

**Rethinking Politics, Scholarship, and Economics:
An Interview with David F. Ruccio**

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Dr. David F. Ruccio is currently Professor of Economics in the Faculty of Economics' Department of Economic Thought and Policy at the University of Notre Dame. He visited the University of Kentucky in February 2003 to participate in the Spring Seminar and Lecture Series on Globalization sponsored by the UK Committee on Social Theory. His lecture entitled "Globalization and Imperialism" explored the intellectual and material foundations of globalization discourses. In particular, he challenged the "depressing inevitability" of these discourses by connecting their production to specific intellectuals and policy makers and by revising them through the Marxian concepts of imperialism and the "imperial machine."

Consistently defying dominant notions of what an economist should be and should study, David F. Ruccio has investigated a multitude of topics that can be broadly gathered under the category of radical political economy. While his earlier writings focused intensely upon the economics of development and underdevelopment, Ruccio has more recently pursued questions of value, subjectivity, and the changing dynamics of class in economic systems raised by postmodernism and poststructuralism. He has also written about the production of economic knowledge both within the field of economics and its variation across other disciplines. In addition, he continues to be a key figure in the ongoing project to reconceptualize the Marxian tradition and currently edits the journal that grew out of this project: *Rethinking Marxism*.

Following his lecture, Ruccio sat down for an interview with members of the disClosure collective. The conversation focused much attention on his involvement with various conceptual aspects of the project to rethink the Marxian tradition. Such concerns led into more specific discussions of the relations between research, teaching, and political action and their materialization in global events like the World Social Forum and local crises such as the effort to split apart his department at the University of Notre Dame. Speaking candidly about both the problems and the possibilities embedded within the heritage of Marxist thought, Ruccio provides a series of forceful and intriguing discussions about the changing nature of politics, scholarship, and economics within a world that is increasingly framed through discourses of globalization.

dC: Since Marxism is a long-standing tradition of critical thought and it has given rise to several theoretical perspectives, we would like to begin by asking you to situate yourself within the Marxian tradition in theoretical as well as in political terms.

DFR: Part of the way I can do that is autobiographically, in terms of where I come from and how I became acquainted with Marxism. The other way is in terms of the work that we do now and where that fits into the Marxian tradition. Let me start with the autobiographical.

I first became involved with radical thought, especially radical social science, in dealing with Latin America. When I spent some time in Latin America during the 1970s as an exchange student, I bumped up against something called dependency theory, the work of Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, and others. Dependency theory was, at that time, one of the key modes of thought within the radical tradition for making sense of the underdevelopment of Latin America and of the relationship between the Third World and the United States. At one and the same time, I found it enabling—that is, encountering a radical way of thinking about that relationship—but I also found it wanting. Working my way through dependency theory, what I found wanting, what I found problematic, was that it focused mostly on how one nation as a whole, or one group of nations, led to the underdevelopment of another nation or another group of nations. It failed to account for what I considered to be the internal issues, the class issues. In my experience—for example, in Latin America—I found that not all Brazilians, or not all Peruvians, were negatively affected or ripped off by their external relationships with the United States, and not everybody in the United States benefited from those relationships. Something else had to be going on.

I became acquainted with Marxian theory through books. I think the first book of Marxism I ever bought was Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation*, which I found on a bookstand in Grand Central Station in New York City when I was 15 years old. I still have that copy, with my young marginal notations. There were also certain journals—like *Monthly Review*, the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, and NACLA's *Latin America and Empire Report*—some of the things that I found on my own as I was working through ideas, especially in college, things I found in bookstores and on the library shelves. Again, while enabling all kinds of new perspectives on events in the United States and how they related to events elsewhere in the world, I found it wanting. On one side, I discovered that the issue of imperialism, the Marxian concept of imperialism, was something different from the notion of unequal power as it arose within dependency theory. But, I also found that, first of all, there was a way in which Marxian political economy was articulated in a scientific vein, with a lot of emphasis on science and scientific methods and getting at the underlying structures and, second, there was a focus on economics without due attention to politics and culture—or, if you will, politics and culture seemed to be more the mirror of the underlying economy than anything else. And so, while I found traditional Marxian and radical political economy enabling, I was also again frustrated by that particular mode of thought.

A lot of this culminated again in my own world, politically in the antiwar movement in the United States and in other kinds of political movements - civil rights, antipoverty, the labor

movement, and so on. Theoretically, I did a senior thesis in college on the history of modes of production in Peru which drew on but also criticized dependency theory. I discovered this mode of production literature which at the time was associated with the work of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, and Louis Althusser, and I had a terrific professor, David Vail, who didn't know this literature but encouraged me to explore it. So, I did some reading there and found it all very difficult. I read somewhere that Fidel Castro had picked up Althusser and Balibar's *Reading Capital*, read the first fifty pages, didn't understand it, and put it down. I said to myself, if Fidel can put it down, I can too. And so, I did.

Until I got to graduate school. One of the wonderful things about arriving at the University of Massachusetts in 1977, for me, was that there was a large group of people, many of them associated with Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff and their students, who took Marxism seriously but were also involved in the project of rethinking Marxism. There was an intellectual climate there of taking radical thought seriously, of taking Marxism seriously, but also of rethinking that Marxism. That was pure happenstance for me, pure serendipity, or *Fortuna*—that I happened to arrive when these things were going on, that my previous reading and interests happened to coincide with what was occurring there.

