

# Karl Marx: 100 not out

Chaired by Alan Hunt



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*What do you consider to be the most important feature that accounts for the continuing significance of Marxism?*

**Eric** The main feature is clearly the critique of capitalism; if everything was going well with capitalism, nobody would be bothered about a theory whose essence is a critique of capitalism. So long as there are good causes for believing that capitalism has got internal contradictions, people will continue to look to Marxism as a guide to analysis.

The second feature is the fact that the transformation of the world which has been undertaken by people inspired by Karl Marx is enormous; the very fact that one-third of the world has been in one way or another so transformed is an element which continues to make people interested in Marxism. Thus Marxism is, in a sense, a live issue largely for that reason. The fact is reinforced by the success Marxism had in, as it were, swallowing all earlier revolutionary and socialist theories and becoming *the* central tradition of socialism. The third feature, and here I speak as an academic, is that Marxism is a way of thinking about the world which has stimulated generations of people; for me, as an historian, I attach particular importance to the materialist

conception of history. I believe that this is both theoretically and in practice the core of Marxism.

**Bob** I agree with Eric on this. I think the most important thing about Marxism is that it provides the only coherent critique of capitalism which is available. It stresses the importance of class struggle in capitalist society and we visibly live in a world where class struggle is a major fact of life. Secondly it stresses that capitalist development is crisis ridden and that capitalism suffers from recurring crises. Again this is a very visible fact of life and therefore it is natural that a theory which stresses these facts should retain its influence. As well as being a theory with considerable explanatory power, Marxism is also a guide to action, a theory of struggle. Gramsci called it 'the philosophy of practice'.

**Anne** Internal contradictions within capitalism are indeed the seed bed for an interest in Marxism. But the very fact that Marxism has to grapple with new forms of contradictions means that we must constantly ask the question, is Marxism adequate to this task?

**Ralph** So long as class conflict endures so long will Marxism as the doctrine of class conflict remain vital. But there is also in Marxism an insistence that conflict is not the war of all-against-all, that it is not inherent in human nature and thus that it is not something that has to be endured or that can only be attenuated. Marxism provides a coherent interpretation of class conflict, but alongside the analysis, there is also the idea that conflict can actually be eliminated, that it is within human capacity to bring social conflict to an end.

*Modern capitalist societies have shown a remarkable degree of stability long after Marx argued that capitalism had exhausted its potential. Do you think that Marxism has adequately understood and explained the persistence of modern capitalism?*

**Bob** After the event, Marxism has done rather a good job. Marxism has a history of being like the man with the sandwich board saying: Beware thy end is nigh! When the end doesn't actually arrive within the expected timespan, Marxists go back to the drawing board, they examine the past and often provide quite good explanations as to why capitalism has managed to survive yet another crisis. The writings of Marx and Engels give very much the impression that the whole world would soon be dominated by modern industry and then the industrial proletariat would sweep all before it. I think the spread of capitalism on a world scale has been slower than they expected. That is the first point. The second and more important point is that Marx and Engels did not adequately recognise how the establishment of parliamentary democracy and the achievement of universal suffrage would act as a political stabiliser. Modern parliamentary democracy is a relatively flexible system. It permits compromises which have a profoundly stabilising effect. The main reason for the survival of capitalism is the fact that it has developed a political system which, so far at any rate, has been able to make the adjustments required for its survival.

**Ralph** There is one way in which I think it can be said that Marx did appreciate the capacity of capitalism to endure. It is of course true that you would sometimes find in Marx's correspondence the expectation that capitalism was about to collapse, but you also find a very clear realisation of the degree of ferocity with which the existing social order would defend itself against serious challenge. This century has been a demonstration of that fact, by means of fascism, counter-revolution, intervention and aggression on a huge scale. There was an unflinching perception in Marx of how bitter class struggle could be. But beyond that I would want to echo what Bob said, that there was also a certain under-estimation of the flexibility and resilience of bourgeois democracy and the degree to which social democracy would be able to attenuate the crises and contradictions of capitalism.

**Anne** I would like to disagree in one respect; I'm not convinced that people have read the concept of 'crisis' in Marxism in sufficient depth. We have to go beyond Marx and Engels. In the *Preface* of 1859 Marx speaks of capitalism developing until it has exhausted its potential and then there being an epoch of social revolution; this has been read in a much too short term form. When Gramsci takes up this concept of 'crisis' he said that capitalism actually entered into a long term organic crisis in which there is still the possibility of capitalism developing itself, but in a new context of a long term epoch of social revolution.

