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REVIEW

## Marx after post-narratives: a critical reading of Ronaldo Munck's critical reading of Marx

**Marx 2020: After the Crisis**, by Ronaldo Munck, London, Zed, 2016, 240pp, ISBN: 978-1783608072

Ronaldo Munck (2016) observes at the start of his ambitious new work, *Marx 2020: After the Crisis*, that even mainstream pundits turned to Marx to help understand the Great Recession of 2008–9. In 2013 *Time Magazine* ranked Karl Marx the 14th most influential figure in all of human history. That same year the prestigious science journal *Nature* reported that Marx is, by far, the world's most influential scholar of all time.<sup>1</sup> When those who had banished Marx to the proverbial 'dustbin of history' turn to *Das Kapital* to comprehend the world of the 21st century it behooves us to once again to take stock of his oeuvre and its relevance for the burning issues of our day.

How do we assess Marxism and the practices that have purported to flow from them? This is the task that Munck has set out to accomplish through a critique of the legacy of Marxist thought in relation to its practice in the 19th and 20th centuries and in light of recent political and cultural currents of thought that are critical, in varying degrees, of Marxism. *Marx 2020* is an update to Munck's earlier book, *Marx@2000*, published in 1999 (disclaimer: I did not read this earlier version).

Munck is a prolific scholar and I have been reading his works for three decades now. As I stated (Robinson, 2014b) in a review in the pages of this journal of an earlier book of his, the particular talent that Munck brings to his work, and what makes it so refreshing, is his ability to identify sweeping trends and historical shifts underway and to synthesize a broad range of literatures with his own analytical and theoretical insights. *Marx 2020* is no exception. Written in the lucid and engaging style that we have come to expect from him, it is a timely review of Marxism in theory and practice from an eclectic perspective that leans heavily on Marx and the Marxists yet also draws on a broader body of literature. I highly recommend *Marx 2020* as a must read for those who want to engage in this debate on the potential and the limits of Marxism for today's world.

But precisely because such debate is crucial, and because this is an important book for those who want to take stock of the Marxist legacy at this time when Marx is making a comeback, I want in this review essay to focus on what I see as a critical underlying shortcoming of the study. Munck is remarkably – almost exhaustively – versed in the Marxist literature. He is just as versed in the vast body of literature associated with the post-structural and post-modern critique of Marxism out of which has grown a host of others posts-, among them post-colonialism, post-feminism, post-development, post-capitalism, and so on. I am quite aware of the vastness and diversity of this post-literature that I here I will simply abbreviate as 'Post-Narratives'. Despite their diversity, Post-Narratives share certain premises rooted in the post-structural and post-modern turn of the late 20th century. The key question I pose here is if Munck's embrace of Post-Narratives is compatible with his stated mission to revitalize Marxism.

As a matter of course, there are invaluable insights from Post-Narratives than we must draw on if we are to understand the human condition and the contemporary world. How can we possibly grasp power and hegemony in global society, for instance, without

understanding the discursive and its relationship to the material? But this is precisely the rub. For many Post-Narrative theories discursive power can and does exist outside of material power. The critique of *Marx 2020* that I focus on here is *not* that Munck draws on Post-Narratives. Rather, he seeks to redeem Marxism *on the basis of* Post-Narratives. Are the fundamental epistemological and ontological assumptions of Marxism compatible with those of Post-Narratives? And are the politics that come out of Post-Narratives compatible with the emancipatory socialist politics that Marxists seeks to advance?

On these fundamental matters the two approaches are not compatible; they are in contradiction with one another. I (Robinson, 2004, 2014a) am as critical of orthodox and dogmatic Marxists as they are of my own non-orthodox Marxist theory of global capitalism. We do need the 'rectification' of Marxism that Munck calls for (p. x) but not from the Post-Narrative theories that lie outside of its epistemological core. What makes this critical review of *Marx 2020* most challenging is that throughout the work Munck remains noncommittal and agnostic. He discusses a vast body of literature yet rarely if ever takes a clear position on where he stands with regard to their claims and suppositions.

