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# An Indigenous, Black, Feminist, Worker, Peasant, Gypsy, Palestinian, Trans Marx. A Savage Marx.

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The Brazilian, even the atheist Brazilian, is a man of faith. I know several Marxists that are also macumberos. A people that can reconcile Marx with Eshú will always be safe, and I repeat, automatically safe.

(Nelson Rodrigues)

## **Marx-Struggle**

2018 marked the bicentenary of Marx. There is an obsession nowadays with announcing the end of Marx (and Marxism). In a phrase that would be oft-repeated throughout history, the liberal Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce declared in 1907 that Marx was dead to all humanity. Hardly had thirty years passed since his death and the dominant classes were scrambling to exorcise the “spectre” heralded by Marx and Friedrich Engels: the spectre of revolution. Today, in 2018, we too are commemorating the hundred years since the German Revolution (long live Rosa!), fifty years since the 1968

“global revolution”, and five years since the Brazilian June [the Free Fare Movement, a popular revolt that reached its peak in São Paulo in 2013]. In what way do these explosions remain alive among us today? Many have attempted to belittle these events, claiming that they belong to the past and did not change anything, that they were defeated. However, attempts to downplay their importance are rooted in fear.

To revive Bertolt Brecht without also criticizing him, Heiner Müller used to say, would be to betray him. Our purpose here is to introduce Marx into spaces, times, outlooks and practices different from the habitual ones, to investigate his affinities, tensions, confluences, and dialogues-struggles with a particular set of Amerindian cosmologies: the Indigenous America that lies beneath Latin America –beneath it, and part of it–, that precedes it in time and exceeds it in space.

A glimpse of an “other Marx”: how will his thought be transformed when confronted with these other lives-struggles? Following the words of Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade, this will be a Marxism “opposed to the copy, on the side of invention and surprise. A new perspective”. As artist and thinker Rogério Duarte reminds us: “We know that the Marxist movement was tropicalista and in its beginnings it embraced all the avant-gardes: constructivism, surrealism, Dadaism, cubism, the left embraced them all alike”. This then will be a materialist dialogue, one born of struggle, like those indigenous mobilizations of which Marx had read, fascinated, in Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society*.

Which Marx are we invoking here? The internationalist militant. The resourceful investigator. The passionate researcher whose preferred motto was doubt everything [De omnibus dubitandum] and who, approaching sixty years of age, could dedicate himself to the study of Russian in order to better understand as specific a question as agrarian property, which would prove so important in the third volume of *Capital*. The refugee, born to a family of rabbis (on both the mother’s and fathers’ side), inhabiting the frontiers between nations and religions, always searching to understand the latest fluctuations of a dynamic reality and drawing on the collective messiah of communism; driven by an active knowledge, following in a powerful lineage of non-Jewish Jews: Spinoza/ Heine/Rosa Luxemburg/Trotsky/Freud.

For two reasons, Marx left behind an unfinished body of work: one, because a series of material difficulties had prevented him from finishing the better part of his books (along with his companion Jenny, they suffered the unimaginable pain of having to bury four children and a grandson), and moreover, the ambitious nature of his works was such that they were ultimately interminable. On the other hand, those unfinished works were in a sense constitutive of the link between theory and struggle. The power, specificity and transformative capacity of Marx's thought arose from its being in permanent contact with diverse struggles. His shifts follow the political creativity of multiple actors: in anticolonial mobilizations (Ireland, India or Mexico), the Russian rural communes (where the communist potential calls into question evolutionism), the political organization of the Iroquois (and its liberating drive); through all these encounters we can observe Marx shedding his Eurocentric trappings. Just as powerful were the events of 1848 and 1871, and his successive periods of exile. Marx, then, is the thinker of struggle. His is a form of thought-struggle. Failing to grasp Marx from this angle, his subversive character and methodology are annulled.

