

July 24, 2013

A Defense of Pluralism

(response to Matthijs Krul's "Kliman vs Heinrich: An Exercise in Marxology")

The other day, Matthijs Krul (2013) wrote about a recent paper by Alan Freeman, Nick Potts, Alexey Gusev, and Brendan Cooney, and me (Kliman et al, 2013) that responds to an article in the April Monthly Review by Michael Heinrich (2013).

1. Matthijs, who's usually very astute, writes that our paper enters into a dispute with Heinrich "about the 'true Marx', about what Marx 'really said', rather than [arguing] on the merits of theories in their own right." What is missing from this formulation, and from his blog post as a whole, is the fact that our paper is a *political intervention*, part of a struggle for pluralism. His dichotomy between philology, on the one hand, and theoretical and empirical analysis, on the other, omits the political dimension and makes no room for it.

The paper is directed against an effort to eliminate Marx's theory of crisis (on the grounds that he really had no such theory). This effort and many related ones greatly hinder attempts *to develop theory and empirical analysis on the foundations left by Marx*. There are the "internal inconsistency" allegations, now there's the "Marx had no theory of crisis" allegation, and there are others. They all serve to discredit the original theories and make it "dogmatic" or "fundamentalist" (a key *Monthly Review* epithet) to return to them as a basis for *doing theory and empirical analysis today*.

Our paper objects to this strongly:

What is objectionable is the attempt to make Marx's own theories disappear by replacing them with one's own theory, instead of letting both contend. This is actually a religious method; it is designed to frustrate theoretical controversy by ruling legitimate alternatives out of order. A scientific approach should examine all alternative explanations of reality *including Marx's own*.

Thus, far from being some arid and abstruse "exercise in Marxology," our paper is fighting a line of argument that would, if it were accepted, further the suppression of Marx's theory and thwart efforts to revive theoretical and empirical analyses grounded in it.

But just as it won't do to dismiss allegations that Marx's theory is internally inconsistent by saying that the issue is pluralism, you can't dismiss the allegation that Marx had no crisis theory by saying that the issue is pluralism. In both cases, you have to deal with arguments that, if they were correct, would serve to a large extent to legitimate the suppression of Marx's own work, especially in academic economics.

Thus, Matthijs' suggestion to ignore issues of "what Marx 'really said'" is inappropriate and politically unwise. It's not reasonable to ask people to produce theory and analysis while blithely ignoring the fact that there's a concerted effort to eliminate the foundations that the theory and analyses are based on. It's like asking a jockey to just concentrate on winning the race and ignore the fact that opponents are trying to poison his horse. Unless and until space is made and resources are given to serious study of Marx's *own* work and research based on it, such research will continue to go nowhere. None of the analysis in my book *The Failure of Capitalist Production* could have been done without the very strong foundation provided by Marx's own work, but extremely few people have been able to obtain that foundation, especially since the mid-1980s.

Also, I should point out the obvious: the effort to make Marx's theory disappear isn't directed against him, since he's dead. It's directed against us. I realize that it makes no logical sense, but the "Marx had no crisis theory" line is being trotted out in various to dismiss the idea that the crisis theory based on the Marx's law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit (LTFRP) and the development of its internal contradictions can help explain the latest crisis.

2. It may seem sensible to separate "what Marx 'really said'" and "the merits of [his] theories in their own right," but it actually makes no sense at all. It is impossible to properly assess the merits of an author's theories without first obtaining a clear and correct understanding of what those theories are and are not. *If one tries to assess the merits of a theory one has misinterpreted, what one is assessing just isn't the author's actual theory. So one's assessment will be wrong.* This is a main theme of our paper: Heinrich doesn't understand the LTFRP and, *because of this*, he wrongly says that Marx didn't prove it and that it can't be proved, and he wrongly implies that what is needed is "Crisis Theory Without the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall."

3. Matthijs writes, "This substitution of philology and exegesis for direct debate cannot fail to make already quite abstract arguments even more confusing and distant from everyday political concerns, and thereby even less accessible to the average activist or intellectual interested in developments in Marxist theory. That's deplorable, and it is incumbent on all those concerned to end this sorry tradition." These sentences suffer from the same problem. I'm more than happy to directly discuss the merits of the LTFRP and Marx's crisis theory, and I have done so in *The Failure of Capitalist Production* (as Matthijs, knows, since he reviewed the book favorably). But it's just not possible to directly debate their merits *with Heinrich*. I wouldn't be debating the merits of Marx's actual LTFRP but the merits of the LTFRP as misinterpreted by Heinrich. And since it's clear that the misinterpreted version is wholly lacking in merit—if the LTFRP were what Heinrich claims it is, he would be right that it's a complete failure—there would be nothing to debate.

4. If the issue is that we supposedly confuse or conflate exegetical issues with theoretical and empirical ones, I plead innocent. Our paper stresses—twice, once at the start and once at the end—that the issue of the explanatory power of the crisis theory rooted in the LTFRP and the development of its internal contradictions "is not an exegetical matter."