I disagree with Bob about the speed of the transformation of the

modern world. We are in a sense dazzled by the speed of development. We have to stop considering Marxism as some kind of closed system and then simply referring back to it to ask whether it works or not. Marxism is itself part of these developments and the question is: can it analyse these new problems, can it guide us in understanding the huge rapidity of social change in a situation where the very expansion of knowledge forces us to rethink the way we can grasp the world?

**Eric** Are we right in saying that Marx argued that capitalism had exhausted its potential? I'm by no means clear that he did say that. In 1883 it clearly had not exhausted its potential and moreover Marx is extremely careful not to say that revolutions were likely anywhere except perhaps in Russia. It is a criticism of many subsequent Marxists who have believed that capitalism was on its immediate death bed but not I think of Marx.

Nevertheless, I think it would be fair to say that Marx would be very surprised to discover, a hundred years after his death, that capitalism is still as flourishing as it is today. But this criticism is more aptly made of Marxists after Marx, who did not try and analyse the exact nature of the capitalism which developed and which wasn't the same as the one Marx analysed in *Capital* in 1867. They began by doing so. Almost as soon as Engels had died, Marxists like Kautsky, Hilferding and Luxemburg began to concentrate on trying to find out the nature of the peculiarly new phase of capitalist development which was then visibly developing, of imperialism, monopoly capitalism and finance capitalism. Now, since that time Marxists have been a bit slow to face the new developments in capitalism and analyse them as they were developing rather than in retrospect. This is very much the case with the developments in global capitalism after the Second World War. Only in the 70s and 80s are Marxists seriously facing the nature of these developments.

**Ralph** The importance of Marxism lies, among other things, in the analysis of a particular mode of production, capitalism, and the real question which we've got to ask is: has this mode of production disappeared? If it had, one could say Marxism is no longer relevant. What Marxists say is that for all the changes which have occurred in the world, capitalism endures as a system of exploitation, by way of wage-labour and commodity production, and from this point of view the dynamic of capitalism in its economic, political, and cultural aspects endures, but assumes new forms.

If you ask of Marxism: does it provide a mode of explanation, a 'tool of analysis', the answer is 'yes'; but then a tool is no more than that — it has to be used properly, and be constantly sharpened and modified. I certainly don't believe that as we read *Capital* or the *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels we will find there an explanation of all the phenomena that have occurred since Marx died. It would be absurd to expect that. So to ask: has Marxism understood the persistence of modern capitalism? The answer is both yes and no. 'Yes' in terms of some quite fundamental basic ideas, 'no' in terms of developments which run counter to Marxist expectations.

*How do you assess the extent to which Marxism has understood the failure of revolutionary socialism in Western Europe? How far has it developed a realisable strategy for socialist transformation within developed capitalist societies?*

**Ralph** If one asks, has Marxism developed an adequate strategy of revolutionary change in advanced capitalist countries, the

answer, it seems to me, has clearly got to be 'no'. Two strategies have been on offer to the socialist movement so far; and both have for different reasons proved to be wanting. On the one hand, there has been social democracy, in a variety of guises, proposing slow, evolutionary, gradual reforms, by way of electoral and parliamentary pressure, which would one day bring about a situation where we would wake up and find that we have been living under socialism for years. This strategy has been extremely influential and has to do with the existence of a framework of representation and capitalist democracy which has been of enormous importance and to which labour movements have been strongly attuned.

The other strategy has been an insurrectionist strategy according to which the experience of the countries which have had revolution by insurrection is to be replicated. Now our problem is that Marxism has not found some way which would avoid the pitfalls and the illusions of parliamentarism on the one hand, and which would also avoid the illusions and adventurism of insurrectionism on the other. It is somewhere between these that Marxism will have to direct its quest for an appropriate strategy in the future.

**Eric** The obvious fact that we don't have any socialist transformations within developed capitalist countries suggests that such a strategy has not been successfully developed so far. I'm not sure here whether we are only talking about a political strategy. I think we should also bear in mind the kind of policy programmes which would be applicable in such a society if such a 'third way' were to be tried, for instance the sort of thing the Italians call 'structural reform'. Exactly what kind of structural reforms and where do they lead? What kind of economy and what phases of transitional economy are we to aim at? In the long run that raises the much bigger question as to exactly the nature of the socialist economies which we hope will be constructed on the basis of what has happened in the past in developed capitalist societies.

