
Which Marx?

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 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 another, 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 Adorno 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 German 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 Manifesto and virtually everything else he wrote)

- Identified alienation, on the basis of the alienation of labour, as the human condition under capitalism (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844)

- Developed a materialist theory of history based on the dialectical interaction of the forces and relations 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 exploitative 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, characterised as it is by monstrous and unprecedented 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 individual 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 anticipate so many fundamental developments of the system?

The answer can only be that he/they stood on new historical ground and were thus able to view history and society from a new vantage point. That ground was the emergence 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 theoretical 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 summarises Marx's views on a particular 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 discussion 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 international rising of women. This is complemented by Becca Bor's piece on 'Marxism and oppression' which reminds us of the ongoing importance of socialists acting as tribunes of all the oppressed. We are also delighted 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 Brendan 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 contributions to the analysis of mental distress. Each of these reviews in itself constitutes a discussion of the issue concerned.

John Molyneux