Inheriting Marx

Daniel Bensaïd, Ernst Bloch and the Discordance of Time

This essay traces a Marxist notion of cultural heritage drawing on the work of twentieth-century thinkers Daniel Bensaïd and Ernst Bloch. Both authors, indeed, address the act of inheriting as a way of rethinking Marxism beyond determinist and teleological concepts of history. In particular, Bensaïd's 1995 *Marx for Our Times* and a 1972 essay on cultural heritage by Ernst Bloch reimagine the handing on of cultural inheritance as the political reactivation of untimely and non-synchronous survivals of past social formations. For this reason, the heritage of Marx conveyed by these authors does not result in a nostalgic preservation of the past but in reviving unrealised possibilities of social transformation. In a comparative reading of Bensaïd and Bloch, the act of 'inheriting Marx' analysed in this essay hence formulates a de-commodifying conception of cultural heritage set against the violence of capital.

The revival of Marx and Marxism in an era of capitalist globalisation should be a way of making a political intervention into the present. Unavoidably, however, twenty-first century Marxism also entails the handing down of a Marxist tradition and a constant work of cultural transmission. Being Marxist today involves, from this point of view, inheriting Marx, while the act of inheriting Marx is an often unacknowledged presupposition for being a Marxist. But what does the expression 'inheriting Marx' possibly mean? The question of 'inheritance,' at first sight, seems to indicate the handing over of possession or accumulated wealth to be passed on to coming generations.

The term 'inheriting Marx,' from this point of view, could sound as a contradiction, or a betrayal. A contradiction because the word 'inheriting' bears the trace of that 'right of inheritance' which Marx himself described as that 'power of transferring the produce of one man's labour into another man's pocket,' which represents the effect and 'the juridical consequence of the existing economical organisation of society, based upon private property in the means of production.'[1] Inheriting could be supposed to indicate, accordingly, an effect of capitalism, and the legal sanctioning of a society based on private property and exploitation. This seems to be incompatible with Marx's commitment to social change and his

[1] Marx 1869, n. pag.

'*categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions* in which man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned and wretched creature.' [2] The transmission of material inheritance partly ensures the reproduction of capitalism, which keeps a great part of humanity wretched, degraded and enslaved. The whole process of 'inheriting' would be, from this point of view, a reinstatement of inequality and the status quo, against what Marx himself described as the 'categorical imperative' that informed and motivated his life and work from young age. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, the historical continuum expressed by heritage cannot be wrested from violence, oppression and barbarism, 'the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostate.'[3]

But the phrase 'inheriting Marx' could also sound as something worse than a contradiction: a true betrayal. Indeed, it could imply the act of turning Marx himself into spoils or dead letter, diluting and silencing his revolutionary potential instead of reviving it in the present. From this point of view, 'inheriting Marx' would seem to make Marx a thing of the past: a textual, critical, or academic 'resource' to be stored, buried and contemplated rather than ground for political action and critique.

[2] Marx 1992, p. 251. In his comments on this passage, from Marx's introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* Ernst Bloch notes that Marx did not abandon this commitment throughout his life, and that this 'imperative' can by no means be restricted to the young Marx. Bloch 2018, p. 22.

[3] Benjamin, in Löwy 2005, p. 47.

Contradiction or betrayal, these summary reflections might suggest that the only way of 'inheriting Marx' might be, perhaps, *not to inherit,* keeping up a constant struggle against the reduction of a legacy to the ineffective patrimony of the few.

The question of 'inheriting Marx,' however, should not be merely dismissed as a contradiction or a betrayal. The point would be, on the contrary, to propose concepts of heritage and inheritance derived from Marx, to be able to sketch a *Marxist theory of tradition and inheritance*, which would not simply replicate the modes of transmission proper to bourgeois, capitalist culture. In a way, the key challenge of 'inheriting Marx' consists in the possibility of formulating a concept of anti-capitalist inheritance, a way of handing on the tradition of class struggle and resistance to alienation and exploitation. This would entail a de-commodifying and emancipatory mode of transmission of culture. It would also enable a way of rereading, transmitting and inheriting Marx, which would emerge out of Marx himself, rather than being projected onto him from other traditions of thinking, be they sociological, philosophical or historiographical. This question also concerns the meaning of being Marxist – declaring one's political affiliation, as I am doing in this moment – as the act of assuming the responsibility and the imperative to be *heir of Marx and the revolutionary tradition of Marxism* in the twenty-first century.

The central argument is of this essay is that a Marxist concept of inheritance needs to address the fact that inheriting cannot simply mean, on the one hand, turning Marx into patrimony or dead letter or, on the other hand, rejecting the very concept of inheritance as incompatible with the Marxist tradition. My main argument is that Marxism should involve the formulation of a Marxist notion of inheritance helpful to the struggle for social and economic liberation, against neo-fascism and the violence of capitalism, and against the commodification of everything which characterises the history of the early twenty-first century. By reading two important Marxist thinkers together, Daniel Bensaïd's and Ernst Bloch, this essay proposes an antagonistic, de-commodifying and politicised notion on inheriting that could become a new keyword in Marxist theory.

This concept of inheritance opposes the reduction of the open-ended, unfinished process of historical transmission to a reified concept of cultural heritage. In this essay, the terms ‘inheritance/inheriting’ and ‘heritage’ will be used as dialectical poles of a work of transmission in which the act of inheriting simultaneously preserves and suspends heritage by turning it into a living matter in the present. Drawing on an essay by Ernst Bloch titled ‘On the Present in Literature,’ the concept of inheritance could be affiliated to what Bloch defined as a process of temporal ‘travelling along’ of past historical experience that are able to reach and become significant again in the present. As Bloch writes:

> Thus a view from past times to one's own becomes possible, that is to say, from times that can be objectified, which might nevertheless concern us as now-time, and hence they concern us and come close to us – Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, but also all formed art works of the past not solely dealt with in a historical sense . . . Such traveling along during which we sometimes change our views cannot completely coincide with that which one calls the cultural heritage. (Bloch 1998, 128).

The act of inheriting what is left open from the past cannot 'completely coincide' with cultural heritage. The reactivation of a past now-time that concerns us in the present is 'not merely contemplative, or even a quotation or from a museum' (128), because, Bloch observes, 'with the really indelible past there is no acquisition at all. Now-time in the past cannot be a possession' (128). The terms heritage and inheritance, from this point of view, need to be grasped dialectically: the act of inheriting is the process whereby an unfinished heritage is re-opened in the present, suddenly becoming integral part of and active force in the current historical situation. The labour of inheritance produces an exploded heritage that recovers the future in the past. A Marxist work of inheritance could correspond to an expropriation of the expropriators in the realm of culture:

what is transmitted is not fixed capital but rather, as Bloch writes, 'the future in the past . . . that which has not become, which is in process. In there we find the repressed, the interrupted, the undischarged on which we can in one and the same act fall back upon while it reaches forward to us' (129). The transmission of inheritance could be seen, from this point of view, an emancipatory re-appropriation of heritage as a renewed political agency in the present.

Accordingly, the problem of inheriting Marx is not an absolute beginning but, rather, part and parcel of the political and intellectual tradition transmitted from twentieth-century Marxism. The current significance of Marx, indeed, cannot not address the temporal distance – 200 years – that separates him from us, as well as the chain of cultural relays, historical processes, and social transformations through which Marx has arrived at us. David Harvey notes that while in recent times 'there has been a flurry of comprehensive studies of Marx in relation to the personal, political, intellectual and economic milieu in which he was writing,' some of these studies 'seem to be aimed at burying Marx's thinking and massive oeuvre along with Marx himself in Highgate Cemetery as a dated and defective product of nineteenth-century thought.'[4]

[4] Harvey 2017, p. 2.

In contrast to this, Harvey convincingly stresses that Marx's object of study and critique was not nineteenth-century society but capital, and 'capital is still with us, alive and well in some respects while plainly ailing if not spiralling out of control, drunk on its own success and excess.'[5] The continuing hegemony of capitalism as global economic system, while now in a different historical phase from Marx's times, makes the question of inheriting Marx urgent and compelling. Indeed, inheriting Marx entails asking the question of how to transmit Marx's legacy in a historical condition still dominated by capital, turning Marx into a tool of antagonism in the present but also recognising that Marxism is also a cultural and political tradition transmitted across generations.

