

Ruccio Group

David: I am David Ruccio and I am the current Editor of the journal, *Rethinking Marxism*. I have the pleasure of having two of my friends and colleagues, here at the table, to have a discussion today about *Rethinking Marxism*, Antonio Callari, a dear friend from graduate school, and Antonio is currently a Professor of Economics at Franklin and Marshall College. Rick Wolff is a current member of the Editorial Board of '*Rethinking Marxism*,' the Editor of the remark section and a Professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Both of you have long been associated with the journal, so I wanted to start by asking you a question.

We just came out of a session, in which there were a 150 people or so at the Left Forum 2008. I think all of us were a bit surprised by the large numbers and by, what seemed to be, the wrapped attention of all of those who were there.

I want to ask you if you thought it was a surprise and, especially, when we think back 20 years, if anything strikes you as, where we have come from, given our initial ideas.

Rick: I'll start. I think the attendance and your 150 is actually conservative, since I know how many chairs are in there. I think it is a remarkable testimony that, after 20 years, during which I don't think it's an exaggeration to say, Marxism has been dismissed from the attention of many academics, who used to take it seriously. It has been in more or less decline in many parts of the world. It is a remarkable testimony that this kind of an audience would gather to both honour and show this kind of interest in a journal of Marxism.

So I was surprised by the attendance and what I thought I might talk about, briefly, here, to see whether it would be of interest to others, is what it might be a testimony to and the best I can come up with, and I've been thinking about it for the last two or three hours, is this.

That Marxism has had its ups and downs in the past and that we might have lost sight of that, that in a period when capitalism for a while would be resurgent, at a period of time when the Labour Movement is the opposite of resurgent; it isn't so surprising that Marxism goes through a period of down-time, let's call it, and that we shouldn't have misunderstood that, as I think I did. We should have seen it for the temporary phenomena that it was. It was no more permanent that Marxism was going to decline than it was permanent that capitalism would be forever resurgent, nor is it a coincidence that over the last six months, as the capitalist system here, in the United States, encounters what is now, already, its most serious challenge since the great depression, that this should coincide with the return of interest in understanding capitalism, in being critical and going beyond a capitalism that can produce the kind of problems it's now producing. So I think it's not too much to say, that that attendance, that interest, which was always there in a subterranean way, is now coming back into a more explicit, affirmative, participatory kind of process.

Antonio: I agree with what Rick is saying. I want to say something about the role that the journal itself, 'Rethinking Marxism,' itself might have had with the attendance today, and even beyond the ups and downs of the times.

I think that the great interest that was evident today was the result of the open way, in which 'Rethinking Marxism' has evolved over the years, as an open space. Clearly, a journal that came out of a particular way of thinking about the need to Rethinking Marxism, opening up new theoretical avenues, new very concrete ideas about epistemology, about class theory; all of the theoretical innovations that the Amherst School has come to be known for, but at the same time, I think that the Editors of the journal showed a lot of wisdom throughout the 20 years, by being a space more than a kind of voice for a particular point of view in Marxism, and I can testify to that, having been on the Board for many years. The degree to which we went out of our way to be open to all sorts of views about, what a Rethinking of Marxism might be all about? And I have been incredibly impressed by the degree to which that openness has been cultivated and has been achieved, both in terms of alternative views in economics, in sociology, in any one discipline, but also in terms of the number of different areas of thinking that the Journal has leant its pages to, so that we have covered the arts, we have covered philosophy, we have covered religion and we have covered sports; we have covered just about every aspect of life. We have covered every aspect of civil society; we have covered every aspect of historical movements. So I think that the Journal has become, not only this space, but certainly a space where so many different ways of thinking about what the issues are, can find themselves welcome that that must have something to do, I think, with the great interest and the diversity of people that has been coming to the events of Rethinking Marxism.

So I think the times have something to do with it, clearly, the problems of capitalism have recalled the firms of resistance and imaginations of what an alternative type of society might be all about, but at the same time, we've been very sensitive to a variety of different voices and we've been open to that, sometimes even more so than people had expected. I think that people might not have expected the kind of openness that Rethinking Marxism has shown and I think it's been invaluable, just for that. If it were for no other reason that to create a space for dialogue, has been a great service.

David: So we could say that Rethinking Marxism is perhaps three things.

One it's a material Journal that has clearly had some success. All three of us would agree that we started out with the idea that we wanted to have a Journal, we wanted to contribute our own ideas and to contribute to the creation of a new Marxist culture, in the United States and more pretentiously around the world. And, as a Journal, we put a lot of work into it and also have been assisted, especially recently, by our association with Routledge. So the Journal gets out there, it gets produced and that's very important.

