

Review

Marx Is Back: The Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) Project

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After years of neglect, a definitive edition of Marx's collected works is once more under way. Included are not only the published works of Marx and Engels, but all known correspondence and numerous notebooks of excerpts that are foundational for understanding the development of Marx's thought. As a result of this project, a different and less dogmatic Marx emerges.

Key Words: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, MEGA, MEGA², *The German Ideology*, *Capital*

Contrary to the forecasts that predicted his definitive fall into oblivion, in the last few years Marx has returned to the attention of international scholars. His continuing ability to explain today's world confirms the validity of his theory, and his texts are increasingly revisited in Europe, the United States, and Japan. The most significant illustration of this rediscovery is the resumption of the publication of his works. In fact, despite the enormous diffusion of Marx's thought in the twentieth century, there is still no unabridged and scientific edition of his works. Of the greatest thinkers of humanity, this fate has fallen exclusively to him.

To understand how this was possible, one needs to consider the vicissitudes of the working-class movement that too often obstructed rather than facilitated publication of his texts. After Marx and Engels died, conflicts within the German Social Democratic party led to great negligence toward the authors' literary heritage. The first attempt to publish their complete works, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), was made in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but in the early 1930s, the Stalinist purges that so severely affected the main scholars engaged in the project together with the advent of Nazism in Germany, abruptly interrupted work on this edition. The next attempt to reproduce the whole of the thinkers' writings, the so-called MEGA², was taken up in 1975, but this too was suspended—this time as a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In 1990, the International Marx-Engels Foundation (IMES) was created with the aim of completing this edition, bringing together scholars from three different

continents. The project is extremely important, especially because a large number of Marxian manuscripts still remains unpublished, and because this herculean undertaking will be used as the basis for all new translations of Marx's and Engels's works in all languages. The MEGA² is composed of the following four sections: all their published works; their correspondence; *Capital* and its several drafts; and, perhaps most important for scholars and critics, the building site of Marx's development: over two hundred notebooks on the most varied topics in eight languages. To date, fifty-three of the planned 114 volumes have been published, sixteen of which came out after the project was resumed in 1998. Each volume comprises two large tomes: one for the text, the other for *apparatus criticus* (for more information, visit <http://www.bbaw.de/bbaw/Forschung/Forschungsprojekte/mega/en/Startseite>).

What sort of Marx arises out of this new historical and critical edition? Definitely a different one from that depicted for so long by his enemies and followers alike. However paradoxical it may seem, Karl Marx is a misunderstood author. Epigones' systematic treatments of his critical theory, the theoretical impoverishment that accompanied its dissemination, the manipulation and censorship of his writings and their utilization for reasons instrumental to the dictates of politics, have contributed to making him the victim of a deep and repeated misjudgment. This rediscovery of his work demonstrates the difference between Marx and "Marxism-Leninism," between the wealth of a problematic and polymorphous framework still to be explored and a doctrine that altered its original conception to the extent of becoming its manifest negation. Those statues with stony profiles that stood in the public squares of many illiberal regimes of Eastern Europe, depicting Marx as a prophet with dogmatic certainties about the future, can now be replaced by the image of an author who, until his death, left a large part of his writings uncompleted so as to dedicate himself to further research to verify the strength of his theses.

There are two examples of this practice of Marx: one is the fragmentary character that was restored to *The German Ideology* in its latest edition, evidence of the "Marxist-Leninist" interpretive falsification that had turned these manuscripts into an exhaustive exposition of "historical materialism" (an expression Marx never used). Far from being confinable to epitaphs, Marx's concept of history needs to be retraced in the totality of his *oeuvre*. The other example is publication of the second and third books of *Capital*, which brought to light over five thousand editorial interventions by Engels and demonstrated that, far from espousing a conclusive economic theory, these were by and large provisional notes under development. The imminent completion of the publication of all the original works left to us by Marx is finally going to permit a reliable assessment.

What is in any case clear is the value of Marx's relentless intellectual efforts; however incomplete, these remain valuable and fertile for interpreting the contemporary world. Faced with the current contradictions and crisis of capitalist society, in these volumes we go back to interrogating the same Marx whom we too hastily put aside after 1989. Having cleared the terrain of the self-professed custodians of his thought, it is hoped that this time we will hear it from the man himself.