

## INTRODUCCION: MARX'S FIELD AS OUR GLOBAL PRESENT

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### **Preamble: What is Marx to the process of fieldwork?**

By the summer of 2018, when this project was originally conceived, two hundred years had passed since the birth of Karl Marx. This date has been widely celebrated with talks, conferences, lectures and edited volumes. One of these many exciting projects, titled *Karl Marx's Life, Ideas, Influences: A Critical Examination on the Bicentenary*, edited by Shaibal Gupta, Marcello Musto and Babak Amini (2019) gathers the contributions to a conference held in July 2018 in Patna, India, at the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI). I first wrote *Marx in the Sweatshop* – now a chapter in this collection - as a contribution to that conference. I conceived that paper as a fieldworker's celebration of the Marxian framework; a framework which, combined with feminist insights, has always strongly guided my research experience. As I wrote it, and prepared to fly to Patna, I realised that far more could and should be said about the potential benefits of deploying Marx and Marxian concepts and methods as a guide for today's 'radical fieldworkers'; those aspiring at 'doing' political economy across the world economy in practice, and committed to social and economic justice. By the time I landed in Patna, the idea of this volume – *Marx in the Field* - had already taken shape in my imagination, and I had contacted many of the contributors. I am excited that its final outlook looks spectacularly similar to my initial 'headnote'. As beautifully explained by Michael Taussig (2011), our attention as fieldworkers is often captured by 'fragments'; by encounters we suddenly experience and which are the outcomes of complex materialist explanations we then need to unpack and carefully analyse. To a certain extent, one could say this project was guided by an 'imagined fragment'; an encounter

between my conscious – unorthodox and feminist - use of Marxian methods of analysis and images from the field experiences that have shaped my concrete training as a social scientist through a continuous process of learning by doing.

This introductory chapter sketches the aims and rationale of the book, and identifies three ways in which Marx can be brought ‘to the field’. Obviously, these are hardly the only ways. However, they are *key ways* in which ‘Marx’ can guide us during field research, and in which the study of the concrete can in turn guide us to (re)read, use, adapt and at times ‘transgress’ and complement Marx’s categories and methods of analysis. Following from this, it should be noted that this volume refers to and engages with issues of (Marxian) method(s) rather specifically; that is, in relation to the complex art (rather than science) of fieldwork – may this take place, as we shall see, in farms, among global exporters, farmers and/or traders; in factories and industrial units, focusing on employers and/or workers; across construction sites, medical clinics or prisons, tribal land and refugee camps; in homes, or inside public offices and dusty (or indeed, nowadays, online) archives. Hence, the ‘field’ here is primarily methodological, rather than geographical, as it refers to the concrete processes of conceptual development of research design, of deployment and adaptation of analytical categories for field research, and/or data collection and analysis. The actual geography of the ‘field’ can vary widely. In fact, while several chapters here focus on the Global South, others either focus on the Global North or explore socio-economic relations connecting different regions of the world economy. Some focus on poor classes; others on elites or petty accumulators or intermediaries. The clarifications above are necessary to fully understand the ethos and scope of the volume, both in relation to the Marxian literature on methods, and to the object of intervention in the development literature.

On the one hand, as argued by Henry Bernstein in his contributions here, there are already many brilliant historical analyses based on Marx's materialism, also instructing more general theoretical debates on method. While hopefully this book will stand as a useful complement to those reads, its primary scope remains becoming a far more practical guide on how to carry out concrete, meaningful Marxian analysis in specific contemporary settings. On the other hand, the geographical remit of *Marx in the Field* is far broader than that of 'classic' development studies research, that tend to focus primarily on disadvantaged settings and classes. In fact, it is an attempt to 'globalise' the discipline, using concrete Marxian analysis as a lens. Notably, this intellectual project is carried out here by specifically showcasing the research of scholars linked - in several different ways - to political economy of development networks gravitating around SOAS, in London, where I was trained and still teach.