Now has Marxism understood the failure of revolutionary socialism in the West? The answer, I think, is certainly yes. Not all Marxists by any means — I don't actually like the phrase 'Marxism' in the singular because there are and always have been a considerable number of disagreements within Marxism. However, enough Marxist schools, including in Communist Parties, have understood the failure of revolutionary socialism, largely out of two historical experiences; the long periods of capitalist stabilisation and expansion such as we had in the 1950s and 1960s and the failure of revolutions when they happened as after 1918. Gramsci, whose ideas are based on the recognition of the impossibility of doing a simple replay of the October Revolution in Western Europe, demonstrates that there is at least a very strong Marxist tradition which has been entirely aware of the fact that we've got to think again about what revolutionary socialists should be doing in developed capitalist countries.

**Anne** I am not terribly happy with this formula about 'the third way'. Such an approach counterposes the first way, social democracy, to the second, the October Revolution. But the way it is very often phrased is that there is a way, somewhere *between* the two. The reason I'm not happy about this idea is that we have to go beyond these two models and pose questions in a very new way. The question of socialism is now being raised in a new way. It's not being posed any longer in terms of more reforms in the tradition of social democracy. It's not being raised in terms of referring back to the experience of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries themselves. It is being raised in terms of the

need, for example, to have a rational control over resources. It is being raised in terms of the inability of the social system to provide jobs for most of its people. It is being raised in terms of the inability of the system to actually cater for a whole range of new needs that are appearing today.

**Bob** I would like to agree with Anne's last points. One of the problems in finding a credible strategy for socialist transformation is to develop a convincing idea of what we actually mean by socialism. The traditional view is that we know what socialism is, we have to go out and preach the message and eventually if we find the right key to peoples' minds, they will accept this message. This seems to me very unmaterialist. What is understood by socialism, often indeed by those who preach it as well as by those who are listening to the message, is not very attractive, and doesn't correspond to peoples' perceptions of what's important in their own lives.

For Marx and Engels, socialism was essentially a democratic economy with socialised production, one in which there are many different freedoms, it was a free society organised on the basis of cooperation. Of course, those were only general slogans. Today the only model which exists, the only fully developed model of socialism realised in practice, is the highly authoritarian system in the East. The establishment of socialism in the countries of Eastern Europe and elsewhere was an enormous historical achievement which has given the people of these countries full employment and a level of economic security quite without equal in the capitalist world. However, the political system in these countries is authoritarian and cannot really be called democratic, in the sense Marx and Engels understood the term. There are also the rather anonymous and bureaucratic social democratic forms of government in certain Western countries which, although they have brought some material benefits, are still highly inegalitarian class societies and have not given the mass of people much direct control over their own existence. However, there are today popular movements, such as that against nuclear weapons and the women's movement, which do raise these demands for democratic control upon which socialism must be built.

**Ralph** Of course one immediately agrees that there are new forces, new movements and new problems which must be incorporated into a popular movement for socialism. No Marxist would seriously deny this. The question is: has Marxism got a political strategy for transforming the existing structure of power? When Bob asks 'what does socialism mean?' I would want to answer that it certainly means dissolving this structure of power and replacing it by a democratic one, which necessarily means a roughly egalitarian one as well. The ultimate vocation of Marxism is a democratic vocation. But one is still left with the question: given this how do you transform the existing structure of power?

**Eric** A transfer of power may be a necessary criterion for the construction of socialism but it isn't a sufficient one. Marx himself is to blame for his failure to consider, in other than the most general outline, what kind of society was to succeed capitalism. For instance it was bourgeois economists who blamed socialists for saying, you talk about the socialisation of production, you have not considered the problems of allocation of resources in an economy. Socialists did not consider them, neither the social democrats nor communists; not until the communists were actually in power in the Soviet Union and had to face them. A good deal of what has been happening in Eastern socialism is to some extent due to the failure to consider problems of the actual

organisation of a non-capitalist economy, some of which could have been considered earlier on. These problems still have to be considered today when we think in terms of the socialist transformation of Western society.

*Marx saw the proletariat as the primary agent of socialist revolution. Is Marx's proletariat being eliminated within modern capitalism? Does the 'new working class' have the capacity to be the leading force in realising socialist transformation?*

**Bob** The proletariat is not being eliminated if by proletariat one means all of those who earn their living by working for others. The proletariat, in this sense, is actually increasing in size in Western society. But the trouble is that most Marxists and the socialist tradition in general have interpreted the term 'proletariat' narrowly to mean industrial proletariat. There isn't the slightest doubt that the industrial proletariat is now disappearing at an extraordinary pace. Projections made for Britain indicate that in the next 10 years the proportion of industrial workers in the work force may shrink to around 25%. In fact what we are witnessing now is a second industrial revolution which is destroying the industrial proletariat in advanced capitalist countries, at a pace much faster than it was created. The industrial proletariat is being wiped out by new technology as fast as the handloom weavers were. This creates profound problems for our understanding of capitalist society and what the future possibilities are.

