Preliminary reflections

The inglorious end of Soviet Communism, the dissolution of the USSR, the victory of liberal democracy, and especially that of the capitalist world economy, seemed to mark the end of Marxism and close down any possibility of renewal. The hegemonic intellectual system in political, economic and social terms is liberalism (more or less social, or more or less neoliberal). Behind the anti-totalitarian defence of human rights, the market has imposed itself as the definitive institution of postmodernity. Marxism supposedly belongs to a past of errors and horrors. Such is the credo of the la pensée unique, of the world-view which, reversing the hopes of Gramsci, has become the common sense of the intelligentsia, and of business and political circles, and which is laid down as the religion of the individual with the full force of the means of communication. Hence, it supposedly remains to write an obituary column on the now definitive death of Marx and Marxisms and release thought to confront the ‘the time of the end of the grand narrative of emancipation’.
But things are not so simple. The history of the years 1968–2005 is extremely uneven. While Marxism-Leninism sank ever deeper into irreversible crisis and moved towards its end, several major operations of theoretical reconstruction testified to the contradictory vitality of the hard core of Marx’s œuvre. Between 1968 and 1977, the last attempts at a revival of Marxist theory in the tracks of the Third International, or on its margins, emerged. They involved proposals for intellectual, moral and political reform addressed to the Communist parties, whether in power or opposition, by theoreticians who were members of them. The œuvre of the great heretics and communist philosophers experienced a final, transient blaze. György Lukács (1885–1971) contributed his last great work, *Zür Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Sein* (1971–3), while Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) published *Atheismus im Christentum* (1968), *Das Materialismus Problem. Seine Geschichte und Substanz* (1968), and *Experimentum Mundi* (1975). In Italy, publication of the original edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* (1975) of Antonio Gramsci facilitated a better appreciation of the philosophy of *praxis*, by differentiating it from the interpretation offered by Palmiro Togliatti (leader of the Italian Communist Party), and made it possible to assess its potential one last time. In France, Louis Althusser (1918–90) made the debate on a new extension of the materialist science of history and its forms a major element in the last international philosophico-political discussion of Marxism, with *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* and *Éléments d’autocritique*, both published in 1974. In fact, the shadow of 1968 held out the prospect of going beyond the old orthodoxy and even allowed for hopes that the project of an escape from Stalinism from the Left might be resumed, at a time when the issue of a revolutionary reformism centred on the rise of instances of radical democratisation was being posed. The *de facto* competition between these different models for reconstructing Marxist theory, nurtured by a re-reading of Marx, contradictory in their relationship to Hegel and the dialectic (which Hegel? Which dialectic?), marked by great heterogeneity in their references to elements of the philosophical or scientific tradition, divided in their assessment of liberalism. This competition between an ontology of social being, a critical utopia of the *not-yet*, a philosophy of *praxis*, and a philosophy of materialist intervention in the sciences and philosophy, represented a moment of great intensity which the over-hasty gravediggers of Marx affect to ignore.

It was accompanied by a great deal of research and the importance of Marx’s contribution and the great Marxist heresies continued to make itself felt in