The list of topics covered here, while intended to be broad enough to convince readers of the many possible applications of Marxian methods for the successful study of the contemporary capitalist world in its concrete instantiations, is hardly exhaustive. There are a number of obvious *lacunae*, particularly in relation to ecology - increasingly a central contemporary concern of Marxist political economy (e.g. Bellamy-Foster, 2002; Moore, 2015; Saito, 2017; Malm, 2018) and always a key concern for feminist political economy and sociology (Merchant, 1980; Mies and Shiva, 1993; Salleh, 1997; Barca, 2019)<sup>1</sup> - or in relation to key geographical centres of accumulation within the world system, like China<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, this volume hardly aims to cover all ground. Rather, it aims at winning the argument that one can draw extraordinarily productive connections between the study of Marx and its methods and categories and the concrete study of global capitalist development, in its various facets. Hence, the study of these methods and categories should be taught in each and every

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<sup>1</sup> Point acknowledged by Dale (2018).

<sup>2</sup> On methods for the study of labour in China, see Fuchs et al (2018).

fieldwork methodology class, across the social sciences. They are not only well equipped to unpack and challenge the complex power relations constituting the global economy. They can also propose fieldwork as a form of political practice in support of social and economic justice, rescuing it from technicistic and/or neo-colonial classification tendencies. Hopefully, many other contributions will then follow in the footsteps of *Marx in the Field*, and fill its many gaps while embracing its aims and objective. The present and future fieldworkers of global capitalism, its multiple nodes of accumulation and gendered and racialised exploitation, plunder, inequality, poverty and injustice need many concrete roadmaps to facilitate their inquiries across the complexities of the world system. Marx was indeed a ‘books person’. Still, my hope is that he would have liked this volume. After all, his work had a twofold aim: unveiling the limitations of classic bourgeois political economy, and illustrate the complex concrete workings of capitalism in his time - in order not only to interpret the world but, crucially, also to ‘change it’. We are deep into this second business here. The next sections analyse three ways in which Marx can be productively ‘brought to the field’; they further reflect on a number of key intellectual sources of inspiration behind this project; and summarise some highlights from each contribution.

### **Marx in the Field, Three Ways**

Marx remains, at once, one of the giants of classical political economy and its fiercest critic. Many of Marx’s observations – like capital’s ever-rising appetite for commodification and for the intensification of exploitation, or its drive towards concentration and the generation of inequality – remain extraordinarily relevant to the study of our global present. Processes of commodification continue being on the rise, multiplying the formation of new highly differentiated markets where even nature, ethics, or life itself may be ‘packaged’ for personal consumption. The appropriation of nature for capitalist purposes and the globalisation of

natural resource industries (Baglioni and Campling, 2017) are leading to what George Monbiot (2014) has defined as '*The Pricing of Everything*'. The rise of what Slavoj Žižek calls 'cultural capitalism' has precipitated processes of commercialisation of ethics, very profitable to a handful of corporations. In retail chains like *The Body Shop*, one can 'shop well to save the world' (Richey and Ponte, 2011) and buy a fancy lipstick or soothing hand cream whilst financing the building of a hospital somewhere in Africa or the purchase of HIV/Aids medications. In food chains like *Pret a Manger* buying a refreshing 'Lemon-Aid' is presented as an ethical act. Commodification is also having a profound effect on social reproduction, and life more broadly. Domestic and care work are increasingly commercialised (Mies, 1986; Folbre, 1996; Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2014), performed globally and nationally by underpaid migrants or ethnic minorities (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002, Yeates, 2014; Grover et al, 2018). New reproductive technologies have enabled processes of commodification of the body and biological reproduction, epitomised, for instance, by the rise of global surrogacy (e.g. Pande, 2015; Sangari, 2015; Vora, 2019; Vertommen, 2016).

This rise in commodification and the escalating speed of global consumption is based on the persistence, spread and deepening of processes of exploitation. In China, the 'workshops of the world', and in many other economies engaged in labour-intensive manufacturing production for export, the exposure of workers to incessant working rhythms has the dark connotations of a proper Orwellian nightmare. Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan (2010) have documented the rise in suicide rates of Foxconn workers, unable to cope with the escalating pressures of the assembly line, as these spiral out of control taking over the whole of workers' reproductive time in dormitories and industrial hamlets, often also run by the company. The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Savar, a few kilometres from Dhaka, Bangladesh, exemplifies the destructive nature of current capitalism and the exploitation it implies for the

labouring body (see Ashraf, 2017). In that circumstance, the bodies of over 1,000 workers were destroyed under a crumbling giant manufacturing plant, as workers were locked inside its premises. Even when not posing such an immediate lethal danger, the ‘abode of production’ of many contemporary industries or farms scattered across the Global South – where the lion’s share of global employment is located (ILO, 2018) – clearly recalls the working conditions described by Marx in *Capital*. Child labour, to which Marx dedicated much space in the chapter on *The Working Day* in *Capital Volume One*, and in his description of the age of manufacture, is still widespread among many industries and in agriculture. According to official estimates, there are still over 200 million children working worldwide, and over 150 million can be classified as child labour. Of these, over 70 million work in hazardous occupations (ILO, 2017). Across many sectors, like coffee, tea, garment, or construction, the ‘business of forced labour’ (LeBaron, 2018) or bonded labour practices (Shah et al, 2017; Guerin et al, 2013) thrive, often either through debt or payment retention mechanisms (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015).

