

Language and critique: Some anticipations of critical discourse studies in Marx

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Abstract

We examine Marx's critiques of language, politics, and capitalist political economy and show how these anticipated critical discourse and argumentation analysis and 'cultural political economy'. Marx studied philology and rhetoric at university and applied their lessons critically. We illustrate this from three texts. *The German Ideology* critically explores language as practical consciousness, the division of manual and mental labour, the state, hegemony, intellectuals, and specific ideologies. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* studies the semantics and pragmatics of political language and how it represents (or misrepresents) the class content of politics and contributes to social transformation. *Capital* deconstructs the categories of classical political economy and their constitutive role in capitalist social relations. This is one aspect of CPE. *Capital* also highlights the structural and agential aspects of these relations, their contradictory dynamic, and their crisis-prone character. We comment on this aspect too. This said, Marx held that social transformation is mediated through political imaginaries and highlighted the need for the proletariat to develop a 'poetry' of the future. We then consider the misleading 'base-superstructure' metaphor and note how, against the thrust of Marx's work, it tends to reify culture. The article concludes that Marx contributed to the critique of semiotic as well as political economy.

Keywords

Base-superstructure metaphor; capitalist mode of production; critique; cultural political economy; Eighteenth Brumaire; historical materialism; intellectuals; Marx; philology; semiosis

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We examine Marx's critiques of language, politics, and the capital relation as pre-theoretical anticipations of critical discourse and argumentation analysis (Fairclough & Graham, 2002) and the semiotic turn in 'cultural political economy' (Sum & Jessop, 2013). We illustrate these remarks from four texts: *The German Ideology*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *Capital* and its preparatory works (such as the *Grundrisse*), and the 'Preface' to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. We conclude by putting discourse in its rightful place in Marx's critique of political economy and outlining a theoretical agenda based on this analysis.

Five remarks situate our analysis. First, understanding philology was central to university education when Marx was a student thanks in part to Hegel's effort to 'teach philosophy to speak German', not Latin, so that it could be linked to ordinary life and be intelligible to ordinary people, thereby helping to build a German nation (Hegel, 1984, p. 107; Harris, 1983, pp. 402–13). Gramsci argued that 'all men are "philosophers"' and that to win hegemony requires linking everyday spontaneous philosophies to more systematic ones through politics (Gramsci 1971, pp. 323, 325; 1975, Q8, §204). Marx studied at the University of Berlin, founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who promoted classical studies, comparative philology, and historical anthropology (DeGolyer, 1992, pp. 115–19; Patterson, 2009, p. 32; Turner, 2014, pp. 127–36; cf. Levine, 1987, and Jones, 2016, on the German historical school of law, which Marx also studied in Berlin). Second, in this spirit and in the rhetorical tradition that he imbibed at school and university, Marx wanted to help the masses to develop their own language, their own political imaginary, to better express their needs and demands. This holds particularly for subaltern classes. Hence, third, an unstated 'guiding thread' in his theoretical and political practices was 'translational' work to turn mystifying speculation into a prosaic language suited to a scientific socialist programme – supported, as required, by skilful use of rhetoric (cf. Martin, 2015).

Fourth, Marx and Engels aimed to demystify not only religion, like their fellow Young Hegelians, but also, unlike them, the secular language of the ruling class, including bourgeois morality, bourgeois 'theory', and the ideas of leading German intellectuals (Cook, 1982; Williams, 1977, pp. 21–26). This goal was central to their approach to *Ideologiekritik* as they deconstructed, 'debased', and disclosed the 'rational kernel' of

the categories and ideas that informed dominant and rival social imaginaries and helped construct social relations of domination (on debasing, see Pepperell, 2014).

Fifth, Marx used language skilfully for political as well as scientific effect (Marx, 1979, pp. 14–16). Witness *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which adopts powerful literary techniques to narrate the background of the eponymous president's *coup d'état* (Marx, 1979). Other powerful works in this vein include the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels, 1976b) and, perhaps surprisingly, *Capital* (cf. Pepperell, 2010; Jameson, 2013).