I spent four years in the program. I was a resident in the program at a good time for me but also at a good time for that program. That is, it was the most exciting time for the UMass program, in the sense that everyone there—Resnick and Wolff and Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis and Jim Crotty and Leonard Rapping were the six key radical political economists there—while they disagreed theoretically and they didn't agree amongst one another about the modes and methods of radical political economy, they all agreed that that's what the program was all about and they all agreed that what their positions were, what their jobs were, what their goal was, was to push the boundaries of radical political economy. So that, we agreed on. They agreed on it as professors. We agreed on it as students. This meant we fought tooth and nail in terms of different ideas but part of that battle, part of that fight, part of that intensity was to push the boundaries and that's why it was so exciting.

And so, while we never either saw Marx or this literature as a set of sacred texts that we were merely going to apply, it provoked many of us to move in new directions. What it meant in terms of our distinction, if you will, or our identity, was on the one hand, distinct from certain currents of radical thought in the United States. We thought of ourselves as Marxists—that is, we took Marxism seriously—at the same time that many in radical political economy were moving away from Marxism and developing a non-Marxist radical political economy. We didn't want to go down that road. We wanted to take Marxism seriously but, as against others for whom Marxism was a set of both fundamental texts and a pretty much settled mode of analysis that could be applied in the form of a kind of economic analysis, we didn't want to go there either. We wanted to engage in a kind of rethinking of Marxism and the Marxian tradition around certain concepts like overdetermination, the specificity of class processes, and what those meant. And so, we found ourselves in the unique position of both taking the Marxian tradition—its concepts and methods, its specificity—seriously but also rethinking it, reinterpreting it and, when necessary, looking beyond it.

So, instead of thinking about this as a single self-contained project, we thought about our work as being inscribed within the Marxian tradition, but of not closing off that tradition to its own critical scrutiny and self-consciousness but also with respect to other traditions. We saw it as a kind of meeting place, a kind of working against the balkanization of thought. In those days, our work was oriented around the concepts of overdetermination, the discursive focus but not causal priority attributed to class processes, and, later on, it became defined as a kind of antideterministic or antiessentialist and, even later, a kind of postmodern Marxism.

That is not a label that we created, that we announced ourselves as, but a label that was applied to us in part because, in some sense through Althusser, through a critique of modernist notions of science in economics, we began to discover other texts. We went back and discovered Michel Foucault and a certain French philosophical tradition oriented around Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguillehem, and the work of Michel Serres, the linguistic tradition around Roland Barthes, the deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida, and so on. We brought many of those ideas together. We're not going to take credit for all this. There was this emerging kind of postmodernism and poststructuralism that we drew from, in part because it connected up with the ways we were trying to open up the Marxian tradition. What was original on our part was taking these ideas seriously and bringing them into contact with, rather than leading to the abandonment of, Marxism. It becomes somewhat controversial, because, in my mind, while some of the work that I do draws from Marxism, other work that I do - along with my frequent collaborators, such as Jack Amariglio, Stephen Cullenberg, Julie Graham, Kath Gibson, and Antonio Callari - draws from postmodernism. And they're not the same thing. But the way I look at it is that not all the answers can be found within the Marxian tradition, and so I do this other work that is not particularly Marxian within a more postmodern tradition, and this work that is Marxist and not necessarily postmodern. I'm always searching about, thinking about the connections across and between, those two areas of thought.

And that, in part, was the theoretical inspiration for where we've come over the course of the last twenty years or so, since I and many others were in graduate school, but also where the project of the journal [*Rethinking Marxism*] came from. That is, the journal was the place where both we individually but also many others could publish and learn about and take seriously and engage in this discussion. Again, our idea, somewhat pretentious, perhaps arrogant, maybe even overblown, was that it would be our contribution to the creation of a kind of new left or Marxian intellectual and political culture in the United States. It was going to be one small contribution, in conjunction with many other things going on in the United States, toward reviving a radical Marxian tradition of critically investigating *the* Marxian tradition, creating the space for new concepts to emerge, and, equally important, opening up the Marxian tradition to other critical traditions that were going on at the time in economics and outside of economics. It was an opening, for example, towards feminist thought. It was an opening towards queer theory. It was an opening later on towards postcolonial thought. It was an opening to psychoanalysis. It was an opening later on to postmodernism. And so, we saw this project as being located in the Marxian tradition, but also as exploring the linkages and connections with other traditions.

Negotiating politics and scholarship

dC: You've hit on the controversy of opening Marxism, of postmodernism and Marxism and that sometimes uneasy relationship, and also addressed in a historical fashion the influence of Latin America on your work. Building from that geographical connection to your theoretical perspectives, we were wondering how your recent trip to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre fits into your work?

DFR: There it's clearly compatible with and comes out of the work that I've done, out of my interests in globalization, imperialism, and radical politics. That is, I consider myself an intellectual working in the academy, a left intellectual, a Marxist intellectual, and that involves certain things for me. It involves not only a concern with, a focus on, ideas, a concern with teaching—which I consider a form of political work—but also a constant preoccupation with events in the world. Without that, I could not do the intellectual work that I do. It's always an odd thing, I think, for me as for most left intellectuals, this concern with the world and concern with the world of ideas, because I am always trying to relate the two together while making sure that one doesn't dictate the other. So, I don't want political concerns and political positions to dictate my intellectual work, nor do I think political positions necessarily fall out directly in any kind of corresponding fashion from the intellectual work that we do. And yet, having said that, I think they are always related. One is a condition of the other, in ways that are not at all straightforward.