In terms of concentration, the astonishing rise in corporate profits rates that have taken place since the onset of neoliberalism has gone hand in hand with the rise of global and national monopolies and monopsonies (Durand and Milberg, 2020). This is so, particularly, in the context of a ‘retail revolution’ driven by an international division of labour where western economies sell and many emerging and developing economies produce, while their emerging middle classes also increasingly embrace high consumption rates. This has manifested in the growth and proliferation of complex global commodity chains stretching across the world economy and organised in complex production, labour and consumption networks and circuits (e.g. Bair, 2009; Selwyn, 2010; Neilson et al, 2014). At the same time, processes of financialisation – of markets, commodities and daily life – are increasingly subordinating

goods, services and people to the capricious forces of what Marx called ‘fictitious capital’ (that is, ‘non-productive’ capital, see Banaji, 2013) and debt. In countries like Brazil, financialisation is leading to the ‘collateralisation of social policy’, further entrenching debt into households’ social reproduction via social schemes (Lavinias, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, concentration is going hand in hand with hikes in inequality, both within and between countries. According to a now famous report by Oxfam (2016), a now infamous 1 percent of the world owns the lion’s share of all global resources and wealth. For the economist Thomas Piketty (2014), this is because *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* has entered a patrimonial phase where returns to capital exceed growth rates; hence turning accumulation into a rent-based project steered by global elites. Worldwide, the social and economic outcomes of these rising inequalities impact upon women and ethnic minorities with particular harshness (Perrons, 2014). Race and gender inequality co-constitute markets, and class (Elson, 1999; Bannerji, 1998). In her recent prize-winning book *Race for Profit* (2019), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor shows how banks and real estates in the US undermined black ownership, reproducing a highly unequal access to property. On the other hand, in white settler states, property always had specific colonial features (Bhandar, 2018). Accumulation under capitalism is *always* gendered and racialised (Davis, 1981; Federici, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2018). During the current COVID-19 pandemic – I am currently working at the final editorial tasks for this book in the midst of the Global Lockdown – the tragic implications of these inequalities are manifesting brutally, with black, other ethnic minorities and context-specific vulnerable communities – like, for instance, Dalits or Muslims in India, refugees and migrants in Europe, BAME and black communities in the UK and US - greatly over-represented among the sick and the dead and over-exposed to starvation, violence or economic hardship, quite spectacularly confirming

Achille Mbembe's (2012) observations on the necropolitics of capitalism (Lee, 2020). In effect, the present pandemic is best represented as a unique crisis of social reproduction (Mezzadri, 2020), turning inequalities into lethal socio-economic weapons for expanding surplus populations.

Arguably, the crisis is also forcefully revealing Karl Marx's truth about global capitalism: that it is primarily based on the exploitation of human labour for the production of *all* value. Indeed, the generalised withdrawal of labour-power from the market during the lockdown has quickly led the world system on the brink of economic collapse. In fact, all the disquieting trends we are currently witnessing – pre and post COVID-19 - which structure the world economy whilst threatening many communities, speak loudly about the broad, general relevance of Marxian insights for the study of our global present. However, to what extent do Marxian *categories of analysis*, as developed in *Capital* or elsewhere by Marx, may still work as a useful operational research framework? Could we use them productively for field-based research in, say, a global factory in India or China, a mine in tribal land in South Africa, a home-based workshop in Italy, a prison in the US, or a large or small farm in Pakistan, Mozambique, or Uzbekistan? Can we use them to understand the financialised features of today's global commodities like coffee or tea, the characteristics of merchant capital and petty trade in South Asia and their relation to the global and national economy, or the tight organization and control of global migration in Europe or the Middle East? Moreover, how can we develop field and data collection methods that are coherent with such categories of analysis, and which are their features, strengths and limitations? And finally, how can we adapt Marxian categories of analysis in concrete fieldwork settings, where, as in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, 'nothing would be what it is, because everything would be

