Part III: From Marx’s Science to His Politics

Several things have colored receptions of Marx. Many have been influenced by misconceptions about Marx’s ideas as well as the problems reading his work, not the least of which is understanding the scientific basis of his dialectical method. Adding to this problem, the historical movements that used Marx’s name and ideas as their inspiration often ended up discrediting him. If what has been called “really existing communist societies” are taken as representative of Marx’s ideas in action, then Marx is deposited in the historical dustbin along with them. There are ample reasons to question this assumption.
Chapter Seven

From Political Economy to the Communist Project

With dialectics helping him grasp the logic of change, and with historical materialism directing his attention to class struggles and material contradictions, political economy brought Marx to at least three conclusions about his present moment. First, capitalism’s demise will come through economic crises and/or a social revolution. Second, capitalism’s technological complexity, material abundance, democratic potential, and class structure produced the presuppositions of communism. Third, for a communist political project to succeed it would need to cultivate the preconditions necessary for its emergence. This chapter examines this project and how it was later transformed under Marx’s name.¹

Prior to Marx’s conversion to it, discourse on communism centered on the utopian theories of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon. Wanting no part in utopian schemes in his early career as editor, Marx (1975d: 220) wrote that “The Rheinische Zeitung, which does not admit that communist ideas in their present form possess even theoretical reality, and therefore can still less desire their practical realisation, or even consider it possible,

¹ An earlier version of arguments in this chapter can be found elsewhere (see Paolucci 2004).