In order to arrive at a sound assessment of the change that has occurred in ideas, we must take account of the transformation that capitalism itself has undergone.1

Among the reasons why Marxism is a strange, even disconcerting, intellectual object is, not least, the occurrence and recurrence of its ‘crises’. The term ‘crisis’, much overused, requires some introductory discussion, however. In what follows, the formula ‘crisis of Marxism’ is to be construed in a resolutely ‘subjective’ sense – at the antipodes, for example, of the usage when economic crises are involved. Thus, we can only speak of a ‘crisis of Marxism’ as a unique moment in which something rather unusual in the history of ideas occurs (have Platonists ever been heard to speak of a ‘crisis of Platonism’ or Kantians of a ‘crisis of Kantianism’?). What this suggests is that a category of agents who identify themselves as ‘Marxists’ declare that they live their relationship to this theoretical object in the form of a ‘crisis’. In other words, ‘crises of Marxism’ are conjunctures when the statement that ‘there is a crisis of Marxism’

is predominantly internal – when this statement serves, in other words, to
designate the experience of ‘Marxists’ when they define their own relation-
ship to this referent.

From this self-referential definition follow several consequences, which
are less seemingly tautological. First of all, the ‘crises of Marxism’ are defi-
nitely not the same as the ‘deaths of Marxism’, periodically proclaimed from
an external and, in general, openly polemical standpoint. The latter pertain
to a quite different logic, in other words, to the ‘spectral’ dimension of the
presence of Marxism in history. What these exorcism sessions tell us is essen-
tially that, like the dead who are feared not to be at rest, Marxism never stops
haunting our present (how else are we to explain the repetition-compulsion
that drives such ritual putting to death?). They also tell us that every ‘death’
of Marxism will invariably be followed by its ‘return’ on the occasion of a
changed conjuncture, like the one we are doubtless currently witnessing.

In a way, Marxism escapes the spectral repetition of death and resurrection
only to enter into crisis, and this is something that gives it a rather disturbing
resemblance to psychoanalysis and the ‘natural’ sciences (compare with the
‘crisis of physics’ at the beginning of the nineteenth century, concomitant,
moreover, with the first crisis of Marxism). Is this a merely formal analogy?
It would appear not, in so far as, like the natural sciences and psychoanalysis,
Marxism can only be defined as a combination of theory/practice stamped
by a radical historicity, and not as a doctrinal corpus formed sub specie aeter-
nitatis, or rather, let us say that it only presents itself thus as a result of cer-
tain conjunctures. In this connection, ‘crises’ are moments when, generating
‘controversies’ that witness a confrontation between contradictory theses, the
discrepancies internal to the theory/practice mix are paraded in the full light
of day and pose the question of a wholesale reorganisation of the theoretico-
practical configuration.

Now – and this is where the convergence with the natural sciences ends – it
is completely illusory to think that the ‘crises of Marxism’ are simple transi-
tional moments, separating two more or less stable states of theory/practice –

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2 For a development of this theme, see Kouvélakis 2000.
3 Lenin begins the section of Chapter 5 of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism entitled
‘The Crisis in Modern Physics’, with this quotation from ‘the famous French physicist
Henri Poincaré’: ‘there are “signs of a serious crisis” in physics’: Lenin 1968, p. 252.
On this episode, see Lecourt 1973.