The German Ideology: discourse and social structure

We begin with a disparate set of manuscripts that Marx and Engels wrote mainly for self-clarification in 1845–46 and subsequently consigned to ‘the gnawing criticism of the mice’ (Marx, 1987b, pp. 262–4). They were first printed posthumously in 1924 in a factitious compilation, *Die deutsche Ideologie* (on their subsequent publication history, see Carver, 2010). The manuscript on Feuerbach, which became Part I of this compilation (Marx & Engels, 1976a, pp. 31–93), has long been widely heralded as the foundational text of ‘historical materialism’. It argues that a materialist – as opposed to idealist – conception of history should begin with living individuals, not abstract man, analysing how they organize material life to satisfy their changing needs, broadly defined, and propagate the species. Such activities form humankind's material mode of production and underpin a definite mode of life. The need to coordinate interaction with nature and/or other people gives rise to language, which, in its plain, ordinary, or everyday form, they write in line with contemporary comparative philology, expresses the practical consciousness of nature, other humans, and social relations. The unity of hand, larynx, and brain as the biological foundation of language is matched on the social level by the unity of production, language, and consciousness (Höppe, 1982, p. 28; Marx & Engels, 1976a, pp. 36, 44; cf. Engels, 1987). In sum, language is treated both as an *intellectual* force of production arising from and enabling social cooperation and as a necessary, constitutive part of any mode of life (Marx & Engels, 1976a, pp. 51–60; cf. Marx, 1975, pp. 298–9, 304; Marx, 1987a, pp. 538–40, 548–9; and Höppe, 1982, p. 55).

The text on Feuerbach then comments on social reproduction, political economy, the state, hegemony, intellectuals, and specific ideologies. It posits that social development involves a growing division between mental and manual labour (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 60). Moreover, the more that mental is separated from manual labour, the greater the tendency to treat ideas as lacking foundations in material life, almost as if ideas descend from heaven. In this sense, symbolic forms do not mirror social structure (as Durkheim's sociology of religion [1976] suggests) but, to continue the metaphor, are reflections in *a series of distorting mirrors* that shape construals of, and conduct towards, the world in quite diverse ways. In particular, where mental production is relatively separate from material production, we find the 'pure', even esoteric, language of ideologists in such fields as theology, metaphysics, and ethics. The same separation inclines intellectuals to explain events and practices in terms of free-floating ideas, cut loose from reality (pp. 44–45, 55–56, 92).

Thus, against a common misperception that later parts of this text critique the illusions of everyday lived experience, false consciousness, or bourgeois ideological manipulation of the masses, they actually critique specific intellectuals and ideological currents. The main charge is that they took features specific to diverse modern social forms and practices for granted, never considered why these features developed when and where they did, and, thanks to this neglect, naturalized them.

Marx and Engels also argued that ideologies differ from other sets of ideas because they serve the interests of power and domination; and, relatedly, they explored how ideological effects emerge – consciously or not – from language use in diverse contexts (cf. Foucault 2000 on truth regimes and, for a more nuanced analysis closer to our approach, Weir 2008). Reflecting this, their later efforts at *Ideologiekritik* targeted *specific* ideologies – technological paradigms, economic doctrines, legal systems, political imaginaries, party programmes, religious belief systems, philosophies, and general systems of ideas – in terms of how they obscured, mystified and legitimated social relations of exploitation and/or domination (McCarney, 1980, pp. 10–11). Marx and Engels also recognized that the most powerful ideological effects may be sedimented in language, language use, practical consciousness, and other forms of signification. Both authors noted the class nature of language; its implicit value judgements; its role in spreading bourgeois mentality

through turns of phrase, figures of speech, and commercial language; the status of economic categories as objective forms of thought; and the mystifying effects of commodity fetishism and the juridical worldview (Engels, 1990; Marx, 1967, pp. 29, 49; Marx, 1987a, pp. 538–41, 547–50; Marx & Engels, 1976a, pp. 102–3, 231; for more examples, Höpfe, 1982, pp. 97–105, 199–203, 222–47).

