

# On Karl Marx's Two-hundredth Anniversary

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It is 200 years since Marx was born. He lived and worked through the middle years of the nineteenth century. Many have tried to treat his ideas as rooted in his time and to consign them to the past as refuted and superseded, but they cannot be disposed of so easily.

Controversy still rages about them and about his legacy.

It was not always so. Marx first formulated his philosophy in popular form in *The Communist Manifesto*, written jointly with Engels and published in 1848. That work begins with the bold statement, "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism".<sup>1</sup> At the time, these words were more an expression of hope than a description of the historical situation as it then was. The Communist League, for which the *Manifesto* was written, consisted of only a tiny handful of activists, without any wider organisation or following. Hardly had the *Manifesto* been published than the revolutionary hopes it expressed were dashed. The revolutions that erupted across Europe in 1848 were defeated. The Communist League, together with other revolutionary groups, was smashed; their members were hounded and persecuted. Marx was forced to flee from Germany and settled in London. Recriminations and in-fighting ensued among the exiled revolutionaries, consuming what little was left of their political energies. Marx all but withdrew from direct political activity to devote himself to his studies in the Library of the British Museum. The "spectre" of communism had, it seemed, been extinguished and the bold vision of the *Manifesto* refuted.

Gradually and steadily, however, the communist movement re-formed and re-organised, and the influence of Marx's ideas began to grow. By 1883, the year of Marx's death, socialist groups had revived and Marx's ideas were spreading and becoming influential throughout Europe. The spectre had returned.

World War I marked a turning point in the development of Marxism. Its outbreak precipitated the collapse of the international socialist movement; its end saw the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. This was quickly followed by the formation of communist parties in many other countries and their unification in the Third International. There was a great

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<sup>1</sup> Marx and Engels 1978.

flowering of Marxist thought in such diverse areas as philosophy (Lukács, Korsch, Frankfurt School), social theory (Bukharin), political theory (Gramsci), legal theory (Pashukanis), political economy (Rubin), psychology (Vygotsky, W Reich), linguistics (Bakhtin); and an explosion of creativity in the arts inspired by Marxism (Eisenstein, Mayakovski, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Malevich, Rodchenko, Brecht, etc).

Despite the deadening orthodoxy that was enforced during the Stalin period the influence of Marxism continued to expand. After World War II there was a second wave of communist revolutions in China, Korea and Vietnam. The influence of Marxism spread to Latin America after the revolution in Cuba, and to Africa where the Communist Party played a central role in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. By the 1960s more than one third of the world's people were living under regimes inspired by Marx's ideas.

With the spread of the political influence of Marxism there was also an enormous growth of Marxist ideas. After Stalin's death, the international communist movement began to break up. In the new freer atmosphere there was a flowering of Marxist thought. Humanist and other ideas critical of Soviet Marxism developed in Eastern Europe and the USSR (Schaff, Kolakowski, Ilyenkov) and the New Left emerged in the West (E P Thompson, P Anderson). With the worldwide upsurge of radicalism in the 1960s a profusion of forms of "Western Marxism" proliferated, including humanist (Sartre, Fromm), Structuralist (Althusser, Poulantzas) and analytical Marxism (Cohen, Roemer).

In the USSR and the Soviet bloc there was a brief period of liberalization, but it was soon snuffed out, and a long period of stagnation and slow relative decline ensued. And then, quite suddenly, Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR came to an end, not through revolution but relatively peacefully, through internal collapse. The whole social and political edifice of Soviet Communism turned out to be a rotten shell which disintegrated as soon as its citizens were able openly to challenge it, although it was helped on its way, to some extent, by a newly resurgent capitalism, championed by Reagan and Thatcher. Communism was widely dismissed as outdated and refuted. Fukuyama even proclaimed that its collapse was the final disproof of the Marxist theory of history and the conclusive demonstration that capitalism and liberal democracy are the final stage of human development, the 'end of history'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fukuyama 1989.

