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Foucault and Marx: Ambivalences, Legacies, and Future Struggles

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In this editorial for the special collection "Foucault and Marx: Legacies, Ambivalences and Future Struggles," we address a topic that has remained marginalized in Foucault scholarship. Against the common premise of Foucault's anti-Marxism, we recall the positive references, theoretical parallels, and explicit connections to Marx in Foucault's work and argue that Foucault mobilizes Marx against Marxism in a heterodox way. An outcome of the international symposium held from 18 to 19 October 2024 at the University of Vienna, the collection follows four lines of discussion: historical-philological, author-focused, conceptual, and emancipative-political. Its five contributions address destruction, the biopolitics of social reproduction, a "disjunctive conjunction" of Marx and Foucault, capitalist time regimes via Postone, and de Lauretis's queer-feminist reading of Althusser and Foucault.

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> "Marx, for me, does not exist. I mean, the sort of entity constructed around a proper name, signifying at once a certain individual, the totality of his writings, and an immense historical process deriving from him." (Foucault 1980c, 76; modified translation)

In an interview on geography in 1976 Foucault expresses the difficulty to speak properly about Marx and Marxism, which leads him to the verdict: "Marx, for me, does not exist." For Foucault, referring to Marx always oscillates between Marx the person, his complete œuvre and the historical process initiated by him and the discourse he founded. The predicament lies not only in the sheer insurmountable amount of Marxist literature, but Foucault explicitly warns against the academization of Marx—although everybody "has the right to do so" (Foucault 1980c, 76, mod. transl.)—because "that means misconceiving the kind of break he effected" (Foucault 1980c, 76). Consequently, re-reading Marx from the standpoint of Foucauldian genealogy attends not only to discursive, philosophical, or epistemological impacts, but also to their immanent political stakes. The significance of said break therefore lies not merely in the new concepts it introduces, but in the forms of political struggle and critical practices that become possible through it. Yet Foucault's warning about the academization of Marx is not an injunction to remain silent about him. Rather, it invites a genealogical engagement attentive to the heterogeneous discourses that have emerged under his name.

Also, Foucault, for us, "does not exist." Even though the name "Foucault" is not (yet) such a strong signifier as Marx, his multifaceted work, different lines of reception as well as potential epistemological and political breaks make an adequate academization similarly difficult. By bringing together Marx and Foucault, this special collection, nevertheless, takes up the "right to do so" by academizing Marx in relation to Foucault himself, while acknowledging the plethora of lineages in, between, and after their interconnection that goes far beyond the authors. The main focus of our collection lies on Foucault's reception, interpretation, and critique of Marx, while intending to open up different points of contact that take their commonalities as well as constitutive differences seriously by tracing and simultaneously adding to their philosophical and political legacy.

1. Foucault and Marx: A Complicated Story

Despite a longstanding systematic and historical interest in the relation between Foucault and Marx (Poster 1984; Smart 1983; Althusser et al. 1970), the topic remained a marginalized line of research compared, for example, to Foucault's links to Nietzsche (Irrera 2025; Rehmann 2022; Harcourt 2021; Rosenberg and Westfall 2018; Schrift 1995).

The question of Marxian and Marxist influences, convergences, and divergences is perceived more as a specialized discourse within Foucault studies than as an essential—indeed, constitutive and systematically crucial—point of reference for Foucault's thought, both in its critical and affirmative dimensions. This relative neglect is linked to the tendency to view Foucault primarily as a critic of Marxism or, quite simply, as a downright anti-Marxist, who rejects the economism of Marxist theory to focus on an analysis of power and subjectivity (Behrent 2019; Martin 2014; Eribon 1991). This characterization is, of course, not entirely unfounded. Foucault frequently positioned himself as a sharp critic of Marxism, whether with regard to its analytical shortcomings, epistemological anachronism, or political inadequacies (Foucault 2003; 2000; 1980d; 1970). These critical references to the Marxist tradition were codified very early on as a seemingly fundamental theoretical orientation of Foucault's work and effectively became a kind of truism, both in Foucault scholarship (Smart 1983; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) and in the Marxist—particularly Anglophone—reception of Foucault (Callinicos 1990; Eagleton 1990). The most recent manifestation of this trope were the controversies surrounding the 2016 edited volume by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, which stirred up the debate for some time (Oksala 2023; Zamora and Behrent 2015).[1]