So, Porto Alegre was, in part, an intellectual curiosity. I literally went there to participate but also to observe and to try to get some sense of how anti-globalization thinkers and activists were coming together, how they were imagining they were going to confront the ravages of globalization, and how they imagined new political moments and movements emerging from that. One of my points or themes of curiosity as I went there was to ask the question, in a general sense, "how do all of us imagine putting into place certain ideas and forms of political organization that not only contest existing forms of globalization but also begin to enact alternative forms of globalization?" That's one of the major reasons I went to the World Social Forum. I felt that I had missed out on the first two—that this is a significant phenomenon in the world, and I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to see what was going on, and I felt that as a left intellectual I needed to be there, personally and politically.

dC: That leads to a more general question in regards to negotiating between, say, scholarship or the world of ideas and that concern with the world as a social organism or as a material entity. We have always been struck by the tension between bringing about a new way of thought and bringing about a new world, and we were wondering how you address the conversion from a concern with ideas and a concern with terms such as narrativity, subjectivity, etc., and a concern with the world where an idea of subjectivity itself doesn't really resonate with a mass population. How do you transfer an idea of mobilization from an intellectual world to a material or political world?

DFR: That's a really good question, but I don't think about it as transferring from one place to the other. That is, the relationship between those two arenas is much more complicated than transferring from one to the other. In fact, let me push it a little bit. I find that idea problematic. That somehow in this world of ideas we come up with schemes and then the question is how do we translate them, in that older notion of translation, into a vernacular that can then be

instantiated in the world. Let me push it even further. I also don't think about it as a good accounting for what I do. I think about them much more as each influencing the other. So, I don't even think about certain ideas except as I am engaged in the world and as I observe other's engagements in the world. So, the conditions for certain ideas even to appear, not only in my own work but in that of many others, don't exist except as there are struggles and fights and resistances and enactments of new kinds of worlds within and beyond the academy.

An important condition for the intellectual work that I and others do is precisely that those political moments and movements exist. Not only that they exist but that we have some humility with respect to them. That is, there are lots of things to learn in those struggles and a kind of faith that they produce moments of change in the world. As I teach the Marxian tradition to my students, Marxism involves a kind of arrogance, a standing there and announcing certain ideas vis-à-vis the world, but also it is characterized by a good deal of humility. That is, it's not a way of dreaming up schemes that then are placed in the world—a kind of blueprint for either what social change should be or what this alternative society will look like—but a humility with respect to, whatever you want to call them—in the Marxian tradition, they're called the masses, the multitude in current terminology—actual people, struggling individually and collectively in their daily lives and a way in which we work in conjunction with such struggles rather than, as I said before, making up these schemes and transporting them to that world.

That said, I don't want to react to your question by saying it only goes in one direction, that whatever the struggles are out there in the world, that they come into this world of the academy or intellectual work or however you want to call what we do. Ideas matter and ideas spring from many different sources. One of the sources whence ideas emerge is the academy, is the work that we do in the academy in conjunction with our jobs, partly the work that we don't get paid for but that we are able to do because we have these paid jobs in the academy. One of the ways in which I think we have rethought the Marxian tradition and one of the significant moments of that rethinking is to take ideas seriously, to consider ideas to be as material as anything else in the world. So, part of my understanding of the materialism of Marxian theory that we have long talked about is the materiality of ideas, that ideas matter, that ideas matter as they are instantiated in the world, that ideas matter as part of social practices, that ideas as they change allow us to conceive not only of the world in which we exist but also of the world that we want to inhabit, that is, a way of enacting our desires.

So, I don't want to put the focus, to make it now very political, either on the march or demonstration at the steps of whatever building, as being the key moment of political action or, on the other hand, the work that one does in writing articles or books or teaching. All of that work has to go on. But it is important that the ideas are developed. It is important that I get to write what I write. And it is important that I get to teach and that I get to teach large numbers of students all the time.

There is a debate amongst Marxists, amongst leftists, that has to do with public intellectuals. And there's a story, a kind of nostalgic story, that at one time there were public intellectuals who wrote books and wrote in newspapers and magazines, and they were read by wide audiences but now, now all the intellectuals are in the academy. That's a stupid story, to put it bluntly. It's stupid, in part, because lots of these left intellectuals who write articles that in many cases are

only read by a few people and give talks that are heard by fifty or sixty people, also on a regular basis throughout the United States in lots of different disciplines, in lots of different major universities and minor universities, in colleges and community colleges, teach students. They teach hundreds of thousands of students every year. The political implications of that are extraordinary. And so, I think one could easily make the argument that, while most of us are not interviewed on the mass media and most of us don't have access to these newspapers in the United States in contrast to many other countries where left intellectuals do have access, that in fact, through our courses we are engaged in dialogues, and we are engaged in teaching that affects hundreds of thousands of people. That's pretty amazing, and that needs to be protected. I see teaching as political activity but not as a mere translation. I see it as the working out of ideas. I see it as a place where those ideas are contested. I see it as a place where new ideas emerge. I see it as an important place where, if you will, the academy or, in its best sense, this world of ideas no-holds-barred meets the world outside the academy. That's certainly what I feel in all of the courses that I teach but especially in my large introductory courses.