These claims turned out to be short-lived. In 2008, less than twenty years after history was supposed to have ended with the collapse of Soviet communism, capitalism was plunged into a deep and prolonged crisis from which it has not yet recovered. The liberal, laissez-faire, free market philosophy which had come to have such strong sway over economic and political thought was discredited. Marx's analysis of capitalism as volatile and crisis-prone was vindicated. Marxist ideas began to be studied again and the idea of an alternative to capitalism came back on to the agenda.

What is Marxism?

This history of the ways in which the influence of Marx's ideas has grown and spread raises the question: what is Marxism? Neither Marx nor Engels themselves used the term, it was first employed by Marx's opponents. Indeed, Engels reports that Marx responded to its use by saying 'all I know is that I am not a Marxist'.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of Engels' life, however, it began to be used by the followers as well as the opponents of Marx,<sup>4</sup> and this usage rapidly gained acceptance to refer to the system of thought created by Marx. It is often also usually taken to include the work of Engels and, by extension, to the ideas of Marx's subsequent followers, derived from or based upon his work.

It is in these terms that I have been talking about it so far. As I have briefly described, Marxism has developed into a tradition of world-historical proportions. Marx's ideas have been taken up by innumerable followers. They have been adapted to new conditions, extended into new areas of enquiry, and developed in a huge variety of political and intellectual contexts. In the process a great profusion of different forms of Marxism have arisen. There are distinctive Russian, Chinese, Cuban, German, French, Italian, British and many other traditions of Marxism, each containing within them a diversity of tendencies and theories. Moreover, there have been numerous attempts to combine Marxism with other schools of thought, giving rise to Hegelian, analytic, structuralist, existentialist, neo-Kantian, and many other interpretations of Marxism. Marxism continues to evolve and new forms continue to emerge.

It may be thought this must have led to the dissolution of Marx's theories into innumerable different forms in which they become unrecognisably scattered and dispersed, but this has not

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<sup>3</sup> Engels n.d. [1956?], 496.

<sup>4</sup> Manale 1974.

been the case. Rather, Marxism is a historical tradition that has developed and grown, like a flourishing tree whose spreading branches are signs of its vigour and strength.

Because it has grown in this way, problems arise when the attempt is made to be more specific about what Marxism is. What did Marx really say? Who are his genuine followers? What is the correct interpretation of Marxism? Many different ways of answering these questions have been suggested.<sup>5</sup>

The attempt is often made to define Marxism by specifying an essential core of social and economic theory. However, it resists such systematisation. Changing and adapting to new situations may be regarded as essential to Marxism as a living tradition. 'We do not regard Marx's theory as something complete and inviolable,' wrote Lenin, 'on the contrary, we are convinced that ... socialists *must* develop it in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life.'<sup>6</sup>

Others have attempted to specify Marxism in terms of its dialectical and materialist method. According to Lukács, for example, 'orthodox Marxism is not the "belief" in this or that thesis ... orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*'.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, the active, political commitment of Marxism to the cause of the working class and to communism may be looked upon as its defining feature. But none of these approaches is without problems.

Sometimes the attempt is made to distinguish Marx's own views, as 'true' Marxism, from the supposed simplifications and distortions of later followers: Engels, Kautsky, Lenin in particular. In recent years some scholarly writers have argued that Engels' version of Marxism, which exercised such an enormous influence on the development of Marxist ideas, misrepresents Marx's own views.<sup>8</sup> Others maintain that Marx's ideas are a product of the nineteenth century conditions in which they were formed and that they no longer apply in the modern world.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it is true that Engels' ideas differ from those of Marx. However, Engels' ideas are developments of Marxism. They are interpretations of Marx's views, they are a form of

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5 These problems are similar to those that arise within Christianity, Islam or in any other great tradition of ideas that has grown and proliferated historically.

6 Lenin 1969, 34.

7 Lukács 1971, 1.

8 Levine 1975, McLellan 1977, Carver 1981, Stedman Jones 2017, Rockmore 2018.

9 Gorz 1982, Hardt and Negri 2000, Sperber 2013.

Marxism. This is the nature of all growth and development: it involves both sameness and difference. To see only the difference of Engels' (or Lenin's, etc) ideas from Marx's and not the aspect of identity and development, is to treat Marx's work in abstraction, cut off from its historical context and from the developing tradition that it inaugurated. It is to treat it ahistorically and abstractly.