Marxism –to think with Marx our current dilemmas– is not a given but something in motion, similar to how Marx and Engels defined communism: the real movement that tends to abolish the present state of things. Marxism thus maintains a potent connection with the volatility of new forms of knowledge, new techniques, and new political conjunctures. The author of *Capital* drew a contrast between, on the one hand, external knowledge and critique (be it rationalist or utopian), and an imminent critique of the present. Dissatisfied with the philosophers' inability to understand praxis, Marx proposed an inversion of theory and practice that questioned philosophy's self-granted autonomy and transcendence. So it was, he set himself the task of elaborating a theory that was connected to the critical practices and revolutionary actions of the French, English and German workers.

And now, what can it mean today to think and struggle with Marx? To conduct research, to understand, to fight, to do science based on (and alongside) struggles and forms of disobedience, without relying on the stability of power and bourgeois science?

## Out of the Wreckage

The Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, arguably Latin America's leading Marxist, wrote the following in his article "Man and Myth":

Myth is that which most clearly and plainly differentiates the bourgeoisie from the proletariat in this epoch. The bourgeoisie no longer has a myth. It has turned incredulous, sceptical, nihilist. [...]The proletariat has a myth: the social revolution. It moves toward that myth with a fervent, active faith. The bourgeoisie negates; the proletariat affirms. Bourgeois intelligence occupies itself with the rationalist critique of the revolutionaries' method, their theory and technique. What great incomprehension! The power of the revolutionaries lies not in their science; it is in their faith, their passion, their will. It is a religious, a mystical, a spiritual power. The power of Myth. Revolutionary emotion.

In the mid-19th century there were five principal actors in international (European) relations: Prussia, England, France, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As Marx pointed out, all five of these were obsessed with a "sixth power" threatening Europe: the movement, the spectre, revolution, communism. We can now say that this idea, the momentum and faith in the profound transformation of existing social relations, managed to expand and permeate a considerable part of humanity, giving way to important conquests: social, political, cultural, and economic rights, the defeat of Nazi-fascism, and so on. However, these victories brought their own set of tragedies, as none of the left's three main political strategies (social democracy, so-called "real socialism", national liberation) could fulfil the dreams on which they were inspired.

But this did not only affect the left. We are living through a period where the diverse "ends of the world" tend to overlap and our hopes have failed to materialize. Few still believe that capitalism can coexist with representative democracy, the welfare state and equal opportunities. The eclipse of "capitalism with a human face" is connected to another fundamental issue: "from 1750 to the present, modern rights and liberties were expanded through the use of fossil fuels. Our liberties are thus concentrated around energy". For centuries there was a powerful consensus that Earth's natural processes

were so strong that no human action could truly transform them. But we have managed it. We did so by destroying forests and burning fossil fuels, turning ourselves into geological agents: our era is the Anthropocene. Or better still, our mode of production has become a geological agent: our era is the Capitalocene.

As Marx said in the Communist Manifesto –albeit in a different context–, our present situation recalls the image of a sorcerer who has lost control of his own spell. Thinking with Marx today defies us to work within our surroundings, amidst the wreckage and ruins that threaten our very lives. The indigenous peoples are all too familiar with this sensation, the “end of the world”, being specialists on the topic since the end of the 15th century. For that same reason it is worth consulting with these other scientists, the indigenous, and begin to consider their findings. Doing so will oblige us to separate ourselves from the rationalist outlook that divides between those who know (“us”) and those who believe (“them”). To learn from collective, situated and embodied knowledge. As Donna Haraway suggests, only a partial perspective gives us the objective viewpoint, hence the central importance of localized politics. To revive Marxism (and Marx) will mean to repopulate it with determinate peoples, thus enriching the meaning of words like “world”, “politics”, “nature”, “humanity”, “relations” and “culture.”

What Marx will emerge from his encounter with the Yanomami resistance?

