

Karl Marx, Yesterday and Today

✦ by Louis Menand, newyorker.com

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On or about February 24, 1848, a twenty-three-page pamphlet was published in London. Modern industry, it proclaimed, had revolutionized the world. It surpassed, in its

accomplishments, all the great civilizations of the past—the Egyptian pyramids, the Roman aqueducts, the Gothic cathedrals. Its innovations—the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph—had unleashed fantastic productive forces. In the name of free trade, it had knocked down national boundaries, lowered prices, made the planet interdependent and cosmopolitan. Goods and ideas now circulated everywhere.

Just as important, it swept away all the old hierarchies and mystifications. People no longer believed that ancestry or religion determined their status in life. Everyone was the same as everyone else. For the first time in history, men and women could see, without illusions, where they stood in their relations with others.

The new modes of production, communication, and distribution had also created enormous wealth. But there was a problem. The wealth was not equally distributed. Ten per cent of the population possessed virtually all of the property; the other ninety per cent owned nothing. As cities and towns industrialized, as wealth became more concentrated, and as the rich got richer, the middle class began sinking to the level of the working class.

Soon, in fact, there would be just two types of people in the world: the people who owned property and the people who sold their labor to them. As ideologies disappeared which had once made inequality appear natural and ordained, it was inevitable that workers everywhere would see the system for what it was, and would rise up and overthrow it. The writer who made this prediction was, of course, Karl Marx, and the pamphlet was “The Communist Manifesto.” He is not wrong yet.

Considering his rather glaring relevance to contemporary politics, it’s striking that two important recent books about Marx are committed to returning him to his own century. “Marx was not our contemporary,” Jonathan Sperber insists, in “Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life” (Liveright), which came out in 2013; he is “more a figure of the past than a prophet of the present.” And Gareth Stedman Jones explains that the aim of his new book, “Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion” (Harvard), is “to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings.”

The mission is worthy. Historicizing—correcting for the tendency to presentize the past—is what scholars do. Sperber, who teaches at the University of Missouri, and Stedman Jones, who teaches at Queen Mary University of London and co-directs the Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge, both bring exceptional learning to the business of rooting Marx in the intellectual and political life of nineteenth-century Europe.

Marx was one of the great infighters of all time, and a lot of his writing was topical and ad hominem—no-holds-barred disputes with thinkers now obscure and intricate interpretations of events largely forgotten. Sperber and Stedman Jones both show that if you read Marx in that context, as a man engaged in endless internecine political and philosophical warfare, then the import of some familiar passages in his writings can shrink a little. The stakes seem more parochial. In the end, their Marx isn't radically different from the received Marx, but he is more Victorian. Interestingly, given the similarity of their approaches, there is not much overlap.

Still, Marx was also what Michel Foucault called the founder of a discourse. An enormous body of thought is named after him. "I am not a Marxist," Marx is said to have said, and it's appropriate to distinguish what he intended from the uses other people made of his writings. But a lot of the significance of the work lies in its downstream effects. However he managed it, and despite the fact that, as Sperber and Stedman Jones demonstrate, he can look, on some level, like just one more nineteenth-century system-builder who was convinced he knew how it was all going to turn out, Marx produced works that retained their intellectual firepower over time. Even today, "The Communist Manifesto" is like a bomb about to go off in your hands.

And, unlike many nineteenth-century critics of industrial capitalism—and there were a lot of them—Marx was a true revolutionary. All of his work was written in the service of the revolution that he predicted in "The Communist Manifesto" and that he was certain would come to pass. After his death, communist revolutions did come to pass—not exactly where or how he imagined they would but, nevertheless, in his name. By the middle of the twentieth century, more than a third of the people in the world were living under regimes that called themselves, and genuinely believed themselves to be, Marxist.

This matters because one of Marx's key principles was that theory must always be united with practice. That's the point of the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Marx was not saying that philosophy is irrelevant; he was saying that philosophical problems arise out of real-life conditions, and they can be solved only by changing those conditions—by remaking the world. And Marx's ideas were used to remake the world, or a big portion of it. Although no one would hold him responsible, in a juridical sense, for the outcome, on Marx's own principle the outcome tells us something about the ideas.

In short, you can put Marx back into the nineteenth century, but you can't keep him there.