It's also been an intellectual and political project. We have, combining a kind of arrogance and humility, a certain set of ideas, ways of at least clearing the landscape that we thought were important to put out there, and then finally, as you just said, Antonio, we wanted to create a space in which, whatever ideas we brought to the table, were articulated with, learned from and contributed to other traditions, other disciplines. Many of us come out of economics, but we always thought that visual arts and fiction and so on were crucial, were crucial to that creating of a new Marxist culture, that working history and psychology, sociology and so on, were absolutely crucial for that, and even digress forums, so that we have published more traditional scholarly articles, but also shorter pieces and reviews, but not just book reviews, but reviews of events, and so we've tried to represent in our pages, in some sense, to make those a manifestation of what this project is.

But I'd like to break it down into three things that strike me. One is Marxism, the second is rethinking and the third is theory. Perhaps I'll start with the last one.

One of the remarkable aspects of our session at the Left Forum, which is a Forum that brings together lots of thinkers, but also lots of activists, as this conferencing has for a long time. That one of the things that RM represents is a taking seriously a theory that we thought, from the very beginning, that many things were needed on the Left, to create a new Marxist culture, we couldn't do them all, certainly as a group, but one of the things we could contribute to was work at the level of theory. I wondered if both of you could address that, its centrality and perhaps what role it plays today.

Rick: I've always, personally, been upset with the dichotomy that exists on the Left and elsewhere between theory and practice or theorists and academics, on the one hand, and quote on quote activists on the other. It always struck me that, whether consciously or otherwise, all activists use some sort of theory to figure out what action they're going to take, against whom, in what way, for what – those are theoretical questions. What is the problem? What is the solution? How do we understand our situation? And I always hoped that the Journal would contribute to providing activists with theoretical reflections that they could make use of it.

I also thought that it is very much a legitimate form of activism, to produce the kind of space Antonio described. An open space for people committed to social change, to think about, talk about and exchange with one another, ways of understanding the situation and ways of changing it. In other words, the theoretical Journal, its production, its quality, is a result of a bunch of activists making that happen, without which it could not have been done.

I also think David is quite right, that one of the things a Journal like this does, whether it says it or not, is to say, 'Theory is important, because here's a bunch of activists who have made it happen, who produced it, who continue to produce it', and the amount of work involved here is enormous. And I feel very strongly that, not the least of the achievements of this Journal has been to cultivate a way of thinking about social problems, that could be, would be and should be very

useful, going forward, in terms of understanding the society we wish to make better, and coming up with ways of doing that.

Antonio: Marxist theory is not possible without rethinking and I think that's one of the inspirations behind the Journal. And it is really one particular way of interpreting Marxism, in a way that I like very much and that connects with some of Marx's ideas about the connections between theory and practice, that we alluded to.

If I go back to Marx's thesis on back, where Marx argues that, if philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point that whether is to change it and Rick spoke about theory is necessary, as a guide to activism, but at the same time, theory has to confront itself with changing reality, with the changing configuration of forces, both academic, intellectual forces and other types of forces. And it is the confrontation between theoretical formulations and the change in structure of life that I think the rethinking part provides.

So I would actually place the emphasis theory on the rethinking because that's where Gramsci called '*The Philosophy of Praxis Marxism.*' I don't think that was just a cute phrase, I think it was actually getting at something about the nature of Marxism as a general approach to thinking about theory and practice, that, in fact, the two have to come together, and that's where the heart of Marx's thought is, it's in the constant process of rethinking and that's how it's always been in the history of Marxism, if you think about it; every period of social transformation has required a confrontation between established theoretical positions and new realities, formulations of new theoretical positions.

So the thing that I've always liked best about our Journal is the clear connections between Marxism and the very practical, very activist sense of rethinking and the creation of an activist's sense of theory formation. So, I think rethinking Marxism and theory, that's what the rethinking part does, it kind of links together Marxism with what theory is supposed to be all about, according to Marx.

David: And the way that I do it with my students, and all three of us teach and all three of us help students read Marx and Marxist ideas, is the famous ruthless criticism letter and that clearly makes an impact on my students, the idea that, in Marx's letter, he, at a relatively young age, he says that our task is precisely the take of the old ideas and to carry out a ruthless criticism that is 1) unafraid of its conclusions and 2) unafraid of the powers that be, that one not mute oneself and I think that's part of its tradition.

And I think we can say many things about, if you will, what is good and vibrant, both about the Marxist tradition in the kind of rethinkings of Marxism that are taking place today. But I'd like to also talk about some of the more difficult aspects and I want to raise, in particular, two of them.

