

Preface

Scornful neglect and intemperate hostility, haughty dismissal and marginal course adoption, selective co-optation and selective bowdlerization: these are some of the strategies adopted by establishment intellectuals over the years in response to the challenge of the thinker born two hundred years ago in Trier. Yet, here we are at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, and it sometimes seems that Karl Marx's real ideas have never been as topical, or as commanding of respect and interest, as they are today.

Since the latest crisis of capitalism broke out in 2008, Marx has been back in fashion. Contrary to the predictions after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when he was consigned to perpetual oblivion, Marx's ideas are once more the object of analysis, development, and debate. Many have begun to ask new questions about a thinker who was often wrongly identified with 'actually existing socialism' and then curtly brushed aside after 1989. Prestigious newspapers and journals with a wide readership have described Marx as a highly topical and far-sighted theorist. Almost everywhere, he is now the theme of university courses and international conferences. His writings, reprinted or brought out in new editions, have reappeared on bookshop shelves, and the study of his work, after twenty years of virtual silence, has gathered increasing momentum, sometimes producing important, ground-breaking results. The years 2017 and 2018 have brought further intensity to this 'Marx revival', thanks to many initiatives around the world linked to the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Capital* and the bicentenary of Marx's birth.

Of particular value for an overall reassessment of Marx's oeuvre was the resumed publication in 1998 of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), the historical-critical edition of the complete works of Marx and Engels. Twenty-eight volumes have already appeared, and others are in the course of preparation. These volumes contain new versions of some of Marx's works (like *The German Ideology*), all his preparatory manuscripts of *Capital* from 1857 to 1881, all the letters he sent and received during his life, and approximately two hundred notebooks containing

excerpts from his reading and reflections to which they gave rise. The latter form the workshop of his critical theory, showing us the complex itinerary of his thought and the sources on which he drew in developing his ideas.

These priceless volumes of the MEGA² edition – many available only in German and therefore still confined to small circles of researchers – show us an author very different from the one that numerous critics, or self-styled followers, presented for such a long time. The publication of previously unknown materials of Marx, along with innovative interpretations of his work, has opened up new research horizons and demonstrated, more clearly than in the past, his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour. It is no exaggeration to say that, of the great classics of political, economic, and philosophical thought, Marx is the one whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

Research advances, together with the changed political conditions, suggest that the renewal in the interpretation of Marx's thought is a phenomenon destined to continue. Recent publications have shown that Marx went deeply into many issues – often underestimated, or even ignored, by scholars of his work – which are acquiring crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. Among these are the ecological question, migration, the critique of nationalism, individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the emancipatory potential of technology, and forms of collective ownership not controlled by the state.

Furthermore, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. He also criticized thinkers who used categories peculiar to the European context in their analysis of peripheral areas of the globe. He warned against those who failed to observe the necessary distinctions between phenomena and, especially after his theoretical advances in the 1870s, he was highly wary of transferring interpretive categories across completely different historical or geographical fields. All this is more evident today, despite the scepticism still fashionable in certain academic quarters. Thus, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it has become possible to read a Marx very unlike the dogmatic, economic, and Eurocentric theorist who was paraded around for so long.

Of course, one can find in Marx's massive literary bequest a number of statements that suggest that the development of the productive forces is leading to dissolution of the capitalist mode of production. But it would be wrong to attribute to him any idea that the advent of socialism is

a historical inevitability. Indeed, for Marx, the possibility of transforming society depended on the working class and its capacity, through struggle, to change the world.

If Marx's ideas are reconsidered in the light of changes that have occurred since his death, they prove highly useful for an understanding of capitalist society but also shed light on the failure of socialist experiences in the twentieth century. For Marx, capitalism is not an organization of society in which human beings, protected by impartial legal norms capable of guaranteeing justice and equity, enjoy true freedom and live in accomplished democracy. In reality, they are degraded into mere objects, whose primary function is to produce commodities and profit for others. But if communism aims to be a higher form of society, it must promote the conditions for 'the full and free development of each individual'. In contrast to the equation of communism with 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which many of the 'communist states' espoused in their propaganda, it is necessary to look again at Marx's definition of communist society as 'an association of free human beings'.

This book – which contains contributions by noted international scholars – presents a Marx in many ways different from the one familiar from the dominant currents of twentieth-century socialism. Its dual aim is to reopen for discussion, in a critical and innovative manner, the classical themes of Marx's thought, and to develop a deeper analysis of certain questions to which relatively little attention has been paid until now. It is hoped that the volume will therefore help to bring Marx closer both to those who think everything has already been written about his work and to a new generation of readers who have not yet been seriously confronted with his writings.

It goes without saying that we cannot today simply rely on what Marx wrote a century and a half ago. But nor should we lightly discount the content and clarity of his analyses or fail to take up the critical weapons he offered for fresh thinking about an alternative society to capitalism.

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