### The People of Merchandise

Officially established in 1992, the struggle for the demarcation of the Yanomami land is bound up with the environmentalist discourse of forest protection. The term *urihi* – Yanomami land– has a juridical dimension in the sense that it guarantees that demarcation, and it has a separate environmentalist meaning that involves the protection of the forest. This struggle is inextricably bound up with a metaphysical perspective (the forest is seen as a living thing inhabited by spirits) that includes a mesh of social coordinates and cosmological exchanges that guarantee the struggle’s very existence. Nature is not inert; quite the contrary, “the forest is what animates us”. In that sense, nature as an isolated domain exterior to humanity does not exist: humans

and non-humans interact and form collectives. The Yanomami, like the Amerindian peoples in general, reject the nature-culture dualism and instead think in terms of subjectivities and “social relations” (communication, barter, aggression, seduction) that make everything “ontologically associated and distributed within a single economy of metamorphosis”.

Davi Kopenawa speaks of two antagonistic forms of life: one linked to a shamanic vision that perceives the forest’s essential image (utupë), its breath (wixia) and its fertility principle, and a second –that of the whites– which is limited to a form of thought “rooted in merchandise”. Kopenawa’s cosmopolitics (where “politics’ and “nature” are indivisible) therefore seeks to denounce the ignorant thought-practice of the “earth eaters”, the white cannibals with their thirst for riches and commodities. In the Yanomami tradition it is the shamanic spirits, guardians of the forest, that guide the individual, and their thoughts are fixed not in words but in the forest itself.

Kopenawa distinguishes between a white knowledge associated with commodities [merchandise] and a Yanomami knowledge. White people say: “We are the cleverest! We are the people of merchandise! We shall be ever more numerous without ever suffering hardships!” And thus is born the expansionary drive: “Their thought was filled with smoke and invaded by night. It closed itself to other things. It was with these words of merchandise that the white people started cutting all the trees, mistreating the land, and soiling the watercourses”. They are clever, but ignorant of the forest. They “draw their words” in “paper skins” (books). “White people’s elders drew what they call their laws on paper skins, but to them they are only lies! They only pay attention to the words of merchandise!” These words recall Marx’s critique of the philosophy of right (law), a critique of the constitution of private property insofar as the “first birthright of capital is equal exploitation of labour-power by all capitalists”. For Kopenawa, “the people of merchandise” is just this, and so it is “they destroyed their forest and soiled their rivers [...] and it was then they lost all wisdom. First they destroyed their own land, then they went to work on the land of others so as to endlessly add to their merchandise”.

According to Kopenawa's conception of capitalism, modes of producing and thinking are bound together: "the whites never think about the things that shamans know, and so they have no fear. Their thought is filled with forgetfulness. They insist on putting all their thought into merchandise". With the white people, human predatory powers reach a point of excess that is reinforced by the pursuit of gold. Similar images appear in Marx's *Capital* when he asserts that capital is "dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks". Capital displays a "vampire thirst for the living blood of labour. To appropriate labour during all the 24 hours of the day is, therefore, the inherent tendency of capitalist production".

Kopenawa's critique is related to the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism. On first glance, Marx says in volume I of *Capital*, the commodity appears to be an obvious enough thing, trivial even, but analysing it more closely we see that it is "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties". Taken as use-value, the mystery goes unnoticed, and the only thing one perceives is its nature as the fruit of labour or something to satisfy human needs. However, Marx continues, hardly does the commodity character come into focus and the thing becomes "sensible supersensible".

That mystery is based in the fact that the commodity reveals to human beings the social character of their labour "as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things", providing them with an image of the social relation mediating between producers and labour as a social relation between objects, separate from producers ("Through this quid pro quo the products of labour become commodities and natural supernatural or social things"). Marx relates this back to the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world", where human products also appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own. He proposes the name fetishism for the phenomenon in which human products enter the world market, a fetishism of the products of labour, i.e. commodities.

Value converts "every product into a social hieroglyphic". This is a social relation of production, no matter if it presents itself in the guise of "natural objects with strange social properties". Marx tries to adopt the commodity's point of view: "Could

commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it."