Inheriting Marx cannot be limited to an act of repetition, merely assessing the validity of a theory, or reinstating an orthodoxy. Transmitting Marx into the present, as the editors of a recent special issue on Marx's bicentenary observe, 'does not mean mechanically applying Marx's thought to 21st-century society. It also does not mean to treat his writings as scriptures, from which one repeats one and the same quotations over and over again.'[6] Inheriting Marx involves an interminable work of interpretation and reading. However, the question of inheritance is much broader than a simple academic debate on textual meaning. Setting interpretation to

[5] Ibid.
[6] Fuchs and Monticelli 2018, p. 407.

work, the process of inheriting outlined in this essay aims to offer a potential link that could help bridge the gap between interpreting and changing the world. If inheritance is not a static object but a reactivation of those futures in the past that have been left unfinished and interrupted, the act of inheriting could act as a point of mediation between theory and praxis, interpretation and militancy. Inheritance would offer, from this standpoint, a more historically conscious precondition for Marxist commitment in the present, whereby coming generations could actively rediscover those elements in the tradition of Marxism that resonate with their structures of feeling.

The question of inheritance can epitomise what Antonio Gramsci would define as a deep and organic 'translatability' of the past into the present: as a philosophy of praxis, Marxism would be the only possible way of ensuring a full translation of elements of past epochs and different cultural heritages into present politics. As Gramsci noted in an important passage of the 11th notebook of his *Prison Notebooks,* an organic concept of translatability would ensure the passage from 'tranquil' theory to political intervention. Drawing on a comment by Hegel on the French Revolution, Gramsci dwells on the insight that Robespierre could be seen as the 'translation' of Kantian philosophy into factual and historical reality. The very possibility of 'translating' the heritage of German philosophical concepts of freedom and subjectivity into the French revolution

demonstrates the fundamental transmissibility of ideas from different historical and social contexts. Even more significantly, this translation is not an abstract and empty nominalism: the only way for philosophy to continue being philosophy, according to Gramsci, is to become politics, to be translated into praxis and history (Gramsci 1472). As an expression of this fundamental transmissibility from theory to praxis, a Marxist concept of inheritance can also suggest a mediation between historical continuity and rupture, avoiding, at the same time, both the risk of presentism and of nostalgia. The space of inheritance intimated in this essay aims to offer such articulation and mediation between the intellectual work of reinterpreting the tradition initiated by Marx and Marxism as a form of direct and institutionalised political engagement.

For this reason, inheriting Marx involves continuing his analysis of class domination, capital accumulation and bourgeois ideology, as they present themselves in the contemporary world. It also means drawing on Marx and the tradition of Marxist thinking and militancy to reimagine the struggle for socialism today. In this article, I will address the question of inheriting Marx through the constellation of two specific historical and intellectual conjunctures: firstly, the publication of Daniel Bensaïd's *Marx for Our Times* in 1995*,* a pivotal work that responds to the question of a Marxist inheritance within a post-1989 world order in which the dominance of capitalism as global system is perceived by many to be absolute and

unchallengeable. In this conjuncture, Bensaïd traces a resurgence of Marx and a revival of the tradition of class struggle. Inheriting Marx becomes, in Bensaïd's thought, a political act of defiance and a way of reimagining history beyond determinism and teleology.

In the second part of this essay, I will continue Bensaïd's thoughtful reappraisal of an untimely Marx by turning to an older text, a 1972 essay by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch titled "Ideas as Transformed Materials in Human Minds, or Problems of Ideological Superstructure (Cultural Heritage)", originally published in Bloch's *Das Materialismusproblem*, which resonates with Bensaïd's research, notwithstanding philosophical and political differences between the two interpreters.[7] Bloch's essay too builds on Marx's views on cultural transmission, especially as Marx developed them in an important section of his introduction to *Grundrisse.* The order of my essay is not chronological but conceptual.

While Bloch wrote his essay twenty years before Bensaïd, the former seems to complement, expand on, and further radicalise the interpretation of the latter. Extending Bensaïd's emphasis on the discordance of times and non-contemporaneity, Bloch mobilises the non-synchronous heritage

[7] Bloch's essay has been translated in English as a chapter of a collection titled *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature.* This is the only available English translation of the essay. All subsequent references to the essay will be from *The Utopian Function*. *Das Materialismusproblem* was published by Bloch after he left the GDR and had moved to West Germany. Jack Zipes, however, notes that Bloch had started to work on a book on materialism during his exile in Paris in the 1930s (Zipes 1988, p. 20). While belonging to Bloch's late period, the essay considered here also draws a line of continuity across Bloch's life, epitomising the very problem of cultural transmission across changing historical circumstances addressed in this essay.

into the prefiguration of a concrete utopia and anticipations of a socialist future. Both Bensaïd and Bloch engage with the same passage from *Grundrisse:* an influential but schematic 'nota bene' in which Marx provides some sketches for a possible theory of a Marxist cultural heritage. While both interpreters focus on the central theme of non-synchronism in Marx, Bensaïd's inheritance highlights the question of the 'discordance' of times as an antidote to positivist and economist deviations from Marxist theory. Building on a comparable critique of positivism and economism, Bloch complements the fundamentally non-synchronic nature of a Marxist notion of heritage by endowing such temporal discordance with what he calls 'elements of rebellion.'[8] The conclusion will return to the opening question about inheritance and, building on Bensaïd and Bloch, will outline a Marxist concept of inheritance that could contribute to think the untimely contemporaneity of Marx and its political significance for the twenty-first century.

1. Daniel Bensaïd: Heritage as Discordance

[8] Bloch 1988, p. 35.

The first part of this essay contextualises Bensaïd's thoughts on inheritance in the historical conjuncture of the early 1990s. Then, it connects Bensaïd's views on the act of inheriting to his wider concept of history by referring to his reading of a passage from Marx's *Grundrisse,* which points to a notion of heritage as discordance of times.

1.1. *The Question of Inheritance*

Evoking Marx today cannot collapse temporal distance or simply pass over historical difference. It cannot, in other words, repress the centuries which, traversing changing material conditions of existence, political transformations and intellectual histories, have brought Marx to the present, especially the watershed signalled by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. As Enzo Traverso writes in his recent book, *Left-Wing Melancholia:*

> The year 1989 stresses a break, a *momentum* that closes an epoch and opens a new one . . . Instead of liberating new revolutionary energies, the downfall of State Socialism seemed to have exhausted the historical trajectory of socialism itself. The entire

> history of communism was reduced to its totalitarian dimension, which appeared as a collective, transmissible memory.[9]

The historical situation produced by the fall of the Soviet Union compels a rethinking of the historicity of Marxism and, most importantly, the question of how the works and life of Marx should be transmitted within a world dominated by the 'singular modernity' of capitalist globalisation.[10] Enzo Traverso opposes the idea of reducing communism to the 'transmissible memory' of a now concluded history and suggests instead reimagining a practice of 'melancholia,' understood as a refusal to mourn and a 'fidelity to the emancipatory promises of revolution.'[11]

Rather than emphasising loss and defeat, Traverso notes that contemporary Marxism requires a relationship with the past that does not necessarily involve 'nostalgia for real socialism and other wrecked forms of Stalinism . . . The lost object can be the struggle for emancipation as historical experience that deserves recollection and attention in spite of its fragile, precarious, and ephemeral duration.'[12] Traverso's reflections address the question of inheriting Marx as a melancholic recollection of a history of struggle that appeared to have been conclusively defeated after

[9] Traverso 2016, p. 2.
[10] The term 'singular modernity' is taken from Jameson 2003.
[11] Traverso 2016, p. 52.
[12] Ibid.

1989. This kind of melancholia emerges, for instance, in the moving beginning of Tariq Ali's *Fear of Mirrors,* subtitled an 'end-of-communism novel,' which represents a melancholic transmission of the promise and dream of socialism:

> At your age my parents talked endlessly of the roads that led to paradise. They were building a very special socialist highway, which would become the bridge to constructing paradise on earth. They refused to be humiliated in silence. They refused to accept the permanent insignificance of the poor . . . How crazy they seem now, not just to you or the world you represent, but to the billions who need to make a better world, but are now too frightened to dream.[13]

Ali's novel expresses, in narrative form, the question of transmitting a revolutionary tradition across different generations in changing historical conjunctures. It is not a coincidence that the problem of how we should 'inherit Marx' was formulated, cogently, by Daniel Bensaïd in the early 1990s, a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of State Socialism.

[13] Ali 2016, p. 1.

