This Special Edition of the IMR marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx in 1818. We produce it in the belief that the ideas of no other individual are as important as those of Marx for understanding — and changing — the world in which we live today.

Of course, the validity of this belief depends among other things on which ‘Marx’ we are talking about. The 135 years since Marx’s death have seen the proliferation of many different Marxisms — first and foremost the ‘Marxism’ of Stalinist Russia and of the Comintern, but also that of Kautsky and the Second International, of Eurocommunism, of Maoism, of Castroism, and of other nationalist movements in the Global South which in turn have attracted supporters in Europe and Ireland (eg in the Official IRA and later the Workers Party). To this must be added various academic Marxism’s such as that of the Frankfurt School, of Althusser and his followers, so-called ‘rational —choice’ Marxism and so on.

This is not a question of pedantic nitpicking over obscure points of doctrine. These different Marxisms believed and preached very different things. Second International Marxism believed in a gradual peaceful transition to socialism through winning a parliamentary majority and taking over the existing capitalist state (essentially the same perspective as that of left wing social democrats today). Stalinist Marxism believed in the possibility of constructing socialism in one country (Russia) and that socialism was perfectly compatible with a one-party police state, the suppression of all opposition and critical thinking, and the cult of personality around a ‘great leader’, providing only that the means of production were owned by the state. Maoism believed pretty much the same as Stalinist Marxism with the addition that the struggle for socialism/communism should be based, not on the working class, but on a mass peasant based army and that the Socialist motherland was China not Russia. Castroism believed that the road to socialist revolution lay through establishing small armed guerrilla foci in the mountains and remote countryside. Eurocommunism more or less reverted to the reformist Marxism of the Second International in terms of its political perspective (philosophically it preferred Gramsci to Kautsky) and then moved even further to the right. The Frankfurt School and the other academic Marxisms, whatever their internal disagreements, all accepted the separation of theory and practice and the reduction of Marxism to a theoretical philosophical/cultural critique (often loosely attached to one or other of the supposed ‘actually existing socialisms’).

If the Marx we are talking about is the Marx of Stalin then his relevance today would be seriously compromised not only by the monstrous crimes committed in his name and the collapse of the Russian and East European Communist states but also by the manifest failure of Stalinist Marxism, even at its most successful, to address so many of the vital challenges facing society today — sexism, racism, homophobia, nationalism, civil liberties, alienation, environmental degradation. If it were the Marx of Mao all that would apply with the added difficulties that there is no peasantry in our part of the world and that Mao’s successors have, in practice, opted for Adam Smith over Marx. If it were the Marx of Castro and Guevara there would less crimes to account for but there would remain the inconvenient fact that, with the sole exception of Cuba, their distinctive strategy was an absolute failure elsewhere in Latin America and was abandoned by the left.

Some sort of return to the left reformist Marxism of Social Democracy, usually masked by references to Gramsci, looks a more relevant and viable project but the ideas of Marx as such are not really necessary for this as can be seen with Sanders or Corbyn and there remains the problem that all past attempts at the reform of capitalism by means of a ‘left’ government running the capitalist state have ended in miserable failure — Syriza being the latest example.

As far as academic Marxism is concerned there is undoubtedly much to be learned from many of its researches and analyses but, in so far as it has separated itself from engagement in working class struggle, it is foreign to the spirit of Marx who, in the words of Engels at his grave side, ‘was before all else a rev-
olutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or an-
to, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions
which it had brought into being, to
contribute to the liberation of the
modern proletariat. And whatever
one may think of the likes of Ador-
no and Benjamin, Louis Althusser
and Perry Anderson, it is clear they
left the task of actually changing the
world to other hands.

In contrast to all of the above the
Marx expounded and advocated
here is the Marx of The Communist
Manifesto and Capital, of The Ger-
man Ideology and The Civil War in
France. It is the Marx who:
- Identified the proletariat ‘as the
really revolutionary class’ and made
his identification with that class the
cornerstone of his theory and his
politics. (The Communist Manifes-
to and virtually everything else he
wrote)
- Identified alienation, on the ba-
sis of the alienation of labour, as the
human condition under capitalism
(Economic and Philosophical Man-
scripts of 1844)
- Developed a materialist theory
of history based on the dialectical
interaction of the forces and rela-
tions of production with the class
struggle as its motor. (The German
Ideology, Communist Manifesto,
1859 Preface).
- Produced a profound critique of
capitalist production as both explo-
itative and crisis ridden on the
basis of the labour theory of value.
(Wage Labour and Capital, Capital
- Who was an internationalist
who said ‘the workingmen have
no country’ and who called on the
workers of the world to unite.
- Who insisted that ‘the working
class cannot simply lay hold of
the ready-made state machinery
and wield it for its own purposes’
(The Civil War in France) but must
smash the state and create new
forms of workers’ power.

This is the Marx who we say is
relevant to the world today, charac-
terised as it is by monstrous and un-
precedented levels of inequality, by
recurring economic instability and
crises, by virtually permanent wars
and by impending environmental
catastrophe and by the immense
global expansion of the system’s
gravediggers, the working class.

In making these claims there is
a further question that must be
addressed. If we reject the notion
of divine revelation or inspiration,
how was it possible for one indi-
vidual or even two, if we include Engels
as we should, to develop in a few
years (essentially before they were
thirty) an integral world view which
retains its validity more than 150
years later and was able to antici-
pate so many fundamental develop-
ments of the system?

The answer can only be that he/
they stood on new historical ground
and were thus able to view histo-
ry and society from a new vantage
point. That ground was the emer-
gence of the modern working class,
then beginning to assert itself as a
force in the world. It was Marx’s
(and Engels’) ability to adopt ‘the
standpoint of the proletariat’ as the
basis for an analysis of the whole
of human history, of the capitalist
mode of production, and of the
struggle for human emancipation
that made their extraordinary theo-
retical achievement possible.

In this issue we have outlined
some of the main aspects of that
achievement by means of a series
of short articles by a number of our
contributors, each of which sum-
maries Marx’s views on a partic-
ular topic. The fact that we could
easily have extended the list of
topics covered (Marx on dialectics,
on ecology, on the declining rate of
profit, on the origins of the family
and women’s oppression, on the
labour process, on trade unions, on
art and literature etc.) is testimony
to the great depth and richness of
Marx’s work.

Of course while marking this two
hundredth anniversary we want to
maintain our analysis and dis-
cussion of contemporary events in
Ireland and elsewhere. To this end
we publish an important article by
Marnie Holborow which locates the
current struggle for repeal of the
8th Amendment within the interna-
tional rising of women. This is com-
plemented by Becca Bor’s piece on
‘Marxism and oppression’ which re-
monds us of the ongoing importance
of socialists acting as tribunes of all
the oppressed. We are also delight-
ed to publish a path breaking study
of the struggle for the Irish language
by Somhairle Mag Uidir.

Finally we include a number of
substantial reviews of books that
will be of interest to our readers:
the new edition of Chris Harman’s
major history of the world, of Bren-
dan Mac Suibhne’s study of The
End of Outrage, on the reception of
the Famine, and of Iain Ferguson’s
and Johann Hari’s recent contribu-
tions to the analysis of mental dis-
tress. Each of these reviews in itself
constitutes a discussion of the issue
concerned.

John Molyneux