Exchange is decisive, since it is there the value of the products of labour are consummated. Marx appeals to the language of theatre to describe the appearance of commodities as a stage entrance. As Jacques Derrida would say: "The autonomy lent to commodities corresponds to an anthropomorphic projection. The latter inspires the commodities, it breathes the spirit into them, a human spirit, the spirit of a speech and the spirit of a will." Capitalism as the production of phantasms, illusions, simulacra, apparitions. Marx appeals to a whole spectral vocabulary –the word spectre already appeared three times in the first paragraphs of the Manifesto –and he describes money "in the figure of appearance or simulacrum, more exactly of the ghost". In Capital, the printing of money by the state is seen as "magic of money", the state appears as an apparition and exchange-value as "a hallucination, a properly spectral apparition". Derrida reads The German Ideology as the greatest phantasmagoria in the history of philosophy.

### **Bewitched Capitalism (Breaking the Spell)**

According to Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, modern concepts fail to capture the true nature of capitalism, since "modernity has imprisoned us in categories that are much too poor, oriented as they are around knowledge, error and illusion". How then can subjection be combined with liberty? For Pignarre and Stengers, the capacity to do so "is something whose frightening power and the need to cultivate appropriate means of protection against is known by the most diverse of peoples, except us moderns. Its name is sorcery." Capitalism is configured to be a magical system without sorcerers, operating "in a world which judges that sorcery is only a simple 'belief', a superstition that therefore doesn't necessitate any adequate means of protection"; a world with a careful division between those who believe (barbarians, savages) and those who know (moderns). However, to think that protection is unnecessary is "the most frightening naivety". Classic colonialism may no longer exist, but coloniality is just as present as ever.



In Marx's approach to capitalism, the world is "bewitched"; the "sorcerer hypothesis" may seem less strange if we consider that Marx's objective was to demonstrate the falsity of bourgeois categories, veiled as they were by abstractions, consensus, free opinion, a world supposedly without slavery where workers are free to sell their labour power, which is remunerated according to a (fair) market price. A system that in actual fact involves the opposite: less "a pseudo-contract - that of your time at work against your salary - but of a capture 'body and soul'". Marx's critique questions the categories that are taken for normal and rational, like his repudiation of capitalist abstractions, all of them fictions that "bewitch thought". A critique and practice inspired by Marx's example will thus lead to a "diagnosis of what paralyzes and poisons thinking and renders us vulnerable to capture". Capitalism turns out to be a master illusionist, and Marx's objective becomes then to make explicit its processes and to show us how to combat it. If capitalism is a bewitched system, the struggle against it can be seen as a counter-spell, a fight to break the spell.

That being said, how to imagine such a process of "spell-unbinding" (a process of both struggle and thought)? By taking critique as a movement towards thinking and feeling differently, by refusing normality as a weapon against the sorcerer's advances. Evidently, Marx did not believe in spells, but the categories he proposed proved decisive in the disenchantment of the capitalist armoury and its production of consensus - his categories remain "a protection against the operation of capitalist capture". As the key instrument, struggle - "the subject of historical cognition is the battling, oppressed class itself", wrote Walter Benjamin in his *On the Concept of History* - creates new relations, new dimensions, opens spaces, tackles new issues (some of which were hitherto prohibited), forges instruments and angles from which they may be applied. That is, revolution is spell-unbinding. And in order to implement it, to ritualize it, to resist and protect it, the first step is to learn from cosmopolitical struggle. Kopenawa offers a powerful cosmopolitical critique of the people of merchandise: after consuming yākoāna and entering into a visionary trance, the shamans are capable of making the acquired xapiripë image-spirits descend and dance, to maintain the flow of life alongside the spirits of the forest (images of the trees, the leaves, the bejuco, but also the fish, the bees, the turtles, in sum, the population of that space).

