



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## What's Left? Marxism, Literature and Culture in the 21st Century

**How to Cite:** Rowcroft, A 2019 Editorial. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 6, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.426>

**Published:** 24 January 2019

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been internally reviewed at the *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. This is in accordance with review protocol for invited guest editorials.

### Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

## WHAT'S LEFT? MARXISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### Editorial

Andrew Rowcroft

University of Lincoln, UK  
[arowcroft@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:arowcroft@lincoln.ac.uk)

---

This special issue aims to contribute to this critical discussion by modestly staking out the contours of Marxist literary and cultural criticism in the twenty-first century, with submissions that reflect the extraordinary diversity of current approaches, ranging across the twenty-first-century British and American novel, twentieth-century film, photography, technology, digital capability, post-critique and 'suspicious' reading practices. The articles in this issue evidence a collective regenerative effort to reassert the writings of Marx, and Marxist critics, as among the most powerful and productive critiques of global capitalism. The introduction concludes with a short summary of the articles that comprise this collection.

---

From the perspective of the close of the second decade, the twenty-first century has been marked by the emergence of a fiercer, more vicious, and menacing capitalism. In the West, governments and politicians continue to cling to a discredited free-market logic, promoting profit and rescinding the political gains of the twentieth century through the reduction of employee rights, pay, and the privatisation of the welfare state (Blyth, 2013). Rising global temperatures and other ecological issues continue to be met with stalled and ineffective political responses, with the United States, one of the major producers of carbon emissions, seeking to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord (Hunt, 2018). Finally, in Britain and elsewhere, neoliberal austerity has powerfully displaced class antagonism into ethno-populist hatreds which have shattered the post-war promise of a common Europe, bound together by shared interest, and the project of progressive political alliances for near two hundred years (Davies, 2016).

At the same time, the return of capitalism has generated a new receptivity to Marx and Marxism, recalibrating the cultural visibility of economic, ecological, and political crisis. As Nancy Fraser argues, this moment can be welcomed for, after many 'decades in which [capitalism] could scarcely be found outside the writings of Marxian thinkers, commentators of varying stripes now worry openly about its sustainability' and scholars 'scramble to systematize criticisms of it' while 'activists throughout the world mobilize in opposition to its practices' (2014: 55). For Fraser, the current talk of capitalism marks a 'growing intuition that the heterogeneous ills' that currently surround us 'can be traced to a common root', meaning that any political 'reforms which fail to engage with the deep structural underpinnings of these ills are doomed to fail' (2014: 55).<sup>1</sup> As Fraser and others argue, what has emerged in recent years is a renewed form of crisis critique that takes seriously questions about the relationship between the deep structures of our current capitalist system and the requirement to secure more equitable forms of social organisation. It is increasingly clear that without a radical change in our political, and economic, situation, capitalist crisis remains inevitable.

Marx's critique remains indispensable in this regard. Marx transcends the limits and partialities of other theoretical approaches, such as *laissez-faire* liberalism, to grasp capitalism as an overreaching social relation grounded in a mode of production

with specific dynamics, tendencies, contradictions, and conflicts. In *Capital* (1867 [1990]), Marx embarks on a critique of political economy, exposing the limitations of bourgeois economics, which tend to deal in sectional analysis and individual phenomena in isolation. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1993: 83) argued that such approaches belonged 'among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades' who could not see that each 'individual's production is dependent on the production [and consumption] of all others'. Drawing upon concepts and categories developed by Hegel, Marx endeavours to represent capitalist totality, to reveal a complex system of determinate relationships ever in full movement, dynamic expansion, and perpetual breakdown. Marx offers not only the necessary tools to comprehend the present conjuncture, but actively seeks to work through the contradictions of capitalism to establish more rational forms of social organisation through the creation of a society of associated producers.

The reversal of Marx's theoretical fortunes is due, in part, to a renewed interest in capitalist economy emerging as a result of the 2008 financial crisis. In Europe, *Capital* was the focus of much critical attention, drawing attention to capitalism's tendency towards crisis and overproduction. New scholarly engagements have come in the form of companions to *Capital* written by Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho, and Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda, and Agon Hamza. In addition, new intellectual biographies of Marx written by Jonathan Sperber, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Sven-Eric Liedman, have provided fresh encounters with his life and works. Finally, Terry Eagleton has provided a powerful defence of Marxism by showing that the most common objections to Marx's thought are grounded in woefully imprecise readings of his work.