The book is organized into nine thematic chapters, each of which explores the relationship between Marxism and a particular area: Marxism and history, nature, development, workers, women, culture, nation, religion, and the future. Munck suggests that through an exploration of each of these areas we can identify the weaknesses and limitations of Marxism and the contributions that other, largely Post-Narrative, approaches can make to overcome them. Each chapter is structured in three parts: a presentation of Marx's original formulations, followed by the historical experiences and failures of Marxist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, and then a review of Post-Narrative critiques of Marxism.

### Historical materialism: A deviation from Marxism? No universals?

In the first chapter, 'Marxism and History', Munck writes off historical materialism as a deviation from Marx that Stalinism turned into dogma. At the same time he insists that the European origin of Marxism makes it inherently limited and approves of the Post-Narrative rejection of any universalism. This dismissal of historical materialism seems to be based solely on the fact that Marx himself never used the term 'historical materialism'.

Yet there is no Marxism absent the fundamental premise of historical materialism, at once a method, an epistemology, and an ontology based on the assumption that human existence along with all other life forms is organized in the first instance around survival, and that this survival is based on complex and structured forms of cooperation and cultural creations that we call society.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, contra Post-Narratives the historical evidence demonstrates that there *are* human universals. The quest for survival *is* universal. That this survival involves a social labor process around which social organization is structured *is* universal. States and social classes throughout the world *did* emerge around new forces of production and the surpluses they generated long before capitalism and the rise of Europe. These classes *have* struggled over the surplus for millennia, in the process generating the social dynamics that are the object of inquiry of Marxist historiography and social science. The basic Marxist categories of analysis – classes and class struggle, surpluses, exploitation, forces and relations of production, and so on – *are* universally applicable.

In his attempt to synthesize Marxist and Post-Narratives Munck asserts that materialism and idealism are compatible. It is one thing to say that structure and agency (or subject and object) are mutually constitutive, and that ideas shape the material world as much as the material world shapes ideas. But it is quite another to give *independent and a priori existence* to ideas and an *existential priority* over the material world to them, for this is *the very essence of idealism*. According to Munck, 'Marx's critical method points [not toward historical materialism but]

instead towards all the radical trends in epistemology, from feminism to deconstruction' (p. 6). But I believe these fundamental tenets of historical materialism *are* the core of Marxist epistemology. Beyond analytical and conceptual spaces in which Post-Narratives may well be compatible with Marxism, there is a fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between the two epistemologies and ontologies.

There is a double conflation in *Marx 2020*. On the one hand, Munck conflates historical materialism with the particular application that Marx undertook of historical materialism as method to the reality of his time and as he saw it. On the other, he conflates Marxism as an epistemology and ontology of human society with how it was applied and practiced in its particular history by Marxists or in the name of Marxism.

If the fundamental premises of historical materialism and human universals have appeared in Marxism as dogmatic or Eurocentric, let us fault the Marxists who applied them in their intellectual and political practices. Marx and Engels were without doubt Eurocentric, as were many European Marxists. Marxists can and have critiqued the Eurocentrism of classical Marxism; we do not need to draw for such critique on Post-Narratives that, based on this critique, dismiss Marxism and historical materialism *tout court*.

Remarkably, Munck ignores the Third World Marxists – their theoretical contributions, their application of historical materialism to histories and realities distinct from Europe, and their legacies of praxis – from Che Guevara and Jose Mariátegui (with the exception of two paragraphs on Mariátegui in the chapter on 'Marxism and Religion') from Latin America, C.L.R. James from the Caribbean, Amílcar Cabral from Africa, and Mao Zedong from China and Kamekichi Takahashi from Japan (this latter, although not from a Third World country, was decidedly non-Western in his Marxism), among many others. Beyond these Third World Marxist revolutionaries, I have lost track of just how many academic works I myself have read by Marxists who critique and move us beyond Eurocentrism.<sup>3</sup>

It is not to the theory and practice of Marxists from the Third World that Munck turns to in order to critique Eurocentrism but to the body of Post-Narrative approaches that reject Marxism and historical materialism as 'grand narrative', 'class reductionism', and 'economism', and instead posit a universe of particulars and the celebration of 'differences' along the lines of Mouffe and Laclau (1985) (whose arguments Munck discusses with no evident disagreement) with no underlying principle of human social existence. On such a basis it is indeed impossible to identify any collective subject capable of social transformation, as I will discuss below.

