and closely connected to this, the relations of exploitation in capitalism cannot be established and reproduced exclusively through economic means. That is to say, the capitalist mode of production structurally relies on the support of ideological apparatuses, such as the legal system and its institutions like ownership rights, or, as mentioned before, the legal figure of the free and equal individual. Using Althusser's parlance, Močnik sums it up in the thesis that, in capitalism, the ideological dominant never fully coincides with the economic determinant. This also applies to the commodity form. While it clearly differentiates the capitalist mode of production from previous ones, it appears in historical reality never as the sole form but //158/merely as a dominant one – that is, always intertwined with other pre- or non-capitalist modes of production. In fact, Marx and Engels believed in the progressive role of the capitalist mode of production, a capitalism that will erase all previous forms of individual and social life, best expressed in the famous lines from the Communist Manifesto:

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.[35]

This vision has been proved wrong. In fact, individuals in capitalism can never face the reality in which they live, and social relations in which they are involved, in their immediacy. It is the fetishistic character of commodity production that prevents this from happening, or, more precisely, makes these individuals experience their mutual relations as relations between things. At stake is the mystery of the commodity form that Marx reveals in the closing section of Capital's first chapter on the commodity: the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of human labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour – as properties of these things – or, in Marx's own words, 'a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things'.[36] The problem is, however, that this fetishistic relation – that is, the reification of social

[34] Rosa Luxemburg, The Accumulation of Capital, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2003, p. 416.
[35] I take this Manifesto quote from Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air, p. 21. The translation is more accurate, since Berman himself slightly altered the standard translation made by Samuel Moore in 1888.
[36] Karl Marx, Capital, Volume 1, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Collected Works, vol. 35, New York: International Publishers, 1996, p. 83.

relations in the commodity form – although predominant in capitalism, has never been able to totalize the entire heterogeneous field of historical praxis.[37]

//159/Thereby it is not just a matter of other pre- or non-capitalist modes of production and the different forms of social relations they imply, but also of the already mentioned displacement of the political fiction of the abstract individual into the originally non-political spheres; that is, the circumstance that under the conditions of neoliberal transformation the abstract figure of a free and equal individual turns into an ideological apparatus of the capitalist state. Močnik explains it in terms of a certain reversal of Marx's formula of commodity fetishism, which, instead of resulting in reification (that is, in the fetishism of things), leads to a sort of humanization of the reified social order with its hierarchies and power relations as they are institutionalized in legal systems. Rewriting Marx, he argues that 'the social relation of subordination and domination assumes, in the eyes of those involved, the fantastic form of a relation between free and equal individuals.'[38] This results in a sort of retro-effect. The social relations of contemporary capitalism are perceived, as in pre-capitalist social formations, as relations of personal dependence, subordination and domination; the social causes of these relations appear masked in the phantasies of personal values, personal excellence or deficiency, personal merits or faults, and so on. Social tensions that necessarily arise from these same relations are ultimately experienced as interpersonal conflicts. In short, Močnik writes, 'The class struggle assumes in the eyes of those involved the fantastic form of personal intrigues.'[39] The more these individuals perceive their social position in terms of their personal biography, or the success or failure of their 'career', //160/and experience their relations to their fellow men and women through competition struggles and mutual exclusions, the more they blindly support and reproduce the structure of capitalist domination. This is, according to Močnik, the mechanism behind the processes that we perceive today, in their existential immediacy, as a re-feudalization of social relations. It comes to light in the entire sphere of civil society, where any element of the individual lifeworld, from lifestyle or entertainment to family relations – elements that were originally of no interest to the state – now might turn into an ideological apparatus of the capitalist state, having huge impact on the political life of society. This is the case,

[37] At least, no more than the class structure of the capitalist mode of production – that is, the class struggle as its historical essence – has been able to produce the effect of social totality. At stake is, of course, Marx's concept of the proletariat as the class of all classes that, in its mere existence, immediately expresses the truth of every class society, and that, in sublating itself in the proletarian revolution, sublates class society as such. See Močnik, Spisi o suvremenom, pp. 266–7.
[38] Ibid., 272
[39] Ibid., 272

for instance, with the phenomena of religious fundamentalism, ethnic nationalism and various excesses of identity politics. It shows itself also in the new governmental technologies: in the concept of corporate ethics, for instance, with its mythology of success and loyalty, omnipresent in today's corporations and large bureaucratic institutions in the fields of economy, finance and governance, where, as Močnik writes, a new noblesse de robe, the contemporary pendant to the famous second estate of the Ancien Régime, is in charge.[40]