This is not to deny that different Marxist thinkers have their own distinctive views and interpretations of what Marx said and what Marxism is. However, this need not involve the claim that one is in possession of the sole true account. One should also recognise that other interpretations are possible and legitimate. To deny this is to be dogmatic and sectarian – faults that have been all too common in the history of Marxism.

In the course of its history, Marxism has become divided into different, often conflicting, tendencies and schools, none of which can unproblematically claim to be the sole true heirs of Marx. Indeed, one must recognise that there is no longer a single theory of Marxism and that we must talk instead of 'Marxisms' in the plural. In any case, it is essential to see that Marxism is a concrete and complex historical tradition which contains within it many different schools and theories, each of which can claim legitimate descent from and connection with the Marxist movement.

However, seeing things in this way does not ultimately escape the problem of how to distinguish between what can and cannot legitimately claim to be forms of Marxism. If anyone who calls themselves or is called a 'Marxist' is regarded *ipso facto* as a Marxist, then the identity of Marxism becomes entirely arbitrary and subjective. Otherwise the problem remains.

It is not possible to specify in advance exactly what is and is not to be legitimately included under the term 'Marxism'; it is impossible to give criteria for a clear and precise boundary. Ultimately drawing such a boundary requires a practical, political decision which will vary according to circumstances. In general, however, and particularly in times of adversity, it seems wise to be as inclusive as possible.

### Marxism Today

We are living in times of adversity now. With the collapse of Soviet communism and the resurgence of neo-liberal capitalism since the 1980s, Marxism – and the left more generally – has suffered a setback of historic proportions. The collapse of communism, many said,

showed that Marxism is dead and that there is no viable alternative to free market capitalism in the modern world. But it quickly became evident that such capitalist triumphalism was premature. Capitalism was soon overtaken by a crisis of its own making. The contradictions of global capitalism are once again evident. The idea of communism is back on the agenda. The spectre has once again returned.

The free market philosophy which has dominated economic and social thinking for the past 40 or so years has been discredited. Marx's analysis of capitalism has been vindicated in some important respects. The present crisis has demonstrated anew that the free market is not the benign, self-regulating mechanism that the free market fundamentalists claim it to be. It does not necessarily serve the general interest or lead inevitably to economic growth and prosperity. On the contrary, as Marx argues, the free market operates as an alien system with a life of its own. It is an uncontrollable and inherently unstable mechanism. It leads to periodic crises in which huge numbers of people are thrown out of work and useful means of production are wantonly destroyed.

What such crises show, Marx argues, is that the capitalist system is incapable of mastering the productive forces that it itself has created. In Marx's graphic image, it is 'like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.'<sup>10</sup> Periodically the forces of production develop so greatly that they come into conflict with existing economic relations.

Thus the system grows through a series of booms and recessions. It is inherently unstable. Recession and crisis are not due only to insufficient regulation or poor government policies, they are an essential part of the dynamic of capitalism and of the mechanisms by which it operates. And what this reveals is that the forces of production have become so large in scale that they are less and less capable of being accommodated within the confines of the capitalist system of private ownership. In order for the economy to be able to expand in a less destructive fashion, a more fully social system of economic and social relations is needed.

This is the economic aspect of Marx's analysis of capitalism which constitutes the most profound and comprehensive theory of capitalism yet created. By and large it has been confirmed by recent events. However, as recent history also makes clear, and as Marx himself recognised, economic crisis alone, no matter how severe, is not sufficient to bring

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<sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels 1978, 478

about fundamental change. A crisis is a purely negative phenomenon, but more is needed. Positive factors must also be present to change the system itself. For this involves not just the collapse of the old system but the creation of an alternative, of a new order.

This is not only an economic process, it is also a political one. It requires the existence of political forces that can bring it about. Here we come to a more problematic aspect of Marx's theory. For Marx also believed that the development of capitalism will lead to the growth of a conscious, organised and militant working class. This is the political force that Marx thought would eventually overthrow capitalism and create a new society.