**Ralph** Even if it is true that there is a decline in the traditional proletariat, and that there is a growing white-collar, sub-professional, sub-managerial working class, does this mean that the availability of the working class as a whole for socialist transformation is less than it was? There is in fact great uncertainty about the political meaning of these sociological changes.

**Anne** I think the issues are much larger than the disappearance of the industrial proletariat. What is involved is actually a complete change in the relationship between production and all the other sectors that are needed to service production. As the industrial proletariat is diminished some are absorbed into jobs servicing production. Our image of the industrial worker has been one of a man, working in factory or mine, linked to a domestic system of reproduction; this has always ignored working women. Now our image has to change because the actual relation between production and reproduction is changing as a result of changes in the position of women. Our political strategy has to relate to these changes and we have certainly not yet achieved this satisfactorily.

**Eric** This is a very difficult question and a crucial one for Marxists. Marx made two kinds of prediction, which were different but which he links. First, he saw capitalism gradually proletarianising most of the population, ie, transforming them into wage-labourers while at the same time capital was becoming increasingly centralised; and in the end the conflict between these two developments would be such as to force the expropriation of the expropriators. The society which followed would be logically one directly based on the social ownership and management of resources. Second, he believed that this would happen through the formation of a class conscious working class, largely defined as an industrial working class, which would gradually acquire this consciousness and organise itself politically as a class (ie, as a party); and this would be the primary agency for achieving socialism.



Now that first long term prediction seems to me to be an extremely valid one, because the tendencies are there. The second prediction was in the medium run an extremely acute and correct one because that is exactly what happened to the working classes in most industrial countries, they did acquire consciousness, they did organise themselves as classes, as class parties (our own Labour Party is a very typical example of this). What was wrong with this is that it assumed that this class was indeed going to keep on expanding in that form and that these parties by themselves would eventually be the agents of socialist transformation. This has not happened and, with the changes which Bob has quite correctly underlined, is not at present likely to happen in this form. This of course does not mean that the parties which survive from this long historical period and which continue to exist as class parties will not continue to play an important and central role in the transformation.

**Ralph** What Marxists in Western countries are faced with is to find what are the appropriate agencies for the new working classes and new movements. It may be that we need now a pluralism of agencies, in a coalition with each other and for advances on different fronts.

*It has become common to speak of a 'crisis of Marxism'. Is this an accurate characterisation of the state of contemporary Marxism?*

**Eric** Well yes, clearly there is a crisis, but it is not a crisis of Marxism. There are probably more Marxists today than there have been ever in my lifetime. But there is a crisis in Marxism. What this consists of is a breakdown of a consensus about what constitutes the main body of Marxist ideas. I don't mean differences in strategy or political organisation because there always have been substantial differences on this. But, from the moment when Marxism as such appeared in the 1880s in Germany, when it formulated itself largely in response to the challenge of Bernstein and revisionism, up until the mid 50s there was a fairly substantial and continuous consensus about what we meant by Marxism.



Now it is that consensus which broke down in the 1950s. It survived the decline and fall of the German Social Democratic Party, which was once the main intellectual authority as to what was and wasn't Marxism. But it has not survived the breakdown of the international communist movement. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is another matter, but at the moment there is no such consensus. There is virtually no proposition made, including those by Marx, which isn't challenged by somebody or other who calls themselves Marxist. Now the fact that they nevertheless call themselves Marxist is not insignificant. Thirty years ago people who challenged those things, would have regarded that as an absolutely conclusive reason why they should stop being Marxists.

Now, can Marxism survive this crisis? Yes, it is historically very likely to survive this crisis. It has survived crises of a similar kind before. It is possible and, I think, desirable that a certain amount of consensus will return as to what is Marxism. I suggest that it will or at least ought to return on the basis of the materialist conception of history. But at the same time, and I think this is a positive thing, it will henceforth be impossible to think of Marxism purely in the singular. Marxism is a body of thought which allows a variety of answers to the same question and enables new questions to be put. We shall be and are living in a world of Marxisms.

**Anne** I think the way in which Eric has described the crisis of Marxism is a reflection of a certain success and vitality of Marxism. Today there is a strong presence of different versions of Marxism in Britain. What worries me is the use of this term 'crisis'; it implies there was some moment in time when everything was all right. What is good about this crisis is that Marxism is having to face a number of challenges. The question is whether Marxism is able through this to develop itself and continue to help us analyse our present situation and the possible future.