Returning to our discussion of the manuscript on Feuerbach, Marx and Engels suggested that the state is an independent social form standing above and outside society that acts in the name of the latter's [necessarily deceptive!] collective interests. They also interpreted political struggles as the illusory forms in which the real struggles of different classes are conducted – a position that was later modified (see below). They posited that every class struggling for domination must gain political power to represent its interest as the general interest (p. 90). Interests can only be articulated through language and this makes it a crucial medium of political struggle. They note that the division between manual and mental labour also exists within the ruling class itself – which includes both practical 'men of affairs' and specialists in ideas (p. 60). When this class succeeds in identifying its interests with the general interest, its ideas become the ruling ideas. On this basis, 'the class that is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force' (p. 59, italics in original). This is grounded, in part, on ruling class control over the means of mental as well as material production. These themes are elaborated in later individual and joint work.

The Eighteenth Brumaire: discourse and the political

Marx's account of the background and impact of Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* on 2nd December 1851 is his most celebrated analysis of politics and state power (on its reception, see Reid, 2007). It can be read in part as a critical analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of political language. Thus Marx noted, in a widely quoted aphorism, that, while 'men make their own history; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves' (1979, p. 103). Less often cited is the immediately following description of ideational constraints that stem from inherited language and outdated worldviews. Here Marx mentioned 'the tradition of all the dead generations', 'superstition about the past', and 'an entire superstructure of

different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life' (pp. 103, 106, 128). Indeed, this text is initially less concerned with the material constraints on action than with discursive affordances for, and limitations on, the representation of class interests and capacities to win and exercise state power.

Accordingly, Marx explores the articulation between (1) the phrases and tropes of language and custom borrowed from the past or recontextualized through intertextual weaving in the present and (2) current political and social realities, such that old phrases may lead to spirited revolutionary action but, more often, prove to be floating signifiers open to political or economic manipulation (Marx, 1979, pp. 103–12, 126–31, 142–6, 148–50, 190–3 and *passim*). Louis Bonaparte was the floating signifier incarnate. For, as Marx argued in *The Class Struggles in France*, although he was 'the most simple-minded [*einfältig*] man in France', he had 'acquired the most multiplex [*vielfältig*] significance. Just because he was nothing, he could signify everything' (1978, p. 81). Different class forces could project their hopes and fears onto Bonaparte; Bonaparte, in turn, skilfully manipulated and exploited this polyvalence to advance his own interests. To become President through a *coup d'état*, however, more was required. As Marx noted in the preface to the second edition, he had aimed to 'demonstrate how the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and relations that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part' (Marx, 1985, p. 57). These circumstances comprised a catastrophic equilibrium of social forces, which enabled Bonaparte to seize power with support from the army, the *Lumpenproletariat*, and the smallholding conservative peasantry. But this alliance did not represent itself as a class movement but as a national-popular force to revive the heroic legacies of Napoleon Bonaparte.

This analysis highlights the primacy of politics, broadly interpreted, in social transformation. For critics of Marxism, this proves the irrelevance of economic class analysis (e.g., Hindess, 1978, Hirst, 1977), thereby ignoring Marx's concern in the same text with lasting economic structures and changing economic conjunctures, the balance of class forces, and the class relevance of political forces. Conversely, for some admirers, it marks a rupture with economic reductionism because it shows that political identities, discourse, and representation on the political stage have their own dynamic (LaCapra, 1987; Lavin, 2005; Lefort, 1978; Katz, 1992; McLennan, 1981).

Other admirers argue that this text anticipates later discourse-theoretical insights into the performativity of language, the discursive constitution of identities and interests, and their role in shaping the forms and terms of political struggle (Fairclough & Graham, 2002; Jessop, 2002; Petrey, 1988; Stallybrass, 1990).