Munck turns in each chapter to Post-Narrative approaches to address the limitations of classical Marxism rather than to cutting-edge Marxist literature on these limitations. In 'Marxism and Nature', he turns to the Post-Narrative ecofeminism rather than to the burgeoning Marxist literature on ecosocialism. In 'Marxism and Development' he relies heavily on the post-modern discursive critique of development as put forth most notably by Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar, for whom development as discourse is a mechanism not of global capitalist exploitation but of Western domination (see, for example, Escobar 1994). 'When we combine post-modernism with post-colonial politics', says Munck, 'we have a very powerful discursive movement seeking to decenter and destabilize the ontological security of the West'. Yet in his brilliant study *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, Vivek Chibber (2013) has put forward a devastating critique of post-colonial theory that lays to rest the notion that the colonial subject is essentially 'different' than the Western subject in a way that would belie the Marxist critique of capitalism.

### Marxism, class, and post-narratives

In the chapter on 'Marxism and Workers' Munck misreads, in my view, the Marxist notion of the proletariat as a universal class. He observes, quite correctly, that 20th-century Third World

revolutions were largely peasant based, and that the old industrial working class in the capitalist core has become fragmented. But Marx does not posit the proletariat as the universal class because it is necessarily the most numerical class or the most visible element of historical struggles. Rather, the proletariat can only emancipate itself through anti-capitalist (socialist) revolution. The character and composition of working classes are constantly being reconfigured, in the Marxist approach, by the dynamics of capitalist development and shifting social identities and forms of organization. It is not the Post-Narrative claims to the 'end of class' that provides the most brilliant analyses of the profound restructuring of the global class structure and new forms of postindustrial labor exploitation but such Marxist works as David Harvey's (1990) *The Condition of Post-Modernity*.<sup>4</sup>

Munck observes that the industrial working class of the BRICS countries now number hundreds of millions that are leading militant struggles, and that the global working class increased from 1.7 billion in 1980 to 2.9 billion in 2010 (p. 210). Yet the global working class is hardly limited to industrial workers. There are hundreds of millions, if not billions of agricultural and service workers, including those who scratch by a living in informal sectors. In his 2002 book, *Globalization and Labor*, Munck noted, 'It is an apparent paradox of the era of globalization that while the labor movement has never been weaker, workers have never been more important to capitalism' (Munck 2002, 111).<sup>5</sup> This is critical because Post-Narratives that Munck suggests can enrich Marxism is disposed to dismiss class analysis as 'class reductionism/essentialism' and 'economism'.

Curiously, in reviewing traditional Marxist analyses of the proletariat Munck does not discuss Lenin's theory of the First World labor aristocracy, which is critical to the split of the global working class into relatively more privileged First World and less privileged Third World workers, as the tendency toward polarization became offset in the core and displaced to the periphery. The British financier and colonialist Cecil Rhodes famously declared in the 1890s that European countries had to become imperialist in order create a labor aristocracy at home so as to prevent revolution. Capitalist globalization may now be resulting in a downward leveling of the global working class.

