Introduction

[According to Le Chapelier, giving the decree of 14 June 1791 in France] the workers must not be allowed to come to any understanding about their own interests, nor to act in common and thereby lessen their 'absolute dependence, which is almost that of slavery'.

*Capital, Volume 1*

... Now, since the state is merely a transitional institution of which use is made in the struggle, in the revolution, to keep down one's enemies by force, it is utter nonsense to speak of a free people's state; so long as the proletariat still makes use of the state, it makes use of it, not for the purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies and, as soon as there can be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist. We would therefore suggest that Gemeinwesen ['commonalty'] be universally substituted for *state*; it is a good old German word that can very well do service for the French 'Commune'.

*Friedrich Engels to August Bebel, 18–28 March 1875*

... Recent years have seen a renewed interest in Marx, not least on account of the world economic crisis. This followed the years of damnatio memoriae that resulted from the failure of 'actually-existing socialism' and the uncritical acceptance of capitalist domination as the only possible future. Certainly, rethinking the problems that Marx posed does require casting off the old orthodoxies, but it is important that we do so without giving up on the destructive power of his thought. A rigorous historical and theoretical analysis of Marx's texts does not necessarily mean signing up to a 'depolitised' vision of Marx, the 'classic philosopher'. Nor does consciousness of the crisis in the Marxism–workers' movement–communist party plexus necessarily lead to some Manichean counterposition between Marx and Marxism, holding the man himself in high esteem while seeing Marxism from Engels onward as a mere mystification of some supposed original 'message'. To appreciate Marx has always
meant taking a non-neutral, non-equidistant position, and thus the Marxisms with the most vitality have always sought to ‘rerun’ Marx’s reflection on the basis of the historical and political conjuncture that they themselves faced. Moreover, the perspective that Marx set out is intrinsically political, as the afterword to the second edition of Capital makes clear: ‘In so far as Political Economy remains within that horizon, in so far, i.e., as the capitalist regime is looked upon as the absolutely final form of social production, instead of as a passing historical phase of its evolution, Political Economy can remain a science only so long as the class struggle is latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena’. Marx’s text ‘admits’ to setting out from the point of view of the proletariat, which cannot just be grafted on to the bourgeois standpoint. It envisages a material transformation of the present situation, on the basis of a continual exchange between the analysis and the breaking-apart of the real.

However, no recognition of the ‘class’ character of Marx’s reflection and its drive to revolutionise existing assumptions should neglect the overall theoretical plane on which his critique of political economy is based. His evaluation of the working class’s political role does not stand in isolation from the conceptual structure of his critique of political economy: working-class subjectivity cannot be articulated and practised without a full exploration of the ‘spectral objectivity’ of the capitalist mode of production. As such, in conceiving the theory-praxis relationship, it is necessary to take account not only of the connection between these dimensions, but also of the fact that they do not directly match: neither dimension can be deduced from the other. In this sense, we ought also to bear in mind the possible separation of theory from politics. The difficulty inherent within this question derives from the fact that even though Marx’s critique of political economy is of political significance, we cannot immediately deduce politics from the critique of political economy. Two perspectives that both forcefully pose the problem of the relation between theory and practice – though they are different, or even irreconcilable – are the perspectives of Louis Althusser (and his school) and of Italian operaismo. Moreover, not only do we face the possibility of a ‘split’ between these elements, but we also need to understand that the real is not immediately visible and transparent, since the capitalist mode of production presents an opaque character – as becomes clear in Marx’s analysis of fetishism, in his polemic with classical political economy.

It is based on these coordinates that this book, set out in four chapters, examines the relationship between the individual and communal dimensions, and thus the intersection of the individual, class, society, and community, as discussed by Marx from the 1860s onward. Though a fully freestanding work, from