Throughout his text, Marx explores the *language and other symbols* through which the class content of politics gets represented or, more commonly, misrepresented. He dissects the semiotic forms, genres, and tropes that political forces employ to articulate their identities, interests, and beliefs on *the political scene*. This comprises the visible but nonetheless 'imaginary' world of everyday politics as acted out before the public through the open and declared action of organized social forces (Poulantzas, 1973, pp. 246–7). Marx employs diverse theatrical metaphors and allusions to describe and map the political stage and critically assesses how the resulting political theatre is played out by actors who assume different characters, masks, and roles in line with changing circumstances, strategies, and moods. Yet he also analysed the relation between surface (but nonetheless effective) movements acted out on this stage and the deeper social content of political struggles. Indeed, Marx wrote that 'as in private life, one differentiates between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, so in historical struggles one must still more distinguish the language and the imaginary aspirations of parties from their real organisation and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality' (1979, p. 128, modified translation).

In this context, Marx studied 'the rude external world' by looking 'behind the scenes' of 'the situation and the parties, this superficial appearance, which veils the *class struggle*' (1979, pp. 161, 128, 127). This external world conditions the uneven, often disjointed, relation of political struggles to the always contingent interests of contending classes and fractions in specific periods and conjunctures and their strategic and tactical possibilities. This excludes the positing of abstract, eternal, and idealized interests attached to classes identified at the level of a mode of production. While this contingent variation holds for all classes, it is stronger for intermediate classes (e.g., the petite bourgeoisie), classes with no immediate role in production (e.g., the surplus population), or declassed elements (e.g., the *Lumpenproletariat*).

For example, Marx noted how industrialization and the rise of financial capital had transformed the class position of the peasantry. Peasants had gained much under Napoleon I from land redistribution but its subsequent parcellization and associated rise in debt weakened them. Louis Bonaparte claimed to represent the proprietorial identity and traditional aspirations of the smallholding conservative peasantry and mobilized them as a vital *supporting class* in his political manoeuvres against other social forces, whilst doing little to help them in practice. However, there are limits to such dictatorial rule. Thus, some years after his coup, when his largely autonomized 'rule of the sword' over society was threatened by social unrest, Napoleon III retreated and tried to reconnect to bourgeois civil society (Marx, 1986).

Finally, we note three important literary elements of the *Brumaire* and an important political conclusion. First, Marx used language performatively, pedagogically, and politically at several levels. He wanted to submit the cult of Napoleon I to 'the weapons of historical research, of criticism, of satire and of wit' (1985, p. 57). Thus, his withering descriptions of Louis Bonaparte also belittled his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte. Likewise, far from being arbitrary, his emplotting of the historical background to the 18th Brumaire is organically related to the intended political effects of this narrative. This is reflected, second, in the employment of parody to portray the ironies in French history. And, third, Marx uses metonymy to show how conjunctural simplification and selective subjectivation shape the forms and effectiveness of class representation. His historical narratives recognize that 'metonymy is the only way to talk about subjects with capacities for agency; positing a coherent subject position from which to act requires denying or ignoring the unstable multiplicity of historical forces that form it (Lavin, 2005, p. 444). This anticipated the claim in cultural political economy that simplification is vital to 'going on' in a complex world (Sum & Jessop, 2013, pp. 187–90, 217). Marx illustrates this in terms of social agents' ability to read conjunctures, discern potential threats and opportunities, articulate suitable identities and interests for social mobilization, and then act effectively on these creative assumptions. Lastly, in this context, he argued that, for the proletariat to advance its revolutionary interests, it must develop its own political language rather than draw, as did earlier revolutions, on the 'poetry of the past' (Marx, 1979, p. 106; cf. Löwy, 1989).