Traverso remarks that 'the end of communism . . . had a strong impact on Daniel Bensaïd . . . No longer obsessed with the defence of a revolutionary tradition belonging to a concluded past, he tried to grasp and interpret the features of the new world.'[14] According to Traverso, indeed, the historical conjuncture led Bensaïd to articulate a Marxism that was 'neither apologetic nor conservative,' and to reinstate the legacy of Marx against deviations and critiques that had turned Marxism into positivism or historicism.[15] Instead, Bensaïd's inheritance of Marx was based upon a notion of history as a 'force field made of uncertainties and possibilities, a highly heterogeneous movement pushed on by discordant and fragmented times.'[16] In his preface to the English edition of *Marx for Our Times,* Daniel Bensaïd notes that the year 1989 implied that Marx was finally 'out of quarantine. We no longer have the excuse of his capture by the bureaucracy and confiscation by the state to duck the responsibility of rereading and interpreting him'.[17] The question of inheriting Marx, in a sense, could only be posed after 1989: after the fall of State Socialism, any sort of instruction or embodiment of Marx in actually existing societies seemed to have vanished.

[14] Traverso 2016, p. 210. Bensaïd reflected on the aftermath of 1989 in '"Nouvel ordre' ou instabilité mondiale?. See Bensaïd 1990.
[15] Traverso 2016, p. 215.
[16] Traverso 2016, p. 216.
[17] Bensaïd 2002, p. xi.

The disappearance of really-existing socialism, however, does not do away with Marx, but rather the opposite. It is only in a world totally dominated by capitalism that the question of inheriting Marx becomes problematic, urgent and vital, as the survival of Marx and Marxism cannot be taken for granted as a historical given. The question of inheriting was, for this reason, at the heart of Bensaïd's reflections in *Marx for Our Times.* As he writes in his Preface:

> Inheriting is never an automatic process: it poses questions of legitimacy and imposes responsibilities. A theoretico-political legacy is never straightforward: it is not some possession that is received and banked. Simultaneously instrument and obstacle, weapon and burden, it is always to be transformed. For everything depends upon what is done with this inheritance lacking owners or directions for use.[18]

Bensaïd makes some important points in this brief reflection. First, he notes that the act of inheriting should not be conflated with 'possession' and hence commodity. Taking the question of inheritance seriously means raising the question of how to de-commodify the legacy of Marx in the

[18] Bensaïd 2002, pp. xi-xii.

twenty-first century. Second, Bensaïd suggests that an inheritance can be 'instrument and obstacle, weapon and burden.' [19] This thought emphasises that the act of inheriting is not inherently charged with either emancipatory or oppressive potentialities. An inheritance can be *both* a weapon and a burden, and these two possibilities are dialectically related to the historical circumstances in which they take place. The transmission of an inheritance, in other words, is always part of wider material historical situations and transformations. Third, Bensaïd remarks that an inheritance should not be merely and passively transmitted from one generation to the next.

Inheriting is a concrete process, an act of transformation, an active involvement with the legacy being inherited, which does not, in itself, preclude deviations, betrayals and false consciousness. Fourth, the inheritance of Marx, writes Bensaïd, does not have any 'owners' or 'directions for use'[20]: in contrast to family inheritance, Marx does not automatically select or nominate his future heirs. Who can claim the status of being Marx's heir, and what would this imply? Accordingly, the problem of inheriting Marx raises crucial questions about contemporary Marxism: how to avoid turning Marx into a commodity or a ossified heritage? How can the legacy of Marx be a weapon rather than an obstacle to the struggle

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

for social justice today? How should the inheritance of Marx be *transformed* by its active taking up in the present? How can an inheritance be transmitted, rather than simply lost or betrayed, without owners and without instructions?

At the beginning of his memoir, *An Impatient Life,* Bensaïd goes back to the question of inheritance in vivid terms, stating that it is 'the heirs who decide the inheritance. They make the selection, and are more faithful to it in infidelity than in the bigotry of memorial. For fidelity can itself become a banally conservative routine.'[21] Against the bigotry of a dogmatic or religious Marxism, he redefined the act of inheriting as a more authentic fidelity, which means 'being faithful to the fissure of the event and the moment of truth, where what is usually invisible suddenly reveals itself . . . As opposed to a dogged attachment to a faded past, it means being "faithful to the rendezvous" – whether one of love, politics or history.'[22]

Bensaïd's mention of heritage as fidelity to a rendezvous, including a rendezvous of love, could suggest a way of rethinking the bodily, biological and hence biopolitical dimension of the act of inheritance, something akin to what Immanuel Kant described, in *The Metaphysics of Morals,* as a 'duty of gratitude' of children towards their parents.[23] The Kantian formulation intimates a way of inheriting that would not be

[21] Bensaïd 2013, p. 6.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Kant 1996, p. 71.

reducible to obligation or debt, but rather reveal alternative modes of transmission in the bodily dimension of inheritance. If the ethic of a Marxist inheritance is opposed to any possession, accumulation, commodification or dogma, this does not mean that the act of inheriting is an abstract or merely philosophical one. A materialist and biopolitical inheritance of Marxism would also entail a practice of transmission linked to the field of production of subjectivities; it would give the formation of antagonistic subjects in the present a non-synchronic historical dimensions inscribed in the very bodily existence, productive power and labour of the oppressed.

Bensaïd's thoughts on inheritance posit the question of inheriting in uncertain times, without guarantee, in stark contrast to an idea of heritage as a 'dogged attachment to a faded past.'[24] Rather, inheriting means remaining faithful to that moment of the past that still remains open, living and incomplete, unfulfilled.

The concern with inheritance that appears in many writings by Bensaïd cannot be detached from his political commitment and, most importantly, militancy. In his memoir *An Impatient Life*, Bensaïd refused the concept of public intellectual opting instead for being recognised as a militant, someone who lives in the middle of things, being committed within

[24] Bensaïd 2013, p. 6.

collective action rather than individually, always 'unreconciled with the world as it is', refusing the spectacle and following a 'principle of solidarity and shared responsibility.'[25] The idea of militancy that guided Bensaïd's life also relates to his role as 'passeur' across generations, a role he attributed to Trotsky.[26]

This means that Bensaïd opposed a form of intellectualism detached from history, collective struggle, partisanship and militancy. In *Impatient Life,* he repeatedly mentions the idea that 'our commencements are always recommencements', and that one 'always begins in the middle.'[27] In his critique of Foucault's disillusionment and anti-Marxist pronouncements in the 1970s, Bensaïd noted that the crisis of Marxism and of revolutionary practice does not mean, as Foucault suggested, that 'we are sent back to 1830, in other words we have to start all over from scratch.'[28] Rather, Bensaïd suggests that even in a moment of defeat, one never starts from zero . . . from nothing, from a blank page or a clean slate . . . The age of extremes has come to an end. It can neither wiped nor bracketed out. It is impossible to start again from 1830, from 1875 or from 1917'.[29] This means that any revolution never starts ex nihilo, but rather joins a continuing history of struggle, defeat and resistance.

[25] Bensaïd 2013, pp. 15-16.
[26] Bensaïd 2010, p. 2.
[27] Bensaïd 2013, pp. 16 and 200.

[28] Foucault in Bensaïd 2013, p. 200.
[29] Bensaïd 2013, p. 200.

In his opposition to any presentism and the reduction of politics to desire, Bensaïd claims that revolution in the present needs to build on the 'old dreams of a better future' which inspired past movements of subversion and protest, triggering a rediscovery of Marx not as 'an eternal return to the founding texts, but rather as a necessary detour towards our own present, via byways on which one might meet forgotten companions.'[30] These points are further developed in subsequent interventions by Bensaïd, such as a 2006 interview on the actuality of Marxism, where Bensaïd expands on the idea that Marx's inheritance is not singular but multiple, plural, and uncertain:

> There isn't one heritage, but many: an 'orthodox' (Party or State) Marxism and 'heterodox' Marxisms; a scientistic (or positivist) Marxism and a critical (or dialectical) Marxism; and also what the philosopher Ernst Bloch called the 'cold currents' and 'warm currents' of Marxism. These are not simply different readings or interpretations, but rather theoretical constructions that sometimes underpin antagonistic politics. As Jacques Derrida often repeated, heritage is not a thing that can be

[30] Bensaïd 2013, p. 207.