The establishment of the common premise of Foucault's anti-Marxism is also remarkable for the fact that there are a number of positive references to, theoretical parallels with, and explicit connections to Marx, mainly, though not exclusively, in the period from 1970 to 1975. The contributions in this special collection explore some of these links in detail; however, a few general remarks on these points will serve as a starting point here. Thematically, it can be observed that Foucault tends to refer to Marx when discussing the historical-concrete, material genesis of capitalism and its constitutive power relations (Foucault et al. 2012; Foucault 2007; 1980c). In particular, in the recently published early lectures at the *Collège de France—Penal Theories and Institutions* and *The Punitive Society*—there are direct and detailed references, on the

[1] Although Foucault's reference to Marx plays hardly any role in the Foucault reception in Frankfurt School Critical Theory, the underappreciation of these systematic links also had an indirect impact on the tensions between post-structuralism and Critical Theory. The elimination of the Marxian thread helped Habermas to portray Foucault as a pure Nietzschean whose conception of power amounted to a generalization of the "will to power" in the social field, leading to an aporia regarding the normative basis for resistance (Habermas 1987). This theory-strategic maneuver, neglecting diagnostic and analytic aspects indebted to the materialist tradition, is continued in more sympathetic readings, beginning with Honneth (1991), who interprets Foucault's analytics of power through an exclusively Nietzschean lens, accusing him of hypostatizing the strategic and advancing a deficient theory of the social. With the notable exception of Demirović (2008), it is only with the reorientation of younger Critical Theory toward processes of subjectivation that new points of connection with Foucault have emerged, bypassing these early polemics (Saar 2025; Loick 2024; Fraser 2022; Allen 2008).

one hand, to contemporary debates in Marxist historiography (Foucault 2019) and, on the other, in the context of a more or less silent dialogue with Edward P. Thompson and Louis Althusser regarding the history of capitalism (Foucault 2015). Here, in the early analytics of power, Foucault conceptualizes disciplinary power as the central factor in transforming life into productive force or labor power, thereby continuing and expanding on Marx's reflections on the historical genesis of capitalism or so-called primitive or original accumulation (Marx 1962). Contrary to the common premise of Foucault's anti-Marxism, it can thus be said that Marx and Marxist theory are not merely touched upon in the early analytics of power, but play a central, systematically and programmatically decisive role.

Even more so, in several instances Foucault makes it clear that, for him, the practice of historiography, for better or worse, is closely linked to Marx—in fact, it is inconceivable without Marx (Foucault 2024; 2003; 1980b). The matter is further complicated by the fact that Foucault frequently employs a method of indirect citation—using Marxian ideas without labeling them as such—in order to avoid the game of affiliation and the reduction to contemporary French Marxisms:

> But there is also a sort of game that I play with this. I often quote concepts, texts and phrases from Marx, but without feeling obliged to add the authenticating label of a footnote with a laudatory phrase to accompany the quotation. As long as one does that, one is regarded as someone who knows and reveres Marx, and will be suitably honoured in the so-called Marxist journals. But I quote Marx without saying so, without quotation marks, and because people are incapable of recognising Marx's texts I am thought to be someone who doesn't quote Marx. When a physicist writes a work of physics, does he feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein? (Foucault 1980b, 52).

The fact that the method of indirect citation is a strategic decision with respect to the French context at that time is also made evident by how Foucault situates the analytics of power in close relation to a Marxian framework when he is not in France but abroad, for example in Japan or Brazil (Foucault 2024; 2007; 2000).

In this light, Foucault's criticisms also become clearer: on the one hand, they generally refer to institutionalized Marxism in France in the 1960s and 1970s, that is, to party Marxism and academic Marxism. Étienne Balibar (2019) and others have pointed out that this critique of academic Marxism, i.e., Althusser, is not always entirely "fair," insofar as Foucault systematically chooses the most scientistic interpretation of ideology and attributes it to Althusser. When Marx himself becomes the subject of criticism, it is with regard to his economic analyses, which, in Foucault's view, do not represent

a significant epistemological break with classical political economy (Foucault 2024; 1970). This was one of the points that led Sartre to issue his famous verdict that Foucault was the last barricade of the bourgeoisie—a point that Foucault later sought to clarify (Foucault 1996; 1994). In any case, it should be noted that in his critical remarks, Foucault makes a sharp distinction between Marx and Marxism (understood as party Marxism and academic Marxism à la Althusser), and that his critiques, with the exception of Marx's economic analyses, refer to the latter.

