

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one socialist in a thousand
has ever read any of Marx's economic writings,
and of a thousand anti-Marxists
not even one has read Marx.¹

1. MARX'S FINAL LABORS AND THEIR POLITICAL RELEVANCE TODAY

For more than a decade now, prestigious newspapers and journals with a wide readership have been describing Karl Marx as a far-sighted theorist whose topicality receives constant confirmation. Many authors with progressive views maintain that his ideas continue to be indispensable for anyone who believes it is necessary to build an alternative to capitalism. 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 or more of neglect, has gathered increasing momentum. 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.²

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 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Twenty-seven more volumes have already appeared (forty were published between 1975 and 1989), and others are in the course of preparation. These include: (1) new versions of some of Marx's works (most notably *The German Ideology*); (2) all the preparatory manuscripts for *Capital* composed between 1857 and 1881; (3) a complete collection of the correspondence sent and

received by Marx and Engels; and (4) approximately two hundred notebooks. The latter contain excerpts from his reading and the reflections to which they gave rise. All of this together constitutes the workshop of his critical theory, opening up the complex itinerary he followed and the sources on which he drew in developing his ideas.

These priceless materials—many available only in German and therefore 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. Indeed, the new textual acquisitions in MEGA² make it possible to say that, of the classics of political, economic, and philosophical thought, Marx is the author whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. The new political setting, following the implosion of the Soviet Union, has also contributed to this fresh perception. For the end of Marxism-Leninism finally freed Marx's work from the shackles of an ideology light years away from his conception of society.

After 1917, to be sure, Marx's writings enjoyed a significant diffusion in geographical zones and social classes from which they had, until then, been absent. But after the first impetus of the Russian Revolution was spent, the later Soviet orthodoxy imposed an inflexible monism that had perverse effects on Marxist theory. In the form of manuals put together at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow, or "Marxist" anthologies on various topics, Marx's writings were often dismembered and remixed into sets of quotations designed to serve preordained purposes. It was a practice introduced by the German Social Democrats from the late nineteenth century on.³ One might say that Marx's texts were treated in the same way that the bandit Procrustes reserved for his victims: if they were too long, they were amputated; if too short, stretched. In the best of circumstances, it is difficult to combine the requirements of popularization with the need to avoid theoretical impoverishment. But in the Soviet Union, first of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), then of Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) and Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982), things could hardly have been worse for the reception of Marx's work.

The dogmatic reduction of Marx's quintessentially critical theory resulted in the unlikeliest paradoxes. The thinker most resolutely opposed to "writing recipes . . . for the cook-shops of the future"⁴ was converted into the progenitor of a new social system. The most painstaking thinker, never satisfied with the results he had produced, became the source of a dyed-in-the-wool doctrinairism. The steadfast champion of the materialist conception of history was wrenched more than any other author from his historical context. Even his insistence that

“the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves”⁵⁵ was locked into an ideology that emphasized the primacy of political vanguards and parties as the forces propelling class consciousness and leading the revolution. The champion of the idea that a shorter working day was the prerequisite for the blossoming of human capacities found himself roped into support for the productivist creed of Stakhanovism. The convinced believer in the abolition of the state was built up into its firmest bulwark. Envisaging like few other thinkers the free development of individuality, he had argued that—whereas bourgeois right masked social disparities beneath a merely legal equality—“right would have to be unequal rather than equal.”⁵⁶ Yet the same Marx was now falsely associated with a conception that erased the richness of the collective dimension in a featureless uniformity.

Recent research has refuted the various approaches that reduce Marx’s conception of communist society to superior development of the productive forces. In particular, it has shown the importance he attached to the ecological question: on repeated occasions, he denounced the fact that expansion of the capitalist mode of production increased not only the theft of workers’ labor but also the pillage of natural resources. Another question in which Marx took a close interest was migration. He showed that the forced movement of labor generated by capitalism was a major component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to fighting this was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labor.

Marx went deeply into many other issues which, though often underestimated, or even ignored, by scholars of his work, are acquiring crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. Among these are individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the critique of nationalism, 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. It is a mistake to suggest otherwise. Marx criticized thinkers who, while highlighting the destructive consequences of colonialism, used categories peculiar to the European context in their analysis of peripheral areas of the globe. He warned a number of times 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 now clear, despite the skepticism 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, economicist, 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 suggesting 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 bring about social upheavals that led to the birth of an alternative economic and political system.

The new advances achieved in Marxian studies suggest that the exegesis of his work is likely to become more and more refined. In this perspective, the period covered in the present volume (1881–1883) and the themes that Marx dealt with during those years offer the contemporary reader plentiful scope for reflection on today's burning questions. For a long time, many Marxists foregrounded the writings of the young Marx (primarily the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*), while the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* remained his most widely read and quoted text. In those early writings, however, one finds many ideas that were superseded in his later work. It is above all in *Capital* and its preliminary drafts, as well as in the researches of his final years, that we find the most precious reflections on the critique of bourgeois society. These represent the last, though not the definitive, conclusions at which Marx arrived. If examined critically in the light of changes in the world since his death, they may still prove highly useful for the task of theorizing an alternative social-economic model to capitalism.

