This chapter investigates the relationships between the stream of thought associated with Marx and the ideas conceived by Kalecki starting from the 1930s. An appraisal is made of Marxist ascendancy over Kalecki, on the one hand, and whether, and to what extent, his work contributed to giving a solution to problems unsolved in Marxist tradition, on the other.

This task is complicated by the ubiquity of Marx’s thought, both on account of the variety of themes he dealt with and on account of the many ramifications he generated or in which he left (sometimes unnoticed) seeds.

It is difficult to disagree with Schumpeter when he argues that vitality is the sign of the greatness of Marx’s system — a greatness in no way undermined by possible weaknesses of single building blocks, but which is confirmed by its permeation of modern economic thought. It would thus be a mistake to evaluate the Marxian system purely on the basis of what Marx actually said. It would similarly be inappropriate to assess its influence on modern thought solely on the basis of those who profess to be Marxists; all the more so because, as has been observed, perhaps the richest fruits of Marx’s doctrine are to be found in the works of scholars who have no explicit ties with Marxist ideology.

5.1 THE THEORY OF EXPLOITATION

Among the questions left open by Marx, the most controversial concern the relationship between values and prices of production, and the problem of effective demand; that is to say, the two moments which mark the Marxian analysis of profit — the origin of profit and the conditions for its realisation. The first relates to the sphere of production, to the exchange between capital and labour, to the difference between the use value and the exchange value of the labour force; the second to the propensity of economic agents to spend. Each aspect corresponds with a feature of capitalism that Marx denounces but whose theoretical basis he is unable to demonstrate: the exploitation of workers and the systematic waste of resources.

Several generations of scholars have debated these themes, with different emphasis. The professed Marxist component has focused attention mainly (and unsuccessfully) on the problem of transformation,
being convinced that this is crucial to validating the theory of exploitation. The second theme has been developed by economists of different extractions, frequently unrelated to Marxism but sharing the aim – by drawing on hints scattered throughout Marx’s works – of setting up ideas and tools able to explain the working of modern capitalist economies.

Kalecki belongs to this second group. Indeed his lack of dogmatism and his intellectual independence from Marxian doctrine are apparent. Kalecki’s Marxism is unavowed, and he generally avoids using categories and the lexicon typical of the Marxist approach. The concepts of labour-value and exploitation (in Marx’s sense) do not recur in Kalecki’s works and no attention is given to notions such as prices of production or the general rate of profits. Kalecki sticks stubbornly to the field of market prices (determined by the cost of production and by that ambiguous creature called degree of monopoly), so that his conception of profit appears entirely within the sphere of realisation.

Kalecki’s silence on the existence of a *causa causans* of profit, prior to realisation, could naturally be interpreted either as a tacit acceptance or as a tacit rejection of Marx’s premises. In the first case, Kalecki would have merely limited his attention to ‘phenomenal reality’, to the conditions for the realisation of the surplus value, while accepting Marx’s points as its ultimate cause (i.e., the law of value and the theory of exploitation). If this were true, however, it would be necessary to verify the compatibility of Kalecki’s categories with those of Marx, which would entail switching from market prices to prices of production and then – through any of several paths, according to a still unsolved debate – to the notion of exploitation.

Kalecki’s complete silence on the matter suggests a second interpretation, whereby the origin of profit rests entirely on the power of firms to set prices over costs; that is to say, profits originate in the power relationship between producers and workers, the latter being regarded as consumers rather than suppliers of labour. Realisation of profits thus depends on the propensities to consume and to invest. The entire problem of income distribution consequently finds its answer on the market, which means dropping the Marxian analysis of distribution. Naturally, this does not imply that the notion of exploitation is foreign to Kalecki, but rather that he does not follow Marx in attempting to pass from a purely ideological conception to one based on scientific verification. Considering his pragmatism, it is hardly surprising that Kalecki took no step in this direction, for he would have viewed the attempt to provide a *scientific* demonstration of exploitation (i.e., of the origin of surplus value) as an escape from a *reality* which required no demonstration.