But what exactly does Foucault criticize about the French Marxisms of the 1960s and 1970s? From our view, Foucault takes issue with a conception of power that is inadequate because it falls short and lacks a sufficiently materialist perspective. This is reflected in particular in three points that Foucault raises: (1) With a few exceptions—such as Althusser—contemporary Marxist theory neglects the concrete effects of power on the body in favor of a theory of ideology. Instead of inquiring into the deforming effects of ideology on a pre-existing consciousness, a truly materialist analytics of power, from Foucault's perspective, requires reversing the order and first analyzing the body and its permeation with power (Foucault 1980a; 1980d). (2) Related to this, Foucault rejects the idea, also prevailing in Marxist theory, that power functions primarily through repression (Foucault 1998; 1977). On the contrary, the effectiveness of modern power depends precisely on its productive character: power produces effects of desire, subjectivity, and knowledge that are primary and constitutive to its functioning (Foucault 1980a; 1980d). (3) Due to the neglect of the micro-level material, bodily, and productive—that is, infrastructural—aspects of modern power, Marxist theory also develops a fixation on the state and state apparatuses that is analytically inadequate and politically dangerous, insofar as it permits the illusion that state apparatuses are neutral instruments of enforcement, and not already corrupted by virtue of their micro-level power base within the disciplines, that could be put to use, for example, to abolish class society (Foucault 1980a; 1980d). Foucault's claim is not that state apparatuses are unimportant. On the contrary, from his perspective, the example of the USSR clearly shows that one must move beyond the idea that power is localized exclusively within state apparatuses if one is to bring about a fundamental, revolutionary transformation of society. Otherwise, the concrete, everyday practices of modern power—with their effects on subjectivation, desire, and knowledge—remain untouched.

It is crucial that, in this critique, Foucault mobilizes Marx against Marxism by building on Marx's historical-concrete, material analyses of the genesis of capitalism, in particular with respect to factory discipline as well as primitive or original accumulation and its subjectivational aspects (Oßwald 2024; Oksala 2023; Read 2022; Mezzadra 2019; Leonelli 2010). We could even go so far as to say that Foucault seems to be concerned

with a critique of the idealist and reactionary residuals in Marxism, that is, in favor of strengthening the materialist aspects. From our perspective, Foucault's critique essentially amounts to an inquiry into the idea and concept of historical materialism—an internal critique, one might say, in which Foucault appears as a proponent of a heterodox materialism, which promises the potential to circumvent the problems of Marxist orthodoxy without abandoning a historical and genetic perspective on capitalism.

As for more recent literature, the 2014 conference "Marx & Foucault: Lectures, usages, confrontations"[2] in Paris and the subsequent edited volume (Laval et al. 2015) marked a notable increase in interest, which was further amplified by the publication of the early lectures at the *Collège de France* (Foucault 2019; 2015). On the one hand, due to the early polarization of Marx and Foucault in both the English-speaking and German-speaking reception, and on the other hand, due to the work of Antonio Negri and materialist feminists such as Silvia Federici, who worked early on toward combining Marx and Foucault, a significant part of this work is in French and Italian, which makes a broader international circulation difficult (Newlove 2024).

In addition to philological and exegetical work, which, due to Foucault's method of indirect citation, constitutes a significant part of research in this field (Balbino 2024; M'Bama 2023; Mezzadra 2019; Elden 2015; Leonelli 2010; Legrand 2007), there are also a number of attempts to bring Marx and Foucault together in analytical, conceptual, and political terms; these "Marxismi foucaultiani" (Polleri 2024) are sometimes more closely oriented toward the authors themselves, while other times they are situated in broader theoretical projects that do not aim to discuss their relationship in the narrow sense (Oksala 2023; Read 2022; Alliez and Lazzarato 2019; Negri 2017; Bidet 2016; Macherey 2014; Dardot and Laval 2012). A third focus of the literature is Althusser, who is discussed both as a link to and as a point of departure for a critique of Marxism (Oksala 2025; Sato 2022; Kelly 2018; Montag 2013; Garo 2011; Balibar 1992).