Capital: The discursive deconstruction/debasing of economic categories

Like several key works penned by Marx, *Capital* is presented as a critique. This time, rather than addressing the categories of religion, political philosophy, law, or liberal political discourse, it focuses on the categories of classical political economy and their role in creating and reproducing capitalist social relations. Marx did not take these categories for granted as universal, transhistorical primitives of economic and political theory but sought to reveal how they expressed, justified, organized and naturalized historically specific social relations of economic exploitation and political domination. This approach went well beyond efforts to debunk theories or deconstruct them; it extended to a method that Nicole Pepperell calls debasing. Deconstruction focuses on the internal conceptual and discursive logic of philosophical and literary texts, their underlying assumptions, paradoxes and lack of closure, and their efforts to disguise their incoherence. Debasing builds on this method to deflate the ‘universalising pretensions’ of high theories such as classical political economy and show how their ‘theoretical claims can still be preserved and appropriated to make sense of some specific and limited aspect of social practice’ (Pepperell, 2014, p. 4). Marx aims to show that the categories of classical and vulgar political economy are necessary illusions that systematically misrepresent real referents in ‘the rude *external* world’ of capitalist social formations. In short, they are socially valid – indeed, performative – but only for a specific mode of production. Assuming their universal validity obscures this historical truth relation.

This approach is most evident in the so-called fourth volume of *Capital*, namely, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, which deconstructs and debases key themes in classical political economy (Marx, 1976). It is also a *leitmotiv* of the three main volumes, whether published under Marx’s authority or Engels’s editorship. For example, Marx argues in *Volume I* that classical political economy, with its genuine scientific achievements, degenerated into the bourgeois apologetics of vulgar political economy as the working-class movement became stronger and challenged the logic of capital (Marx, 1967, pp. 23–26).

In this context, *Capital I* begins with the observation that the ‘wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an

“immense accumulation of commodities” (Marx, 1967a, p. 43). Starting with the commodity with this almost self-evident feature of everyday life in bourgeois societies and treating it as the economic cell-form of the capital relation, Marx initially focused on two key features of this relation. First, goods and services are produced as commodities with a view to sale for monetary profit rather than immediate consumption by their producers. So they had to have exchange-value as well as use-value. Second, more importantly, workers’ labour-power acquires *the form* of a commodity, sold and bought on the labour market, although it is actually a fictitious commodity. The consequences of treating it here and in the labour process as *if* it were a commodity are the features that most distinguish capitalist from pre-capitalist economic formations. Marx also claimed, against the fetishized and fetishizing categories of bourgeois political economy, that all ‘value-added’ produced in capitalism (hence the total surplus value available for reinvestment or redistribution in the form of profits of enterprise, interest, or rent) is entirely due to the exertion of labour-power rather than deriving, as vulgar political economy suggests, from the contributions of productive capital, money, or land as well as labour. Whether value is added depends, however, on capital’s ability to control workers in the labour process – with this economic struggle typically hidden from view when commodities reach the market. Marx proceeded to analyse many other economic aspects of capitalism in terms of the performative but mystifying effect of related economic categories – for example, prices, profits, interest, and ground rent. Marx also showed that political and ideological struggles are conditioned by categories and institutions that are peculiar to the bourgeois political sphere and civil society – such as the capitalist form of the sovereign state based on the rule of law.

On this basis, Marx defined some fundamental laws rooted in the generalization of the commodity form to labour-power, the competition among capitalists for surplus profits, and the institutional separation of the profit-oriented, market economy from the juridico-political sphere and wider civil society. These laws do not operate with iron necessity as an external force but are actualized as tendencies in and through different forms of class struggle in specific conjunctures – struggles that involve, *inter alia*, the continued reproduction and affirmation of the categories (and associated forms of thought) that orient actions that have their own emergent structural effects and crisis-tendencies that operate ‘behind the backs of the producers’ (Marx, 1967,

p. 135). Thus, a key theme in *Capital* is the improbable renewal of the capital relation – whether due to the problematic spatio-temporal and social coordination of different capitals or to the disruptions introduced through competition or class struggle and other forms of resistance. Capitalist reproduction may appear ‘natural’ but is always mediated through social practices, which have both discursive and extra-discursive moments. These relations are also subject to reflexive reorganization to modify the process of differential accumulation and stakes of competition and struggle. These arguments prefigure contemporary work on the performative role of economic imaginaries in reproducing the capital relation, shaping accumulation regimes or varieties of capitalism, and guiding crisis-management (e.g., de Rycker & Don, 2013; Erreygers & Jacob, 2006; Hauf, 2015; Jessop, Fairclough & Wodak, 2008; Maesse 2013; Rooney, Hearn & Ninan, 2005).