He wasted a ridiculous amount of his time feuding with rivals and putting out sectarian brush fires, and he did not even come close to completing the work he intended as his magnum opus, “Capital.” But, for better or for worse, it just is not the case that his thought is obsolete. He saw that modern free-market economies, left to their own devices, produce gross inequalities, and he transformed a mode of analysis that goes all the way back to Socrates—turning concepts that we think we understand and take for granted inside out—into a resource for grasping the social and economic conditions of our own lives.

Apart from his loyal and lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels, almost no one would have guessed, in 1883, the year Marx died, at the age of sixty-four, how influential he would become. Eleven people showed up for the funeral. For most of his career, Marx was a star in a tiny constellation of radical exiles and failed revolutionaries (and the censors and police spies who monitored them) but almost unknown outside it. The books he is famous for today were not exactly best-sellers. “The Communist Manifesto” vanished almost as soon as it was published and remained largely out of print for twenty-four years; “Capital” was widely ignored when the first volume came out, in 1867. After four years, it had sold a thousand copies, and it was not translated into English until 1886.



The second and third volumes of “Capital” were published after Marx died, stitched together

by Engels from hundreds of pages of scrawled-over drafts. (Marx had spectacularly bad handwriting; Engels was one of the few people outside the family who could decipher it.) The “Theses on Feuerbach,” which Marx wrote in 1845, were not discovered until 1888, when Engels published them, and some of the texts most important for twentieth-century Marxists—the cobbled-together volume known as “The German Ideology,” the so-called Paris manuscripts of 1844, and the book entitled the “Grundrisse” by its Soviet editors—were unknown until after 1920. The unfinished Paris manuscripts, a holy text in the nineteen-sixties, did not appear in English until 1959. Marx seems to have regarded none of that material as publishable.

In Marx’s own lifetime, the work that finally brought him attention outside his circle was a thirty-five-page item called “The Civil War in France,” published in 1871, in which he hailed the short-lived and violently suppressed Paris Commune as “the glorious harbinger of a new”—that is, communist—“society.” It’s not a text that is cited much today.

One reason for Marx’s relative obscurity is that only toward the end of his life did movements to improve conditions for workers begin making gains in Europe and the United States. To the extent that those movements were reformist rather than revolutionary, they were not Marxist (although Marx did, in later years, speculate about the possibility of a peaceful transition to communism). With the growth of the labor movement came excitement about socialist thought and, with that, an interest in Marx.

Still, as Alan Ryan writes in his characteristically lucid and concise introduction to Marx’s political thought, “Karl Marx: Revolutionary and Utopian” (Liveright), if Vladimir Lenin had not arrived in Petrograd in 1917 and taken charge of the Russian Revolution, Marx would probably be known today as “a not very important nineteenth-century philosopher, sociologist, economist, and political theorist.” The Russian Revolution made the world take Marx’s criticism of capitalism seriously. After 1917, communism was no longer a utopian fantasy.

Marx is a warning about what can happen when people defy their parents and get a Ph.D. Marx’s father, a lawyer in the small city of Trier, in western Germany, had tried to steer him into the law, but Marx chose philosophy. He studied at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, where Hegel once taught, and he became involved with a group of intellectuals known as the Young Hegelians. Hegel was cautious about criticizing religion and the Prussian state; the Young Hegelians were not, and, just as Marx was being awarded his degree, in 1841, there was an official crackdown. Marx’s mentor was fired, and the Young Hegelians became

academic pariahs. So Marx did what many unemployed Ph.D.s do: he went into journalism.

Apart from a few small book advances, journalism was Marx's only source of earned income. (There is a story, though Sperber considers it unsubstantiated, that once, in desperation, he applied for a job as a railway clerk and was turned down for bad handwriting.) In the eighteen-forties, Marx edited and contributed to political newspapers in Europe; from 1852 to 1862, he wrote a column for the New York *Daily Tribune*, the paper with the largest circulation in the world at the time.

When journalistic work dried up, he struggled. He depended frequently on support from Engels and advances on his inheritance. He was sometimes desperate for food; at one point, he couldn't leave the house because he had pawned his only coat. The claim that the author of "Capital" was financially inept, and that he and his wife wasted what little money came their way on middle-class amenities like music and drawing lessons for the children, became a standard "irony" in Marx biographies. Sperber contests this. Marx had less money to waste than historians have assumed, and he accepted poverty as the price of his politics. He would gladly have lived in a slum himself, but he didn't want his family to suffer. Three of the Marxes' children died young and a fourth was stillborn; poverty and substandard living conditions may have been factors.

