

MARX: A HUNDRED YEARS ON

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The ability of capitalism to continue developing, combined with its manifest failure to serve the needs of the mass of the world's population provides the backdrop to the hundredth anniversary of Marx's death. With the old beacons in the night dimmed or gone, we must construct our own future, and we could do a lot worse than go back to the classics: not as instruction manuals but to help us ask the proper questions of our own age; to indicate a path of analysis and to cultivate a sense of contradiction; to help us to *see* the present in all its richness and complexity, and to build on those developments which can serve as the basis of a better future.

If Marxism is going through a crisis, it is not a matter of a closed system put into jeopardy because of a theoretical dispute. Rather the political and social challenge confronting us requires maturity. It is no longer a question of defending a holy father, or repaying a debt as Gerry Cohen puts it, but the modest attempt to see better and to act more effectively.

This collection is a sign of the continued potency and inspiration of Marx's works and the openness and anti-dogmatism of Marxist intellectuals asking searching questions because of a political commitment to addressing the problems and possibilities we face. A sign of the health of Marxism in recent years has been the existence of wide ranging debates which, however, have led to many dilemmas. These essays succeed in providing the reader with an overview of many of these as well as taking the discussion further by asking what is useful in Marx's works and what we need to reassess.

It is impossible to do justice to all the interesting aspects of all of the essays in a short review. A particularly thought provoking and exciting article is Stuart Hall's piece on ideology. Assessing recent debates, he discusses the richness and complexity of Marx's view which has so often been flattened in various treatments. Marx attempted to explain how ideology is a limited or inadequate view of the world unable to explain the whole of social relations, and Hall argues that we should replace notions of 'true' or 'false' consciousness with terms like 'partial' and 'one-sided', or 'concrete and whole'. This helps set the agenda for a concrete analysis of how

everyday experiences back up those ideas which in Gramsci's terms organise the masses. In other words Hall redefines the 'scientific' nature of a Marxist theory of politics as a new kind of realism in which the parameters of what is possible, of political intervention and creativity, are defined or 'determined' by an historically constructed terrain in which the outcome is never pre-ordained or guaranteed. Marxist theorising, he writes, faces an 'open horizon' since 'the paradigm of perfectly closed, perfectly predictable systems of thought is religion or astrology, not science.' The economic determines the setting 'since Marxism is surely correct, against all idealisms, to insist that no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located.' Yet the economic does not determine or guarantee the outcome or precise forms of social processes. The loss of certainty (of our theoretical innocence?) may well create anxiety, yet it is the pre-condition of 'the development and refinement of new concepts and explanation . . . the sign of a living body of thought, capable still of engaging and grasping something of the truth about new historical realities.'

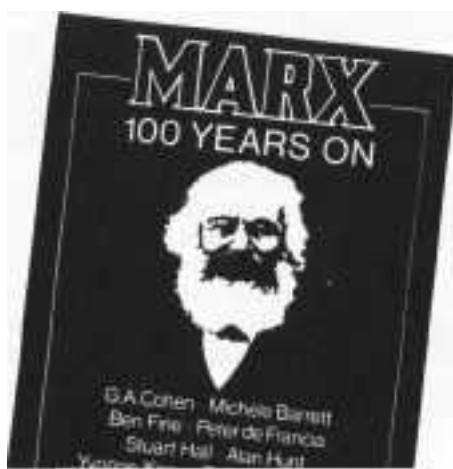
A direct dialogue between Stuart Hall and another of the contributors, Gerry Cohen, would be interesting. Cohen's article is very useful both for those who have not read his book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, because he summarises his main line of argument elaborated there, and for those who have, because he modifies some of his positions. The concern of that book, and this essay, is to examine in a highly rigorous way what he defines as the central tenet of historical materialism, ' . . . that history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive powers, and that societies rise and fall according as they enable and promote, or prevent and discourage, that growth', the theme sketched by Marx in his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. In an important revision of his earlier position Cohen redefines the concept

of 'fettering' of development in terms of the *use* of productive forces and 'restricting the growth of a capacity' rather than absolute stagnation. In concrete terms, he argues that ' . . . capitalist relations of production impede optimally productive use of the high technology those relations are so good at creating . . . under different arrangements the same forces of production could be used to bring about a benign realignment of labour, leisure and education.'

