



Marx at 200

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Anniversaries never serve as a mere recollection of a person's historical work. When they are about an epoch-making theorist like Karl Marx, who together with his friend and companion in struggle Frederick Engels, founded "scientific socialism" there are only two possibilities for the ruling class or the left wing of the bourgeoisie, the reformist organisations: to keep silent or to solemnly declare him dead again.

A dead man who keeps returning

In 2018, especially in May, there will be more celebrations and commemorations. Marx' birthplace Trier not only takes the anniversary of her most famous son as an occasion for "tributes" and events, but also wants to make capital out of the critic of capital. Even the CDU voted in the city council for the construction of a larger-than-life statue and the mass production of devotional objects, especially for the Chinese market.

Hardly any major publishing house can be found that is not publishing a "new" Marx biography, hardly any renowned scientific institution that does not at least organize a series of lectures or a symposium, no bourgeois newspaper that is likely to do without an obituary.

Some dead are more alive than the living.

Even if the official commemoration culture is more like desecration than an appreciation, there is something involuntarily revealing in Marx's bourgeois appropriation and distortion.

Hardly any theorist or their scientific work has so often been declared "dead", "outdated" or "disproved". Even several new Marx biographies like those by Gareth Steadman Jones from 2016 never tire of exposing his work and politics as "illusionary". However, the question arises as to why someone who has been declared wrong and dead a thousand times must now be proven wrong again on thousands of pages of hundreds of books.

The corpse who won't stay buried

The critique of Marx after the Second World War, as set out, for example, in Karl Popper's "Poverty of Historicism", was certainly not much more stupid or wiser than today's "rebuttals". But against the background of the economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, it could point to a constant improvement in the living conditions of everybody, as it appeared on the surface society. The theory of crisis and the theory of relative impoverishment developed by Marx seemed refuted, the proletariat had "disappeared", integrated and ascended into the "middle class".

Moreover, revolutionary theory under Stalin and Mao had been canonised as "Marxism-Leninism" and degenerated into the ideology of legitimacy of a ruling caste that overturned Marx and Lenin's theory, programme, and politics. In the West, the Frankfurt School and other forms of "Neo-Marxism" broke with the revolutionary core of his theory. "Organised capitalism" would be capable of successfully cushioning the state from crisis, the proletariat was incapable of constituting itself as a revolutionary subject. Thus one could be particularly "critical" of capitalism but at the same time make a successful career in the bourgeois academic world.

Marx is back

The current period of global crisis and the associated intensified intra-imperialist rivalry naturally undermine any theory of a gradual improvement in the situation of the working class, its social advancement and the weakening of class opposition.

In the first volume of "Capital", Marx, as we know, presents a theory of the relative impoverishment of the working class. We encounter this even in phases of expansion and increase in wages, because it also corresponds to the fact that the newly created wealth in the form of added value is constantly accumulated on the part of capital.

?But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low must grow worse.?

So, even during a period of capitalist expansion, and Marx wrote Capital during just such a period, the economic dependence of the working class, the dominance of capital, grows.

Bourgeois science, but also reformism, is blind to the theory of relative impoverishment because it ignores the ever stronger rule of dead over living labour, the ever more comprehensive subordination, unification and alienation of the labourers by capital. In the social-democratic model of the welfare state, but also in Stalinism, the "liberation" of the class degenerates into a state welfare service that cannot relieve alienation, but only wants to make it more attractive. For Marx, on the other hand, even somewhat better-paid wage slavery remains exactly that.

Today we live in a period in which ever larger parts of the class are struggling with falling incomes, where even in the traditional imperialist centres like Germany millions have become precariously employed, where an army of "working poor", including children and pensioners, live in poverty. In countries such as China and India, where industrial production is expanding feverishly, the number of over-exploited poor is also growing apace.

Regardless of academic debates, Marx's theory and descriptions of the general laws of capitalist accumulation in the first volume of Capital read like a presentation of "the latest" forms of exploitation. Crisis theory seems plausible again today. The law of the tendential fall of the profit rate, rightly highlighted by Marx as one of his central discoveries, proves to be far more realistic than a whole series of revisionist critics claim.