Economics, disciplinary hegemony, and university politics

dC: There was an article published in the January 24th [2003] edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussing a schism between orthodox and heterodox economics. While the article includes a discussion of areas outside the United States, it also focuses on and speaks specifically about what's happening with the economics department at the University of Notre Dame. Perhaps you could describe what's going on.

DFR: It is a project rather than something that has already happened, and it is a project that comes from outside the department. We can talk more about that later, but let me spend a few moments on the *Chronicle* article itself because it started out being an article about the post-autistic economics movement—which is just a wonderful name and a good movement—which started in France and moved to England and now exists in the United States. In fact, it now exists around the world. So they, the French students who first put together the manifesto of the post-autistic economics movement, struck a chord that has been picked up in lots of other places and now really is international, not necessarily a coordinated movement but an international movement in the sense that lots of people around the world are speaking to these issues. In the *Chronicle* article, the author started out writing an article on that movement. Along the way, he discovered through his interviews that all of the issues he was writing about were taking place at that moment at the University of Notre Dame.

In a general sense, economics is unlike any other discipline in the sense that, different from other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, there is a hegemonic theoretical framework, what we call neoclassical economics, that attempts to colonize the space of the discipline of economics. And while it hasn't succeeded in colonizing that entire space, it has certainly been very active, especially in the postwar period, especially in the United States, in establishing the conditions under which certain methodologies and not other methodologies and certain foci and not others are privileged over all others. By methodology, I mean both a focus on individual rational decision-making and certain modes of formal, especially mathematical, analysis. The certain foci or themes basically revolve around the idea that solutions to economic and social problems can be found through markets and not outside of markets or through other modes of

economic organization, of which there have been many over the course of human history—and, for that matter, still are. So, that focus on individual rational decision-making and mathematical analysis and a celebration of free markets and private property has come to dominate the discipline of economics. That was not true in the nineteenth century. That was not true in the first half of the twentieth century, in which economics in the United States was a much more agonistic or pluralistic field. In the postwar period, with the rise of what some people call Samuelsonian economics, neoclassical economics of this particular sort came to dominate the discipline of economics in the United States, and to exclude other forms of economics. It not only seeks to define economics but to punish schools of thought and their adherents that are not neoclassical. And so, it's always been a tricky thing to do economics other than neoclassical economics.

Ironically enough, in conjunction with this post-autistic economics movement, I would make the claim that one of the interesting aspects of the period in which we live right now is that there are more nonmainstream or nonneoclassical schools of thought, and more participants or adherents to these non-neoclassical schools of thought, perhaps than at any other time since the turn of the previous century, since the early 1900s. There is what some of us have described as a kind of postmodern moment in modern economics that has to do with the fragmentation of the discipline and the emergence of all of these feminist, Austrian, post-Keynesian, classical, Marxian, radical, and many other schools of thought in economics. So that if one did a head count, and nobody has ever done this, but my impression is that there would be more nonneoclassical economists than there are neoclassical economists. Which speaks to the materiality of hegemony, that hegemony doesn't have to do just with numbers, that hegemony can be established through other means. And so, I would argue at one and the same time that neoclassical economics is hegemonic and that there are more non-neoclassical economists now than neoclassical economists. It's an interesting issue.

All of which leads up to the situation at Notre Dame. Notre Dame is one of five or six departments of economics, with undergraduate and graduate programs, which defines itself and has prided itself on being an eclectic program. The list would include the University of California-Riverside, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst—where I received my degree—New School University, American University in Washington, and perhaps the University of Utah. Notre Dame has been for the better part of twenty-five years a school which had a majority—as all of these schools do—of mainstream economists—however one defines that—but, interestingly enough, which, by virtue of having a sizeable minority of nonmainstream economists, was considered to be a heterodox economics department. You know, it's like teaching a women's studies course and giving two lectures on lesbians and students walk out and say, "Oh, half the course was about queer theory!" Just by the virtue of the fact that you do it, it seems to occupy a large part of the landscape.

So it is in economics. Just by having a few heterodox economists, the entire department gets called heterodox, in contrast to all of the other departments, all other 98 percent of them in the United States, that are only and exclusively mainstream. These five or six departments have existed on contested terrain. They have been embattled. They have kept it together. They have moved forward and so has the department at Notre Dame. Its distinctiveness is precisely the idea that it includes a wide variety—Marxist, feminist, post-Keynesian, radical, and neoclassical and

traditional Keynesian and so forth – of economists. It includes different modes of analysis; so some people do large econometric studies, some people do much more mathematical modeling, other people work on case studies, some people actually think about the relationship between economics and noneconomics, culture and art and so on—with an overall interest in both methodological diversity and social justice. That's been our self-conception. It has been that way for a long time and it's been quite a successful department.