The new critical renaissance in Marx's work has been no less pronounced in literary studies and its cognate fields. In 2009, *Mediations*, the journal of the Marxist Literary Group, featured essays by Nicholas Brown, Nell Larsen, Imre Szeman, and Sarah Brouillette, that sought to 'define the project and concrete praxis of Marxist literary criticism today' and to extrapolate 'methodological and disciplinary conclusions [...] to arrive at general indications regarding major disciplinary concepts' (Nilge and Sauri, 2009: 1–11, 2). Self-consciously situated within a moment of

profound disciplinary crisis, featuring fractious debates about the role of critique, theory, and the efficacy of deep reading practices intensified by millennialism, these essays sought to gesture to the 'range of potentiality contained in literary study in the twenty-first century' and what 'these challenges might mean for Marxist literary criticism' in the contemporary era (Nilge and Sauri, 2009: 2–3).

Imre Szeman's essay was particularly interesting in this regard, arguing that Marxist literary criticism possesses no singular set of considerations, aims, or objectives that adequately define it. We should recall here that while Marx and Engels maintained the importance of art, literature, and culture in their discussions of history and economics, Marx's remarks on aesthetics are often tentative, occasionally in conflict, and dependant on some of the most complex concepts in Marxist theory, such as ideology (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 2). As John Berger argues, the relationship between culture and economics is a:

Question which Marx posed but could not answer: If art in the last analysis is a superstructure of an economic base, why does its power to move us endure long after the base has been transformed [...] He began to answer [...] and then broke off the manuscript and was far too occupied ever to return (2016: 47).

Ultimately, Marx was more concerned with political revolution than aesthetic criticism, yet he never demanded that literature provide tactical support to his efforts, or attempted to furnish formulas by which the validity of literary works might be judged. As such, for Szeman:

There is no such thing as *a* Marxist literary criticism: no established approaches, no clear methodology, no agreed-upon ideas about how to approach a text or what count as appropriate texts to read, or, indeed, no clearly established sense of why one might expend energy on literary analysis to begin with. It is difficult even to establish a core set of interests and commitments that mark it off from other forms of literary criticism. Marxist literary criticism need not even make reference back to Marx (2014: 379–388, 381, italics in original).

Nevertheless, there remain discernible historical circumstances or patterns – ‘modes of intervention’ – that ‘Marxist literary criticism has taken’ (2014: 380). Beginning in the 1920s with the early work of Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, and Lukács, Marxist criticism began by working with, rather than against, received approaches to texts, becoming ‘one of a handful [of approaches] which can be substituted for one another depending on context or even an individual critic’s analytic sensibilities (2014: 381). Marxist criticism then developed a greater attention to the function of institutions, professional organisations, and university departments, endeavouring to map out dynamic shifts by focusing attention on form rather than content. Szeman’s third stage, associated with the work of Eagleton and Jameson, is concerned with the development of more pluralist Marxist critical systems that interrogate literature and culture as ideological categories.

On Marxist literary criticism now, Szeman recognises various positions. He ends by contending that the study ‘of literature within universities may not be the main site for such transformations to be better understood or actualised’ (2014: 388). As Szeman cautions, this ‘isn’t the same as saying such studies don’t have any value’ but a recognition that the position from which we address literature seems ‘unexpectedly immune to reformism’ (2014: 388).

This special issue aims to contribute to this critical discussion by modestly staking out forms of Marxist criticism in the twenty-first century. ‘What’s Left? Marxism, Literature and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ was held at the University of Lincoln in July 2016. The conference grew out of the meetings of the Marx Research Seminar, a speaker series which has featured, among others, Guy Standing, Sean Sayers, and John Holloway. The event was generously supported by the College of Arts (University of Lincoln), Lincoln Doctoral School, and School of Political and Social Sciences (University of Lincoln). It featured fifteen papers by scholars working in Marxist philosophy, literary criticism, and cultural studies, with keynotes by Paul Crosthwaite and Stuart Sim. Submissions to the special issue were extensive and the five articles collected here have been carefully selected. Firstly, the articles reflect the diversity of current approaches within contemporary Marxist criticism, ranging across the twenty-first-century British and American novel, twentieth-century film,

photography, technology, digital capability, post-critique, and 'suspicious' reading practices. At the same time, the articles in this special issue evidence a collective regenerative effort to reassert the writings of Marx, and Marxist critics, as among the most powerful and productive critiques of global capitalism.

Harry Warwick examines how Ridley Scott's classic film *Alien* (1979) 'both registers and anticipates the "new enclosures", the complex dynamics of dispossession and privatisation that "have wracked the globe in the last 40 years"'. For Warwick, *Alien's* diegetic universe 'is one in which the foundations of capitalism, and the terms of the capital-relation itself, are precarious or under question – one in which the terms have become legitimate objects of debate rather than the self-evident bases of capitalist accumulation'.