> handed down or preserved. What matters is what its inheritors do with it – now and in the future.[31]

Bensaïd's fascinating reappraisal of Marx resonates with Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the question of inheritance in *Spectres of Marx,* a book published in the same historical situation of *Marx for Our Times*, a few years after 1989. Derrida writes, indeed, about the inheritance of Marx as a 'double bind' inhabited by 'contradiction and secret.'[32] The act of inheriting Marx, according to Derrida, would not simply involve the transmission of a positive heritage – a thing or a text to be merely appropriated or reiterated in the present. Rather, inheritance is an enigmatic interpellation that situates the heir in the difficult position of having to inherit something that has not been fixated yet. Inheritance would involve, hence, a responsibility without response. Derrida puts it as follows:

> An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing . . .* If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same

[31] Bensaïd 2006, p. 1.
[32] Derrida 1994, p. 213.

> time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret – which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'[33]

As Bensaïd acknowledges, Derrida opened many vital points of reflection, including rethinking the notion of value and the question of inheriting Marx's thought as a secret and an enigma – emphasising the productive, creative dimension of inheriting as a form of labour rather than a 'natural or genetic' pool. Derrida's reflections triggered a set of responses included in the collective volume *Ghostly Demarcations,* which testify to the importance of his thought.[34] However, Derrida's own approach to 'inheriting Marx' remains highly problematic because it is, after all, written from an explicitly *non-Marxist perspective* – even if, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, 'it was good that Derrida wrote *Specters*. Deconstruction has been so long associated with political irresponsibility . . . that it was significant for its inventor to have given his imprimatur to rereading Marx.'[35] However, the responsibility of inheritance would also entail a political and public position-taking obliging the heir to declare her or his partisanship, what Michael Lebowitz aptly describes as 'following

[33] Derrida 1994, p. 18.
[34] Sprinker, 1999,
[35] Spivak 1995, p. 66.

Marx,' understood both as 'coming after' but also as 'following in the same path' asMarx.[36]

Terry Eagleton rightly remarks that deconstruction 'has operated as nothing in the least as radicalised Marxism,' rather offering a kind of academic pseudo-activism utterly detached from socialism: Derrida's inheritance would, in fact, amount to a 'Marxism without Marxism.'[37] To be a true heir of Marx, one must be a socialist. This would make *Spectres of Marx* radically different from Bensaïd's *Marx for Our Times,* which is written as a *Marxist inheritance of Marx.*

Marx's inheritance should not become a sort of possession held tightly by a few legitimate heirs or owners. But in order to be a real inheritance, it should be transmitted within a common tradition and a shared political affiliation: inheritance involves a continuum, taking sides and the responsibilities of an heir. Against what Ellen Meiksins Wood calls 'the default of revolutionary consciousness within the working class and . . . dissociation of intellectual practice from any political movement,' the only way to inherit Marx is to attempt to reconnect intellectual activity and class struggle, assuming the radical continuum of struggles for emancipation and social justice to which Marx himself belonged.[38]

[36] Lebowitz 2009, p. xiii.
[37] Eagleton 1999, p. 84.
[38] Wood 2016, p. 9.

Set in sheer opposition to anti-Marxist or post-Marxist reactions, inheriting Marx obliges one to declare their belonging to the socialist tradition, even if it is configured as the participation in a counter-tradition, and a belonging that involves a radical critique of any commodified and stationary ideal of belonging as possession. Bensaïd's reflections replace the concept of a fixed 'Marxist heritage' in the hands of apologists and academics with a different way of inheriting Marx, one that involves the necessity of 'memory smugglers,' so that 'what, one day, made hope radiate is not forgotten.'[39]

1.2. The Bifurcations of Time: Bensaïd's Reading of Marx

Bensaïd's thoughts on inheritance needs to be linked, more widely, to his theory of historical time and his thoughts concerning the very possibility of inheriting Marx in the present, of turning a nineteenth-century thinker into our living contemporary. This is a central methodological problem that Marx himself helped to formulate, especially in the draft introduction to his *Grundrisse,* in which he reflected on the possibility of survivals and returns of superstructural forms, which would include art, literature, and philosophy, when the material economic and social circumstances have

[39] Bensaïd 2014, p. xxi.

radically changed. More specifically, the passages from Marx's *Grundrisse* that inform Bensaïd's reading are to be found in a nota bene included by Marx at the end of the draft introduction, where Marx expands on what he called 'the uneven development of material production relative to e.g. artistic development.'[40]

A phrase that was to become famous after the theory of 'combined and uneven development' by Leon Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution,* Marx's usage of 'uneven development' in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* has to do with a very specific concept of historical change.[41] Marx suggests, indeed, that seeing society as a totality does not imply homogeneity. The advancement of forces of production, technology, and the economy – what pertains to the 'material' base of society – does not follow the same temporal and historical logics of other aspects of society, such as art and literature, education, politics and the law.

The totality of a given society in a specific historical conjuncture is, for this reason, a discordant, multiple, differentiated totality in which different temporalities or layers of archaic and modern formations coexist side by

[40] Marx 1993, p. 109.
[41] After Trotsky, the term 'combined and uneven development' has been significantly developed in Marxist criticism by Michael Löwy (1981) and the Warwick Research Collective (2015), within current debates on the notion of 'world literature.'

side. Marx further developed his concept of an ‘uneven development’ of different social spheres as follows:

> In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation, the skeletal structure as it were, of its organisation . . . It is well known that Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art but also its foundation. Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chance has Vulcan against Roberts and Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier?[42]

Marx makes some important remarks here pertaining, first of all, to the relationship between the material and the cultural. The first point made by Marx concerns the fact that one cannot reduce the cultural production of an epoch or a society to being a simple mirror of the material conditions of existence. There is a disproportion or discordance between social and

[42] Marx 1993, p. 110.

cultural spheres, leading some epochs to witness a 'flowering' of the arts in relatively 'under-developed' economic circumstances. As Stuart Hall notes in his reading of the *Grundrisse,* 'his argument is that, like "money" and "labour" and "production" itself, art does not "wade its way" in a simple, sequential march from early to late, simple to develope [sic], keeping in step with its material base. We must look at it in its modal connexion and relatedness with other "relations" at specific stages.'[43]

Reflecting on the survival of Greek art in a modern, capitalist society, Marx himself paved the way to thinking the temporality of cultural transmission that will be continued by Bensaïd. If ancient Greek mythology is the 'foundation' of ancient Greek art, how can the latter survive in a modernising, capitalist era in which any mythological foundation is made impossible by scientific discoveries and technological advancement? This question captures an important aspect of Marx's thoughts about inheritance because, while Marx acknowledges that it would be impossible to produce ancient Greek art in a non-mythological, capitalist society, however, paradoxically, traces of the vanished world persist in the present. Marx writes that 'the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and

[43] Hall 1973, p. 62.

that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.'[44]

This passage from the *Grundrisse* should not be dismissed as a reductive view on ancient Greek art as normative canon. The value of Marx's thoughts is not aesthetic but epistemological and methodological. The key problem of the non-contemporaneous, uneven development of culture and society does not consist in the fact that cultural forms become obsolete as the economic base changes, but precisely in the opposite: the paradox is that past cultural and social forms do survive in a changing world and continue to affect the present even after their conditions of possibility have disappeared.

Marx's usage of the concept of uneven development opposes any unilinear, mechanistic view of history as transition from simple to complex, and rather envisages a materialist and dialectic way of connecting cultural and social formations, capitalist and pre-capitalist elements. In *Grundrisse,* indeed, Marx 'starts to conceptualise capital not according to the scheme of *genesis, development, crisis,* but in the combination of these moments and their temporalities.' [45] Instead of a progressive, unilinear and teleological notion of history, the *Grundrisse* intimate a non-synchronic concept of multiple temporalities, a system where what

[44] Marx 1993, p. 111.
[45] Tomba 2013b, p. 403.

Stavros Tombazos calls the 'organic' time of capital – the point where time of production and time of circulation intersect – is complemented by a multiplicity of times, including the reactivation of primitive accumulation and pre-capitalist forms surviving in the present.[46]

Bensaïd builds on Marx's *Grundrisse* in order to propose a way of inheriting Marx that needs to be understood as a critique of historical reason, especially as a critique of teleology and determinism. Bensaïd notes that 'every social formation comprises relations of production that are derivative, transposed, unoriginal . . . There is disjunction, discrepancy, discordance, "uneven relation", and "uneven development" between material production and artistic production, between legal relations and relations of production.'[47] Bensaïd connects the *Grundrisse* to other texts by Marx, especially *Capital* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* which outline a theory of contretemps and discordance at the heart of the Marxist concept of history. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire,* notes Bensaïd, the present 'is always played out in the garb and cast-offs of another age, under assumed names, with words derived from the mother tongue . . . Far from being effaced in its wake, the past continues to haunt the present. Politics is precisely the point where these discordant times intersect.'[48]

[46] Tombazos 2014, p. 5.
[47] Bensaïd 2002, p. 21.
[48] Bensaïd 2002, p. 22.