In this picture of the future... The Middle Ages may have not been as dark as the common narrative suggests, but today's neoliberal capitalism is about to give them another chance. A quick glimpse of how the ongoing process of re-feudalization might change the world is given to us in a quotation taken from the introduction, written by Leon Trotsky in 1937, to Jack London's famous dystopian novel The Iron Heel:

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> In this picture of the future there remains not a trace of democracy and peaceful progress. Over the mass of the deprived rise the castes of labour aristocracy, of praetorian army, of an all-penetrating police, with the financial oligarchy at the top. In reading it one does not believe his own eyes: it is precisely the picture of fascism, of its economy, of its governmental technique, its political psychology![41]

Is this the world in which posterity will commemorate the second centenary of Karl Marx's Capital? Read in its perfect, ultimately canonized English translation only by a tiny Marxist fraction of the digital Republic of Letters, a new global community of scholars dominated by an even thinner aristocracy, the knights and barons of academic excellence who claim the possession of knowledge, as well as the privileges and influence it brings, as their inherited right, and whose social status is based on the labour of a growing army of cognitive serfs? And where shall these scholars discuss Karl Marx's critique of capitalism? In the castles and forts of the future knowledge societies, the elite global universities, still accessible only to a transnational caste of 'the successful'; in these old baroque institutions, which have survived until today not because they have so smartly adapted to the ever-changing world of new communications technologies, global trade and finance, and rapid growth of neoliberal economies, but rather because the social relations in this new world increasingly resemble those fixed and fast-frozen social formations of the

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[40] Ibid., p. 274.
[41] See www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/ironheel.htm; accessed March 201

pre-revolutionary absolutism in which these institutions were born.[42] Finally, whom will they be addressing – the English-speaking global civil society of Anthony Giddens's 'clever people', who eagerly wait for the elite Marxist pundits to explain to them the mystery of commodity fetishism, the limits //162/of capital accumulation, and why capitalism still cannot survive its contradictions? There is an impression that the circle of those who still read and discuss Karl Marx's Capital is growing today, sometimes expanding into unexpected directions.[43] But this impression is deceptive. In fact, the overall social, historical and cultural ground on which this new interest in Marx occurs is increasingly narrowing. It is shrinking together with the light of the central sun of freedom, the figure of the free and equal individual that has been for the last two centuries illuminating the worlds revolving around it. The more the sun cools down, ever-larger parts of its system are swallowed by the new vernacular darkness. And while here, around the dimming light of an old, tired and ever-weaker freedom, Capital is well preserved, lovingly taken care of and seriously discussed and studied – as is right and proper for such a valuable and long-canonized piece of the world's cultural heritage – there in the darkness people don't give a damn about the book. Rather, they get buried again with their holy Bibles, Qurans or Torahs, with their reconsecrated national myths, or the masterpieces of post-truth trash. But if it is true that they have abandoned Marx, it is even more true that Marx has abandoned them. He no longer talks to them in their new vernaculars – the languages of the decaying post-translational societies that have become slow to catch up with the acceleration of technological development, global trade, finance and politics; that increasingly lose the capacity to convey the complexity of the contemporary world and to critically reflect upon its contradictions, dangers and chances; that have scrapped the ideas of enlightenment – which once raised them into the spheres of //163/secular universality, natural and human sciences, culture, the rule of law and political freedoms – to replace them with the neo-medieval 'values' of servitude, ignorance and superstition; that have sunk into their own ahistorical temporalities, without any relation to a common history, the languages of those who were liberated from Marx only to be left behind by global capitalism. They have accumulated an enormous capacity for political mobilization, but it is today increasingly activated

[42] Slovenian sociologist Jože Vogrinc, in Močnik, 'Utopizam s onu stranu utopizma', p. 273.

[43] 'John Cassidy, the New Yorker magazine's financial correspondent, told us in 1997 that Wall Street itself was full of study groups going through Marx's writings, trying to grasp and synthesize many of the ideas that are central to his work: "globalization, inequality, political corruption, modernization, impoverishment, technological progress ... the enervating nature of modern existence..." He was "the next great thinker" on the Street.' Berman, 'Tearing Away the Veils'.

for the interests of domination and exploitation. It is from this ever broadening and deepening vernacular darkness that contemporary capitalism draws today the ideological energy for its ongoing reproduction. At stake is a metabolism between the neoliberal economy and neo-medieval social relations, a kind of ideological accumulation of the capitalism of our age. Once, the greatest minds of the Late Middle Ages, like Dante, Galileo and Descartes abandoned Latin, the lingua franca of learned Europe, and turned to the vernaculars of hoi polloi, in which the modern era found its expression. Later, even freedom learned to speak in the languages of the sans-culottes and proletarians, in which also Marx's Capital was written and in which it has subsequently been translated. Perhaps the time has come to do it once again – to recover freedom from the heart of the neo-vernacular darkness.