Development and struggle

Today's bourgeois criticism of Marx, and its (left) reformist variant, therefore cannot reject Marx in its entirety. They accept certain moments or concepts of his theory. But they reject the totality and the revolutionary core of Marx's work all the more decisively.

Thus, the economic theorist, the author of "Das Kapital", is recognised as an astute critic from whom even ideologues of the ruling class can learn. But his revolutionary conclusions, the escalation of crisis into a revolutionary transcendence of capitalism, the necessity of socialist revolution are dismissed as "disproved", "one-sided" or pure "desires".

Marx may even have been right in the field of individual phenomena, but his conclusions regarding the laws of movement of capitalism, its inner logic of development, could not have a scientific character, would at best be speculations of only literary interest. In the field of politics, Marx is said to have had a fatal and long outdated "exaggerated" claim - namely to give a scientific foundation to the programme and tactics of a revolutionary party. In reality, like any bourgeois politician, he had just fished in troubled waters.

This method of accepting aspects of Marx's work as scientific, but rejecting its connection to the overall context, is not new. It is by no means found only among bourgeois or academic critics, but above all in ?Revisionism? of both old and new varieties. After Marxism had already prevailed against ideologically petty-bourgeois currents such as Proudhonism and anarchism during its founders' own lifetimes, in the last quarter of the 19th century, their revolutionary conclusions were relativised within the new mass workers? movement itself.

Revisionists, led by Eduard Bernstein, and the British Fabians, argued that capitalism's crises had permanently lost their acute revolutionary potential and that bourgeois democracy was an adequate instrument for reforming away capitalism, or at least its worst abuses.

Even the orthodox critics of Marx tended to make his revolutionary perspectives a distant 'final goal' and accept electoralism and trade unionism on a routinised basis as the actual practice of the movement, on which they and the reformists could agree. Karl Kautsky, 'the pope of Marxism', came to epitomise this combination of revolution in theory with reformism in practice. Only those Marxists who came from countries where major revolutionary tasks remained, such as Rosa Luxemburg, V I Lenin and Leon Trotsky tried to link militant class struggle tactics to revolution as a practical goal.

This evolving revisionism and reformism, although it sometimes openly opposed Marx, often enough concealed its criticism by proposing only to update "some aspects" of his work. Later, a more or less distorted version of Marx himself was used to criticise revolutionary communism - a method that is currently used in Germany by the Left Party and the Luxembourg Foundation, for example. The advantage is obvious: one hopes in this way to present one's own reformist policy as "revolutionary" and especially "critical" in reference to Marx (or Engels or Luxemburg). But before we deal with this, let us turn once again to the real heritage of Marx.

Origin of Marx's work

The scientific method of Marx and Engels and their politics emerged in the confrontation with three great currents of their time: Hegelianism, Political Economy and Utopian Socialism. Although these theoretical models represented enormous progress in understanding modern, emerging bourgeois society, they had already reached their inner limits during the youth of Marx and Engels.

Hegel's dialectical method revolutionised our understanding of history. Change, the becoming, the emergence of the new, and progress arising from inner contradictions, not only opened up a changed view of the historical process, but also of emerging bourgeois society. But Hegelianism, like its leftist disciples, remained attached to idealism, seeing in historical development ultimately a form of self-knowledge of the absolute spirit. Thus, although his dialectical method emphasised the moment of development of historical phenomena and, therefore, the inevitable demise of particular social or political forms, his idealistic system also required an end to this development, which had to end with a form of "absolute truth". This conservative, affirmative side of Hegel's philosophy led from the spiritual heights of the system to "tame political conclusions" (Engels), in the profane lowlands of Prussian absolutism.

Adam Smith and David Ricardo tried to work out the laws of political economy, to get to the bottom of them. They developed important aspects of value theory but they were not able to overcome the class-based limitations of their theory and thus the internal contradictions of their work. In particular, they were not able to understand the historical, ephemeral character of the capitalist mode of production itself. Rather, like today's academic economists, although at a far superior theoretical level, they accepted the idea that capitalism is the last word in history.