2. The Vienna Symposium on Foucault and Marx

This special collection is an outcome of the international symposium "Foucault and Marx: Ambivalences, Legacies, and Future Struggles," which we organized from 18 to 19 October 2024 at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna.[3] The symposium was part of the *World Congress Foucault: 40 years after*, commemorating

[2] https://michel-foucault.com/2014/12/01/marx-foucault-lectures-usages-confrontations-2014/.

[3] On the symposium's webpage, you can find the program and the abstracts of the 18 talks from the conference. https://foucaultmarx40.univie.ac.at/?page_id=11 A detailed conference report on the talks and the surrounding discussions was published in German in *Genealogy+Critique* (Krach 2024).

the 40th anniversary of Foucault's death with more than 50 locally organized events all over the world. Motivated by the marginalization of the relationship between Foucault and Marx in both Foucault studies and Marxist scholarship, the symposium set out to bring together some of the most established scholars with emerging researchers in these fields to discuss the manifold lineages, connections, but also departures and rifts between Foucault and Marx.

In the following, we want to highlight some lines of discussion that were explored in the course of the symposium, lines that are also represented in the papers of this special collection. Building on the existing literature on Foucault and Marx, one prominent thread throughout the symposium was the *historical-philological* one, focusing on the role Marx and Marxist theory play in Foucault's work, condensed in the question if he is indeed a "A Nietzschean Communist" (Foucault 1991, 51), as he proclaims in a conversation with Duccio Trombadori in 1978. Especially in light of the already mentioned more recent publications of Foucault's lectures on the *Punitive Society* (2015) and the *Penal Theories and Institutions* (2019), Foucault's reception of labor theories and his reflection on the role of the "Lumpenproletariat" was debated extensively. This focus on the history of ideas was further enriched by the *author-focused* line of discussion, looking at the relationship of Foucault and Marx via different third authors. Besides the important role of Althusser and the representatives of Critical Theory, thinkers like Toni Negri, Georg Lukács, Stuart Hall, Moishe Postone, and Teresa de Lauretis were also discussed prominently. The question of different traditions of reception of Foucault, Marx, and their relationship in the French, German, Italian, and Anglo-American theories was an important point of examination here.

Another angle to approach the relationship of Foucault and Marx is the *conceptual line*, which focused especially on biopolitics as a concept that both authors bring forth in different yet related ways. Besides that, conceptions of ideology, power, and agency in Marx, Marxist theory and Foucault were explored extensively.

While there are many more strands of discussion in the symposium and the papers of this special collection that could be identified, the question of politics in one way or another remains a common point of reference. This *emancipative-political line* emerged repeatedly throughout the symposium, transversally crossing all talks and conversations. In facing a global rise in totalitarian and fascist politics, an increasing number of armed conflicts and wars as well as the emergence of new technologies changing the conditions of labor, accelerating communication and information flows (impacting the subjectivation of people in manifold ways), it became evident that thinking about Foucault and Marx is not just about academic quibbles. Reading Foucault and Marx together is most fruitful when it is connected to political issues, struggles, and

movements, allowing us to better understand, analyze, and contextualize the polycrisis of today, while exploring the possibilities of emancipative politics.

3. The contributions to the special collection

Gordan Maslov and Atila Lukić (2025) explore the concept of "destruction" in the thought of Foucault and Marx. For Maslov and Lukić, a complementary reading of the two thinkers provides an understanding of the conditions and effects of capital accumulation under biopolitics, with "life" forming an important link between their works. The theme of "destruction", however, is addressed only indirectly, namely as the underbelly of the production of commodities and subjectivity. Marx and Foucault both focus on the productive aspect of capital and power. Thus, destruction in the sense of an annihilation that cannot be reintegrated into the process of the reproduction of subjects and milieus can only be conceived as an apocalyptic end-time scenario or as a mystical beginning. The reality of climate change, however, compels us, according to Maslov and Lukić, to conceive of the everyday nature of radical destruction. By reading Marx and Foucault against the grain and starting from the question of destruction, the production of the lumpenproletariat and the persistent presence of sovereign spectacles of violence amidst biopolitics, become visible as unproductive destruction and necropolitical tendencies of capitalism.