**Bob** I think the crisis of Marxism is on two levels. There does exist a crisis, a serious crisis within Marxism, but in some ways it is a crisis of growth. Firstly, we are all in a way trying to free

ourselves from the heritage of Stalinism and therefore Marxism reflects the uncertainties and political conflict which stem from the fact that the Soviet Communist Party no longer dominates the Western parties. The second problem concerns the period around the 60s when Marxists were attempting to come to terms with the changes that were taking place in Western societies. In certain respects they fell into the classic revisionist trap of assuming that capitalism would be prosperous and that we have to produce a Marxism for a prosperous, fully employed society. They have been caught on the hop, because just at the time when they had transformed their own minds in line with the new reality, this new reality has become rather like the old reality. Hence you have a rather strange situation in which a lot of the 'new Marxisms' of the late 60s now appear to be very antiquated, even in comparison with the Stalinist version that was the orthodoxy some considerable time before.

Yet at the same time there is an immense amount of interesting and important writing at the moment. I think that Marxists have much more to offer now in understanding what is happening in the present world crisis than any other school of thought. Paradoxically Marxism appears as though it is in crisis, but one only has to look in the realm of economics where conventional thought is in disarray to realise that Marxism is in a relatively healthy state.

**Ralph** There have been enormous advances when I think of what passed for Marxism in the days when I was a student. One had an exceedingly narrow vision of what used to be called the four great teachers. People then thought of Luxemburg as a radio station, of Trotsky as an agent of the Gestapo, and Gramsci was totally unknown. When one compares this with the efflorescence of the last 20 or 30 years, I think this has been, on balance, a positive period. Without being over-optimistic I would not want to give too much emphasis to a crisis of Marxism. Marxism continues to represent the most humane projection of the future as well as the most cogent analysis of the present that is on offer.

*To what extent do you think Marxism is capable of analysing both the positive and negative features of what has come to be called 'actual socialism'?*

**Ralph** There is a problem which Marxism has not been very good at coping with, and that is the problem of elites, oligarchy, bureaucracy and the reproduction of privilege and repression on the ruins of the old economic and social order. The challenge presented by much of the experience of the Soviet Union, China and the other existing socialist countries is in this respect very great, but need not be paralysing. Some of the categories of Marxism can be used to explain and understand that experience, but it requires a lot of retooling to undertake such an analysis. We do find in Marx concepts of domination and power which are helpful even though Marx under-estimated the extent of the problem. There are a number of questions which arise here and where Marxists have only made a beginning in developing a serious sociological and political analysis.

**Bob** The Marxist tradition needs to confront the degeneration of 'actual' socialism. A very serious problem is raised by the opponents of socialism who claim that, no matter what the intentions of socialists, this degeneration is a necessary feature of any socialist society. Marxists have not really answered this charge, they have blamed the historical circumstances under which socialist societies were established, or else they have

blamed certain individuals, like Stalin. One either finds devils or one points to accidents of history. I find such explanations very unconvincing. We are faced with two difficult problems which Marxists have not come to terms with. How is it possible to organise a complex society in a non-bureaucratic way? And how is it possible to maintain centralised institutions whilst preserving their democratic character?

**Anne** I think that we have to establish a new starting point. There are political and historical reasons why these countries appeared as models, but can no longer function as such. Yet a number of the problems they face are problems that exist for us today; the problem of complex institutions, of popular control, of socialising domestic labour, the contradictions between the increasing centralisation of society and the aspiration to democratic control. We must not see the problems of capitalist society as automatically resolved by the advent of socialism. We have to undertake a dual analysis, of the socialist countries and the capitalist countries, on the assumption that these are problems that are going to face us for a long period of history.

**Eric** There is no reason to assume that the first country which makes a revolution under the leadership of a Marxist party must become the model. In fact for historical reasons the Soviet Union was for a long time regarded as *the* model. Much of the analysis and the critique of 'actual socialism' has been drenched in the past polemics of the Bolshevik tradition. Trotskyists, for instance, have been continuing the debates within the Soviet Union in the 1920s and however useful and important these debates were, they are historically specific debates which don't necessarily inform our attitude today.

On the non-Marxist side the whole analysis has been overwhelmingly dominated by the desire to find an argument against the labour movement and against socialism anywhere else. Now there is absolutely no reason to suppose that the attempt to build socialism must necessarily lead to the kind of dictatorial power and undemocratic structure which have been produced in a number of countries. If there is such a reason it does not only apply to socialism, it also applies to the whole development of the 20th century state, East and West.