what it isn't'?<sup>3</sup> Should today's street-vendors or gig-economy service deliverers be classified as (disguised) workers rather than micro-entrepreneurs, shifting policy focus from credit provision towards wage improvement? How do we investigate merchant capital, trade networks and petty commodity production, and their linkages with larger factories or industrial workshops? And in what ways can we use Marx when studying the home, reproductive activities and reproductive workers, and the global processes reconfiguring social and biological reproduction? In short, how *do we do* Marxian analysis in *practice*, in diverse sectoral and geographical contexts? How can we deploy *Marx in the Field*? These are some of the questions the contributions to this volume grapple with and aim to answer.

Marx's conceptual apparatus powerfully resonates with intellectuals, researchers, academics and activists worldwide. The concepts he introduced have already forcefully returned to haunt the mainstream social sciences. Somewhat amusingly, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, we had the pleasure to spot references to Marx even in the (hardly progressive) daily London tube newspaper *Metro*. Marxian insights are also proving useful to grapple with the terrible health and economic implications of the current COVID-19 crisis (Samaddar, 2020) and the historical link between capitalism, ecology and pandemics (e.g. Wallace et al, 2020; Fasfalis, 2020). Yet, the practical relevance of Marxian political economy for actual, concrete field-based research remains under-theorised and not systematically analysed. Strongly focused on concrete fieldwork and research cases, and aimed at filling this gap, this collection highlights three ways in which we can productively bring Marx into the field.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Fine (2010) deploys this quote from Lewis Carroll's tale in his Marxian analysis of *Social Capital*.

The first way is by showing the relevance of the Marxian research framework in practice by focusing on one or more key concepts, categories or processes highlighted by Marx in his critique of political economy and study of capitalist development. This line of contribution aims at illustrating how key Marxian tropes illuminate the ways in which contemporary capitalism unfolds in different settings and with which implications for processes of development, by reference to specific concrete cases. Examples of key themes discussed in different contributions to this volume are: the study of the commodity form and the concept of commodity fetishism; Marx's category of landed property; the distinction between absolute or relative surplus extraction or between formal and real subsumption of labour; the connections between production and circulation and the role of merchant capital; or the links between production, pauperisation, health depletion and/or nutrition. Notably, whilst discussing the methodological and explanatory relevance of these tropes, the essays in this collection may also highlight how we can rethink these concepts, categories and processes in relations to the cases analysed. This exercise may entail illustrating the distinct ways in which contemporary manifestations may depart from the classic Marxian explanation, or how Marxian concepts can be re-historicised, complemented, reworked and deployed in combination with insights inspired by other progressive literatures like, for instance, feminism, critical realism or postcolonial analyses, effectively 'queering' methods and categories for concrete research. On the other hand, these shall never be congealed across time, but rather remain 'living' and contemporary analytical tools.

A second way to bring *Marx in the Field* is through a discussion of how Marxian categories may appear in 'disguised form' across the world economy, and how we can unveil and investigate them during fieldwork. If the previous line of contribution aims at underlining the great contemporary power of Marxian analysis for the methodological conceptualisation of

our Global Present, this line of contribution is premised on showing the concrete steps needed to apply Marx's categories and concepts in settings where these may not appear in straightforward ways. An obvious example is the ways in which the labour process or indeed class – as well as class politics - may manifest in complex ways, apparently distant from the original Marxian formulation, obviously embedded in the contemporary history of its own time. Indeed, contemporary labour relations across the world economy, especially those involving women and marginalised groups – may appear as quite diverse and seem distant from the historical form of wage labour as studied by Marx. By the same token, also capital and its many representatives may appear under different historical guises and forms. Contributions to this second way of bringing *Marx in the Field* describe and illustrate how to distinguish between essence and appearance. On the other hand, the deconstruction of *fetishism* – of what appears - is a key insight of the Marxian method overall. Essays engaging with this second research agenda may also describe the difficulties in researching field settings; especially when structured by harsh power relations or dominated by ruthless elites.