Marx's journalism made him into a serial exile. He wrote and published articles offensive to the authorities, and, in 1843, he was kicked out of Cologne, where he was helping run a paper called *Rheinische Zeitung*. He went to Paris, which had a large German community, and that is where he and Engels became friends. An earlier encounter in Cologne had not gone well, but they met again at the Café de la Régence, in 1844, and ended up spending ten days together talking.

Engels, who was two years younger, had the same politics as Marx. Soon after they met, he wrote his classic study "The Condition of the Working Class in England," which ends by predicting a communist revolution. Engels's father was a German industrialist in the textile business, an owner of factories in Barmen and Bremen and in Manchester, England, and although he disapproved of his son's politics and the company he kept, he gave him a position at the Manchester factory. Engels hated the work, but he was good at it, as he was at most things. He went fox hunting with the gentry he despised, and made fun of Marx's attempts to ride a horse. Engels eventually became a partner, and the income helped him keep Marx alive.

In 1845, Marx was expelled from France. He moved to Brussels. Three years later, though, something happened that almost no one had foreseen: revolutions broke out across Europe, including in France, Italy, Germany, and the Austrian Empire. Marx wrote “The Communist Manifesto” just as those uprisings were getting under way. When unrest reached Brussels, he was suspected of arming insurgents and was evicted from Belgium, but he returned to Paris. Rioters there had broken into the Tuileries and set the French throne on fire.

By the year’s end, most of the revolutions had been crushed by monarchist forces. Many people who were or would become important figures in European art and literature—Wagner, Dostoyevsky, Baudelaire, Turgenev, Berlioz, Delacroix, Liszt, George Sand—had been caught up in the revolutionary excitement, and the outcome led to a crisis of faith in politics (the subject of Flaubert’s novel “Sentimental Education”). The failure of the 1848 revolutions is what Marx’s line “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” refers to. (He got the phrase from Engels.) The “tragedy” was the fate of the French Revolution under Napoleon; the “farce” was the election of Napoleon’s nephew, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Marx considered a nonentity, to the Presidency of France, in December, 1848. Bonaparte eventually declared himself Emperor and ruled until 1870, when France lost a war with Prussia. The Paris Commune was a by-product of that war.

So in 1849 Marx was forced into exile once again. He fled with his family to London. He assumed that the stay would be temporary, but he lived there for the rest of his life. That is where, day after day in the Reading Room of the British Museum, he did the research for “Capital,” and it is where, in Highgate Cemetery, he is buried. The impressive bronze bust you see on his tombstone today was placed there, in 1956, by the Communist Party of Great Britain.

What was Marx like? The number of first-person reports is not large, but they tend to agree. He was, in some respects, a caricature of the German academic (which he had once expected to become): an imperious know-it-all with untamed hair in a misbuttoned frock coat. He once described himself to one of his children as “a machine condemned to devour books and then throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history.” He wrote all night in clouds of tobacco smoke, books and papers piled around him. “They are my slaves,” he said, “and they must serve me as I please.”

In professional matters, he was forbidding. He was a cogent speaker but had a lisp and was a poor orator; he knew it, and rarely addressed a crowd. He was ruthless in print, made enemies of many friends and former allies, and did not suffer fools—a large subset of his

acquaintance, in his view. One German exile referred to him as “an intellectual customs agent and border guard, appointed on his own authority.”

Still, he commanded respect. A colleague, recalling Marx at twenty-eight, described him as “a born leader of the people.” He was actually good at running the show—as an editor and, later on, as the dominant figure in the International Workingmen’s Association, known as the First International. His hair was black; his eyes were black; his complexion was swarthy. Engels called him the “black fellow from Trier”; his wife and children called him the Moor.

In private, he was modest and gracious. When he was not sick—he had a bad liver, suffered from bronchitis, and grew fist-size boils, which Sperber thinks were caused by an autoimmune disorder but which may have been a symptom of his liver disease—he was playful and affectionate. He loved Shakespeare, made up stories for his three daughters, and enjoyed cheap cigars and red wine. His wife and daughters adored him. A Prussian government spy who visited Marx at his home in 1852 was surprised to find him “the gentlest and mildest of men.”

