There has been a major renewal of Marxist work on state theory in the last thirty years. This has been prompted by the crisis of the national state and its typical forms of intervention in the 1970s; the challenge to Eurocentric theorising caused by the economic success of Japan and other Asian powers; liberation from the deadening effect of official Marxist-Leninist doctrines after the Soviet Union collapsed; the emergence of new forms of government, governance, and governmentality; the reciprocal interaction of ‘globalisation’ and the restructur-ing and recalibration of state apparatuses; and new sources, stakes, and forms of social resistance to the logic of accumulation on a world scale. Thus contemporar-y Marxist analyses not only explore conventional themes and approaches in state theory but are also addressing many new issues, developing new theoretical and political arguments, and critically re-evaluating classic texts and approaches.

Re-reading the Marxist classics

Marx’s and Engels’s work on the state comprises diverse philosophical, theoretical, journalistic, partisan, ad hominem, or purely ad hoc comments. The changed political conjuncture and the continuing
(but still incomplete) publication of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* have prompted critical re-evaluation of Marx’s theoretical and political analyses and Engels’s own contribution to their development. While this has transformed our understanding of Marx’s critique of political economy and revealed his concern with political ecology, it has also prompted new interpretations of his critique of the state and politics.¹

The same sort of re-reading can be seen in traditional Marxist approaches to the state, which have generally been organised around four main axes. First, economic reductionist analyses sought to explain state forms and functions in terms of more fundamental economic structures, interests, and struggles – thereby ignoring the specifically political dimensions of the state and their implications for state power. Contemporary Marxism generally eschews crude economic reductionism, but there is still much interest in the path-dependent co-evolution of different forms of state and ‘varieties of capitalism’ – at the risk of reifying national capitalisms as so many independent forms of capitalist organisation rather than locating them within a broader, ‘variegated’ world market.²

Second, a certain ‘historicist’ voluntarism emphasised the transformative potential of autonomous political class struggle without paying due regard to the strategically selective institutional legacies of political structures. While there is now more appreciation of how forms and institutions ‘make a difference’, celebration continues of mass movements, the ‘multitude’, and autonomous, self-organising, and decentred collective wills as key forces in political revolution and the dismantling of the official state apparatus. Two influential works in this vein were Hardt and Negri’s post-operaist identification of the ‘multitude’ as the new revolutionary subject operating inside the heart of the new imperial beast (see below) and Holloway’s ‘open-Marxist’ argument that it would be possible for autonomous, self-organising groups to assume control of social life without reconstituting the state machine and state power.³

² Albritton et al., 2001; Bischoff 2003; Candeias and Deppe 2001; Hoffman 2006; Nitzan and Bichler 2002.