The conditions of the working class in industrial countries at the time he was writing were dreadful. Nevertheless, Marx did not regard the new industrial working class as a mere downtrodden and exploited mass. The impact of industry was not purely negative. The working class was united and educated by its experience of it, its solidarity and consciousness were increased. It was radicalized and energized by these conditions. Steadily, through the nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century, it became politically stronger – more united, better organized and more militant. A revolutionary industrial working class committed to socialism was growing up just as Marx predicted.

#### Capitalism today

In the industrialized world, however, much has changed since then, and whether Marx's analysis still applies today is increasingly questioned. Although capitalism has led to an enormous and widening gulf of inequality, and to widespread unemployment, poverty and misery, there are no signs that a revolutionary working class is emerging.

In particular, it is clear that the character of the classes that make up advanced industrial societies has been transformed. It is often said that these are now 'post-industrial' societies. Industry is playing a diminishing role in their economies and the industrial working class constitutes only a diminishing part of their work force.

In part, this is due to global economic changes. Marx focused on capitalism in Britain in the nineteenth century, and in the main he analysed it as a self-contained national phenomenon. Capitalism has now developed into a global system. Industry is moved to where the pay is lowest and conditions worst. Workers all over world are thus put into direct competition with each other. Much industry has been moved away from the older industrial centres in Europe and North America and relocated in China and India. Nevertheless, capitalism has not ceased to be an industrial system: industry is still fundamental to the economy.

The economy is also said to be becoming 'post-industrial' because of changes in the character of production itself. Production is being automated, productivity dramatically increased. The number of workers in manufacturing industries is now only a small fraction of what it used to be, and the same is even more the case in agriculture. At the same time, increasing numbers are working in the service sector – in offices, shops and even at home using computers. The solidarity and class consciousness of the industrial proletariat in its heyday, rooted in the social conditions of factory life, have gone. Trade union membership and working class political militancy have declined dramatically. They are unlikely ever to return.

In short, the character of classes has changed greatly since Marx's time, and the Marxist conception of social class needs to be rethought accordingly. What is more questionable, however, is the often expressed view that class has now ceased to be the fundamental form of division in capitalist society. Though its character has changed, the working class still makes up the great majority of the population, in Europe and North America at least. For the most part, however, the working class is very different from the industrial proletariat of earlier times. It is now located in offices and shops, in distribution depots and call centres, more than in factories. But these workers are still members of the working class as Marxism conceives of it. That is, they are people who have no share in capital, they are dependent entirely on their labour for their livelihood, and they occupy subordinate positions in the division labour.

Nevertheless, many observers have ceased to regard the modern working class as a potential revolutionary force. Instead they look to disenfranchised, dispossessed and disaffected social groups – to women and minority groups, and to the young. They look for revolutionary potential to the environmental movement, the women's movement, and to the amorphous anti-capitalist movement.<sup>11</sup> However, these groups lack the solidarity and unity of interests of the class-based socialist movement or the unifying vision of Marxism. It is doubtful that they can form a sufficiently united or coherent movement. The working class is still the most significant and potent locus of potential revolutionary activity, even if there is little present sign of it fulfilling this role.

The current economic crisis has eroded people's faith in the established political parties, and led to a greater level of support for radical alternatives, the left may not be the main vehicle for these. The danger is of the sort of nationalist, racist, authoritarian and far right reaction

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<sup>11</sup> Gorz 1985, Hardt and Negri 2000.



that we see in Trump's America, in Britain opting to leave the European Union, and in the rise of the far right across Europe. And this is borne out by the experience of the Depression of the 1930s. Socialism remains a distant prospect.

Similar things must be said about the situation in other parts of the world. The theory that the massive wealth generated by global capitalism would 'trickle down' and benefit even the very poorest has proved illusory. On the contrary, the gulf between rich and poor has increased dramatically, not only within nations like those of America and Europe, but also globally. In large parts of Africa and Latin America the most dreadful levels of poverty and disease are endemic; and yet for the present there are no signs of revolutionary forces emerging.