Without in any way suggesting that the dilemmas posed by much of the argument are resolved in Gramsci's work, what strikes me is that the field of much of Gramsci's discussions is also set by Marx' 1859 Preface, part of which he paraphrases over and over in his critique of economism, and his development of the concept of passive revolution. The material premises must exist for change to take place and at a certain stage capitalist relations become fetters on the development of the productive forces. Within this long term organic crisis of capitalism, there ensues in Marx' words, an 'epoch of social revolution' which does not *guarantee* that socialism triumphs, but means that socialism is *possible*. And it is also *necessary* if we are to fulfil human needs as they have developed.

Gregor McLennan's clarification of a range of debates about historical materialism goes back to that earlier 'crisis of Marxism' at the end of the last century and suggests the limits of several more recent positions. He intersects some of the points made by Stuart Hall and Gerry Cohen when he poses questions about the status of philosophy and scientific knowledge in Marxism, asks whether Marxism is a philosophy of history or an empirical theory of it, and considers the role of the class struggle. 'The process of showing the considerable but skeletal strength of historical materialism', he writes, 'also involves accepting its limitations.' The dilemmas historical materialism faces, he argues, 'are opportunities . . . as well as the form of its theoretical crisis.'

Alan Hunt's essay on Marx and representative democracy provides a critical reading of the limited appreciation by Engels as well as Marx of the profound transformation taking place in political relations. I couldn't help feeling, however, that his discussion remains at a surface level. The spread of the suffrage and the participation of socialist parties in a system of 'political competition' are the manifestation of something much deeper: the changed relationship between the state and social needs as a result of the activities of the working class movement. The inadequacy of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the state stems as



much from a failure to see that the Paris Commune signalled the *end* of an epoch. At the end of the last century the whole terrain of politics changed *permanently* as states attempted to answer social needs while allowing for the reproduction and continued dominance of capitalism despite its long term crisis. *That* is the meaning of a political competition in which the state must preserve its mass base.

Michele Barrett's work has previously summarised the kind of corners Marxist theory has boxed itself into in recent years. After reading several of the essays in this book, I felt that new possibilities exist. In particular, Stuart Hall's piece provides an opening for a fruitful discussion of the relationship between the reality of women's oppression, the ideology which reinforces and is reinforced by concrete social relations, and women's struggle to go beyond the constraints facing them. In trying to 'save' some of Marx for feminism, Michele Barrett misses, I think, some extremely useful aspects of his work. For example, she suggests that his criticism of the limits of political emancipation and a bourgeois concept of equality and political rights, was the reason why he was insensitive to much of the struggle for women's rights in the last century. Yet it is precisely his analysis of the gap between an abstract equality and the daily, material reality of human experience which is useful for us today when we argue that women can be legally equal without being emancipated, or liberated as *women*. Problems in the way that Marx posed important questions are much deeper than the use of 'man' or his social prejudices (he and Engels were even worse about the Slavs!).

Perhaps Marx and Engels can be of much more use to feminism and the Left in general if we recuperate the sense of the contradictory nature of concrete historical development which is so evident in their work. And if we arrive at the conclusion that Marx's work is highly limited in answering questions which are being posed in a new way today, we face what Gregor McLennan calls another opportunity as well as a dilemma, one created out of the historical experience of millions of women.

Another politically crucial task is a Marxist analysis of the experiences of the socialist countries which goes beyond simple defence or attack. Ben Fine considers what Marx had to say about economic relations under socialism and the limits to what we can find in Marx. He considers the level of abstraction at which we can attempt to analyse socialist economies and what, on the other hand, has to be rooted in concrete

historical, empirical conditions. By giving a good deal of priority to the latter we find an unstated question lurking between the lines: how far can we extrapolate an economic or technical discussion from political questions and when are the various aspects tightly bound together? The narrative keeps making jumps from Marx to very concrete developments without raising the question of *new* problems faced by Marxism. This is despite the fact that in important ways Fine says we cannot apply central concepts in *Capital* to concrete socialist economic development. To take another example, women's dual role in the productive and the domestic spheres is a hallmark of both socialist and capitalist countries today, and requires a development of Marxism beyond Marx. And it requires a concrete analysis if we are to understand how this contradictory phenomenon presents a blockage (a fetter?) on socialist economic development as well as providing possibilities for women's liberation.

Unfortunately, space does not permit discussion of the pieces by Gwyn Williams, George Rude, Goran Therborn, Peter De Francia or Yvonne Kapp, though this last piece has a very nice sketch of Marx's family life in which a few warts but also some very warm feelings are evident.

Anne Showstack Sassoon