Utopian socialism took up the universal promises of freedom of bourgeois society and used them as a yardstick against which to judge the bourgeoisie that came to power. The ruling class did not fulfil its own promises of freedom, justice and human rights. Thus, although early socialism recognised the antagonistic character of society, its idea of a better, socialist society still assumed a bourgeois legal horizon and was, therefore, essentially a moral critique with no scientific basis. The existing capitalist conditions were simply contrasted to "better", domination-free, conditions partly through ingenious and inspiring visions of the future society, partly, for example in Proudhonism, by counterposing to generalised commodity production a supposedly fairer form of the same thing.

Marxism arose as a break with these ideas. Through criticism and polemics against the contemporary, ultimately increasingly reactionary, partisans of these theories, Marx's own politics were established scientifically.

Historical Role of the Proletariat

Marx and Engels always focused on understanding the historical role of the proletariat. This is the point around which Marx's theoretical work, his political work, his complete works revolve.

For Marx, the working class is not just a social-statistical category, characterised by low income, limited access to cultural resources, structural disadvantage, and so on. Rather, the working class can only be understood in relation to

capital, indeed to the totality of bourgeois society. The proletariat is not just an accumulation of individuals with the same characteristics, rather, it must be understood in relation to the capitalist class, in the context of a contradictory relationship.

Therefore, the working class itself must always be understood in its becoming, its changing nature - not only in the sense that its composition, its structure, etc. are constantly changing due to the changing composition of capital, but above all because the proletariat can only become a class for itself in struggle, in its organisation, and by connecting it with Marxist theory. Trade unions are elementary forms of organisation. What is decisive for Marx, however, is the constitution of the class as a political party, a union of the most conscious parts of the class, its vanguard, on the basis of a common programme for the overthrow of capitalism.

Already, in the early writings and the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels had established that: "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product."

In other words, the capitalist mode of production produces its own "gravedigger", the class that has both the ability to overthrow these conditions, and, unlike earlier oppressed classes, as a class without collective means of production, it can only liberate itself by placing the productive forces under planned social control. To this end, the "expropriators", that is, the owners of "capital", must be expropriated.

Marx's theoretical work, for example in "Capital", provides the basis for people to understand and justify the revolutionary role of the proletariat. The sections that refer, for example, to the struggle for the 10-hour day, and especially those that emphasise the need for the proletariat to take political power, are not "unscientific" additions to "Capital", but rather the decisive conclusions drawn from the criticism of political economy. In "Capital", for example, Marx explains not only the significance but also the limits of economic struggles by showing, after the development of the value form and the transformation of money into capital, that the concept of capital itself also includes class antagonism, the struggle for the distribution of surplus value. He explains why the value of labour as a commodity appears as a wage and why the essence of capitalist production is disguised in the wage fetish.

Even if the overall project for "Capital" remained unfinished, Volume One developed the internal laws of the mode of production, the exacerbation of its inner contradiction and the solution towards which it drives;

?The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated?

The comprehensive scientific analysis Marx presents in "Capital" would have been impossible without the critique of bourgeois economists, without the analysis and generalisation of the emerging workers' movement and its struggles and without the dialectical method. However, Marx does not mix them eclectically like the "modern" bourgeois university, but creates a new method. Their decisive criterion of truth lies not in academic "discourse", but in practice, more precisely in the revolutionary practice of the working class.

State and Revolution

What can be said of "Capital" also applies to all other aspects of Marx' work. It is not a question of explaining only a part of society, but the totality of its circumstances. Even if many things remain fragmentary, Marx and Engels (and all great Marxists) have in common the understanding that all important social problems and conflicts are part of the class struggle. This can be seen, among other things, in the treatment of the national question, the oppression of women, the relationship between man and nature, the question of war and the relationship between reform and revolution.

For Marx, the working class must seize political power in order to be able to consciously reshape society. From the analysis of capital it becomes clear that the proletariat cannot establish a new mode of production piecemeal within the

framework of the existing society, because it is characterised precisely by its non-ownership of the means of production. For this reason alone, it must expropriate the capitalist class and centralise the most important social resources in a single hand, the state.