From this point of view, historical development cannot be seen as a 'tranquil stream,' but rather as 'full of junctions and bifurcations, forks and points.'[49] This is a radically anti-determinist and anti-teleological vision, whereby it is political struggle that determines the (uncertain and contingent) outcome of history, instead of being derivative of an abstract and predetermined plan. Bensaïd hence builds on Marx's reflections on the survival of past forms in order to challenge a concept of social totality as homogeneous ensemble and of history as mechanic causality. He highlights that Marx inspired and articulated a 'new way of writing history.' As Bensaïd continues:

> The new way of writing history invoked by Marx thus introduces the decisive notions of contretemps or non-contemporaneity . . . In articulating these temporalities, which are heterogeneous vis-à-vis one another, Marx inaugurates a non-linear representation of historical development, and opens the way to comparative research.[50]

Bensaïd builds on Marx to propose his own concept of Marxist history as a set of bifurcations and a 'multiplicity of times in which economic cycles,

[49] Bensaïd 2002, p. 23.
[50] Bensaïd 2002, p. 21-22.

organic cycles, ecological cycles, and the deep trends of geology, climate and demography intervene.'[51] Drawing on Bensaïd, Harry Harootunian stresses that, in his 'nota bene,' Marx 'underscored a critical approach to the abstract notion of progress . . . Hereafter, the relationship between real history and written history could no longer be reduced to the narrative that is supposed to impose order on the jumble of facts.'[52]

The idea that Marx introduced a 'new way of writing history' helped Bensaïd configure a concept of the historical present as a multitude of potentialities rather than a fixed interval in time, defending Marx against accusations of determinism, teleology and positivism. But Bensaïd also adopts this concept of history – an inherently Marxist concept of history – to reappraise the figure of Marx himself, as a 'meeting point' where 'the metaphysical legacy of Greek atomism, Aristotelian physics and Hegelian logic is put to the test of the Newtonian epistemological model, the flourishing of historical disciplines, and rapid developments in the knowledge of the living being.' [53] Marx's thought is reinterpreted as 'profoundly anchored in its present' but at the same time overstepping and exceeding that present 'in the direction of the past and the future.'[54] Marx cannot be reduced to expressing some material reality of his times, but

[51] Bensaïd 2002, p. 23.
[52] Harootunian 2015, p. 42.
[53] Bensaïd 2002, p. 4.
[54] Ibid.

rather as a sort of ‘vector’ opening up his times to unpredictable futures and survivals of past forms in a non-simultaneous constellation. Turning Marx into a ‘vector of possibilities,’ Bensaïd paves the way for inheriting Marx as an untimely figure that survives and exceeds the bounds of the historical context in which he lived.

According to Bensaïd, inheriting Marx needs to start by grappling with the multiplicity of layers, times and voices that inhabit the writing of Marx and reverberate throughout the tradition of Marxism. Drawing on a short essay by Maurice Blanchot, Bensaïd stages a non-contemporaneous, discordant inheritance of Marx by linking the historical materialist concept of uneven development to a rereading of Marx’s writing as inhabited by what Blanchot described as a multiplicity of voices:

> Marx does not live comfortably with this plurality of languages, which always collide and disarticulate themselves in him. Even if these languages seem to converge toward the same end point . . . their heterogeneity, the divergence or gap, the distance that decenters them, renders them noncontemporaneous.[55]

[55] Blanchot 1997, p. 100.

A Marxist concept of inheritance, from this point of view, should start by addressing the discordance of time that characterises a materialist understanding of culture and society. The uneven development of cultural and economic forms, indeed, prevent any reduction of heritage to a fixed commodity or object to be simply appropriated. It also paves the way to thinking an asynchronous and antagonistic concept of tradition within a socialist politics.

2. Ernst Bloch: Heritage as Rebellion

The second part of this essay connects Bensaïd's concept of heritage as a discordance of times to Ernst Bloch. It starts by introducing Bloch's concept of Marxism as concrete utopia in relation to Bensaïd's own reflections on utopia and messianism. In spite of taking diverging positions on important issues such as the question of utopia , the two authors share a similar philosophy of time and a common approach to an idea of inheritance as reactivation of non-simultaneous potentialities of the past. Bloch's reading of the same passage from *Grundrisse* analysed by Bensaïd is hence addressed, in the second section, as a rethinking of the political valence of the non-synchronic and untimely dimension of cultural heritage.

2.1. *Marxism between Tradition and Utopia*

Bensaïd's theory of a discordance of times and his reading of Marx's introduction to the *Grundrisse* resonate with another important text written decades before, which offers a possible complement to Bensaïd's rethinking of Marx's untimely timeliness, and a further exploration of the question of 'inheriting Marx.' This is an essay started between 1936 and 1937 but originally published in1972 by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch titled 'Ideas as Transformed Material in Human Minds, or Problems of an Ideological Superstructure (Cultural Heritage).'[56] Written before 1989, but published after Bloch had to leave East Germany (GDR) because of his critique of Stalinist policies on education and his unorthodox Marxist perspective, Bloch's essay revolves around the question of the relationship between art and society, or 'base' and 'superstructure.'[57]

As Cat Moir notes, the publication of Bloch's *Subjekt-Objekt* in 1951 and Bloch's defence of academic freedom against Stalinist policies triggered a debate that resulted in accusations of revisionism against Bloch, who had to step down from his post at the University of Leipzig, and was

[56] The essay originally appeared as chapter 43 of Bloch's *Das Materialismusproblem* (Bloch 1972). While written in 1936-37, the essay was reviewed and expanded from 1969 to 1971 for its first publication in 1972.

[57] Peter Thompson notes that, in his late years, Bloch defined himself as 'not a non-Marxist' in order to avoid association with the Stalinist legacy. Bloch's Marxism needs to be seen as an 'open system' in which 'all movement toward stasis and dogma is to be challenged in a processual dynamic that relies upon an interaction between contingent events and the tendencies and latencies toward progressive change that inhere in human history.' Thompson 2016, p. 441.

eventually declared ‘un-Marxist’ in a 1957 tribunal set against him.[58] The English translation of Bloch’s essay on cultural heritage was Included in a larger section of *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* titled ‘Art and Society,’ Bloch’s essay deals with a Marxist conceptualisation of the production of culture beyond the dualism of idea and matter, or base and superstructure. In particular, Bloch critiques the reduction of Marxism to economism, and shows instead that a Marxist point of view enables the analysis of society as a totality of interrelated processes and practices.[59] Yet, Bloch proposed a creative and humanist materialist philosophy, in which Marxism is not only cold, objective analysis of capitalism, but also the striving for a concrete utopia, the promise of a future human emancipation expressed by the defeated struggles and hopes of past generations: ‘Bloch's concept of utopia is grounded in history, is directed toward political and revolutionary activity and acknowledges class struggle as the way to concrete utopia.’[60]

Bensaïd cannot be fully aligned with Bloch in relation to many important questions, including the Blochean formulation of the notion of utopia, of which Bensaïd was far more skeptical. Indeed, in a 1995 essay titled

[58] Moir 2018, p. 210.

[59] Bloch’s thoughts are in constant, critical conversation with those of Georg Lukács, who also reflected on the fact that ‘it is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality.’ Lukács 1971, p. 27. Bloch’s notion of an open-ended, non-contemplative and critical totality, however, is very different from Lukács’s concept of totality. Bloch engaged with this concept in *Heritage of Our Times*. Bloch 1991, p. 115.

[60] Kellner and O’Hara 1976, p. 30.

‘Utopia and Messianism,’ Bensaïd critiqued Bloch for having failed to translate the utopian imagination into practice, and for what he perceived was Bloch’s missed critique of Stalinism in the 1950s: ‘for him, in the binary world post-Yalta, the utopian line of flight is a form of provisional compromise with a bureaucratic order that he refuses without daring to confront head-on.’[61]

While Bensaïd acknowledged that Bloch’s utopianism, especially as Bloch developed it in *The Principle of Hope,* could offer ‘a line of resistance to the Stalinist bureaucratic order, and a response to the “undernourishment of the revolutionary imagination”,’ however, Bloch’s ‘anti-bureaucratic utopia would then be the expression of a non-practical feeling of democratic socialism and of the actual withering-away of the state.’[62] According to Bensaïd, Bloch’s version of utopia could only reduce revolution to a cultural revolution and did not offer really effective tools to militant political struggle. Furthermore, Bensaïd perceived Bloch’s emphasis on the future, the not-yet and anticipatory consciousness to undervalue the importance of the past in guiding social transformations in the present.