Base and superstructure: Discourse and the economy

The discussion of the materialist conception of history in *The German Ideology* and the 1859 Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1987b) are emblematic texts. They are often claimed to show that Marx had a reductionist model of the social world in which an economic base generates a matching juridico-political superstructure, forms of life, and social consciousness. This model had different functions in the two texts. In the text on Feuerbach, its role was diacritical. On the one hand, it shifted attention from an *idealist critique of religion and theology to a materialist critique of law and politics*; and, on the other, in treating language as practical consciousness, *its materialist stance excluded any claim that the social world can exist prior to thought*. In the 1859 Preface, however, the base-superstructure metaphor had two diversionary roles. First, pragmatically, it was penned to lull the Prussian censors into approving the *Contribution* for publication (Prinz, 1969). For, it implied that, as a *scientific* monograph, based on years of disinterested research, it was neither a work of propaganda nor an attempt to intervene in Prussian politics. Moreover, underlining the book’s non-threatening nature, its Preface stated that capitalism would end only when its growth potential was exhausted and the social relations of capitalist production had become fetters on further economic development (Marx, 1987b, p. 263). Thus, in contrast to the *Manifesto*, working class struggle, revolutionary or reformist, was a taboo subject.

Second, theoretically, Gareth Stedman Jones suggests that Marx had to resort to the mechanical base-superstructure metaphor because his *Contribution* lacked the often-promised – and, for a critique of the capitalist mode of production, essential – chapter on capital. So, unable to refer to the historically specific contradictions of the capital relation, Marx resorted to the more generic dialectical contradiction between the material forces and social relations of production (Jones, 2016, pp. 408–10).

The famous guiding principle outlined in the Preface states that the articulation of the material forces and social relations of production ‘constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness’ (1987b, p. 263). Note that Marx does not posit unilateral causal relations here. Furthermore, ‘changes in this economic foundation sooner or later transform the whole immense superstructure ... the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’ (ibidem). This implies a reciprocal influence of these discursive (but also institutional) forms on economic development.

This innocuous scientific guideline, reminiscent of the text on Feuerbach, was relegated to a footnote in *Capital* (Marx, 1976, p. 86n). Yet the Preface has won inordinate significance – especially as Engels hailed it as the definitive statement of the scientific principles and laws of historical materialism, highlighting the ultimately determining role of the economy in historical development. However, as Terrell Carver noted, when reduced to a mechanical base-superstructure metaphor, this guideline betrays the richness of Marx’s critique of political economy and historical analyses. Consequently:

[t]he better-illustrated discussions of the *Manifesto*, the more intensely political analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and the more exploratory conceptual studies in the economic works, from the *Grundrisse* through the various drafts and published volumes of *Capital*, were then ‘rigorously’ judged against Marx’s ‘guiding’ insights (Carver, 1996, p. xiv).

As suggested above, the most serious misreading of this metaphor – emphasized in official Marxism – claims that the economic base mechanically and unilaterally determines the form and content of the juridico-political superstructure and forms of social consciousness. This reifies culture as an epiphenomenon of the economic base. At least four problems arise here. First, it is inconsistent with Marx's dialectical approach as developed no later than the manuscript on Feuerbach, which emphasized the mutual relations between the three 'levels' of a social formation. Second, while Marx's materialist approach to history did start from the social relations of production, he generally argued that social transformation is mediated through political action. Indeed, he asserted the primacy of the political over the economic when there were economic crises. Third, Marx and Engels insisted that sense- and meaning-making are not confined to the superstructure but are co-constitutive of all social practices and interaction. This excludes treating the economic base one-sidedly just as it excludes the ideological temptation of reifying culture in the manner of ideological 'dealers in ideas'.