A final line of contribution and a third way to bring *Marx in the Field* entails the description, discussion and analysis of which practical methods of data collection can guide a Marxian political economy approach to the field, again by reference to concrete cases studies. Which data better illustrates some key processes analysed in the context of Marxian political economy? And which fieldwork strategies? And which concrete methods did Marx use, and to what extent can we still learn from and deploy them? Essays aiming at providing some answers to these questions discuss the ways in which distinct quantitative and qualitative methods, or indeed their combination, help us imagine concrete ways to operationalise the study of production, labour or circulation, distribution, consumption and reproduction in ways consistent with Marxian thought and scope. Some analyses also dwell on the difficulties

to develop these methods in practice, and/or on the operational limitations of doing research across the world economy. Others question the very possibility to identify data collection methods ‘more appropriate’ to a Marxian inquiry, or discuss how to concretely rethink Marxian methods – like workers’ inquiries – when focusing on social relations not originally explored through a Marxian lens. Some contributions also briefly touch upon issues of ethics in the field, always complex in contexts defined by harsh relations of domination. Indeed, the Marxian analytical framework should never be divorced from political practice.

Obviously, there may be crossovers between these three lines of contributions, with some essays neatly fitting into one, addressing two, or even covering all three. This depends on how contributors have interpreted the task of illustrating the interconnections between Marxian analysis and their own fieldwork experience. For instance, there may be overlaps between the difficulty in identifying Marxian categories in the field and the practical ways in which these can be researched and analysed. In fact, readers may also be able to spot further ways in which contributions bring *Marx in the Field*, and I strongly encourage them to try.

### **Inspirations and Aspirations**

The concrete exploration of the world-system has been the subject of fascinating analyses. George E. Marcus’ influential paper on the different ways to conduct ethnography ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world system (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1995), has triggered a productive debate on the different ‘trails’ and tropes field research may follow, and on the rise of multi-sited ethnography, its benefits and challenges, or difference, if at all, with classic anthropological methods (e.g. Shah, 2017). The latter issue is also explored in Michael Burawoy’s *Global Ethnography* (2000) in relation to the mutual shaping of local struggles and global forces (see also Chari and Gidwani, 2005), while Anna Tsing’s (2005) ‘Friction’

collapses the distinction between global and local altogether to explore the co-constitutive nature of global interconnections and their concrete instantiations in ‘zones of awkward engagement’ (useful comparisons in Gagnon, 2019). *Marx in the Field* does not directly engage with these debates; it is not a book on ethnography. However, it cuts across some of their concerns, as its exploration of different avenues for Marxian political economy indirectly propose a way to do research both ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world system, by deploying categories and methods stressing the global-local co-constitution of the socio-economic processes shaping global capitalism.

Far more directly, *Marx in the Field* has taken inspiration from some key methodological texts in development studies, sociology and anthropology, and development economics, based on a political economy approach to development. One key text inspiring this project is undoubtedly *Fieldwork in Developing Countries* (1993), edited by Stephen Devereux and John Hoddinott. This collection, now 25 years old, still remains a unique reading in the development literature, for the honesty of its accounts, its operationalization of political economy analysis and discussion of practical fieldwork issues and limitations. A second source of inspiration is represented by the text *Agricultural Markets from Theory to Practice: Field Experience in Developing Countries* (1999), edited by Barbara Harriss-White. This is a brilliant guide of how to navigate the vagaries of field research in practice, whilst accounting for the harsh power relations at work in rural settings. With its focus on agricultural markets, its scope is more circumscribed, aimed at scholars and students of agrarian change. Also this text is almost 20 years old.

Besides these two volumes, a number of other useful articles have also addressed issues of political economy inspired fieldwork, in terms of either method/s or research ethics. One is

Jan Breman's powerful rejection of neutral accounts in contexts characterised by huge disparities in power, which he explains in 'Between accumulation and immiseration: the partiality of fieldwork in rural India' (*Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1999). Another is Sharad Chari's reflection on developing a Marxian political economy approach to self-representation, to capture the ways in which workers may engage in acts of everyday resistance against the sheer power of capital in their daily lives, developed in 'Marxism, Sarcasm, Ethnography: Geographical Fieldnotes from South India' (*Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 2003). A third is Michael Burawoy's generous discussion of the limitations of ethnographic methods due to 'inadequate theoretical reflection', in 'Ethnographic fallacies: reflections on labour studies in the era of market fundamentalism' (*Work Employment and Society*, 2013). Finally, Henry Bernstein's essay 'Studying development, Development Studies' (*African Studies*, 2006) highlights the fracture between the study of development as the process of capitalist penetration in developing regions – what Cowen and Shenton (1996) called 'immanent' development – and the evolution of development studies as a (neo)colonial discipline fostering an 'intentional' development project increasingly narrow and market-based. It also illustrates the explicatory power of Marxian political economy for the study of the global development process and its class- and state-based dynamics.