In their analysis of the revolution of 1848 (see Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" or Engels, "Revolution and Counterrevolution in Germany") however, they explained that the working class cannot simply take over the existing bourgeois state apparatus, its bureaucracy, police and army, its judiciary and so on. This state machine was created through the struggle of the bourgeoisie with the feudal class and was perfected as an instrument of rule in the course of the class struggle with proletariat. As Marx explained in the The Eighteenth Brumaire:

"The parliamentary republic finally felt compelled in its struggle against the revolution to strengthen the means and centralisation of governmental power with the repressive measures. "All revolutions have perfected this machine instead of breaking it."

Twenty years later, in a letter to Kugelmann on April 17, 1871, Marx wrote:

"If you look at the last chapter of my 'Eighteenth Brumaire', you will find that my next attempt in the French Revolution is not to transfer the bureaucratic military machinery from one hand to the other, but to break it, and this is the precondition of any real popular revolution on the continent."

The political form of this rule, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is finally found in the Paris Commune:

"So this is the Commune - the political form of social emancipation, the liberation of work from the usurpation (slavery) of the monopolists of the means of work created by the workers themselves or gifts of nature. Just as the state machine and parliamentarianism are not the real life of the ruling classes, but only the organised general organs of their rule, the political guarantees, forms and expressions of the old order of things, so the commune is not the social movement of the working class and consequently not the movement of a general renewal of humanity, but its organised means of action. The commune does not eliminate the class struggle by which the working classes want to achieve the abolition of all classes and consequently all [class domination] (...), but it creates the rational intermediate stage in which this class struggle can go through its various phases in the most rational and humane way."

The Commune was thus essentially a "government of the working class" (Marx). But it can only fulfil its real historical function, if it acts in the historical interest of the class, otherwise this form also degenerates into a "fraud" (as would have happened to the soviets in Russia if the Bolsheviks had not conquered the majority and led them to the uprising in October).

Marx therefore not only discovered the historical significance of the Commune, his assessment was also in stark political contrast to that of the anarchists who saw in it the ?abolition of the state?. Not only did he show solidarity with the Commune revolutionaries, he also subjected their weaknesses and half measures, military and economic, to sharp criticism.

It is no accident that these aspects of Marx's work, the revolutionary culmination of his thinking and the conclusions to be drawn from it, have not only been fought openly by bourgeois critics but have also always been points of criticism for revisionism.

Revolutionary Strategy

Marx' and Engels' struggle for a proletarian party and an International runs through their entire life's work. For them, without becoming sectarian, programmatic clarity always went together with principled unity.

In the "Communist League" Marx and Engels had resolutely opposed the voluntaristic and utopian positions of Weitling's followers and others and provided the League with a scientific programmatic basis in the form of the "Communist Manifesto". The League aspired to be an international organisation uniting Germans, French, Belgians and English, though the speed of revolutionary developments in 1848 rendered this impossible in practice.

As David B. Ryazanov correctly points out, the intervention of Marx and Engels in the emergence of the First International can be regarded as an early form of the "workers' party" tactic. As the Inaugural address of 1864 shows, Marx and Engels were well aware that not only "Marxist" elements would gather in the International, but also the representatives of mass trade unions or the followers of Proudhon as the strongest ideological counterweight.

Marx and Engels did not regard such a joint party as a final goal, however, but rather as a transition to a progressive clarification, which they also pushed for in their writings with polemics such as "Wages, Prices and Profit" and the resolutions of the International Congresses.

The assessment and consequences of the Commune marked a turning point which was also the final break with the anarchists. The polemics from this period, especially at the time of the London Congress in 1871 and the Hague Congress in 1872, still represent an enormous fund of criticism of sham revolutionary left-wing radicalism and the actually petty-bourgeois doctrinal character of this policy.