[61] Bensaïd 2016, 5. Kellner and O’Hara address Bloch’s defence of Soviet Marxism in the 1950s as a contradiction between his politics and his philosophy. Bloch distanced himself from Stalinism after the 1950s and was hence harshly critiqued in the GDR. Kellner and O’Hara 1976, p. 14.
[62] Bensaïd 2006, p. 4.

It is important to recognise Bensaïd's critique of Bloch and to stress that, on the important problem of utopia, the two authors cannot be fully aligned. However, looking at Bloch's thoughts on the questions of cultural heritage, tradition and cultural transmission, can complicate any sheer opposition between the two authors. Indeed, Bloch's concept of cultural heritage should not be seen as a mere retreat from political engagement, but rather as a necessary precondition to construct a tradition of struggle against oppression, creating a sense of solidarity across the generations and reviving antagonism in the present, which can be productively aligned with Bensaïd's own view on inheritance.

Indeed, Bloch's 1972 reflections on inheritance build on and extend a concept of tradition as discordance of time and non-synchronous coexistence of temporal strata, turning the past into a repository of unrealised potentialities and anticipations of contemporary sites of struggles. An idea of heritage as key political dimension necessary to social struggle runs through Bloch's entire philosophical development, before and after his experience during the 1950s in East Germany. It is from the point of view of reactivating the legacy of defeated and enslaved generations of the past, for example, that Bloch revisited the figure of sixteenth-century radical theologian Thomas Münzer as anticipation of future revolutionary struggles, already in his 1921 book on Münzer. As Peter Thompson remarks, in his 1921 book, Bloch suggested that 'the

desire for human liberation can crop up at inappropriate times and in inappropriate ways. The peasants uprising in 1525 . . . are seen as early attempts to achieve communism based in collectivized property relations and social egalitarianism but whose time came far too soon.'[63]

In his comparative reading of Bloch and Walter Benjamin, Bensaïd clearly prefers the latter, endorsing Benjamin's messianism as an alternative to Bloch's utopia, though of course the fact that Benjamin died in 1940 makes Bensaïd comparative reading of the two authors even more untimely, as Benjamin could not have engaged with the situation of the 1950s. Bensaïd remarks that while 'Bloch focuses his attention on the emancipatory potential of the daydream, Benjamin, above all, looks to awaken the world from its nightmares inhabited by the fetishes of capital.'[64] Bensaïd portrays Bloch's utopia as a sort 'religious nostalgia' but nonetheless recognises some 'parallel trajectories' between Bloch and Benjamin: 'both combine the promises of future liberation with the redemption of an oppressed past. Both share the same suspicion of victories and the same feeling of debt towards the defeated.'[65] Bensaïd points out important differences between the two authors, but in my view, differences should not cover up fundamental affinities between Bloch and Benjamin, especially their shared emphasis on rethinking the question of

[63] Thompson 2013, p. 15.
[64] Bensaïd 2016, 6.
[65] Bensaïd 2016, 1.

a tradition of the oppressed whereby the past could become the source of unrealised possibilities of social transformations, hence the necessity to define a kind of intellectual labour oriented towards the future in the past, challenging unlinearity and determinism.

In her thoughtful critique of Susan Buck-Morss's opposition between Bloch and Benjamin, Cat Moir similarly stresses the closeness of the two authors on the question of the utopian imagination. Moir writes, from this point of view:

> Bloch rested revolutionary hope simply on dreams no more than either he or Benjamin rested it simply on technology. In volume two of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch explicitly examines various forms of technology as potential bearers of the desire for emancipatory transformation. Simultaneously, as we have seen, he invokes the concept of *Heimat* [imagined homeland] partly as a critique of technological 'progress'. Ultimately, though, for both Bloch and Benjamin, neither wishful images nor technology are sufficient without political action. Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, and Bloch's articulation of it in the *Heimat* figure, make history as a call to action visible.[66]

[66] Moir 2016, p. 11.

Showing the deep affinity with Benjamin's messianic concept of the dialectical image, Cat Moir notes that the value of 'Bloch's utopianism lies in its ability to highlight the historical debt the present owes to the catastrophic failures of past attempts at social liberation.'[67] Accordingly, Iin spite of Bensaïd's critique of Bloch, there are many common elements that connect the two thinkers, who can be placed alongside each other in a series. It is not by chance that Enzo Traverso concludes his recent analysis of Bensaïd with a reference to Bloch's idea of a 'concrete utopia' as a way of characterising Benjamin's and Bensaïd's philosophies of social transformation.[68] Bloch and Bensaïd share a common rejection of unilinear, teleological concepts of history, and both strongly oppose a reduction of Marxism to the positivist ideal of *homo oeconomicus*. Indeed, in his 1972 essay, Bloch offers a compelling critique of economism and the reduction of cultural forms to 'epiphenomenal reflection of socioeconomic tendencies,'[69] thence echoing Bensaïd's emphasis on the discordance of times. Against economism and teleology, Bloch proposed an 'open' dialectics attentive to the inaudible elements of history and social struggle.[70]

[67] Moir 2016, p. 13.
[68] Traverso 2016, 234.
[69] Durst 2001, p. 174.
[70] Bloch 1976.

In my analysis of Bloch, I do not suggest that Bloch and Bensaïd do not have any differences and discordances, but aim to suggest that their philosophies of time can be seen as two ways of imagining historical materialism as a political mobilisation of non-synchronism. In his Preface to *Marx's Temporalities,* Massimiliano Tomba mentions both authors in a paragraph in which he explores the 'political problem of "remembrance," as against the postmodern destruction of memory' and the need for thinking events 'simultaneously in a historical and non-historical way: historical, because they belong to the past; non-historical, because they leap out of the past as a possible future.'[71] Closely linked to their concepts of historical time, Bloch's and Bensaïd's common references to Marx's mention of an 'uneven development' of culture and society in the *Grundrisse* show deep affinities that contribute to a continuing discourse on the question of inheriting Marx.

Bloch gives further meaning and political value to a notion of history as vector of possibilities, exploded present and discordance of times. Indeed, this concept of history does not simply prevent any reduction of Marxism to determinism or teleology. Bloch also redefines the very concept of 'inheritance' and a Marxist cultural heritage as something radical different from the triumphal march of the oppressor and continuum of domination.

[71] Tomba 2013, p. ix.

In this regard, Douglas Kellner notes that ‘Bloch's work is a magnificent project of decoding our cultural heritage to restore to us our human potential. His concept of the "not-yet" militates against the notion of an innate, ahistorical human essence, for our species has not-yet become what it can be and thus has not yet realised its humanity.’[72]

The significance of Bloch’s concept of heritage, indeed, is set against the Marxist dismissal of cultural heritage as ideology of the ruling class, as well as against Walter Benjamin’s idea of a ‘tradition of the oppressed’ as a sequence of breaks and disjunctures. In contrast to the reduction of heritage to hegemony, Bloch envisages *the possibility of an emancipatory historical continuum* that would be a vital element for realising socialism. Cultural heritage operates as a link connecting the dreams and struggles of different generations in a non-synchronous form of historical transmission.

2.2. Mobilising Discordance: Bloch’s Reading of Marx

In his 1972 essay, Bloch draws, explicitly, on the same passage from *Grundrisse* later analysed by Bensaïd, concerning the uneven development of social and cultural forms in history. In a similar way, Bloch

[72] Kellner 1983, p. 281.

addresses the discordance between base and superstructure and reflects on how Marx's idea of an 'uneven development' of art and society leads to rethinking the very notions of history *and heritage* from a Marxist perspective. He remarks:

> The ancient slave and feudal societies no longer exist, but this is not the case with Greek and medieval art. Both have experienced numerous revivals in history that bring out new problems and continue to show their validity. Marx himself emphasised this 'non-synchronous development.' He considered Greek art and eternal and even incomparable model. In other words, there is a relative return of the cultural superstructure even when the base disappears, and this return is subsumed by the so-called cultural heritage quite independently of preservation through censorship or imitation.[73]

Bloch adopts here the concept 'non-synchronous development' as a keyword to redefining the transmission of cultural heritage. The term 'non-synchronous' plays a central role in Bloch's own philosophy of history and especially in his *Heritage of Our Times,* where he formulates a theory of non-synchronism as a way of explaining the rise of Nazism in the 1930s.