Yet even if it were true that the crisis theory of the third volume of *Capital* is Engels' rather than Marx's—or, indeed, our own "construction"—that would not matter at all

from a scientific (wissenschaftlich) perspective. It would not matter even if Marx himself might ultimately have come to repudiate it had he lived long enough, as Heinrich suggests. The fact remains that this crisis theory exists. And it is entitled to contend with the alternatives and to be assessed against them on the basis of relative explanatory power, not eliminated and not ignored on the grounds that, as Heinrich's editors put it, "Marx never ceased to develop his thinking on the phenomena of crises in capitalism, and never ceased to discard earlier formulations."

5. Matthijs charges that "[b]oth sides are quite inconsistent, in that they accuse each other of selective reading and use of unpublished documents to prove their point, which both of them indeed are guilty of." This is wrong for a few different reasons. First, the only accusation that Heinrich made against us (rather than Marx) is that an example of mine that disproves Okishio's "theorem" allegedly has an "absurd assumption" as a "precondition." Second, we don't "accuse" him of using unpublished documents to (try to) prove his points. In my view, there's nothing wrong with using such documents. The quality of the evidence they provide is sometimes an issue, but that's another matter. Third, I don't think our paper is guilty of "selective reading"—we deal with all of the evidence that Heinrich himself put forward, for instance. If we are guilty, where? Matthijs doesn't say.

6. He writes, "Some have pointed to the one clause in which Marx writes 'rises' and Kliman et al. suggest this may be a slip of the pen, which seems an illegitimate and opportunistic argument; but such things do indeed happen, as proven by the infamous case of the Wicked Bible." I'll interpret "which seems" charitably, as "which may seem to be," and let it pass. But I should point out, which Matthijs doesn't, that we also provide a different interpretation of "rises" that is also plausible and consistent with the LTFRP, and we argue at some length that Heinrich's interpretation is the least plausible of the three. Let me also note that I do stuff like writing "rises" when I mean "falls" *all* the time. My unpublished writings and notes are full of such stuff (and Marx's "rises" was in a comment he wrote in the margin of his book), but it creeps into my published work as well. (E.g., on p. 158 of *The Failure of Capitalist Production*, "real wages and salaries of nonproduction and supervisory employees have risen by 9 percent" should be "... production and nonsupervisory..."; on p. 172 of *Reclaiming Marx's "Capital"*, "which purchased four bushels of seed corn in Year 1, purchases eight bushels in Year 1," the second "Year 1" should be "Year 2.") The only thing exceptional about the dropped word in the Wicked Bible is that it resulted in a Biblical commandment to commit adultery.

7. I can't make sense of Matthijs' comment that "[w]hat seems ignored by both parties is that ... it would be highly *suspect* if there were *not* inconsistencies in [Marx's] comments and works" (emphasis altered). We don't ignore this at all. It's what underlies our suggestion that "rises" may well have been a slip of the pen.

8. Instead of debating what Marx's own theory of capitalist crisis was, Matthijs suggests, "[o]ne could resolve a lot of the problems by simply opposing the two as Kliman et al.'s theory of the rate of profit versus Heinrich's — then a real decision could be made." I sympathize with the spirit of this, but it's not possible or desirable to do so in this case. First, Heinrich has no theory of the rate of profit. His article serves as a stalking horse for the *Monthly Review* theory. It is *Monthly Review* that has given us philology instead of openly engaging in a direct debate, i.e.,

instead of addressing the extensive empirical and theoretical critique of their theory in *The Failure of Capitalist Production*. (I'm not charging them with using Heinrich's article as a smokescreen because they can't defend their theory against the critique, but the evidence to date does not permit us to reject that hypothesis.) Second, "Kliman et al.'s theory of the rate of profit" is *Marx's* theory (as we interpret it, of course). To call it our own would be plagiarism, which I regard as serious ethical misconduct. On the other hand, the record shows that we are always willing and ready to defend the logic and explanatory power of the theory on the basis of its contents, and that *we do not try to defend its logic or explanatory power on the grounds that it is Marx's theory*.

9. Matthijs ends by saying that "making the argument about 'the real Marx' and *limiting one's domain* thereby necessarily to the total opus of Marx's works makes such implications and their empirical and theoretical support difficult to comprehend, liable to confusion, and frustrating for people not already among the ranks of the converted to one or another camp" (emphasis added). But we have certainly not limited the domain to that. Some of the authors of our paper have done theoretical and empirical analyses of our own. Our paper cites a goodly number of such works, which in turn cite additional ones. But, again, it's simply not possible to debate these things with Heinrich, because he has nothing to say about them—with one exception. The exception is that he claims that the LTFRP cannot be proven. We argue that this charge stems from his serious misunderstanding of what the law is, and that once it is correctly understood, it is clear that it was proven long ago (by Marx).

References

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