“We can no longer continue to operate along the basis of a colourless critique, one that isn’t also heavy with the flavours of life”, says Toni Negri. Historically speaking, Marx and Marxism baptized the revolutionary subject as the industrial worker (male, white, European). As subject, this proletariat showed considerable strength, but that perspective was highly limited and passed over a number of rich struggles. It ignored the nexus between capitalism and patriarchy (capitalism’s beginnings in witch hunts and through its control over the female body), or between capitalism and slavery, or capitalism and racism (the constitutive relations between race and class). It thus never took seriously the possibility that resistance to capitalism would assume multiple subjects (peasants, women, blacks, the colonized, LGBTQI and others), each one insubordinate in its way against the destruction and appropriation of life forms and collective intelligence that came with capitalist expansion: powers of life against the forces of death.

For Marx, class is not an abstraction but rather a concrete collectivity that comes into existence through the movement of struggle. It is constituted through struggle. Class itself asserts the question of different struggles (and the struggles for difference). Each epoch experiences the possibility of liberating its own as well as its others. In that sense, Benjamin thought of the role of the proletariat as “the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden”. Marxism has tended to be guided by a determinate universal (class), but we can counter that tendency with the common, built from below out of our shared vulnerabilities and precarities. For the Brazilian context, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has this to say:

If you look at the ethnic and cultural composition of Brazilian poverty you will see who is poor. Basically, Indians and blacks. And when I say Indians I include Africans. Also, I include the hapless immigrant. They are all a mixture: Indian, black, poor immigrant, free Brazilian, caboclo [of mixed indigenous-European ancestry], mestizo, the son of the boss’ housemaid, the son of his slave. The cultural unconscious of all poor Brazilians is largely Indian.

Like the Algerian psychiatrist and militant Frantz Fanon used to say, “[i]n the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue.” In a different context, albeit presenting Marxism with a similar challenge, Marisol de la Cadena has shown the lack of understanding between Mariátegui and the indigenous peoples: while Mariátegui considered the ayllu [the traditional communities at the base of the Incan social pyramid] a fundamental element, he regarded them more as a territory (which for him represented the foundation of “Incan communism”), whereas, according to the indigenous vision, the ayllu are indivisible from non-human agents, the earth is inseparable from larger sociocosmological coordinates, as we saw in the words of Kopenawa.

### **A Vital Marx**

In his previously cited article, Mariátegui also states “professionals of Intelligence will never find the path of faith; the masses will. Later, it will fall to the philosophers to codify the thought that emerges from the feats of the masses”. If once it was the insuperable horizon of our time, some part of Marxism’s present weakness is due to its domestication. Paradoxically, part of the movements and their Marxist elaborations placed their faith in the bourgeoisie, in its science and knowledge production, as well as that conception of an external nature and its idea of a pristine universal subject. Rather than thinking of class struggle by starting with the witches, they opted to embrace the witch hunters... And so the spectre was domesticated, bringing with it an enormous loss in revolutionary potential.

A living Marxism must be open to contamination and the materiality of struggles (as well as other materialisms). Curious to note, in his *Ethnological Notebooks*, Marx transcribed in great detail the ceremonies and council rituals of the Iroquois. Let us imagine Marx in the forest taking yākoāna, connecting with ancestral healing wisdom. Something that would be much more relevant in a capitalist universe like ours, where people are made to suffer (amidst an epidemic of depression and other contemporary illnesses) along with the planet. Struggles heal, especially cosmopolitical struggles. Let

us imagine Marx in a terreiro de candomblé [Afro-Brazilian religious ceremony]. In the epigraph to this text, the conservative writer and dramaturge Nelson Rodrigues satirizes the idea that there could exist such ties between macumba and Marxism, but I think his joke should be taken seriously. Marx and Eshú, the Yoruba god. A Marx undomesticated, fuel for struggles. A black, feminist, indigenous, worker, peasant, transgender Marx. A savage Marx.

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