One is that Marxist theory, as we know it, Marxist texts were born in the mid-19th Century – here we are in the year 2008 – and what is it, what allows us to take our inspiration from those texts and make sense of them today?

And the second point I want us to talk perhaps a bit about is the legacy of socialism, and really existing socialism and the experience of the Soviet Union and so on. I think that's particularly important here, in the United States, where, if we're not in a Cold War, certainly still live with the vestiges, the remnants of that Cold War phenomena, which people were very suspicious and the question is, should we take that as also part of our legacy, not only the wonderful aspects of Marx and tradition, but also the, if you will, crimes that have been committed in the name of Marxism.

Rick: I would respond, as follows, with a little summary sketch of the remarkable history of Marxism, of which our Journal is just a footnote.

Yes, Marx wrote, in the middle of the 19th Century, most of his mature work and that's a long time ago, verging now on a 150 years. So the question is, why are we discussing it now? And the answer lies, I think, in what happened to Marxism, very briefly, from the time Marx finished his writings until now.

First of all, Marxism spread like wild fire. There are no parallels, for example, in the history of the spread of Christianity or the history of the spread of the Muslim religion, or any other mass global phenomena. No movement has ever spread so far, so fast. From 150 years ago, with a handful of German intellectuals and a few others in Europe, we now have what? Marxist Journals, Marxist Newspapers, Marxist Trade Unions, Marxist Political Parties, Marxist Clubs, Marxist Groups, Marxist Newspapers in every country on the planet. They are obviously stronger in some places and weaker in others, and some places they're underground because they're illegal, but the spread is extraordinary. There's no place in the world you go where you don't get a reaction when you say something is Marxist or you are a Marxist, it may not be positive, but they know what you're talking about, or they think they do – that's extraordinary.

Any tradition that spreads that far and that fast is going to have countless different interpretations. Too many different people, in too many different cultures, under too many different circumstances are trying to make sense of a tradition of thought, not to get all kinds of different and sometimes clashing understandings. It is a rich, diverse tradition and it could not be otherwise, give that history.

Second point; for a short time, that process of spreading and diversification was constricted. For a peculiar set of reasons, the Soviet Revolution in 1917 produced the following bizarre circumstance.

All the different socialists and Marxists at that time, and there were many, in many countries already then, were trying to make social change and having a rough go of it. Because of the circumstances of Russia, a small group of Marxists there made a social change, took power and kept it, to everyone's surprise, including theirs! For the next 70 years, roughly, one country was the place where Marxists succeeded on their own, to make the kind of revolution they'd been talking about and to re-shape society. That gave them a prestige and

an influence that made it seem, for a long time, as though Marxism was what they were doing and what they were doing was Marxism, and so a complicated, diverse, multi-directional tradition was viewed, in much of the world, as a much narrower limited tradition.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, that situation changed. We're still in the process of re-adjusting back to the way things were before 1917 with this difference; Marxism has matured, Marxism has changed, Marxism has involved many more people. The result is, Rethinking Marxism was literally born when this change began, that is, we are here and were here at the re-discovery and re-birth of all the different tendencies, many of which have been marginalised, and a whole new birth of new ways of doing Marxism, under a circumstance where it's no longer constricted, where you can be very many different things and be interested in and based in, in Marxist tradition and that's been our good luck.

One of the reasons our Journal has succeeded, because of the historical moment at which we embraced a project, which was transforming as we took account of its different moments and that's really what we're still doing, and I think we are, therefore, the products, as David put it, both of the explosive positivity and expansion and of the Marxist tradition, but we're also shaped by its constriction, by the time when the Soviet Union's own internal needs and foreign policy required a much narrower conception of Marxism.

What I sometimes tell my students when they first encounter the Journal is, play on the following joke – it's not your grandfather's Marxism, it's not the Marxism you thought it was. It's a much richer, more expansive tradition than you were led to believe, not through a fault of yours, but through that time when Soviet needs dictated what it was understood to be.

Antonio: I couldn't agree more with the nice way in which Rick Wolff have created this sense of, both the narrowness of Marxism at a particular moment in history and the openness that Marxism, as a global movement, represents.

I think that, to go back to your sense of 150 years after, it's actually a very small period of time. I think that Marx represented an opening of our eyes and our mind into the future, kind of foreseeing a radical of root transformation of society that we are just beginning to grasp. I think it will take a long time for the type of hope that Marxism represents, to become the reality for the masses of people in the world. The historical transformations that took us from the servitude of feudalism to the limited kind of freedoms that the bourgeois represented took a long time to come about, to be implemented, with lots of trial runs – some successful, some not successful – along the way, and yet the enlightenment and the bourgeois kind of persevered through time and, eventually, created their image of a better society, which in some ways it was. I don't want to sound too much like a determinist, kind of historical Marxist, but in some ways I think one could make an argument.