He became engaged to Jenny von Westphalen, also from Trier, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-two. Sperber thinks that a fairy tale has grown up about the marriage, but Jenny is said to have been exceptionally beautiful, and she was devoted to Karl. He wrote passionate love poetry for her. The engagement lasted seven years, during which he finished his studies, and they rarely saw each other. The relationship was mainly epistolary. (Sperber believes that they had premarital sex. I certainly hope so.) In her letters, Jenny calls Karl her “little wild boar.”

The one possible flaw in the domestic idyll has to do with a child born to their servant, Helene Demuth. She was a “gift” to the Marxes from Jenny’s mother and lived with the family. (Almost all women in nineteenth-century Britain who could manage to retain a servant did so. Even Miss Bates, in Jane Austen’s “Emma,” who lives on the charity of her well-off neighbors, has a servant.) Helene’s child, named Frederick and called Freddy, was born in 1851 and was brought up by foster parents. Marx’s daughters didn’t meet him until after Marx’s death.

Engels claimed paternity. This was not implausible. Engels was unmarried and had a taste for working-class women; his longtime lover, Mary Burns, worked in a Manchester factory. On his deathbed, though, forty-four years later, he is supposed to have named Marx as Freddy’s real father, information that became known in Communist circles but was not

made public until 1962. Sperber and Stedman Jones accept the story, as does the author of the standard English-language biography, David McLellan, although one of Engels's biographers, Terrell Carver, thinks that the evidence is not conclusive. Demuth remained with the family; after Marx's death, she went to work for Engels. And the Marxes' marriage survived.

It is sympathy for Marx that leads Sperber and Stedman Jones to insist that we read him in his nineteenth-century context, because they hope to distance him from the interpretation of his work made after his death by people like Karl Kautsky, who was his chief German-language exponent; Georgi Plekhanov, his chief Russian exponent; and, most influentially, Engels. It was thanks mainly to those writers that people started to refer to Marxism as "scientific socialism," a phrase that sums up what was most frightening about twentieth-century Communism: the idea that human beings can be reengineered in accordance with a theory that presents itself as a law of history. The word the twentieth century coined for that was totalitarianism.

So, by 1939, when the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin published his widely read and not wholly unadmiring study "Karl Marx: His Life and Environment" (still in print), he could describe Marx as "among the great authoritarian founders of new faiths, ruthless subverters and innovators who interpret the world in terms of a single, clear, passionately held principle, denouncing and destroying all that conflicts with it. His faith . . . was of that boundless, absolute kind which puts an end to all questions and dissolves all difficulties." This became the Cold War Marx.

It's true that Marx was highly doctrinaire, something that did not wear well with his compatriots in the nineteenth century, and that certainly does not wear well today, after the experience of the regimes conceived in his name. It therefore sounds perverse to say that Marx's philosophy was dedicated to human freedom. But it was. Marx was an Enlightenment thinker: he wanted a world that is rational and transparent, and in which human beings have been liberated from the control of external forces.

This was the essence of Marx's Hegelianism. Hegel argued that history was the progress of humanity toward true freedom, by which he meant self-mastery and self-understanding, seeing the world without illusions—illusions that we ourselves have created. The Young Hegelians' controversial example of this was the Christian God. (This is what Feuerbach wrote about.) We created God, and then pretended that God created us. We hypostatized our own concept and turned it into something "out there" whose commandments (which we

made up) we struggle to understand and obey. We are supplicants to our own fiction.

Concepts like God are not errors. History is rational: we make the world the way we do for a reason. We invented God because God solved certain problems for us. But, once a concept begins impeding our progress toward self-mastery, it must be criticized and transcended, left behind. Otherwise, like the members of the Islamic State today, we become the tools of our Tool.

What makes it hard to discard the tools we have objectified is the persistence of the ideologies that justify them, and which make what is only a human invention seem like “the way things are.” Undoing ideologies is the task of philosophy. Marx was a philosopher. The subtitle of “Capital” is “Critique of Political Economy.” The uncompleted book was intended to be a criticism of the economic concepts that make social relations in a free-market economy seem natural and inevitable, in the same way that concepts like the great chain of being and the divine right of kings once made the social relations of feudalism seem natural and inevitable.