[73] Bloch 1988, pp. 33-34.

In the context of his 1972 essay, Bloch refers to Marx's notion of 'non-synchronous [or uneven] development' to rethink cultural heritage. Bloch notes that the survival of cultural forms after the collapse of the social system out of which they originated is often perceived as a 'return' and 'revival.' The first statement advanced by Bloch concerns the use of the term 'cultural heritage' to indicate the 'return of the cultural superstructure' after the disappearance of the base.

Cultural heritage is, from this point of view, an inherently posthumous process, a formation expressing the outliving of social totality. The second, equally important, point made by Bloch concerns the fact that cultural heritage does not equal a simple preservation of the past in the present. The return of expired cultural forms, in other words, should not be confused with the musealisation or monumentalisation of these forms. Heritage is, for this reason, radically different from memory, remembrance or preservation.

Bloch's method of analysis is dialectical and materialist: cultural heritage subsumes the returns of the past into the materiality of the present. Such a return, he writes, 'demonstrates the difference between the ideologically unreflected base and culture and the creatively postulated transformations in a more or less pointed manner.'[74] Cultural heritage

[74] Bloch 1988, p. 34.

needs to be seen, accordingly, as a material process whereby elements of the past return in the present and are revived as part of a new social constellation and new conditions of existence. At this point, however, Bloch introduces a powerful thought that goes beyond a simple notion of heritage as return or revival of something that still speaks to the present even if the original social conditions in which it emerged no longer exist. Indeed, building on the question of the 'uneven' or 'non-synchronous' development of art and society, Bloch focuses on a specific observation advanced by Marx in *Grundrisse*:

> Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art, but also its foundation . . . Greek art presupposes Greek mythology, in other words that natural and social phenomena are already assimilated in an unintentionally artistic manner by the imagination of the people.[75]

In Bloch's analysis, these reflections by Marx become explosive forms of critique, true weapons of criticism that indicate a notion of cultural heritage radically opposed to heritage as monument of oppression.

Bloch's argument develops Marx's insights by showing that the reappearance of outmoded cultural forms in subsequent social systems –

[75] Marx 1993, p. 111.

e.g. Greek art in capitalist societies – testifies to a property of all cultural heritage: the fact that cultural heritage is a transformation of society rather than a mere reproduction of it. When heritage is wrested from its epoch, in other words, some aspects of the original heritage come into view and are reactivated. Bloch explains:

> So, even after mythology has disappeared or has dried up through the rational, subject-object relationship, even since the Renaissance, the artistic transformation still lives from mythological elements that are recollected . . . And this is possible (even if we take into consideration the first false consciousness to which mythology contributed many times) because the mythology that preceded art (even the pre-Greek) was the first and most prevalent medium of change.[76]

Bloch's reflections result in a further rethinking of cultural heritage as medium of change still visible in the pre-modern mythology carried over into the capitalist age. While mythology can operate as false consciousness and reconciliation of social contrasts, writes Bloch, the return of mythological elements in the present also testifies to a different

[76] Bloch 1988, p. 34.

role of mythology – and opens the possibility of a different politics of cultural transmission.

The return of the past in a non-synchronic manner reveals the fundamentally active, transformative role of culture. Beyond preservation, cultural heritage consists in the reactivation of the transformative force embodied in the cultural traces and inheritances that are being handed over. What lives on, in other words, is not the mummified, ossified remnants of the past – a ghost haunting the present – but the seeds of material and social transformation that the heritage firstly embodied and operated in its place of origin.

This concept leads Bloch to reimagine the very idea of mythology, as he comments:

> The first appearances of mythology precede the starting point of the division of labour and the formation of classes. They can be found in primitive communism itself and in later, increasing elements of rebellion . . . At that time it was not the task of mythos to convey and normalise social contradictions in an imaginative way. Rather, myth tended to convey the fear and tension in relation to nature that was felt to be eerie . . . That which is itself untrue in the mere mythological

> as such is the hypostatisation of its conceptions . . .in a *rigid and existing postulated transcendence.*[77]

Bloch's rethinking of mythology overcomes any simple reduction of the mythological to reconciliation and 'normalisation' of social contradictions in pre-modern societies. Rather, Bloch emphasises that the surviving elements of myth are 'elements of rebellion,' conveying fears and tensions at work in society. There is what Bloch calls a 'surplus' of meaning in myth, which exceeds a mere reiteration and pacification of society and returns in subsequent epochs as an unreconciled sign of still surviving social antagonism. Accordingly, Anson Rabinbach observes that 'though Bloch recognises that there is a regressive aspect to myth . . . myth demonstrates for him its purpose in all symbolic culture which derives from an unsatisfied hunger, from a no longer articulate, repressed past that strives to transcend the boundaries of that which has not yet been.'[78]

In the twentieth century, the regressive side of the return of mythology was analysed by Bloch in his *Heritage of Our Times* to address the rise of fascism and Nazism. Indeed, 'Bloch got into a lot of trouble with his fellow Marxists in the 1930s for taking fascism seriously, rather than dismissing it as a simple capitalist aberration or a delusion.'[79] For Bloch,

[77] Bloch 1988, p. 35.
[78] Rabinbach 1977, p. 10.
[79] Thompson 2013, p. 16.

fascism could be seen as a ‘true conservative revolution’ that mobilised, appropriated and diverted a romantic critique of modernity into a genocidal reinstatement of capitalist relations of oppression and exploitation. As Peter Thompson notes, ‘while Bloch criticises the romantic, the nostalgic, and the backward-looking, he does not criticise their impulses.’[80]

Instead of dismissing fascism, Bloch attempted a true Marxist – dialectical and materialist – analysis of fascism as political mobilisation of non-synchronic elements, which in his view needed to be reclaimed as tools for socialist politics and wrested from fascism. These ‘elements of rebellion’ or ‘cultural surplus’ embody the potential to defy the ideological function of culture as legitimation of hegemonic social relations and carry over a secret history of struggle in the making of cultural heritage. Indeed, these elements incorporate a primitive resistance to capitalism and the unrealised dream of a communist world. The role of this rebellious cultural surplus is to intimate utopian possibilities of social transformation. In myth, in other words, there are elements that transcend their historical period and the function of ideological reproduction in order to survive in subsequent times as signposts of unrealised social transformations that have not taken place, yet could take place, in the future.

[80] Ibid.

A concept of cultural heritage as a rebellious 'cultural surplus' that goes beyond ideology and intimates possibilities of social transformation is important because it allows Bloch to continue his analysis of Marx, especially the passage from the *Grundrisse* about the non-synchronic or uneven development of culture and society.

The key insight developed by Bloch consists in applying Marx's ideas about the temporal discordance between art and culture to Marx himself. In other words, Bloch adopts his concept of a rebellious cultural heritage as a way to reinterpret Marxism and the way in which Marxism has become a tradition and heritage, without succumbing to the bourgeois mode of cultural transmission based on ownership and alienation. Indeed, Bloch notes that Marxism involves a concept of history pitted against the *res gestae* of a few selected leaders and 'great men,' giving the role of history-makers back to the working class. Yet, 'Marxism itself, which appears to dethrone people, is named after the mighty person of its founder, and Marxism is what it is because the great moment found a great specimen, not just a Proudhon or even a Lassalle.'[81]

Bloch adopts the term 'genius' to redefine the cultural significance of Marx as founder of a tradition that survived its own historical epoch and that, because of its abilities to go beyond ideology, keeps returning in

[81] Bloch 1988, p. 37.

subsequent times as a revolutionary force. This heritage keeps the name of its founder as its recognisable sign: taking Marx as a guide to change the present, even if in a heretic and unorthodox form, still constitutes the basis of Marxism. Marx's 'genius,' according to Bloch, consisted in having ripped open his own times instead of simply justifying and interpreting them. In contrast to ideology, which gives an epoch its illusory solutions and harmonisations, cultural heritage embodies a utopian dimension that opens up time to a multitude of unrealised potentials, carrying them over into the future.

This concept of cultural heritage does not simply offer a way of 'inheriting Marx,' but it also involves a *Marxist redefinition of the concept of heritage itself.* Bloch offers a long paragraph in order to define an historical materialist, Marxist notion of inheritance, by building on and going beyond Walter Benjamin's critique of heritage in his theses on the concept of history. Benjamin had denounced how cultural treasures, spiritual achievements and monuments of culture were at the same time documents of oppression and barbarism, manifesting and reinstating the system of violence that had made the making of those cultural treasures possible in the first place.

