

Introduction

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Returns to Marx

Owing to theoretical disputes or political events, interest in Marx's work has fluctuated over time and has gone through indisputable periods of decline. From the early twentieth century "crisis of Marxism" in Italy and France to the dissolution of the Second International; from debates over the contradictions of Marx's economic theory to the tragedy of Soviet communism, criticism of the ideas of Marx seemed persistently to point beyond the conceptual horizon of Marxism. Yet there has always been a "return to Marx." A new need develops to refer to his work – whether the critique of political economy, the formulations on alienation, or the brilliant pages of political polemic – and it has continued to exercise an irresistible fascination to both followers and opponents. Pronounced dead at the end of the twentieth century, Marx has now suddenly reappeared on the stage of history: there is a rekindling of interest in his thought, and the dust is ever more frequently brushed off his books in the libraries of Europe, America and Asia.

The rediscovery of Marx is based on his continuing capacity to explain the present; indeed, his thought remains an indispensable instrument with which to understand and transform it. In face of the crisis of capitalist society and the profound contradictions that traverse it, this author who was hastily dismissed after 1989 is once more being taken up and interrogated. Thus, Jacques Derrida's assertion that "it will always be a mistake not to read and reread and discuss Marx"¹ – which only a few years ago seemed an isolated provocation – has found increasing approval. Since the late 1990s, newspapers, periodicals and TV or radio programs have repeatedly discussed Marx as being the most relevant thinker for our times. The first article of this kind that had a certain resonance was "The Return of Karl Marx,"

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, London: Routledge, 1994, 13.

published in *The New Yorker*.² Then it was the turn of the BBC, which cited Marx as the greatest thinker of the millennium. A few years later, the weekly *Nouvel Observateur* devoted a whole issue to the theme *Karl Marx – le penseur du troisième millénaire?* (thinker of the third millennium?).³ Soon after, Germany paid its tribute to the man it once forced into a 40-year exile: in 2004, more than 500,000 viewers of the national television station ZDF voted Marx the third most important German personality of all time (he was first in the category of “contemporary relevance”), and during the national elections of 2005 the mass-circulation magazine *Der Spiegel* carried his image on the cover, giving the victory sign, under the title *Ein Gespenst kehrt zurück* (A spectre is back).⁴ Completing this curious collection, a poll conducted in 2005 by the radio station BBC4 gave Marx the accolade of the philosopher most admired by its listeners.

Furthermore, the literature dealing with Marx, which all but dried up 15 years ago, is showing signs of revival in many countries, both in the form of new studies and in booklets in various languages with titles such as *Why Read Marx Today?*⁵ Journals are increasingly open to contributions on Marx and Marxism, just as there are now many international conferences, university courses and seminars on the theme. Finally, although timid and often confused in form, a new demand for Marx is also making itself felt in politics – from Latin America to Europe, passing through the alternative globalization movement. In particular, since the onset of the international economic crisis in mid-2007, academics and economic theorists from various political and cultural backgrounds have again been drawn to Marx’s analysis of the inherent instability of capitalism, whose self-generated cyclical crises have grave effects on political and social life. In all parts of the world leading daily and weekly papers have been discussing the contemporary relevance of Marx’s thought.

In this context of what some commentators have described as a “Marx renaissance,” the aim of the present special issue of *Socialism and Democracy* is to make a close study of Marx’s principal writings

2. John Cassidy, “The Return of Karl Marx,” *The New Yorker*, October 20/27 1997, 248–59.

3. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October/November 2003.

4. *Der Spiegel*, 22 August 2005.

5. One of the most significant examples of this new interest in Marx’s writings is the continuation of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), the historico-critical edition of his complete works, which resumed in 1998 after the interruption that followed the collapse of the socialist countries. See Marcello Musto, “The rediscovery of Karl Marx,” *International Review of Social History*, 2007, no. 52/3, 477–98.

in relation to some of the major problems of our own time, and to show how and why some of his theories constitute a precious tool for the understanding and critique of the twenty-first century world.