The reason that “Capital” looks more like a work of economics than like a work of philosophy—the reason that it is filled with tables and charts rather than with syllogisms—is the reason given in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: the purpose of philosophy is to understand conditions in order to change them. Marx liked to say that when he read Hegel he found philosophy standing on its head, so he turned it over and placed it on its feet. Life is doing, not thinking. It is not enough to be the masters of our armchairs.

Marx thought that industrial capitalism, too, was created for a good reason: to increase economic output—something that “The Communist Manifesto” celebrates. The cost, however, is a system in which one class of human beings, the property owners (in Marxian terms, the bourgeoisie), exploits another class, the workers (the proletariat).

Marx was fanatically committed to finding empirical corroboration for his theory. That's what it meant to put philosophy on its feet. And that's why he spent all those hours alone in the British Museum, studying reports on factory conditions, data on industrial production, statistics about international trade. It was a heroic attempt to show that reality aligned with theory. No wonder he couldn't finish his book.

Marx had very little to say about how the business of life would be conducted in a communist society, and this turned out to be a serious problem for regimes trying to put communism into practice. He had reasons for being vague. He thought that our concepts, values, and beliefs all arise out of the conditions of our own time, which means that it's hard to know what lies on the other side of historical change. In theory, after the revolution, everything will be "up for grabs"—which has been the great dream of leftist radicalism ever since.

Marx was clearer about what a communist society would not have. There would be no class system, no private property, no individual rights (which Marx thought boil down to protecting the right of the owners of property to hang on to it), and no state (which he called "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie"). The state, in the form of the Party, proved to be one bourgeois concept that twentieth-century Communist regimes found impossible to transcend. Communism is not a religion; it truly is, as anti-Communists used say about it, godless. But the Party functions in the way that Feuerbach said God functions in Christianity, as a mysterious and implacable external power.

Marx did not, however, provide much guidance for how a society would operate without property or classes or a state. A good example of the problem is his criticism of the division of labor. In the first chapter of "The Wealth of Nations," in 1776, Adam Smith identified the division of labor—that is, specialization—as the key to economic growth. Smith's case study was the manufacture of pins. Rather than have a single worker make one pin at a time, Smith argued, a pin factory can split the job into eighteen separate operations, starting with drawing out the wire and ending with the packaging, and increase production by a factor of thousands.

To us, this seems an obviously efficient way to organize work, from automobile assembly lines to "knowledge production" in universities. But Marx considered the division of labor one of the evils of modern life. (So did Hegel.) It makes workers cogs in a machine and deprives them of any connection with the product of their labor. "Man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him," as

Marx put it. In a communist society, he wrote, “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes.” It will be possible “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic.”

This often quoted passage sounds fanciful, but it is at the heart of Marx’s thought. Human beings are naturally creative and sociable. A system that treats them as mechanical monads is inhumane. But the question is, How would a society without a division of labor produce sufficient goods to survive? Nobody will want to rear the cattle (or clean the barn); everyone will want to be the critic. (Believe me.) As Marx conceded, capitalism, for all its evils, had created abundance. He seems to have imagined that, somehow, all the features of the capitalist mode of production could be thrown aside and abundance would magically persist.