Fourth, if there is a rational kernel rather than ideological deformation at the heart of the base-superstructure metaphor it would, once more, be a historically specific feature of capitalist social formations, not a universally valid, transhistorical constant. Only in these formations are classes defined through social relations of production that are disembedded from broader institutional forms (such as kinship, political bonds, or religion). In introducing the cash nexus into all spheres of society, modern capitalism overturned traditional social ties, freeing social relations to be shaped by the capital-labour relation and the profit-oriented, market-mediated dynamic of accumulation. However, as Karl Polanyi (1944) observed, once disembedded from traditional society, the capitalist market economy needs to be re-embedded in a market society. This requires a certain conformity or coherence among the economic order, the juridico-political superstructure, and forms of consciousness. But this is a dialectical relation, not a mechanical, one-sided one; and it must be created through specific and precarious practices that can at best produce a temporary and provisional relation of formal and material adequacy between the social relations of production and the wider social formation. Gramsci developed similar arguments on how a relatively coherent 'historical bloc' emerges to reflect 'the necessary

reciprocity between structure and superstructure' (1971: 366; 1975, Q8, §182); and likewise argues that this reciprocity is realized, to the extent that it is, through specific political, intellectual, and moral as well as economic practices.

Conclusions

Marx offered a *totalizing perspective* on social relations in terms of the historically specific conditions of existence, dynamic, and repercussions of the social organization of production. This does not commit him to the view that the world comprises a *closed totality* that is unified and governed by a single principle of societal organization (e.g., capital accumulation) or that taking economic organization as an entry-point to social analysis is the only scientifically valid or politically sound approach. On the contrary, it poses questions regarding the conditions in which one or another principle becomes dominant or even hegemonic and what is the most appropriate entry-point for exploring different social formations. This depends in part on the performative and creative role of language in orienting social practices in terms of specific categories of thought and action throughout a social formation. Sense- and meaning-making (semiosis) are essential to all social relations – not just those that are abstracted therefrom and categorised as 'superstructural' or 'cultural'. This excludes any simplistic base-superstructure model as well as an idealist approach to historical explanation. It does not exclude – indeed, it demands – analysis of the variable causal weight of specific sets of semiotic–material relations in different conjunctures and the circumstances in which one or another set of practices enable social forces to make their own history.

We conclude that much of Marx's work can be read as a series of contributions to the critique of *semiotic* economy, that is, to an account of how language and symbolism are involved in the emergence of specific forms of social organization and contribute to the imaginary (*mis*)recognition and (*mis*)representation of class (and other social) interests. As Norman Fairclough and Phil Graham argue, Marx anticipated much of what would now be regarded as critical discourse and/or argumentation analysis. For many of his studies emphasized

the dialectical interconnectivity of language and other elements of the social and can therefore do full justice to [the] social power of language in ... capitalism without reducing social life to language, removing language from material existence, or reifying language (Fairclough & Graham, 2002, p. 187).

Marx interpreted language as an expression of practical consciousness and critiqued the manual–mental division of labour, which inclined intellectuals to believe that ideas were the motor force of history. He engaged in systematic, even symptomatic, critiques of the basic categories that organized capitalist relations of production and adapted, modified, and ‘translated’ into corresponding juridico–political, intellectual, and philosophical social forms and consciousness. Given that politics, not the evolution of the productive forces, was the key moment of social development, Marx also explored what nowadays one might call the semantics and pragmatics of political discourse and specificities of political struggle in bourgeois societies, which involved articulating and securing support for an account of the (always illusory) general interest that could help for a while to stabilize an inherently contradictory, crisis–prone capitalist social order. His semiotic analyses were grounded in his early philosophical and theoretical studies but remained largely pre–theoretical and unsystematic, however, as they served significant heuristic and political purposes. Marx was a pre-disciplinary scholar who focused on the critique and transformation of bourgeois society. Later advances in critical discourse and argumentation analysis could be used to refine his concepts and systematize his methodological tools. This is what we have been attempting in our development of cultural political economy (Sum & Jessop, 2013). But, as we also argue, this should not be pursued at the cost of undermining the scope for integrating critical semiotic analysis into the more systematic critique of political economy. This was Marx’s principal intellectual project.

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Note: MECW indicates *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart. Dates for individual volumes are cited but other publication details are not given.

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