Marx and the analysis of contemporary capitalism

Of course, the writings that Marx composed a century and a half ago do not contain a precise description of the world today. It should be stressed, however, that the focus of *Capital* was not on nineteenth century capitalism either, but rather – as he put it in the third volume of this work, his *magnum opus* – on the “organization of the capitalist mode of production, in its ideal average,” and hence in its most complete and most general form. When he was writing *Capital*, capitalism had developed only in England and a few other European industrial centres. Yet he foresaw that it would expand on a global scale, and formulated his theories on that basis. This is why *Capital* is not only a great classic of economic and political thought, but still provides today – despite all the profound transformations that have intervened – a rich array of tools with which to understand the nature of capitalist development.

The truth of this has been all the more apparent since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of the capitalist mode of production to new areas of the planet like China. Capitalism has become a truly worldwide system, and some of Marx’s analyses – not others, of course, which gave rise to mistaken predictions – have revealed their significance even more clearly than in his own time.⁶ As this geographical expansion has taken place, the internal contradictions of capitalism have asserted themselves with greater stringency. Marx has probed the logic of the system more deeply than any other modern political thinker. If his analysis is updated and applied to the most recent developments, it can help explain many problems that did not manifest themselves fully until the twentieth century. One thinks, for instance, of the role of finance in capitalist accumulation – a widely debated issue today, which Marx already made the object of a penetrating analysis.

Themes and objectives of this issue

Despite the new interest in Marx, few recent studies of his ideas have gone beyond generic formulas – such as “Marx, the prophet of

6. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

capitalist globalization” – to discuss in a theoretically effective, textually rigorous manner the ways in which a rereading of his work can help to explain the political, economic and social phenomena of today. The present collection attempts to address this task, without adopting an apologetic approach to Marx’s work or indeed neglecting to demonstrate some of its contradictions. The aim is to bring together varied reflections on the Marxian *oeuvre*, drawing on different perspectives and fields.

Marx’s analysis of capitalism was not merely an economic investigation but was also relevant to the understanding of power structures and social relations. With the extension of capitalism into most aspects of human life, Marx’s thought turns out to have been extraordinarily prescient in many fields not addressed by twentieth century orthodox Marxism. One of these is certainly the transformations brought about by so-called economic globalization; others that we address in this collection encompass the full complexity of present-day politics, including issues of ethnicity, nationalism, freedom and democracy. In each dimension, we see how Marx even today has an invaluable contribution to make. The essays in the second part of this collection show how these varying insights have emerged in a wide range of national settings.

Why Marx again?

After years of postmodern manifestos, solemn talk of the “end of history” and infatuation with vacuous “biopolitical” ideas, the value of Marx’s theories is again becoming more and more widely recognized.

What remains of Marx today? How useful is his thought to the workers’ struggle for freedom? What part of his work is most fertile for stimulating the critique of our times? These are some of the questions that receive widely varying answers. If the contemporary Marx renaissance has a certainty, it lies in a rejection of the orthodoxies that have dominated and profoundly conditioned the interpretation of this philosopher. Even though marked by evident limits and the risk of syncretism, a period has arrived that is characterized by many theoretical incarnations of Marx. After the age of dogmatism, perhaps it could not have happened in any other way. The task of responding to this new situation is therefore up to the research, theoretical and practical, of an emerging generation of scholars and political activists.

Among the “Marxes” that remain indispensable, at least two can be identified. One is the critic of the capitalist mode of production: the tireless researcher who intuited and analysed this development on a global scale and described bourgeois society better than anyone else. This is the thinker who refused to conceive of capitalism and the regime of private property as immutable scenarios intrinsic to human nature and who still offers crucial suggestions to those who want to realize alternatives to capitalism. The other Marx to whom great attention should be paid, is the theoretician of socialism: the author who repudiated the idea of state socialism, already propagated in his time by Lassalle and Rodbertus; the thinker who understood socialism as the possible complete transformation of productive and social relations, and not as a set of bland palliatives for the problems of capitalist society.

Without Marx we will be condemned to a critical aphasia. The cause of human emancipation will therefore continue to need him. His “spectre” is destined to haunt the world and shake humanity for a good while to come.