Influenced by these contributions and debates, this volume aims at more systematically exploring the relevance of a Marxian lens for the study of development. In fact, by highlighting the ways in which Marxian analysis can be operationalized *for the Field* across the world economy, this collection has the ambitious aim to mainstream the study of Marx, his concepts, categories and methods not only for *studying development*, but also for *development studies*. If this discipline is to fully embrace its potential to speak about power

and injustice, and to provide a key analytical lens for the study of global transformations learning from the experiences of developing regions and their trajectories, then it needs to overcome its narrower, technicistic tendencies and to be returned to the broader field of political economy. So, overall, the process of bringing *Marx in the Field* can be seen at once as the product of a long-standing tradition of studying capitalist development across the world through the lens of political economy, as well as a novel endeavour aimed at narrowing the gap between the theory and practice of development studies.

As I already mentioned in this introduction, SOAS, where I was trained and where I am still based, in London, remains a central academic institution for ‘doing’ Marxian political economy in practice – productively influenced by insights of other radical intellectual traditions, like feminism, postcolonial or critical race theories, crucial to ‘decolonise’ development. All contributors to this collection have links with SOAS - as alumni, academics, associates, or friends. Some studied, worked, or still work at SOAS. Others are engaged in debates on rural transformations featured in the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, or have/had links with the *International Initiative for the Promotion of Political Economy* (IPPE) or the *Historical Materialism Conference*, all SOAS-based. This is a key feature of this book; it codifies some of the specific ways in which critical development studies is interpreted at SOAS; influenced by Marxian political economy yet incorporating insights from other radical traditions and focusing on practical lessons for/from field research. Notwithstanding the circumscribed institutional ‘catchment area’, this collection includes a rather socially diverse group of authors engaging with Marx and fieldwork on the basis of distinct intellectual trajectories and focusing on varied case studies.

Finally, whilst this volume aspires at mainstreaming Marxian political economy for *thinking and doing* development studies in practice, it also tries to push the discipline beyond its original boundaries. First, the study of development today exceeds its original geographical focus on developing countries. The globalization of processes of production, circulation, exchange and distribution entails the need to think about development as a global process and project. According to many contemporary Marxist scholars, Marx's framework was always meant to study the development of capitalist forces *globally* (e.g. Banaji, 2010; Pradella, 2014). Second, as facile linear and modernising narratives of development get increasingly disproven, due to mounting evidence that today it may be 'The West' following 'The Rest' (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014), insights from development studies can prove increasingly useful to investigate the socio-economic changes taking place across the world economy. This is particularly evident with reference to the study of economic migration and the so-called refugee crisis, but also with regard to the spread of informal/ised work relations and economic activities, generally – erroneously - associated with developing settings. Indeed, as mentioned, not all essays contained in this collection focus geographically on developing regions. And while some address classic themes in development studies, like rural poverty, informal work or petty production, others analyse global financial markets, novel processes of global commodification, and focus on wealthy or emerging economies. However, they all show the productive ways in which it is possible to bring *Marx in the Field* in ways that challenge rigid disciplinary boundaries and turn the study of development into the concrete exploration of our deeply interconnected global present.

### **Contributions: Marx and Old and New Areas of Enquiry**

As a significant number of chapters in this volume bring *Marx in the Field* in more than one way, it would make little sense to try to organise them into sub-sections merely based on the three lines of contributions I identified as central in previous sections. I have decided instead

to organise the book based on content and context. Chapters engaging with ‘older’, or more classic concerns in Marxian political economy – such as exploitation; accumulation; capitalist elites; production, circulation and merchant capital; and the concrete workings of financialisation - appear first in this volume. These chapters are concerned with the usefulness of Marxian categories for the study of contemporary capitalism; some focus more on national processes of development, while others are concerned with either regional or global circuits of production, trade and finance (chapters 2-7). A second bloc of chapters explores the key Marxian category of class *in the field*, its features and/or politics and institutions, and discuss fruitful ways in which it can and should be researched in practice, overcoming structural, rigid definitions (chapters 8-10). Chapters focused on less explored themes in political economy – such as unfreedom, nutrition, or health – follow (chapters 11-13), and the collection ends with two contributions which either further stretch the boundaries of Marxian political economy to explore novel areas of enquiry related to the global commodification of life, or engage with what can be defined as relatively ‘marginal categories’ in the study of political economy (chapters 14-15). These contributions may engage with debates over the relevance of Marxian categories, or the ways in which they may appear in ‘disguise’ in the field. Greatly informed by feminism, a few contributions also provide useful analyses of the empirical material used by Marx in his work and its relevance for contemporary studies on the bodily traits of working poverty, besides exploring possibilities for data collection and their challenges. With this simple reader in mind, let’s now briefly present each contribution.