*Has Marxism adequately come to grips with the range of questions posed by modern feminism?*

**Anne** The real question here is whether Marxism is capable of looking at the developments of real social movements and of real needs, including those of women. There has been a lot that has come out of Marxism that has been useful in this context, for example, the criticism of the bourgeois notion of equality that we are all equal in the abstract. What feminism too is suggesting is that we cannot understand the way in which institutions produce inequality if we do not criticise this notion.

At the same time, the women's movement is posing new questions for Marxists. It is posing the possibility of a different relationship between the domestic and the productive sphere. This corresponds to a very real change in women's lives because, as the majority of women are now in the labour force, it means that they are actually combining those two areas in a different way. So there are a whole range of new problems which, for example, challenge the present traditional organisation of production and work. Work up to now has been organised according to a logic which does not take account of individual needs. The trade unions have always accepted this, that we should change our lives

to accommodate the job or not enter into the competition for a certain job. The challenge posed by feminism is to fit work to human needs and not people to work.

There are many ways, then, in which Marxism is extremely useful in analysing the position of women, but at the same time Marxism is itself being challenged by the women's movement and by feminism.

**Eric** If there is one aspect of Marxism about which we don't have to be too self-critical it precisely concerns women. Marxism has from the very start dealt very specifically with this problem. The shortest list of Marxist classic works will include Engels' *Origins of the Family*, the book on which German social democracy was brought up. The movement itself, and against the instincts of a good many of its members, old unreconstructed chauvinist workers and peasants, constantly kept stressing the need to liberate women because it wasn't just the liberation of one gender but the liberation of all humanity. And let's make no bones about it, whatever criticism can be made of actual socialism, they have made a tremendous positive difference to women.

Now there are a number of questions which have arisen out of the historical experience of the women's movement. One of them has been for instance that the early advances of women's emancipation first in capitalist countries and in the socialist countries have apparently run out of steam. When a new women's movement began in the 1960s, they acted as though they were the first. Marxism has only recently become aware of the sheer depth of the problem of the inferior position of women in society. It is after all the first form of exploitation of one human being by another. It would be too optimistic to expect it to be abolished as easily as more recent forms of exploitation. Now there is once again a strong feminist movement with which we all sympathise greatly and it is a crucial component of the movement for socialism.

**Bob** The socialist countries have had a rather advanced programme on the position of women in society. It has had certain limitations; it does not fully take into account the role of women in the division of labour and of their position within the family; but it has still resulted in enormous advances for women. This process of advance is reaching its limits. This stagnation reflects a problem which is very deep in Eastern Europe. It arises from the monopoly position of the communist parties in these countries and the fact that there are no autonomous women's movements in Eastern Europe. Without such an autonomous women's movement, it is difficult to see how real pressure for new advances can develop.

**Ralph** Eric seems to me to be right when he speaks of the record of Marxism in relation to feminism, but there is one important proviso, that arises from the strong Salvationist element in Marxism which implies that after the revolution all will be well for everybody, including women. The insistence by feminists that male domination is not so easily disposed of is something that has been very positive in challenging this Salvationist element in Marxism. But this insistence has led some radical feminists to reject any notion that socialism is particularly relevant to their own purpose. This seems to me mistaken.

**Anne** I am surprised at the complacency here. Marxism has an enormous amount to learn from the challenge that's being posed to it by feminism. There are important gaps in the way that Marx and Engels posed issues regarding women. For example, there is the whole question of 'productionism', the belief in production



for production's sake, relegating the sphere of reproduction to second place. Today the women's movement is insisting that it is unsatisfactory to do this. Unless we begin posing these questions today in a very concrete way, in terms of actually creating institutions which allow a transformation in the division of labour between men and women in the here and now, why on earth should things be any better under socialism?

*What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist political tradition in Britain?*

**Eric** The strength of Marxist political tradition in Britain is that it is and has been from the start an integral part of the labour movement. It has been a minority part — there is no question about it — but it has always been an integral part. This is particularly shown by the strength of Marxist militants in the trade unions and this is a tradition which continues to this day. The weakness has been that for a variety of historical reasons no mass political party committed to Marxism developed in this country, unlike in a number of other countries. Up to the present and for foreseeably the future, the Marxist political parties have been minority parties operating in organic connection to, but as a sort of an outrider of, the mass labour movement. Until the 1930s the weakness of the Marxist political tradition in Britain was the absence of any significant body of Marxist political theory. On the contrary, in Great Britain almost alone from all other countries, a specifically non-Marxist or anti-Marxist ideology of socialism developed. This is one of the things the Fabians did. So to that extent, the Marxist ideology and Marxist political analysis, and the personnel attracted to it, was weaker in Britain. This, since the 1930s, has been rather less marked.