I think it will take just as long for the kind of vision that Marxism represents, that is one where freedom has got to do with the absence of exploitation and how we work; it's got to do with our construction of human beings with an identity as producers, where we exercise the ability to control how work shapes us and how we shape work, which we don't have yet. It will take a long time to come to that point, to establish that as a human right and to create the type of society that will allow it to be institutionalised and protected by the legal and cultural framework.

So 150 years is kind of a speck in the passage of time and I think that we are in very exciting moments, just for the reasons that we've both mentioned. That Marxism has become liberated from kind of the narrow interpretation that was placed on it and one moment in history to the Soviet experience, and I hope that what we can do with a Journal like 'Rethinking Marxism' is create enough intellectual conditions for the next moment in time comes that Marxism will be able to protect itself a little bit better from being shaped into a narrow formulation and be able to remain a space for imagination and for the ongoing sense of struggle and resistance to all forms of oppression, then it can actually be. So, time is yet young.

David: Well the way I do it with my students, I mean one of the things that Rethinking Marxism has been committed to from the very beginning is to create, as Antonio said, an open space, and as Rick said, to confront its own tradition and to chart new futures for Marxism. Part of that, clearing the landscape, rethinking and getting rid of the old determinisms and creating new forms of Marxism is to create a new vision of historical process. It is one that has no guarantees and while that sometimes is perceived as a loss, by activists and by students and by our colleagues, it seems to me to create two possibilities.

One is to say that, one of the possibilities are, by attempting to create a society in the name of Marxism, is to create monstrosity and yet those monstrosities are never the inevitable product; that social change occurs under particular social circumstances and when we think about eliminating exploitation, when we think about creating new forms, as you said Antonio, of freedom and of justice, that is literally in our hands; that is literally in the hands of people who are trying to change their lives and if we contribute anything, it's contributing to new modes of thought, to new philosophies, to new ways of thinking, that in their various and complicated, direct and in-direct ways, are attempts to enable the opening of new insights, where people can not only confront the injustices of the society in which we live, but also to imagine real alternatives.

Rick: A last word, I thought, to comment also, is that Marx somewhere wrote that his way of thinking represented simply an instance of capitalisms, self criticism, that always struck me that that's what Marxism is. Marxism is the self-criticism of capitalist society. In that sense, Marxism is the shadow of capitalism and you can't get rid of your shadow and every effort of human beings to get rid of their shadow has proven unsuccessful. As long as there is capitalism it will engender self-criticism, like everything else in the world engenders self-criticism. And so, if what the world is experiencing in the last 30

years is a resurgence and global spread of capitalism, that's good news for Marxism, it'll spread with it.

Self-criticism is something we all engage in. We kind of, each of us know that a little bit of self-criticism is essential for personal growth, the same is true for society. There are times when we avoid it, when we feel good enough about ourselves or so fearful of where the self-criticism will take us, that we postpone it for a while and then something happens to remind us that we need to do some self-criticism, we need to be open to other people's suggestions because while it's painful and difficult, it is the way to personal growth and so it is with society. We're coming out of a period of hiding from Marxism as the self-criticism of capitalism.

I'm proud that our Journal was a major force in keeping that self-criticism alive and vibrant and I think we are now going to reap the rewards, as more and more people, in the face of capitalism with obvious problems, are looking for a critical way of understanding and going beyond them.

Antonio: I, personally, must thank Rethinking Marxism because what I have found out, by my association with Rethinking Marxism and all of the people that made Rethinking Marxism, is that I have worked in a community of scholarship and I think academics are easily deluded into thinking that scholarship and thinking is an individual activity. It's not. Most people understand that it's not, at least in an intellectual way, but I think that having a community of scholarship as Rethinking Marxism has been, has actually given me, not just an intellectual understanding of what it means, that scholarship is a community, and that intellectual work is done in a community; that it's actually made me live that, it's made me practice it, it's made me realise how much of my own contribution would not have been possible, however little it might have been, and I think that it was not that much, but it would not have been possible without the cooperation and the contributions of everybody else. It's real energy at work.

David: I want to thank both Antonio Callari and Richard Wolf, both of whom have, through their writings, contribute to the Rethinking of Marxism; both of whom have, through their work on the Journal, contribute to the Rethinking of Marxism and we are all in their debt to the work that they have done and continue to do.

Thanks very much to both of you.

Rick: And that applies to David Ruccio, even more than to either of us.