In 1881 and 1882, Marx made remarkable progress in relation to anthropology, precapitalist modes of production, non-Western societies, socialist revolution, and the materialist conception of history. He also closely observed the main events in international politics, as we can see from his letters expressing resolute support for the Irish liberation struggle and the populist movement in Russia, and firm opposition to British colonial oppression in India and Egypt and to French colonialism in Algeria. He was anything but Eurocentric, economicist, or fixated only on class conflict. Marx thought the study of new political conflicts, new themes, and geographical areas to be fundamental for his ongoing critique of the capitalist system. It enabled him to open up to national specificities and to consider the possibility of an approach to communism different from the one he had previously developed.

2. A FORGOTTEN CHAPTER: THE "LATE MARX"

Marx's ideas have changed the world. Yet despite the affirmation of Marx's theories, turned into dominant ideologies and state doctrines for a considerable part of humankind in the twentieth century, there is still no full edition of all his works and manuscripts. The main reason for this lies in the incompleteness of Marx's oeuvre. The works he published amount to less than the total number of projects left unfinished, not to speak of the mountainous *Nachlass* of notes connected with his unending researches.

Marx left many more manuscripts than those he sent to the printers.⁷ Incompleteness was an inseparable part of his life: the sometimes grinding poverty in which he lived, as well as his constant ill health, added to his daily worries; his rigorous method and merciless self-criticism increased the difficulties of many of his undertakings; his passion for knowledge remained unaltered over time and always drove him on to fresh study. Nevertheless, his ceaseless labors would have the most extraordinary theoretical consequences for the future.⁸

In many biographies of Marx, the narrative of the main events in his life has been treated separately from his theoretical achievements.⁹ Studies of an academic character have mostly ignored the existential vicissitudes, despite the fact that these considerably influenced the course of his labors. Quite a few authors have lingered over the differences between Marx's early and mature writings,¹⁰ without showing a sufficiently thorough knowledge of the latter. Many other studies have based themselves on a misguided division between "Marx the philosopher" and "Marx the economist" or "Marx the politician."

Nearly all the intellectual biographies published to this day have given undue weight to an examination of Marx's youthful writings. For a long time, the difficulty of examining Marx's research in the final years of his life, especially the early 1880s, hampered our knowledge of the important gains he achieved. This is why all biographers devoted so few pages to his activity after the winding up of the International Working Men's Association, in 1872.¹¹ Not by chance, they nearly always used the generic title "the last decade" for this part of their work. Wrongly thinking that Marx had given up the idea of completing his work, they failed to look more deeply into what he actually did during that period. But if there was some justification for this in the past, it is hard to understand why the new materials available in MEGA² and the volume of research on the "late Marx" since the 1970s have not led to a more significant change in this tendency.¹²

The present book aims to fill a gap in the literature on Marx. However, the author is also aware that it is still a partial, incomplete contribution, not only because the volumes of MEGA² relating to the 1881–1883 period have not yet been published in their entirety,¹³ but also because Marx’s work spans the most diverse spheres of human knowledge, and his synthesis represents a peak difficult to climb. Besides, the need to contain this monograph to a reasonable number of pages made it impossible to analyze all of Marx’s writings with the same degree of attention; it has often been necessary to summarize in a few words what should have taken at least a paragraph, or in one page what would have required a section to itself. In particular, the richness and complexity of *The Ethnological Notebooks* really demand exhaustive analysis, which will be attempted in a forthcoming work. It is in full awareness of these limitations that the reader is here offered the results of the research conducted up to this point.

In 1957 Maximilien Rubel (1905–1996), one of the most authoritative twentieth-century interpreters of Marx’s work, wrote that a “monumental biography” had still to be written.¹⁴ It is a judgment that remains valid today, at a distance of more than sixty years. The MEGA² series has given the lie to all the claims that Marx is a thinker about whom everything has already been written and said. But it would be wrong to argue—as do those who overexcitedly hail an “unknown Marx” after each new text appears for the first time—that recent research has turned upside down what was already known about him.

There is still so much to learn from Marx. Today it is possible to do this by studying not only what he wrote in his published works but also the questions and doubts contained in his unfinished manuscripts. This consideration is all the more valid for the material dating from the final years of his life.

The “late Marx” is also the most intimate Marx: he did not conceal his frailty in life yet continued to struggle, did not evade doubt but openly confronted it, chose to press on with his research rather than take refuge in self-certitude and lap up the uncritical adulation of the first “Marxists.” This Marx is one of a very rare, radically subversive breed, quite unlike the twentieth-century image of a granite sphinx pointing to the future with dogmatic certainty. He beckons to a new generation of researchers and political activists, who are taking up and continuing the struggle to which he, like so many others before and since, devoted his whole existence.