It is now under attack. The Dean of Arts and Letters at Notre Dame and some in the higher administration are upset with an economics program that, given the nature of the discipline, has a relatively low ranking in, for example, the National Research Council survey—precisely by virtue of being a different department, it doesn't have a high ranking—and that it focuses on and raises issues of social justice on a regular basis, in our writings and in the classroom and so on that makes some people uncomfortable. A plan was therefore devised. It was announced in secret a couple of years ago, and much more publicly in the last year, to split the department. What many don't understand is that it's not an even split—16 of us oppose the split while 3 or 4 are in favor. The other thing that many don't understand is that the split doesn't come from inside the department, that is, it's not a department which was divided on itself. It has always had these different groups and different ideas that certainly argued and discussed but got along pretty well. But now coming in from the outside is a proposal to split the department in an unbelievably convoluted fashion, by renaming the existing department the Department of Economic Thought and Policy (the Department That Doesn't Fit In), and creating a new department, a Department of Economics (or a Department of Real Economics).

So, there'll be a department of “flaky” economics and a department of “real” economics, and some of the members of the department of flaky economics would be invited to join the department of real economics. The rest of us, some sixteen of us, would not be. We would be consigned to this Department of Economic Thought and Policy. They, the Department of Economics, would have a graduate program. The Department of Economic Thought and Policy would not. The Department of Economics would have a commitment for new, five or seven or nine, hires and we would have no commitment for any new hires, for replacing those who leave or retire or anything else. It's an attempt to split the program and to promote one view of economics and to marginalize the other. The idea would be that over time, through retirement and attrition, this other department, this renamed department, would shrink and become relatively insignificant. It wouldn't have many majors because the students would have to choose “flaky” economics over “real” economics, and at some later point, who knows, they would either abolish the department, and with it the tenured positions, or take the few who remain and integrate them back into a Department of Economics, which would then be something very different from what it was before. It's a movement, which I think comes through in this *Chronicle* article, that raises key issues of university governance and what a university is about, which are important issues and which as academics we haven't spent a lot of time thinking about or a lot of time working on. [See Postscript to this article for an update on the re-organization.]

Consumption and the rearticulation of class

dC: We now want to turn to other theoretical issues in your work. Marxian theory has devoted a great deal of energy to the analysis of production, but the consumption side of the analysis has

remained largely unexplored. So, we were wondering what spaces within Marxian theory could be mobilized from the perspective of a consumers' movement?

DFR: Let's back up because there's been a kind of dominant interpretation of Marxian economics and Marxian value theory that has had—and I would argue that also in Marxian politics—has had a not exclusive but certainly strong focus on production. That is, one of the traditions within Marxian economics—the dominant one I would argue again, especially in the United States—that I, and many people I work with, have reacted against—part of our opening up, if you will, of Marxian value theory—has been an attempt to rework and reconfigure that. I think that both theoretically and politically, that focus on production, that making production a kind of essence from which everything else can be derived, has had unfortunate intellectual implications in terms of the development of the theory but also political implications. It has missed out on lots of other moments, one of them being consumption, but it has also devalued and undervalued and forgotten about important aspects of distribution, for example, as well as consumption that some of us have set out to rectify and modify and to change and further develop. I think many of those elements are there within Marxian value theory, so I don't think it takes a departure from Marxian value theory in order to engage in those developments. One of the major criticisms that was developed by Jean Baudrillard, but also by many others, was that Marxism was all about production, forgetting about use-value, forgetting about consumption, and, therefore, that Marxian value theory had to be abandoned in order to develop a theory of consumption and a theory of use-value. I think that's wrong. That is, I think that interpretation of Marxian value theory exists and that interpretation can be abandoned. That does not mean that's all that Marxian value theory is about.

As I understand Marxian value theory, the commodity, a good or service produced by labor and exchanged in markets, is defined from the start as having both a use-value and an exchange-value. In addition, it has a value in production being defined in terms of labor. So, the idea of use-value, connected in turn with the issue of consumption, is there from the start. A commodity cannot be exchanged in markets—that is, its exchange-value will not be realized—unless the commodity has a use-value—that is, a social usefulness. It's there from the start, in terms of the twofold nature of the commodity, as Marx defines it, and then seems to disappear. It disappears that is. Marx does not write a whole hell of a lot about use-value from then on, although certainly he does in the first three chapters of *Capital* that many people kind of skip over because they really are very difficult chapters. But it also more importantly disappears from the Marxian tradition, so the Marxian tradition of value theory becomes an analysis of the conditions of production and not of consumption. That, in turn, I think, was connected with a certain kind of politics, which was a politics of production, a politics of struggle within production and a kind of anti-consumption. That is, consumption was conceived in a bourgeois society to represent a kind of false consciousness, and so, a particular interpretation of Marxian economic analysis becomes caught up with a particular conception of subjectivity oriented around true and false consciousness. Consumption was often conceived to be a deflection from the real concerns of production, and so, both theoretically and politically, I think there has been a problem in the Marxian tradition. I mean, much more can be done that involves the moment of consumption or the identity, if you will, of the social identity of individuals as consumers, their subjectivity and involvement in commodity exchange.

Let me give you an example which borrows from the important work of George DeMartino. It's a very concrete example that comes from trade-union organizing where the traditional notion of union organizing is that only those who participate in producing a particular good or service should be involved in the union and, therefore, in the case of a hospital, for example, you form a nurses union and that's a relatively self-contained unit that looks to get support from the community to engage in its union organizing drive. But it's that particular union producing nursing services or that particular union producing meat at the Hormel factory, or that particular union producing steel in a steel factory that is the beginning and basis of the union, that, it seems to me, excludes consumption, or only invokes consumption when it wants to organize a consumer boycott, and fails to appreciate the pleasures and desires and connections that can be made in and through consumption.