Friederike Beier (2026) develops a feminist Foucauldian-Marxist framework for analyzing the biopolitics of social "re_production" as a constitutive entanglement of production and reproduction. The bringing together of Marxist-feminism of reproductive labor and the biopolitics of governmentality from Foucault is the central aim. Beier argues that the biopolitical strategies have often been neglected in the analysis of capitalism through the Marxist-feminist lens. Re_productive labor is not merely an invisible background condition of capitalism; it is actively governed, measured, reorganized, and instrumentalized as part of broader biopolitical strategies. In this sense, re_productive labor can be understood in relation to biopolitical governance and regulation. The intersectional inequalities are reproduced through the strategies of their recognition of the state which takes the form of commodification, privatization and externalization. The article asks where the growing governmental interest in unpaid care and domestic work comes from, and what it leads to. Childcare, family policy, migration regimes, domestic labor, and care infrastructures thus appear as biopolitical sites in which states regulate the reproduction and optimization of populations. The material conditions of Foucault's theory are being cared for by focusing on social re_production.

Matteo Polleri (2025) proposes a "disjunctive conjunction" in the connection of Marx and Foucault. Their differences between exploitation and power, ideology and normativity, alienation and subjectivation, emerge from shared problems and unarticulated presuppositions. It's not about a theoretical antagonism, the "point of heresy" is a shared split that can mutate, a zone of conceptual torsion, where separation and conjunction occur simultaneously. The article goes along with Balibar who reads Foucault in a sense that uses Marx against himself and at the same time uses him as a supporting surface. To read across the fractures one can expose the internal limits, silences, and unrealized possibilities of each framework. Polleri shows that Foucault uses the "point of heresy" in several senses: as an internal divergence within an epistemic order, as an anachronistic anticipation or after-effect of another discursive order, and as the liminal standpoint of archaeological analysis itself. Foucault can therefore be understood, through these different encounters with the point of heresy, as engaging with alternative theoretical frameworks that address the same problems that haunted Marx.

Tanja Wischnewski and Johann Szews (2026) explore conceptualizations and the perception of time under capitalism, developing this theme with reference to Moishe Postone and Foucault. Although the two authors are usually interpreted in contrasting ways, a convergence emerges from their shared reference to Marx, particularly in the context of their reflections on the capitalist time regime. Wischnewski and Szews therefore propose a complementary reading. Postone describes the structure of a historically specific capitalist temporal order. Within this, the historical time of progress and abstract time—the working hour as an empty unit of productivity that can be filled at will—stand side by side, unmediated and alienated. By reading Foucault's analysis of power as an analysis of regimes of time, Wischnewski and Szews illustrate how Foucault views the problem of capitalist time from the perspective of subjectivation, which can explain the naturalization of the historical categories analyzed by Postone. The authors also trace a convergence between the two thinkers in their reflections on abstract domination.

The contribution from Chiara Stefanoni and Francesco Aloe (2025) develops a queer-feminist redefinition of the relationship between Marx, Althusser, and Foucault, starting from the problem of social reproduction. Following Althusser, reproduction is not reduced to economic processes but understood as the comprehensive production of the conditions under which capitalist societies are able to persist. Where Beier's notion of re_production foregrounds the active biopolitical governance and organization of reproductive labor, Stefanoni and Aloe begin from an Althusserian concept of the reproduction of capitalist social relations and extend it through Foucault and de Lauretis to sexuality and gender. Through an expanded concept of reproduction, Marx

can be connected to Foucault: Marx primarily analyses the economic dimension of capitalist reproduction, while Foucault examines the extra-economic forms of power and knowledge through which modern subjects are produced. The authors draw on Teresa de Lauretis's queer-feminist reading of Althusser in order to radicalize this connection through the question of gender. On this basis, the text prepares a reading in which Foucault's dispositif of sexuality appears as a continuation of Althusser's theory of ideology and at the same time as an instrument for analyzing the organization of generative reproduction and gender domination in capitalist societies.

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Exploring the connection between Foucault and Marx remains a necessarily unfinished project. Not only do new publications continually offer novel perspectives on Foucault's complex relationship to Marx and Marxist theory, but new social and political challenges compel us to continually re-examine these theories and their connections in terms of their relevance and political applicability. Where are the continuities, where the breaks? Which authors connect, which authors point to entirely different paths? Which concepts link the projects of Foucault and Marx? And above all, how does a discussion and analysis of the ambivalences and legacies make it possible to shed new light on today's pressing issues? Examining the interconnections, breaks, and continuities between Foucault and Marx this special collection not only "takes the right" to add new perspectives to the existing scholarship but may allow us to analyze current crises in a new light and, so we hope, open up new political horizons.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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