Prelude

“ STRUGGLE! ”

IN AUGUST 1880 JOHN SWINTON (1829–1901), an influential American journalist with progressive views, was on a trip to Europe.¹ While there, he paid a visit to Ramsgate, a small coastal town of Kent, located a few kilometers from the southeastern extremity of England. This journey was made to conduct an interview for *The Sun*—the newspaper he edited, which at the time was one of the most widely read in the United States—with the man who had become one of the main representatives of the international workers’ movement: Karl Marx.

Though German by birth, Marx had become stateless, after being banished by the French, Belgian, and Prussian governments when they stifled the revolutionary movements that emerged in their countries between 1848 and 1849. When Marx applied for naturalization in Britain in 1874, his request was denied because a Scotland Yard report labelled him a “notorious German agitator and advocate of communistic principles,” who had “not been loyal to his own King and country.”²

For more than a decade Marx had been a correspondent for the *New-York Tribune*; in 1867 he had published a major critique of the capitalist mode of production entitled *Capital*, and for eight years, beginning in 1864, he had been the guiding figure of the International Working Men’s Association. In 1871 his name had featured in the pages of the most widely read European newspapers, when, having defended the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France* (1871), the reactionary press had baptized him the “red terror doctor.”³

In summer 1880, Marx was in Ramsgate with his family, under doctor's orders to "refrain from work of any kind"²⁴ and "to restore [his] nervous system by doing nothing."²⁵ His wife's health was worse than his. Jenny von Westphalen (1814–1881) was suffering from cancer and her condition had "suddenly been aggravated to a degree which menace[d] to tend to a fatal termination."²⁶ This was the situation in which Swinton, who had been chief editor at the *New York Times* throughout the 1860s, got to know Marx and drew a sympathetic, intense, and accurate portrait of him.

At a personal level, Swinton described Marx as a "massive-headed, generous-featured, courtly, kindly man in his 60s, with bushy masses of long reveling grey hair," who knew "not less finely than Victor Hugo . . . the art of being a grandfather."²⁷ His conversation, "so free, so sweeping, so creative, so incisive, so genuine," reminded Swinton of Socrates "with its sardonic touches, its gleams of humour, and its sportive merriment." He also noted "a man without desire for show or fame, caring nothing for the fanfaronade of life or the pretence of power."²⁸

However, this was not the only Marx whom Swinton would describe to his readers. The interview that appeared on the front page of *The Sun*, on 6 September 1880, mainly presented the public face of Marx: "one of the most remarkable men of the day, who has played an inscrutable but puissant part in the revolutionary politics of the past forty years." Swinton wrote of him:

[He is] without haste and without rest, a man of strong, broad, elevated mind, full of far-reaching projects, logical methods, and practical aims, he has stood and yet stands behind more of the earthquakes which have convulsed nations and destroyed thrones, and do now menace and appall crowned heads and established frauds, than any other man in Europe.⁹

The discussion with Marx convinced the New York journalist that he found himself in front of a man who was "deep in the times," whose hand "from the Neva to the Seine, from the Urals to the Pyrenees, [was] at work preparing the way for the . . . advent" of the new era. Marx impressed him because of his ability to "survey the European world, country after country, indicating the features and the developments and the personages on the surface and under the surface." Marx went on to speak

of the political forces and popular movements of the various countries of Europe—the vast current of the spirit of Russia, the motions of the German

mind, the action of France, the immobility of England. He spoke hopefully of Russia, philosophically of Germany, cheerfully of France, and sombrely of England—referring contemptuously to the “atomistic reforms” over which the Liberals of the British Parliament spend their time.¹⁰

Swinton was also surprised by Marx’s knowledge of the United States. He was an attentive observer and “his remarks upon some of the formative and substantive forces of American life were full of suggestiveness.”

The day passed in a series of lively discussions. In the afternoon, Marx proposed “a walk along the shore to the beach” to meet his family, which Swinton described as “a delightful party—about ten in all.” When evening fell, Marx’s sons-in-law Charles Longuet (1839–1903) and Paul Lafargue (1842–1911) continued to keep the two men company; the talk was “of the world, and of man, and of time, and of ideas, as our glasses tinkled over the sea.” It was at one of these moments that the American journalist, “over the thought of the babblement and rack of the age and the ages,” immersing himself in the depth of “the talk of the day and the scenes of the evening,” ventured to ask the great man in front of him a question “touching upon the final law of being.” It was then, during a moment of silence, that he “interrogated the revolutionist and philosopher with a fateful question: “What is [the law of being]?” Swinton sensed that the mind of Marx had “inverted for a moment, while he looked upon the roaring sea in front and the restless multitude upon the beach.” Finally, Marx replied in a deep and solemn tone: “Struggle!”¹¹