To this day, a whole series of reformists and conciliators have criticised Marx for having been too "dogmatic" and hard on the anarchists and syndicalists. They assume that the division of the International, the break with the anarchists, could have been avoided in this way. In reality, it was about fundamental questions of revolutionary politics. Marx understood the Commune as a weapon of the class, whose struggle could not end with the seizure of power in a single city or even a single country. He expected the dictatorship of the proletariat to take decisive measures against counterrevolution within and without.

It is in this context that Marx's criticism of the Communards, who failed to expropriate the Bank of France or to march against the counterrevolution concentrated in Versailles, must be understood. He also accused the Central Committee of the National Guard (the armed vanguard of the Paris proletariat) of having abandoned leadership too early to the Commune, elected by universal suffrage, thus placing it in the hands of "accidental" and politically confused elements instead of fulfilling its own political responsibility.

Kautsky, who already described the support for "terror" against counterrevolution in the *Rheinische Zeitung* as a "youthful sin" of Marx, found this "incomprehensible" in his polemic "Terrorism and Communism", which was actually directed against the Bolsheviks.

In reality, this is only incomprehensible to people who place abstract "democratic" parliamentary procedures and dogmas above the requirements of revolution, that is, its victory and its defence. It illustrates very well the difference between a consistent revolutionary like Marx and a centrist who fluctuates between reform and revolution. The latter may also want the "revolution" and even the "dictatorship of the proletariat", but only as long as it does not become "dirty", is not forced to implement dictatorial steps that contradict democratic or other "principles", because in this way the danger would arise that the revolution itself could become authoritarian rule over the proletariat.

Of course, no one can deny this danger, especially after the experience of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. But for those who see socialism, the transcendence of capitalism, as essential to the well-being, even the survival, of humanity, a social revolution inevitably goes hand in hand with such dangers. The establishment or defence of the rule of the working class requires despotic, dictatorial measures against the (formerly ruling) oppressors and their partisans. The alternative is not a slow and gradual attainment of the same goal but rather despotic, dictatorial measures against the working class and the oppressed.

The way out of this problem is not to "think it away" through principles or dogmas, but to face it. The dangers undoubtedly associated with such measures can only be overcome by decisive revolutionary action, a fighting workers' democracy, the revolutionary struggle against bureaucratic degenerations, and a correct strategy for extending the revolution, that is, its internationalisation.

The basic question that ultimately led to the failure of the First International after the defeat of the Paris Commune was not whether it should be "broader" or "narrower", more or less "authoritarian". Marx and Engels did not only draw central conclusions from the Commune with regard to the state question, they also emphasised the central importance

of creating a political workers' party that could systematically lead all aspects of the class struggle.

Here, however, they encountered the resistance not only of trade unions and syndicalists, who saw the real class struggle in the economic struggle, but also the anarchists, who spoke out against political actions and the struggle for partial political demands. Neither wanted to know anything about the conquest of political power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the one because they feared bloody repression and civil war, the other because they dreamt of the immediate abolition of the state and all authority. Engels was scornful in his critique:

"But the anti-authoritarians demand that the authoritarian political state be abolished in one fell swoop before the social conditions that have created it are destroyed. They demand that the first act of social revolution be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen never seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act by which one part of the population imposes its will on another by means of guns, bayonets and cannons, that is, by the most authoritarian means imaginable; and if it does not want to have fought in vain, the victorious party must give duration to this rule by the terror that its weapons inspire in the reactionaries".

Undoubtedly, the break with anarchists and syndicalists was also forced by Marx and Engels moving into the foreground the necessity of building a revolutionary workers' party. Thus, at their request, the London Congress of the First International decided by a majority "that the constitution of the working class as a political party is indispensable for the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate goal - the abolition of classes"

The collapse of the First International was therefore based on fundamental political differences. The break was not only inevitable, but also a historical advance in clarifying proletarian strategy and tactics.

For revolutionaries, the relevance of Marx's work consists in its purpose of explaining the laws of movement of capitalism and the necessity of socialist revolution, thus theoretically and programmatically equipping the working class for its historical task of "overturning all conditions in which a human is a humiliated, a subjugated, an abandoned and a contemptible being.?"

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