**Ralph** I think Eric is right in suggesting that there has been a genuine thin red thread in the otherwise pink cloth of the labour movement. But when that has been noted and prized, the fact remains that the British labour movement has on the whole been

based upon a powerful and long standing anti-Marxist tradition. Its leadership has not simply been indifferent to Marxism, but has been powerfully opposed to it. Marxism has been very much on the defensive. In that sense we are now in a stronger position. I think it is important that Marxism should develop and become a stronger part of the labour movement in Britain; and I take it that the struggle for Marxism is one of the essential ingredients of the struggle for socialism. Marxism is a challenge, an alternative view in the labour movement, not in any exclusivist, sectarian, dogmatic way, but as a genuine challenge to the predominant Fabian and social democratic traditions of the labour movement.

*Has the greatly increased interest in Marxism in the 60s and 70s come to an end?*

**Anne** A certain level of interest in Marxism, in reading Marxist writing, is still there. The Marxism of the 1960s came through activism and probably not through reading much of the masters. It was born out of the breakdown in American hegemony in the Vietnam struggle and the civil rights movement. But I think that today in terms of Marxist debate and discussion we are at a higher level than in 1968.

**Eric** I am not particularly worried about the fact that the attraction of Marxism fluctuates as a generational matter. Not many people became Marxists from 1950 to the late 1960s. What I am worried about is that these waves of interest in Marxism generally reflect a leftward turn in the politics of the country as a whole or of the world. And at the moment this isn't happening. My generation became Marxists because of the crisis and the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s. Later, people were politicised by the Vietnam war or by some other great political event; for example, the 1968-69 movements. The important thing is the present depoliticisation within the labour movement and elsewhere rather than the fact that fewer people have come to write Marxist books or have become Marxists in the last 5-7 years. I am less worried about that aspect if only because a good deal of the Marxist analysis provided in the last few years has been unusually competent and positive. Very much of the work done recently is much better and more down-to-earth than much of that in the early 70s when there was an enormous amount of bletcher: philosophers who weren't interested either in interpreting the world or in changing it, but only in seminar papers for other Marxist philosophers. On a different note, one thing that does worry me is a systematic attack on Marxism, that is now developing in England and elsewhere in Western Europe. I think we are now confronted with a battle of anti-Marxist ideas being mobilised against us.

*How do you assess the future prospects for Marxism in Britain?*

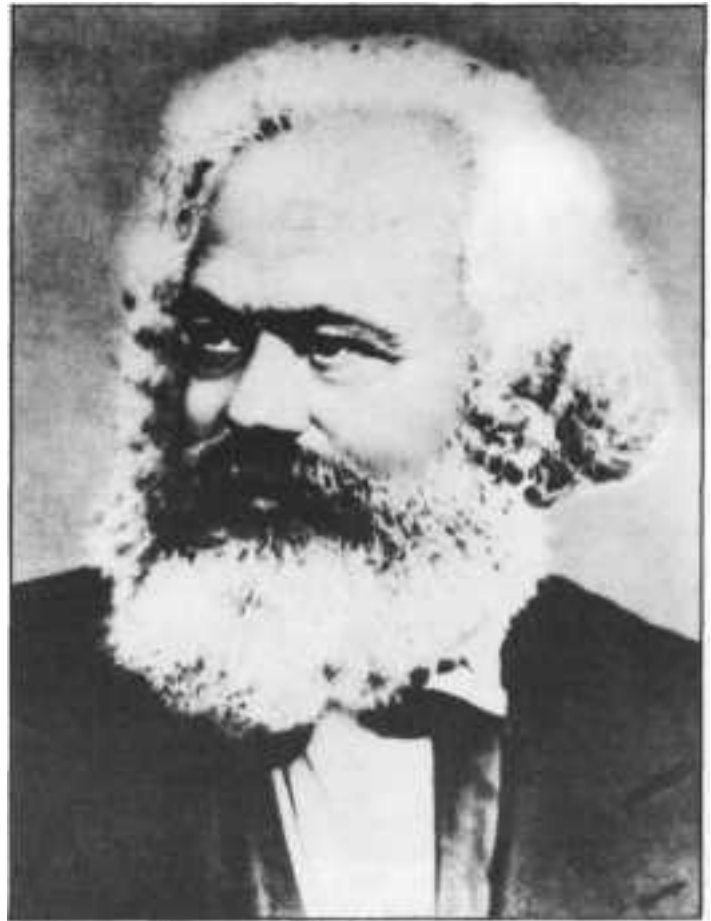
**Eric** This is not quite the same as the political prospects of Marxism in Britain because sometimes academic Marxism can flourish without much of a Marxist political movement. I would have thought the prospects are positive in so far as a certain radicalisation both within the Labour Party and more widely. Since there are now more people open to left ideas that is good news in terms of Marxism. In this respect we should recognise the important role of the Communist Party in Britain; because the Communist Party, if it has the weaknesses of the Marxist tradition in Britain, also has its strengths. One reason for its strength is that it is an integral part of the labour movement while also having a political and theoretical analysis which at any rate in past years