After this introduction, in chapter 2 Henry Bernstein explores how some key questions central to all empirical research can be addressed in ways informed by Marxian categories, methods and approaches. His chapter also explores the challenges posed by Marx’s notion of

what is ‘visible’ and empirically researchable and what is necessarily ‘invisible’ in capitalism; what is ‘essence’ and what ‘appearance’, based on Marx’s conception of commodity fetishism. Drawing from Balibar, the chapter concludes with observations on researching class relations, dynamics, experiences, beliefs and practices, reflecting on the ways in which class encapsulates all social practices, without being the only one.

In chapter 3, in an ambitious analysis contributing to all three lines of enquiry of *Marx in the Field*, Barbara Harriss-White reconstructs Marx’s insights on merchant and commercial capital and shows how they shape debates on Indian capitalism. Drawing on decades of field research, the chapter outlines the features of actually existing commercial capitalism in India and explores the many methodological challenges of developing a concrete Marxian research agenda to study commercial capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Along compatible lines, in chapter 4, Muhammad Ali Jan illustrates the features of a methodological approach aimed at grappling with diversity *within* capital, by deploying an underexplored concept in Marx; that of ‘fractions of capital’. Also drawing on Weber, the chapter identifies three dimensions along which fractions within a class can be identified; spatial, scalar and a social origins-based. Drawing from a variety of examples from the Global South, including his own fieldwork in rural and small-town Pakistani Punjab, Jan highlights how concrete studies of different forms of capital in different contexts must pay attention to the threads that bind social groups despite their diversities.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 continue the concrete exploration of classic themes in political economy-exploitation, accumulation and finance – although they more heavily stress the global or regional features of such dynamics. In chapter 5, my chapter identifies three tropes of

Marxian methodology relevant to the study of India's 'sweatshop regime'; namely, centering the analysis around 'the commodity' in order to illustrate the concrete workings of 'commodity fetishism'; the study of the distinct modes of surplus value extraction, their interplay and implications for the body; and the mapping of processes of subsumption of labour, resulting in various 'forms of exploitation'. The chapter illustrates the need to explore the social traits of exploitation and social reproduction drawing on the feminist literature.

In chapter 6, Adam Hanieh shows how Marx's extensive writings on class can deeply inform research in the Gulf. This chapter reflects on how Marxist conceptualisations of class help grasping the specificities of labour, migration, and capital accumulation in the Gulf, their regional social relations and dynamics. Particularly concerned with accumulation and drawing from many years of experience of researching capital-labour relations in the region, this analysis illustrates how Marx's work can turn into a powerful guide to doing fieldwork in the Gulf – revealing the right questions to ask and helping to unveil hidden connections.

In chapter 7, Susan Newman discusses the relevance of *Volume Two* of Marx's *Capital* for the integrated analysis of social relations of production, exchange and finance across global commodity circuits. Focusing on the global coffee commodity chain, the chapter examines the relationships between merchants, traders and workers, turning coffee into an object for consumption, as well as the roles of money-owners, money-lenders, and money-managers operating on international financial exchanges and whose interests and operations impact on other commodity chain actors.

In chapter 8, Benjamin Selwyn reflects upon his experience in deploying Marxist class analysis to grasp the production and labour dynamics unfolding in export grape production in

Brazil. Illustrating the forces at work encountered in the field, the chapter discusses a dual process of ‘learning Marx by doing’; first, related to moving from abstract and static to dynamic and experiential conceptions of class; and, second, based on using field-based knowledge on class struggle to re-theorise capital-labour relations. The analysis also discusses useful methods for mapping and recording field findings to identify concrete manifestations of class and power.