These processes – the rise of a First World labor aristocracy that lost its revolutionary character, the current decline of that aristocracy, the global restructuring of work and labor, and so on – do not indicate a failure of Marxism insofar as Marxism itself is able to explain them. Theory is historical and history is contingent and not predetermined. That certain historical expectations expressed by Marx and Marxists did not come to fruition does not necessarily invalidate Marxism. Collective agency constantly shapes and reshapes structures, which themselves are momentary historical ossifications of such agency, so all social theory is historical and must keep apace the dynamics of change. The rise of a labor aristocracy was the result of European workers' struggles along with the ability that European states and capitalists had to tame these struggles by colonialism and imperialism. Is it not possible that the industrial working class' revolutionary uprising in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere in 1917–1923 *could have been successful?*

The chapter on 'Marxism and Women' is utterly confusing. Munck faults Engels, in his famous work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, for *not* seeing capitalism and patriarchy as distinct systems yet a few pages later he faults socialist-feminism for just such a dualism. Further on he states, 'Engels bequeathed to the modern socialist feminists ... a view of capitalism and patriarchy, or class and gender, as autonomous systems' (p. 109). While he seems to criticize Engels for linking women's subordination to the rise of class, the actual anthropological record is quite clear that men and women lived in conditions of relative equality until the Neolithic revolution between 10,000 and 4,000 years ago that produced a surplus and the first class societies (see Coontz and Henderson 1986; Burke-Leacock 1981).

Patriarchy and capitalism are indeed seen as independent systems in socialist-feminist theory. Munck does critique this dualism yet conflates socialist feminism with Marxist feminism, which posits no such dualism and rather seeks to critique the shortsightedness of classical Marxism and explain the oppression of women from within the epistemological core of Marxism. The most insightful feminist works that I have read on production and social reproduction, on the origins of inequality in sociohistorical events and processes, and on capitalism and the oppression of women have in my view come from Marxist-feminists such as Silvia Federici (see, for instance, her brilliant *Caliban and the Witch* (Federici 2004)).

The 'race, class, gender' triad and 'intersectional theory', and its currently popular spin-off, 'privilege theory' (see, e.g. Chhonara and Prasad 2014) are based on Post-Narrative notions of autonomous 'systems of oppression'. These theories are now hegemonic in the academic study of racial and gender inequality and have shaped the common sense understanding of these oppressions. Class in this triad is at best reduced to the institutional category of labor, categorical rather than relational, based on one's standing in the labor market. More often than not, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, North-South, and other sets of relations are not theorized in relation to class but *in place of* class. Intersectionality posits 'race', gender, and class as independent systems that intersect externally. 'We have a thriving theory industry which ruptures the integrity of the social and joyously valorizes "fragments"', notes Marxist feminist Himani Bannerji (2015), 'preferring to posit a non-relational inchoateness or to add them whenever necessary'.

For Marxism the universe is an *open totality* based on internal relations. An *internal relation* is one in which each part is constituted in its relation to the other, so that one cannot exist without the other and only has meaning when seen within the relation. Hence, 'race', class, and gender relations are *analytically distinct* and are *constitutive of each other* within a larger system of social relations nested in an open totality. By totality I mean that everything is internally connected to everything else and internally related; there is nothing outside of the totality of these relations. The universe is constituted not by things but by relations. In this approach, 'race' and gender do not have an independent status. 'Race', class, and gender form an internally related nexus grounded in the basic ordering principles of the relations of production and of social reproduction.

In contrast, Post-Narratives see in 'race', class, and gender independent systems that intersect externally. But giving 'independent' status to these categories implies an *external relation* among independent structures, in which each part has an existence independent of its relation to the other. By epistemological fiat Post-Narratives reject a totality, which is dismissed a priori as an oppressive and 'totalizing' 'grand narrative' that would 'reduce "race" and gender to class'. In the same vein, Post-Narratives prohibit us by epistemological fiat from theorizing any underlying ordering principles, that is, historical or structural determinations that in the first place give rise to class formation, racialization and engendering, and that could give some underlying conceptual unity to the 'race', class, and gender triad.

### Post-narratives and the betrayal of the intellectuals

Is this all just arcane academic debate with no relevance to the burning political struggles of our time?

