

# Marx: the return of the giant

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If an author's eternal youth consists of his capacity to keep stimulating new ideas, then it may be said that Karl Marx has without question remained young.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, conservatives and progressives, liberals and social democrats almost unanimously decreed Marx's final disappearance, yet his theories have once again become highly topical — with a speed that is in

many respects surprising. Since 2008, the ongoing economic crisis and the deep contradictions tearing capitalist society apart have aroused new interest in an author too hastily set aside after 1989, and hundreds of newspapers, magazines and TV or radio stations have featured Marx's analyses in "Capital" and in the articles he wrote for "The New-York Tribune," while he was observing the panic of 1857, i.e., the first international financial crisis of history.

After 20 years of silence, people in many countries are again writing and talking about Marx. In the English-speaking world, conferences and university courses on his thought are back in fashion. "Capital" is once more a best-seller in Germany, while a *manga* version of it has been brought out in Japan. In China a huge new edition of his collected works is being published (with translations from German and not, as in the past, from Russian). In Latin America a new demand for Marx has made itself felt among people active in politics.

This rediscovery has been accompanied on the academic front with the resumption of the new historical-critical German edition of the complete works of Marx and Friedrich Engels, the MEGA<sup>2</sup>. The new German edition is organized into four sections: (1) the written works and articles; (2) "Capital" and all its preparatory manuscripts; (3) the correspondence; and (4) the notebooks of excerpts. Of the 114 planned volumes, 58 have been published so far (18 since the resumption of the project in 1998). This project has been publishing many unfinished works of Marx in the state in which he left them, instead of with the editorial interventions that often marked them in the past.

Thanks to this important innovation as well as the publication for the first time of various notebooks, the Marx who emerges is in many respects different from the one presented by so many opponents and ostensible followers. The stony-faced statue who pointed the way to the future with dogmatic certainty on the squares of

Moscow and Beijing has given way to the image of a deeply self-critical thinker, who, feeling the need to devote energy to further study and checking of his arguments, left a major part of his lifetime work unfinished.

Various established interpretations of Marx's work are therefore being opened up for discussion. For instance, the first 100 pages of "The German Ideology" — a text much debated in the 20th century but nearly always considered complete — have now been published in chronological order and in their original form of seven separate fragments. It has been discovered that these were leftovers from other sections of the book on two Left Hegelian authors, Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner. The first edition published in Moscow in 1932, however, as well as the many later versions with only slight modifications, created the false impression of an opening chapter on Feuerbach in which Marx and Engels exhaustively set out the laws of historical materialism (a term never used by Marx) or — as the French Marxist Louis Althusser roundly put it — conceptualized "an unequivocal epistemological break"

Another interesting aspect of this edition is the clearer distinction between the parts of the manuscript written by Marx and by Engels. This leads to a very different reading of certain passages that used to be thought of as an integrated whole.

Take, for example, the sentence that various authors, in a spirit of either fierce criticism or ideological defense, have treated as one of Marx's main descriptions of postcapitalist society: "Society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner..."

We now know (also thanks to the version of "The German Ideology" published in 1974 by the Japanese scholar Wataru Hiromatsu) that this came from the pen of Engels (then still under the influence of the French utopian socialists) and did not at all meet with the favor of his closest friend.

The textual acquisitions are also of importance for Marx's magnum opus. Four new volumes of MEGA<sup>2</sup> published in the last 10 years, which contain all the missing drafts of Volumes II and III of "Capital" (left uncompleted by Marx), allow us to reconstruct Engels' entire process of selection, composition and correction in the editing of Marx's manuscripts. We can thus see which of his several thousand alterations (a figure unthinkable until very recently) were the most significant in the long period of his labors between 1883 and 1894, and ascertain where he was able instead to stick with Marx's original text — which, even in the case of the famous law of

the tendency of the falling rate of profit, was clearly not meant to represent the final summation of his research.

To relegate Marx to the position of an embalmed classic suitable only for specialist academic research would be a mistake on a par with his transformation into the doctrinal source of "actually existing socialism." For in reality his analyses are more topical than ever. When Marx wrote "Capital," the capitalist mode of production was still in a relatively early period of its development. Today, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of capitalism to new areas of the planet (first and foremost China), it has become a global system that is invading and shaping all (not only the economic) aspects of human existence. In these conditions, Marx's ideas are proving to be more fertile than they were in his time.

Moreover, today economics not only dominates politics, setting its agenda and shaping its decisions, but lies outside its jurisdiction and democratic control. In the last three decades, the powers of decision-making have passed inexorably from the political to the economic sphere. Particular policy options have been transformed into economic imperatives. This shunting of parts of the political sphere into the economy, as a separate domain impervious to change, involves the gravest threat to democracy in our times. National parliaments find their powers taken away and transferred to the market. Standard & Poor's ratings and the Wall Street index — those mega-fetishes of contemporary society — carry incomparably more weight than the will of the people. At best, political government can "intervene" in the economy (when necessary to mitigate the destructive anarchy of capitalism and its violent crises), but they cannot call into question its rules and fundamental choices.

After 20 years in which paeans of praise for market society had to face only the vacuity of assorted postmodernisms, the new ability to survey the horizon from the shoulders of a giant such as Marx is a positive development not only for all the scholars interested in a serious understanding of our contemporary society, but also for anyone involved in the political and theoretical quest for a democratic alternative to capitalism.

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