has never lost sight of the fact that what we have to do is not organise unrepresentative minorities, but mobilise and move the masses of not only the labour movement but all other groups opposed to reaction and war. What my generation of communists learned is that the way forward on the British road to socialism is unsectarian. And without wishing to demean the merits of other groups of Marxists, of which there are many, I think the Communist Party is the least sectarian and the strongest when it comes to a realistic Marxist analysis of the British situation. We have been around longer than most and have learned the hard way that we must operate within the actual social and political environment of Great Britain. The Communist Party has a key role to play on the Left, not least because it knows it isn't the only force on the Left.

Ralph I think that the fundamental ideas of Marxism are very likely to continue to gain influence in the labour movement and beyond, and to serve as the basis upon which socialists will want to build, as they confront new problems and new tasks. But the really important question, as I see it, is not about Marxism as a body of thought, but about the kind of political organisations which can best articulate and represent in practice the socialist aspirations which are embedded in Marxism. In this respect, there is no room for complacency; for I do not believe that any of the existing political formations of the labour movement can, for different reasons in each case, now really help the movement forward — not the Labour Party, not the Communist Party, and not any of the other groupings on the Left. We must not make a fetish of parties and organisations, but they are needed; and I think that the time is ripe and over-ripe for Marxists and others to begin talking to each other about what kind of political formation could serve as an effective force in the struggles of the working class, and of the 'new social movements', and how it could help to give to socialist ideas the wide hearing and acceptance which they do not now have. No doubt, the Labour Party will long continue to be the major party of social reform in Britain; but socialists should now think seriously about what else is needed, and how they can bring it about.

Bob Well, I think the starting point must be the severe economic crisis which is now afflicting the Western world, a crisis to which no end is in sight. Even though the working class has so far been rather passive in the face of this, I think that this situation cannot continue indefinitely; there will be resistance sooner or later. Then there will be a growing interest in theories which point a way forwards towards an alternative. And the main theory is, of course, Marxism; it is the main contender. There is likely to be a revival of popular interest in Marxism.

There are a number of questions concerning the character of the Marxism which will emerge from the present period. One possibility is there could be a growth of Utopian Marxism, of the kind exemplified by the self-styled revolutionary left, which often goes together with sectarian forms of political activity. This is one possibility — a sectarian and semi-religious Marxism. The other is a much wider kind of Marxism which can achieve a hegemonic position within movements of popular protest and resistance. Such a Marxism must be able to provide guidance through what is a very difficult political situation. We are not in a revolutionary epoch in Britain. Marxism must provide guidance for struggle in a non-revolutionary epoch, to chart a path through the present crisis; a path which involves strengthening popular forces so as to lay the basis for a more radical transformation at some time in the future.



The Communist Party has in the postwar period recognised this. For this reason it has not had simply a revolutionary programme; it has put forward a programme of advanced reforms in a national context — *The British Road to Socialism*. It has been denounced by critics on its Left for being reformist and for being chauvinistic because it sees the nation as being the primary locus of action. Both of the criticisms are unfair and I would defend the Communist Party for taking this kind of approach, because it has represented a serious attempt to come to grips with reality. However, our emphasis on the need for a purely national programme is no longer entirely adequate because the crisis is one of the whole of the Western world and Britain is now an exposed and relatively weak economy. It is now unrealistic to believe that Britain alone can chart a way out of the crisis. There must be a more international approach, and this requires some degree of unity of the Left in Western Europe as a whole.

Anne I disagree with those who label the present political agenda as reformist, implying that at some later stage we will enter into a new 'revolutionary' phase. It is precisely in the present period of political and economic instability that we need to be sensitive to the contradictory nature of developments, to new social needs that are expressing themselves. The situation demands radical solutions. The question is what political force is going to influence the outcome of events. For any Left wing strategy to have a hope of success it has to be rooted in the changes that are occurring. I think that what we have been arguing is that Marxism can be useful for developing such a strategy. Time will tell.