With the apparent triumph of global capitalism in the 1990s following the collapse of the old Soviet bloc, the defeat of Third World nationalist and revolutionary projects, and the withdrawal of the Left into post-modern identity politics and other forms of accommodation with the prevailing social order, many intellectuals who previously identified with anti-capitalist movements and emancipatory projects seemed to cede a certain *defeatism* before

global capitalism. The decline of the Left and socialist movements worldwide, a result, among other factors, of the chronic gap between theory and practice, thought and action, led to a degeneration of intellectual criticism as well. An embrace of the 'End of History' thesis was the end not of history but of critical thought. It was out of this defeatism that Post-Narratives bloomed. All narratives were now equally valid. Marxism was a 'Eurocentric/Western-centric ideology'.

Indeed, Munck observes that in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 'there did not appear to be a single theoretical strand worth saving, an ethical stance worth defending, nor any point in articulating a Marxist understanding of the world' (p. 194). Yet a living, breathing Marxism never thought any less of itself because of failed Marxist practices.

Post-Narratives came to play the theoretical counterpart to identity politics. All forms of 'resistance' to *oppression* were now celebrated but *exploitation* was banished from the popular vocabulary. Any understanding of *exploitation* requires the tools of Marxist political economy yet this was maligned a 'class reductionism', 'metanarrative' of (white, male) Westerners, and 'economism' so that any underlying structural causes of oppression could not be identified. In rhetoric Post-Narratives denounces capitalism (in the abstract, with no concrete analysis, and as 'just another' among the multiplicity of oppressive systems) but in the practice the best identity politics can aspire to is symbolic vindication, diversity (often meaning diversity in the ruling bloc), non-discrimination in the dominant social and political institutions and equitable inclusion and representation *within* global capitalism.

*Marx 2020* is less a Marxist critique of traditional Marxism than an 'unhappy marriage' of two incompatible epistemological systems, Marxism and Post-Narratives. These Post-Narratives alienated a whole generation of young people in the late 20th and early 21st centuries from embracing a desperately needed Marxist critique of capitalism at the moment of its globalization. The Post-Narrative rejection of political economy as a 'totalizing narrative' and an 'oppressive discourse' deprived us precisely of the tools to understand and confront global capitalism. At a time when vital rebellion is breaking out everywhere yet cannot move beyond the multiplicity of fragmented struggles, spontaneity, aversion to theory, and the dead end of identity politics, we need to critique more than ever the Post-Narrative critics of Marxism.

In curious contrast with the tone of the rest of the book, in the final chapter, 'Marxism and the Future', Munck validates Marx, political economy, and class relations. In this chapter he quotes Marx approvingly with regard to the proletariat: 'It is not a question of what this or that proletariat, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what according to this being it will historically be compelled to do' (p. 208). And he observes that to date the diverse currents involved in worldwide popular rebellion against the ravages of global capitalism, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, 'have not been unified and have not engaged with more traditional labor movements or the revolt by the "wretched of the earth"' (p. 211). As this critical review of *Marx 2020* has tried to argue, the Post-Narrative epistemological and ontological system would make any such unity and engagement difficult. The renewal of Marxism that Munck calls for requires not a marriage but a break with the underlying postulates of Post-Narrative theories.

## Notes

1. For *Time's* ranking, see the Time website report, accessed on 21 August 2017 at: <http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/10/whos-biggest-the-100-most-significant-figures-in-history/>. Jesus was ranked in first place, and curiously, Muhammad came in third, after Napoleon. In relation to the ranking of 35,000 high-profile scholars, see *The Smithsonian* online, at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/karl-marx-is-the-worlds-most-influential-scholar-180947581/>,

accessed on 21 August 2017. Marx scored 22 times higher than the nearest historian and 11 times higher than the nearest economist.

2. Let us recall that for Laclau and Mouffe 'society' is not a valid object of discourse, as Munck notes (approvingly? ... it is not clear).
3. One such early work that had an influence on my own critique of Eurocentrism is Wolf (1982).
4. Munck makes reference to Manuel Castells (1996), who also discussed the restructuring of work and class in his trilogy the *Network Society*. But Castells focuses on the core regions of world capitalism in this discussion.
5. He (Munck 2002, 185) goes on to observe that globalization 'is a process based less on the proliferation of computers than on the proliferation of proletarians'.

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