In chapter 9, [drawing on long-term fieldwork on trade unions and manufacturing across India](#), Satoshi Miyamura illustrates the contemporary relevance of Marx's analysis for the study of labour relations and struggles. Set against juridical and dualist approaches to labour institutions, and methodological individualistic, reductionist and conflict-free mainstream conceptions of labour relations, this analysis shows that Marx’s method provides a productive framework to explore trade union politics in the subcontinent.

Chapter 10, by Farai Mtero, Brittany Bunce, Ben Cousins, Alex Dubb and Donna Hornby, analyses how Marx’s conception of class as a ‘concentration of many determinations’ can inform fieldwork in rural South Africa, where class and livelihood strategies are co-constituted and differentiated along lines of race, gender and generation, and households combine multiple income sources, including wage labour, self-employment and welfare payments. The chapter indicates which methods for data collection can be mediated by Marx’s key concepts and theories, such as the production and appropriation of surplus value, accumulation and social reproduction, and describes how this approach – compatible with Critical Realism - informed research in four distinct fieldwork projects.

In chapter 11, Lorena Lombardozzi unmaskes the limitations of current studies on ‘forced labour’ and discusses how these often conceal the structural, concrete determinants of labour exploitation. Her chapter explores the case of agrarian labour in Uzbekistan post-Soviet independence, and investigates the empirical, methodological and epistemological complexities underpinning the concept of labour freedom in this region through a Marxian lens. It also highlights the need for mixed-methods for data collection to explore complex social relations and the contradictions of late capitalist accumulation.

In chapter 12, Tania Toffanin illustrates the relevance of Marx’s observations on health and exploitation for the study of more contemporary forms of homework and body depletion. Focusing on the Italian case, the analysis illustrates the interrelation between gendered exploitation in the home and adverse health effects. It underlines the benefits and challenges of deploying Marx’s concrete methods of enquiry to connect health and work – based on labour inspectors’ and doctors’ reports - and it discusses the limitations of Marxian understandings of domestic labour’s structural role in capitalist development.

In chapter 13, Sara Stevano compares ‘Marx’s diet’ in *Capital*, illustrating the malnourishment of Britain’s working classes based on data from public health investigations, with the patterns of food consumption dominating among the poor in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. Using primary data collected in Mozambique and Ghana, the chapter shows the similarities and differences in the poor’s diets across time and space. It also stresses how concrete methods to analyse food consumption and its linkages with food systems must include multiple data sources and levels of analysis.

In chapter 14, Sigrid Vertommen interrogates the usefulness of the Marxian method in capturing the features of commercial surrogacy in Georgia, and highlights the processes of invisibilisation preventing Georgian surrogates from being considered ‘real’ workers despite their centrality in this rising global industry. While calling on Marx to focus the attention to the regimes of labour at the heart of processes of valorisation in the fertility industry, the chapter stresses the need to move beyond Marxist productivism to denaturalise the fictitious separation between productive and reproductive work. The chapter also discusses the possibilities and challenges of undertaking a workers’ inquiry centred on reproductive work.

Originally concluding the collection, chapter 15, in a preliminary way, interrogates the relevance of Marxian methods and categories for the study of what would appear as three ‘marginal’ figures in political economy; namely, the tribal chieftaincy, the prisoner, and the refugees. In the process of thinking about these figures, the chapter, which takes the narrative form of a collective conversation with Gavin Capps (chieftain), Genevieve LeBaron (prisoner) and Paolo Novak (refugee), we learn both what Marxian political economy can offer, analytically and politically, and what may be its main methodological constraints.

Finally, completing this introduction during the COVID-19 *Global Lockdown*, I felt the urge to also include an intervention focusing on the ways in which Marx’s insights can guide us through a complex ‘field’ indeed: that of understanding the concrete implications and effects of this pandemic in specific regions of the world economy, whilst locked inside our homes. Drawing on evidence from India collected in the ‘cyber-field’, Subir Sinha brilliantly engages with this difficult task in chapter 16. Here, focusing on migrant labour in India in COVID times, he highlights points of contact between Marxism and postcolonial studies, and reflects on new avenues for and understandings of ‘field-based’ analysis. While this chapter

concludes the collection, it hardly concludes the enquiry of what may be further productive ways in which Marxian insights may be deployed to study the ‘margins’ of political economy. Hopefully, the end of *Marx in the Field* is only the beginning. But let’s now ‘leave this noisy sphere’ and follow Marx across the world economy, whose concrete secrets must ‘be laid bare’.

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