Up until approximately the late 1970s, Marxism remained an explicit reference point in major social and intellectual debates. This was the period when from within international Communism the great heretics of Marxism, whose thinking had been formed from the 1920s onwards and who had experienced the vicissitudes of Stalinism and post-Stalinism, made their final contributions and won a certain audience. This was the case with Gyorgy Lukács and Ernst Bloch, who died in 1971 and 1977 respectively, after having published their last great books: *On the Ontology of Social Being* (1971) and *Experimentum Mundi* (1977). In a way, this was also true of Antonio Gramsci’s major work: the *Prison Notebooks* were published in 1975 in their original version by Valentino Gerratana (replacing the old thematic edition organised by Palmiro Togliatti, which had formed a whole generation of Italian Marxists from the 1950s) and imparted a final radiance to the philosophy of praxis. All these works sought to subject the worn-out orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism to a critique of its presuppositions and to challenge its claim to represent the one and only truth. A survivor of the Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, Lukács explicitly made his ontology of social being a new theoretical basis for a democratic revival of real socialism.
These years also witnessed a multiplicity of programmes for an intellectual and moral reform of Marxism, united in their rejection of Soviet diamat and histomat and their concern to give a second lease of life to a revolutionary movement confronted with its own involution and impasses. These full-scale endeavours accept theoretical pluralism as a fact, but do not renounce a new unity of theory and practice whose vehicle is to be a communist party that has certainly been democratised, but nevertheless maintained in its revolutionary unicity. Over and above their shared anticapitalist passion, it is doubtless this political and organisational assumption that profoundly unites them. Each seeks to rediscover a unity of theory and practice; and the theory is always identified with historical materialism as a system of knowledge of capitalist development, its contradictions and its possible transformation, just as the practice is identified with the historical action of the masses guided by Communist parties. Finally, all of them are convinced of the necessity of a distinctively philosophical or meta-theoretical clarification of Marx’s theory as a condition of its revival and of its heuristic capacity for analysing changes in capitalism and socialist society.

These points of agreement soon give way to substantial disagreements, which demonstrate both the fertility and the ambiguity of Marx’s legacy; to notable differences in theoretical references, with the crucial problem of assessing Hegel and interpreting the dialectic; and to significant divergences on the politics to be pursued (in particular, as regards the role of the state, law, ethics, ideologies, and culture). In the guise of a return to Marx, each constructs its own Marx – a Marx who is, above all, meta-theoretical.

The late Lukács and the ontology of social being

Reverting at the end of his enterprise to the themes of History and Class Consciousness (1923), the late Lukács criticises the Weberianism of his leftist youth – a romantic Weberianism, focused on the denunciation of capitalist rationalisation-alienation. He abandons the subject-object dialectic embodied in the class consciousness of the proletariat, charged with overcoming the bourgeois separation between subject and object via the teleology of history. He stops exalting the revolutionary subjectivity of a class that is the only one capable of putting an end to the abstractional effects of commodities and exchange-value, of surmounting the catastrophic crisis of capitalist