So, to create a stark alternative, another way of understanding the problem is to think about a union as all those who are involved not only in producing but also consuming hospital services. So, one could imagine a union of a different sort which involves all of those who are concerned that the capitalist reorganization of health care has undermined the provision of good health care in terms of quality and also created very high-priced health care that is unavailable to many, such that there are many who not only produce those services, and get screwed over attempting to produce them, but also who consume them, who could band together in a union that both changes the conditions under which those commodities are produced but also under which they are consumed. That's a kind of expansive notion of union organizing that is made impossible by solely focusing on production and that is made possible by revaluing the notion of consumption in relationship to the production and circulation of commodities. That is an interesting political moment within capitalism, but also it is the basis, or could be the basis, for imagining more collective or communal forms of organization in which the collectivity or the commune is not just those who produce goods and services—what are often called the direct producers or the productive laborers—but also involves others in the community who have a stake in the ways in which goods and services are produced and distributed and consumed and so on.

dC: How does the imagining of such collective or communal organizations fit with the reprivileging of class within the rethinking Marxism project? As we understand it, in this reprivileging, class takes on a very specific definition which is very useful, certainly analytically very useful. However, one of the concerns is then that it's a definition which can appear in its specificity to truncate some of that circuit of capital whereas other definitions of class seem a little looser perhaps, but more fully entrained in the process of realization of surplus value.

DFR: Yes, I think there's a danger. I don't think it necessarily succumbs to that danger, but I think there's a danger, and I think about it in the following way: as you call it, the rearticulation of class—I wouldn't call it necessarily a reprivileging, but certainly, a focusing on class and giving it a kind of discursive priority within the analysis as against, for example, focusing on the accumulation of capital, which you might see in David Harvey's work and other important thinkers in the Marxian tradition—is a way of focusing on what is often elided within other formulations, which tend to focus much more on the so-called laws of motion of capitalism. It creates a particular moment in which one can focus on the modes in which surplus labor is performed and appropriated and distributed.

So, it's a rescuing of that idea, but, by virtue of its specificity, class precisely demarcates and finds a place within the social formation wherein surplus labor and the processes surrounding it obtain. But it also says there are a lot of other moments in the social formation which are not class, which are not surplus labor, and so, there is something quite liberating by making that concept of class very specific. It says this is what class is and it's not all these other things. Having done that, and this is always, always a danger in any one of these theoretical moves that we make, having done that it then calls for a reintegration of these elements. By having made them distinct, it then asks what's the relationship amongst and between them? In other words, if class is everything, then there's no need to conduct a concrete, specific investigation of its relationship to other moments within the social totality. If it's everything, then it's nothing. By making it more specific, it then says, if this political moment is not class and we have class here, now *we have to do the analysis*. Not an analysis which can be given to us theoretically, from a general concept, but an analysis that has to be conducted concretely and contextually and contingently of what is the particular relationship between this mode of appropriating surplus labor or this way of distributing surplus labor and this particular political process, this particular cultural process, and so on –

dC: -- and the political work of articulation?

DFR: Exactly, which is already given in a larger analysis in which it is enfolded into laws of motion and in which, even before you do the analysis, you know exactly how it is going to unfold because it's a law. If it is less lawlike and more specific and concrete and contingent, then you have to produce that analysis and sometimes you have to produce that analysis on the ground. That, therefore, is an opening to return to one of our concepts, a kind of materialist moment, and that materialism involves an analysis of the concrete circumstances rather than a presumption that those concrete circumstances are merely the manifestation or an unfolding of this underlying law. So, for me, that's an important aspect of both the discursive focus on class but also making that particular notion of class quite specific.

dC: Given that notion of the overdetermined and contingent character of these class processes which you just described methodologically, what about the politics of that kind of notion of class and where do you position yourself in relation to, say, the Laclau and Mouffe point on creating hegemonies, discursive hegemonies, and so on, and their radical politics?

DFR: Let's start with Laclau and Mouffe. While I've gotten a lot out of Laclau and Mouffe and I think it's an important text [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*], the mistake that they make is to presume that any focus on class must be an essentialism, a causal essentialism. So, Laclau and Mouffe, for all that they do on suturing the social space and so on, fail to appreciate the possibility that there can be a discursive focus on class, a privileging of class in the analysis, a concern with getting at issues of class, without making it a causal essence, without reducing the social space to being merely the epiphenomenon, to being the phenomenal form of this underlying structure.

Again, there are always tensions, but it's a tension we've attempted to resolve by making a distinction between causal priority and discursive priority. It's a hard one because in social theory the question is always, if you're going to focus on this, then you must be focusing on it

because it is the most important thing. In some sense, we want to refuse that answer precisely by keeping that tension in play of choosing to focus without giving the foundation for that focus being the causally most important thing. But that raises a whole other set of questions and that's a set of questions that has to do with the consequences of, or the performativity of, the concept. If you refuse the ontological argument that you're focusing on something in your analysis—I think this is a larger issue in social theory, not just for Marxism, focusing on something without invoking an ontological essence as the warrant for focusing on that thing—then you have other questions to ask and one of those questions that you have to pose is, why? That “why” need not be answered in terms of an ontological essence but can be answered in terms of its effects, its effectivity, its political consequences, what you want out of the analysis. So, as I think about the issue of class and the issue of labor and the issue of the body— since I think all those things are connected—I think about them not as an ontological essence, not as a key to unlock the world, but as a space, a way of making connections.