In Asia conditions are different. China and more recently India have been industrializing at an unprecedented rate. The processes that were occurring in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century and which Marx analyses in *Capital*, are being repeated on a massive scale and at an accelerated pace. People are flooding in from the countryside to the cities to work in the newly created factories which have sprung up. Extremes of wealth and poverty exist side by side. China is now the locus of the greatest concentration of the world's industrial workers; but whether these developments will lead to the creation of a militant working class in Asia, as they did in nineteenth century Britain, remains to be seen. There are few signs of anything like this at present.

#### Future prospects

This apparent absence of revolutionary stirrings has provoked various responses on the left. That no revolutionary forces are evident, some argue, does not necessarily mean that revolution will not occur. According to Badiou and others, history involves ruptures and discontinuities.<sup>12</sup> Revolutions are inherently unpredictable occurrences. They can occur suddenly and unexpectedly.

Badiou's favourite recent example is the events of May 1968 in Paris; he also cites the Cultural Revolution in China. These events seemed to erupt quite suddenly out of nowhere. They were surprising, even to their participants. Nevertheless such events do not arise out of

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<sup>12</sup> Badiou 2010. This sort of view has been particularly influential in recent French philosophy: it is put forward, in one form or another also by Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, and, in relation to Marxism, particularly by Althusser 2006.

nowhere as Badiou suggests, they are the outcome of previous developments and larger forces. This is evident when they are seen in their wider historical context.

For example, the events of May 1968 in France were part of a much larger series of movements for change that was growing throughout the 1960s. These included the civil rights movement in the USA, the world wide movement against Apartheid in South Africa, the struggle against imperialism, focused particularly on opposition to the war in Vietnam, and other peace and student protest movements. These all culminated eventually in a global convulsion that came to a head in that year, with student and other mass protests all over the capitalist world, and massive upheavals in the non-capitalist world as well: the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the Cultural Revolution in China, the 'Prague spring', etc. To see that there is this wider context to the events of May 1968 in France does not, of course, explain them. However, it does indicate that to understand them one must look to the wider historical conditions that led to them. That is the only rational approach to seeking an understanding of why these events occurred.<sup>13</sup>

Other writers, like Streeck, are aware of this and recognize the way in which the ongoing crisis of capitalism raises questions about its ultimate destiny.

Is capitalism coming to an end? The problem is, while we see it disintegrating before our eyes, we see no successor approaching.... Capitalist society is disintegrating, but not under the impact of an organized opposition fighting it in the name of a better social order.<sup>14</sup>

Streeck thus thinks that there will be an on-going crisis without resolution.

The historical period after the end ... of capitalist society will be one lacking collective political capacities, making it a long and indecisive transition, a time of crisis as the new normal, a crisis that is neither transformative nor adaptive, and

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13 As Bensaïd (2004) argues, referring to some other supposed 'events' cited by Badiou: 'the storming of the Bastille can be understood only in the context of the *ancien régime*; the confrontation of June 1848 can be understood only in the context of urbanization and industrialization; the insurrection of the Paris Commune can be understood only in the context of the commotion of European nationalities and the collapse of the Second Empire; the October Revolution can be understood only in the particular context of 'capitalist development in Russia' and the convulsive outcome of the Great War.'

14 Streeck 2016, 35

unable either to restore capitalism to equilibrium or to replace it with something better.<sup>15</sup>

Streeck is right to argue that the capitalist system is in crisis, but there are good grounds to question his view that the system can simply stagger on indefinitely. The situation is too full of conflict and tension, too volatile, to remain static. The conditions that must lead to change are evident.

One of Marx's most important insights is that capitalism is not an inescapable necessity, but only a limited and particular stage of historical development. Capitalism came into existence at a certain time, it grows and has a life history in the course of which it increasingly becomes a barrier to the full use of our productive powers and to its own further development. It will be superseded eventually. Society and the economy need not be ruled by the hostile and alien mechanism of the market. Who can say that we are the end of history and that better alternatives are no longer possible?

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<sup>15</sup> Streeck 2016, 37

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