Against Benjamin's reduction of cultural heritage to commodity and testimony of exploitation, Bloch proposes a different notion of heritage, which would encompass Marxism itself. He writes:

> Cultural heritage only becomes what it is when the heir does not die along with the benefactor, when he stands on the side of the future in the past, when he stands with what is indelible in the cultural heritage and not with the takeover of parasitical rulers. Cultural heritage will stop being a victory march . . . as soon as the earth possesses the power to transform what has been transmitted by the past into something immortal and, if necessary, in spite of itself, to transform what is anticipated that continues to be an element in it . . . It operates as the *successive continuation of the implications* in the cultural constellation of the past gathered around us as non-past.[82]

Bloch's summary of a renewed Marxist notion of cultural heritage is important for many reasons. First, it gives an interpretative key to reimagine the meaning of 'inheriting Marx' as the imperative to define a Marxist concept of heritage, which would include the transmission of Marx himself in it. Second, Bloch's materialist notion of heritage points out that, while the oppressor appropriates culture in order to reproduce and to legitimise their rule, the workers are those who *make the heritage* and

[82] Bloch 1988, p. 46.

hence should reclaim it as their own. Benjamin's maxim about every monument of culture being at the same time a monument of barbarism is true, but it should not erase the fact that monuments of culture *become monuments of barbarism but are not exhausted by the barbaric system that appropriates them.*

From this point of view, Bloch's reflections on inheritance seem to echo some aspects addressed by Benjamin in his writings on the figure of the collector as historical materialist. Thus, in his essay 'Unpacking My Library,' Benjamin compared the collector to an heir responsible for the survival and transmission of the past, remarking that 'the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility' (66). However, the past being transmitted and inherited should not be seen as a commodity or a fetish. In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin offered a critique of 'the disintegration of culture into goods which become objects of possession for mankind,' stressing instead that the 'work of the past remains uncompleted for historical materialism' (35).

The concept of heritage intimated in these remarks emphasises the transmission of what is unfinished and incomplete in the past. This concept involves a shift from heritage as object to heritage as a 'work of the past' that is being reactivated in the present. Heritage does not mean handing down dead objects but rather the insertion of a specific historical experience in a constellation able to 'integrate their pre- as well as post-

history; and it is their post-history which illuminates their pre-history as a continuous process of change' (28). Heritage means hence the insertion, through the interminable work of inheriting, of a singular historical event or temporal fragment into a dialectical, critical constellation 'in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this present' (28).As cultural work transmitted through the generations, cultural heritage contains the seeds of a concrete utopia in the present; heritage is a work of transformation that survives because the transformation it promises has not yet been fully accomplished. The third, vital aspect of Bloch's concept of heritage concerns the fact that heritage should not be merely seen as an element of the past but, rather, as a utopian, anticipatory consciousness of political possibilities stored in the transmission of culture. As Anson Rabinbach notes, 'for Bloch the past is a beacon within the present, it illuminates the horizon of that possibility which has not yet fully come into view, which has yet to be constructed.'[83] Accordingly, Bloch's concept of tradition 'is not the handed-down relic of past generations, but an image of the future which, though geographically located in a familiar landscape, points beyond the given.'[84]

History proceeds, according to Bloch, as an open-ended dialectics, whereby the heritage of a historical period should not be seen as a closed,

[83] Rabinbach 1977, p. 6.
[84] Ibid.

finished object of contemplation. Heritage should not be transmitted as museum relic or as spoils to be appreciated or reconstructed. Heritage as such is incomplete and requires a work of continuation and completion, building on Bloch's dialectical notion that history 'is only history because it stands in the light of its completion, its end. The completion remains outside the efficacy of the historical process itself and yet could not exist without it.'[85]

As Caroline Edwards observes in an essay on Bloch's literary criticism, 'Bloch's lasting achievement . . . was to rescue the centrality of utopia within literary and cultural life as a crucial catalyst for political agency; shaping interventions into a social reality that he saw as fundamentally unfinished.'[86] In sum, Bloch's rescue of the notion of cultural heritage as a weapon of the oppressed has wider implications for answering the question which opened this essay, once again: what could the phrase 'inheriting Marx' possibly mean?

3. Conclusion: Reality plus the Future

[85] Siebers 2011, p. 64.
[86] Edwards 2013, p. 202.

Confronting Daniel Bensaïd and Ernst Bloch on the question of inheritance can lead to rethinking the very concepts of heritage, cultural transmission and tradition in Marxism. This comparative reading suggests, first of all, that the concept of heritage, and the related notion of inheriting, should not be dismissed as either mere repetition or dogma or, on the other hand, as synonym with capitalist appropriation, triumphal march of the oppressor and dispossession of the poor. Inheriting is key to keeping the Marxist tradition and struggle for socialism alive and has to do with vital problems at the heart of Marxism. In particular, a Marxist concept of inheritance indicates that transmitting from the past should become a way of rediscovering unrealised potentialities for social liberation, imagining the future by turning to the possibilities, dreams, hopes and struggles of the past. Bensaïd's emphasis on heritage as discordance of time and temporal bifurcation needs to be complemented by Bloch's suggestion that heritage contains utopian elements of rebellion testifying to the open-ended nature of history as constantly made and unmade through social struggle.

Inheriting Marx entails imagining a mode of cultural transmission that does not turn heritage into commodity or ideological reproduction of capitalism. It means thinking an historical materialist concept of heritage understood as cultural work that the oppressed need to reclaim as their own, wresting the production of culture from the barbarism and the appropriations of the

capitalist system. A Marxist heritage is, from this point of view, an equivalent of the expropriation of the expropriators in the realm of culture. It means placing Marx, once again, in the hands of cultural producers of today, and to revive Marx's legacy as a constellation of the non-past within the present. In the concluding passage of his 1935 essay, 'Marxism and Poetry,' Bloch portrayed Marxism as integral part of 'the imagination of the people,' and highlighted its relevance to poetic production. As he wrote:

> Marxist reality means: reality plus the future within it. Marxism proves by bringing about concrete changes that are left open: there is still an immeasurable amount of unused dreams, of unsettled historical content, of unsold nature in the world.[87]

If Marxism means understanding reality 'plus the future within it,' the inheritance of Marx points towards what has not yet been accomplished rather than the spectres of a past now gone. Drawing on a distinction which Bloch famously proposed in the first volume of *The Principle of Hope,* it might be said that inheriting Marx means keeping both the 'cold' and 'warm' streams of Marxism alive today. By 'cold' stream, Bloch meant 'the science of struggle and opposition against all ideological inhibitions

[87] Bloch 1988, p. 162.

and concealments of the ultimately decisive conditions, which are always economic.'[88] Combined with the cold analysis of material conditions and critique of ideology, the heritage of Marx also includes a 'warm stream,' which Bloch identifies as the striving towards the goal of human emancipation and the 'construction of communism,' of which Marxism constitutes the 'strongest consciousness' and 'highest practical mindfulness.'[89] The 'warm' stream, Bensaïd notes in his essay on Bloch and Benjamin, represents the 'sudden appearance of the virtual' in the 'cold' analysis of reality.[90]

The heritage of Marx includes the transmission of this 'virtual' dimension or real possibility along with the factual history and intellectual tradition of Marxism. Inheriting Marx means, in the end, to reimagine a new temporality and a new sense of historicity. In *Marx for Our Times,* Bensaïd reflects on the new 'temporality of knowledge' articulated by Marx as follows:

> Knowledge of the past cannot consist in donning its cast-offs, slipping into its shoes, or taking in the completed picture of universal History in some panoramic view . . . but to permit a fleeting glimpse, through a half-opened door and in flickering torchlight, of the still

[88] Bloch 1986, p. 209.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Bensaïd 2016, p. 4.

> unsettled landscape of what is desirable. A *prefiguration of the future* lacks the certainty of a predictable end.[91]

What Bensaïd describes as a 'prefiguration of the future' in the past resonates with Bloch's rethinking of the utopian dimension of cultural heritage, the 'what-is-in-possibility' of the past. It offers a continuation of Marx's own thoughts on the 'uneven development' of culture and society from his introduction to *Grundrisse.* Inheriting Marx means inheriting the uncertainty about a future, which can only be constructed, step by step, through constant struggle for social justice, without guarantee. While 'the weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force,' as Marx commented, however 'theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.'[92] Inheriting Marx could hence mean, in the end, finding such 'material force' in those prefigurations that survive, despite defeat, in the dreams and in the struggles of past generations.

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[91] Bensaïd 2002, p. 27.
[92] Marx 1992, p. 251.

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