The way I teach it to my students, which sometimes gets them very upset, is that the issues of labor and surplus labor, as a way of defining class, are arbitrary. The starting point could be lots of things. One could tell a narrative of capitalism using all kinds of different value theories. It's arbitrary, but it has its effects. By choosing labor rather than the maximum production of use-values - as it is in neoclassical theory - or sunspots or peanuts or whatever—all of these are possible value theories, all of them internally consistent value theories—by focusing on the concept of labor, certain connections are made and connections and identities are created and so on. It involves and identifies with laboring bodies, bodies that sweat and bleed and are punished in the context of capitalist production. It connects up with the body, a body that labors but also a body that desires and, therefore, while it's a specific concept, it is also expansive, since a concern with that laboring body is a concern with bodies as they are marked and produced within capitalism and, at the same time, they are bodies that desire and that exceed the conditions of capitalism. One almost—I wouldn't say automatic, but almost automatically—is forced to move beyond that traditional, maybe more specific, male, white, laboring body, as it has often been produced within the Marxian tradition, to produce a diversity of bodies. I think there are interesting ways in which Foucauldian notions of bodies and feminist and queer retheorizings of bodies and the significance of bodies within Marxian theory as markers rather than essences opens up an entirely new landscape. It touches on issues of consumption that you raised before. And so, if you follow those connections, the focus on class that Laclau and Mouffe say from the start must be an economic essence or that Baudrillard says must be a production essence becomes a much more contingent place to stand, wherein one can refuse those kinds of essentialist tendencies.

Globalization and imperialism

dC: A question that emerged for us following your presentation was why you emphasized “imperialism” and an “imperial machine,” two terms that have for various reasons not been used much in recent scholarship on globalization. In your presentation, you spoke of a kind of baggage attached to the term “globalization,” but to us there seems also to be a baggage that comes with the phrase “imperial machine.”

DFR: So, what does it do for me? Why do I want to invoke imperialism and yet redefine it in terms of this machine imaginary rather than in the way that has been deployed previously?

dC: Yes.

DFR: Part of the reason I want to invoke imperialism is to reconnect with parts of the Marxian tradition. So, part of a critical relationship to the Marxian tradition is the ability to retrieve certain concepts which have been forgotten along the way—that had some critical import—and, at the same time, to redefine them. So, I want to invoke it, I want to resuscitate it, I want to excavate it, and I want to deploy it in new ways.

Globalization, as it is often used on both the Right and the Left in my view, has a kind of depressing inevitability about it. It is taken to be a stage of the world's unfolding. There was a previous stage in which the argument is, globalization was only partial and incomplete and now it's taken over the entire world. Part of my argument, empirically, is that that's wrong, that there are previous globalization stages and stages that undo globalization and different forms of globalization and resistances to globalization. Therefore, in certain ways at least, the current forms and types of globalization are not inevitable. So, I want to undermine the inevitability argument by making the connection to the previous periods, but I also want to undermine the argument by saying, if imperialism was taking place in that earlier globalization period, then what prevents us from using that concept now? I use imperialism rather than globalization because imperialism for me carries with it the idea that something is being done in the world, and something is being done by one group to another group. There is a sense, an imaginary or an effect, of a *doing* that, for me, globalization does not have. Globalization, for me, is an unfolding and not a doing, and there is something about the concept of a doing that I think is important to us.

dC: Is there a subject or origin for this 'doing'?

DFR: It is without origin or a subject, but it doesn't mean that nobody is doing the doing. In this way, I want to make the connection to exploitation. Exploitation in my view is a process. That does not mean that there are not individuals and groups who occupy the positions of exploiter and exploited. They occupy positions and are interpellated as such. So, in the same sense, with the imperial machine. I want to deprive it of a subject because I don't want to think about it as having to spring from a particular individual or group, as their creation, but rather as enabling and creating such groups and energizing such groups. And yet, I want human faces attached to the projects associated with the imperial machine as well as to the resistances to that machine. If you noticed in my presentation, I had both the resistances—the anti-imperialist moments—and those who are carrying out the project associated with the imperial machine, neither of which is the origin of that machine. That is what I want to stay away from.

I think that speaks to a larger issue of social theory, of what kinds and notions of causality we want to deploy. I think it's possible to produce a conception of the social world, including of the imperial machine, wherein we think about processes without subjects—a kind of antihumanism, if you will—which doesn't prevent us from engaging in a politics which demonstrates both resistances and alternatives to that imperial machine. That is, I don't think we need a humanism

and I don't think we need originary subjects in order to carry out a politics. I think our politics looks different as a result, but I disagree with those who claim that, once we think about the social world in terms of a process without a subject, we lose a political moment—just as I disagree with those who argue that we need essentialism in order to engage in politics. I think that's wrong, but I think politics changes as a result. For me, the political moments associated with recognizing an imperial machine, the political moments that recognize those who carry out the imperial project, have faces and names and engage in conspiracies—such as the fact that Cheney, Rumsfeld, and others have been sitting down for the better part of fifteen years working out the New American Century, their project to colonize the world—but the imperial machine does not originate with them. They can be opposed, the project can be opposed, but the opposition to the project is not identical with just opposing those individuals as if somehow, if they disappeared or they were voted out of office, that the energies and intensities and identities associated with the imperial machine would somehow disappear.

