CHAPTER 1

Between the Ancient and the Modern

1 Science and Utopia

One of the less obvious geopolitical consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall, although very important for a limited group of experts, was the end of a honourable man’s extended military service. The duration of the service, almost a century, may sound amazing, but is less surprising when we know the man’s name is Karl Marx. The philosopher, economist and political organiser, all fields in which he seems to have excelled, was called up to guard the defences of those unfortunate and luckless regimes answering to the name of real communism and of their vulgar state philosophy, called ‘dialectical materialism’. Marx was finally given back his freedom when he was retired from military exile on the eastern borders. This freedom meant he could once again walk amongst all those who frequent the peaceful gardens of thought and respond to their questions, liberated from the military obligation to answer in a warlike, schematic and propagandistic way on serious issues concerning the history and life of human beings. The so-called liberation of Eastern Europe is relevant to the following pages only insofar as it concerns Karl Marx’s liberation, at the end of his military service and the opportunity this provides to return to discussions with him, over and above any presumed alignments. This will permit a renewed pleasure to be taken from the complex and original richness of his mind, without being dismayed by the limits and profound backwardness that, at times, appear to overshadow some of his thoughts.

Recommencing a productive examination of Marx’s thought means, primarily, discarding every myth regarding his heroic figure and his alleged, uncorrupted love of truth, his unconditional dedication to the good – myths subsequently distorted and betrayed by his followers. It means instead to find within Marx’s theoretical weaknesses the principle of those rigidities and extremisms that very often characterised later forms of Marxism.

One of this book’s objectives is to find within the contradictory history of Marx’s thought the multiple sources of the history of Marxism or, preferably, of the history of Marxisms. This requires an analysis of all the theories, even in their most difficult interpretations, which consistently choose to highlight partial and exclusive aspects of Marx’s work, without undertaking the patient, global reconstruction demanded by the tortuous progression of his thought. The point of Marx’s regained freedom is essentially his liberation from Marxism.
and the introduction of a new methodological approach that releases Trier’s philosopher from apologetic rituals which, for over a century, have considered him immune to error, but thereby end up only handing him over to the turbulent freedom of his own contradictions.

However, humanising the hero, removing him from a celebrative alienation and returning him to the effective time and space of his work, also needs to avoid falling prey to the opposite approach of demonisation. Particularly in recent years, and despite a few formal acknowledgements, this is effectively what happened to Marx’s thought, inasmuch as it is seen as lacking substantial theoretical dignity. He is frequently accused of being unable to abandon ideology’s passionate and deforming vision and of raising things to the objective and dispassionate level of theory. Furthermore, it has been argued that he was never able to raise his thoughts to the levels of science and philosophy. This study instead aims to examine more mediated, concrete and human configurations, avoiding demons and gods and the celebrations of absolute evil and good.

It is undeniable that Marx himself, from the very start, claimed an entirely special status for his work or, in other words, one that was both theoretical but also immediately practical, in terms of its value as a tool for the organisation and the liberation of the modern proletariat. So much so that, beginning with this claimed non-speculative but fundamentally practical-political nature, the most profound criticisms made of Marx’s theoretical works are that they have created an undesirable mixture of description and prescription, or, in other words, of cognitive application (that aims to describe reality as it is) and practical application (that aims to transform reality as it is hoped it will be). The intrinsically ideological nature of Marx’s work thus supposedly consists in the prevailing of desire over thought, which means that, even when acknowledging his brilliant ability to identify elements valuable for the interpretation of history and social life, he also stands accused of generating one of the most extreme and damaging combinations of all time, that of science and utopia.

The clearest conceptual formulation of this type of criticism, according to which the levels of real and substantial analysis in Marx are combined with those of the imagination and its abstractions, had already been made by Benedetto Croce, at the end of the nineteenth century, in his *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx* [Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica], with a specific reflection concerning the well-known Marxian theory of value. This theory, which Marx introduces at the beginning of *Capital*, famously hypothesises that commodities in the modern market are exchanged on the basis of the amount of labour contained within them and interprets