Robert Cashin Ryan and James Fitz Gerald turn to the current anxiety in literary studies, asking, 'what exactly is it that we—literary scholars—do?' For these critics, the solution is not to be found in attention to 'surface topography nor formal ingenuity', but rather 'an attention to form at its limits'. The work of Edward Said furnishes a useful conceptual strategy:

Said's work, while rarely taken up by either Marxists or post-critical theorists, can, we will argue, be seen as deeply invested in the defining questions of each and so offers a method that pushes through the intellectual deadlock of the current moment.

John Hillman's analysis of twenty-first century photography and media follows Marx's famous formula of C-M-C to suggest a process of experience-image-experience. For Hillman, the proliferation of images through Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, means photography has become both a form of abstract labour and enjoyment: 'Image becomes more than image: it is the mediation of experience into something incrementally excessive of simply image and becomes a new means for a different mode of production'.

Jae Sharpe argues Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015) 'is the attempt to situate the development of the Internet and of technocratic corporations within the historical context of Marxist efforts in the postwar era'. For Sharpe, despite

Franzen's reputation for conservatism, *Purity*, along with his other novels such as *The Corrections* (2001), share:

An interest in the possible directions that remain for leftist ambition in the aftermath of failed radical projects and in modes of collective action that would account for the practical limitations of a neoliberal age.

*Purity*, then, suggests that collectivist projects necessitate transparency 'but must resist the urge promoted by contemporary Internet culture to fetishize such exposure or assume its inherent radicalism'.

Finally, Nicholas Huber's article examines issues of production, exchange, and surplus, exploring the problematic of mediation in financialized capitalism through an attention to the relationship between writing and contemporary money forms, juxtaposing, and placing into dialogue, selections from Marx and the British novelist Tom McCarthy. As Huber argues, McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) remains exemplary for its preoccupation with 'monetary-inscriptive techniques' and is 'pockmarked by Marxian concepts'. Focusing on the idea of 'remainder' or 'surplus', Huber reads McCarthy's novel in relation to the second volume of *Capital*, in which 'money is enigmatically treated from the perspective of bookkeeping'. Indeed, Huber argues, 'if *Remainder* advances a hypothesis, it might be that money, memory, and media form a politico-aesthetic triptych'.

As is clear to those engaged in Marxist criticism today, Marx is both essential and insufficient to the profound and urgent problems of twenty-first-century capitalism. While the diversity of these essays seeks to empower readers through offering multiple approaches to Marx, and Marxism, seeking out shared critical commitments is always an essential task. It is here that Samir Amin's definition of what it is to be a Marxist remains among the most useful:

To be a "Marxist" is to continue the work that Marx merely began, even though that beginning was of an unequalled power. It is not to stop at Marx, but to start from him. For Marx is not a prophet whose conclusions, drawn from a critique of both reality and how it has been read, are all necessarily

“correct” or “final”. His opus is not a closed theory. Marx is *boundless*, because the radical critique that he initiated is itself boundless, always incomplete, and must always be the object of its own critique (2010: 9–10).

As Amin argues, Marxism must ‘unceasingly enrich itself through radical critique, treating whatever novelties the real system produces as newly opened fields of knowledge’ (2010: 10). This special issue seeks to pursue a critically rich conversation with, against, and beyond Marx.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Open Library of the Humanities for their generous support and assistance. Thanks to all those who made contributions to the issue and to the peer-reviewers for their feedback.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Amin, S** 2010 *The Law of Worldwide Value*, trans. by Brian Pearce and Shane Mage. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Berger, J** 2016 *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, Overton, T (Ed.). London: Verso.
- Blyth, M** 2013 *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, W** 2016 The New Neoliberalism. *New Left Review*, 101, September–October 2016. <https://newleftreview.org/II/101/william-davies-the-new-neoliberalism> [last accessed 07/01/2019].
- Fraser, N** 2014 Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism. *New Left Review*, 86: 55–72. (March–April 2014).
- Hitchens, C** 2009 The Revenge of Karl Marx: What the author of *Das Kapital* reveals about the current economic crisis. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/04/the-revenge-of-karl-marx/307317/> [last accessed 07/01/2019].
- Marx, K** 1990 *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1. Trans. by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.

**Marx, K** 1993 *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. London: Penguin.

**Nelson, C** and **Grossberg, L** 1988 Edited, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

**Pendakis, A, Diamant, J, Brown, N, Robinson, J** and **Szeman, I** 2014 Edited, *Contemporary Marxist Theory*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

**How to cite this article:** Rowcroft, A 2019 Editorial. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 6, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.426>

**Published:** 24 January 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The text 'OPEN ACCESS' followed by a circular icon containing a padlock, symbolizing open access.