That for me is an important aspect of conceiving of the imperial machine as a machine, as a set of assemblages that can connect up with other machines, or as a project in the world in that fashion, rather than in the ways in which globalization is often articulated. That's why, at least at this point in time, as a kind of provisional move, I want to break with that globalization discourse and think about the possibilities associated with the imperial machine as a way of colonizing the world, which is always partial and incomplete. It is something that they are doing to us that we can both resist and side-step. The way globalization discourse is articulated is very difficult, theoretically and politically, because we are always inscribed within globalization and there's no way of stepping outside it just as Gibson and Graham have argued with respect to totalizing concepts of capitalism. It's very difficult to resist. So, that's, if you will, the effects and consequences of the performativity of the concept, which make it attractive for me.

dC: What direction do you think your interests will take you over the next five to ten years? Will you return to the discussions of economic subjectivities that we touched upon earlier or is there something different ahead for you?

DFR: Part of the new project that I'm working on—I don't know exactly where it will go yet—but I broadly define it as focusing on the diversity of approaches that exist inside economics. One often hears the expression “economists say this” or “economists think that” or “economists look at markets in this way,” and, in my experience in the discipline of economics, economists don't look at markets in a single way. They, in fact, look at markets in a diversity of ways. Marxist economists don't understand markets in the same way that feminist economists understand them or in the same way that neoclassical economists understand them. So, work needs to be done to, in some sense, put that diversity forward.

But I'm also interested in recognizing and articulating economic ideas that are produced outside the discipline of economics. It seems to me that there are a lot of interesting economic ideas and representations that have emerged in other disciplines—in sociology, in anthropology, political science, cultural studies, literary criticism and elsewhere—much of which is oriented around what we might call the gift economy and representations of the gift. Noncapitalist representations. So, if you will, a second part of my project is to excavate and to put into contact with one another lots of those ideas that are produced outside the discipline of economics.

The third aspect of this project concerns economic ideas that are produced outside the academy itself and that are embodied in lots of genres and forms of popular culture—in popular music, in novels and poems, in speeches, in art, by economic activists. One of the things that I was interested in at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was precisely the economic representations that are used by and that are produced by antiglobalization activists—what motivates them, what are the economic representations that are clearly different from those of mainstream economists, and academic economists more generally—that motivate their work and that permit them both to engage in resistances and to imagine alternatives? Such a recognition requires a move, if you will, of putting them on an equal footing or at least on the same plane rather than presuming a hierarchy wherein there are academic knowledges that are the correct scientific representations of the world, and everything else, which is conceived to be a kind of ersatz and, therefore, a representation only as a kind of parody of real scientific knowledge. This is an intellectual project but it's also a political project, and it's a political project of excavation, it's a political project of engagement, it's a political project that involves a certain amount of seeing and listening to representations without presuming that they are wrong or right. It is also a project that does not involve just a celebration of all these other representations but a kind of critical engagement with them because I neither want to dismiss them nor to celebrate them in their entirety but precisely to engage them in a critical fashion. And it's a project—which involves a certain amount of writing and a couple of conferences that I am organizing—that I'm going to be working on for the next five or ten years. I don't know exactly where it will go, and there's something nice and exciting about not knowing exactly where it will go. It all depends. There's no fixed end point. I'll get on the train - to use one of my favorite examples from Althusser's writings - spend time sitting and talking with the passengers I encounter, and see where I'll go.

Postscript

On 20 March 2003, the Academic Council of the University of Notre Dame voted overwhelmingly to split the Department of Economics—against the stated wishes of the vast majority of members of the department (15 out of 20). The vote took place after a concerted campaign, on the part of the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters and other members of the university administration, both to malign the activities and accomplishments of faculty in the existing department and to support the proposal to split the department into two different units.

The proposal that was finally adopted and put into operation during the summer of 2003 involved a number of *sui generis* measures: the creation of a Faculty of Economics, the renaming of the existing department as the “Department of Economics and Policy Studies” - with the 15 members who opposed the idea - and the creation of a new department, the “Department of Economics and Econometrics,” with invitations to the 5 members who either actively supported or did not oppose the idea. The stated goal of the new Department of Economics and Econometrics is confined to “neoclassical economics”; only research and teaching in that single approach to economic inquiry will be permitted. Moreover, while the undergraduate program is to be shared by the two departments, the doctoral program was awarded solely to the newly created department. (For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that while the future of the

renamed department is uncertain—it could be marginalized or even dismantled at the same time that the newly created department is rewarded with a series of new, high-profile hires—the faculty members were offered letters guaranteeing them tenure in the college in the event that their department is eliminated at any point in the future.)

There is much that is wrong about this decision. Among other things, it tramples on academic freedom - in that it is based on a fieltly not to open academic inquiry but to one economic theory over all others - and violates the accepted norms of faculty governance - since the proposal to split the department was rejected by large majorities at the level of both the department and the college, and was only finally approved after a fiercely partisan campaign by members of the unversity administration. The decision should also be disquieting to all who are concerned about the fate of higher education for another reason: it represents the wholesale embrace of the market by the university, thereby creating an empty shell, at least insofar as intellectual inquiry is concerned.

- David F. Ruccio, February 2, 2004

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