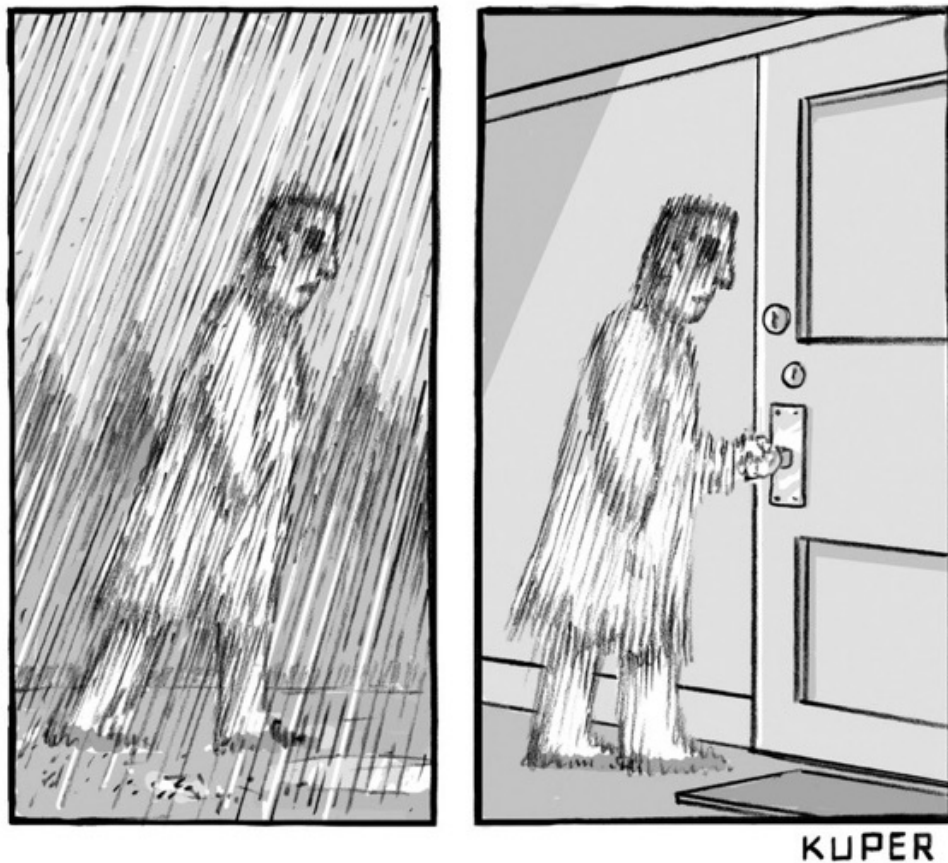
In 1980, the philosopher Peter Singer published a short book on Marx in which he listed some of Marx’s predictions: the income gap between workers and owners would increase, independent producers would be forced down into the ranks of the proletariat, wages would remain at subsistence levels, the rate of profit would fall, capitalism would collapse, and there would be revolutions in the advanced countries. Singer thought that most of these predictions were “so plainly mistaken” that it was difficult to understand how anyone sympathetic to Marx could defend them. In 2016, it is harder to be dismissive.

“Economists today would do well to take inspiration from his example,” Thomas Piketty says about Marx, in the best-seller he published in 2013, “Capital in the Twenty-first Century.” The book did for many twenty-first-century readers what Marx hoped “Capital” might do for nineteenth-century ones. It uses data to show us the real nature of social relations and, by doing that, forces us to rethink concepts that have come to seem natural and inevitable. One of these is the concept of the market, which is often imagined as a self-optimizing mechanism it is a mistake to interfere with, but which in fact, left to itself, continually increases inequality. Another concept, closely related, is meritocracy, which is often imagined as a guarantor of social mobility but which, Piketty argues, serves mainly to make economic winners feel virtuous.

Piketty says that for thirty years after 1945 a high rate of growth in the advanced economies was accompanied by a rise in incomes that benefitted all classes. Severe wealth inequality came to seem a thing of the past (which is why, in 1980, people could quite reasonably call Marx’s predictions mistaken). It now appears that those thirty years were an anomaly. The

Depression and the two world wars had effectively wiped out the owners of wealth, but the thirty years after 1945 rebooted the economic order.

“The very high level of private wealth that has been attained since the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties in the wealthy countries of Europe and in Japan,” Piketty says, “directly reflects the Marxian logic.” Marx was correct that there is nothing naturally egalitarian about modern economies left to themselves. As Piketty puts it, “There is no natural, spontaneous process to prevent destabilizing, inequalitarian forces from prevailing permanently.”



The tendency of the system to increase inequality was certainly true in Marx’s own century. By 1900, the richest one per cent of the population in Britain and France owned more than fifty per cent of those nations’ wealth; the top ten per cent owned ninety per cent. We are approaching those levels again today. In the United States, according to the Federal Reserve, the top ten per cent of the population owns seventy-two per cent of the wealth, and the bottom fifty per cent has two per cent. About ten per cent of the national income goes to

the top two hundred and forty-seven thousand adults (one-thousandth of the adult population).

This is not a problem restricted to the rich nations. Global wealth is also unequally distributed, and by the same ratios or worse. Piketty does not predict a worldwide working-class revolution; he does remark that this level of inequality is “unsustainable.” He can foresee a time when most of the planet is owned by billionaires.

Marx was also not wrong about the tendency of workers’ wages to stagnate as income for the owners of capital rises. For the first sixty years of the nineteenth century—the period during which he began writing “Capital”—workers’ wages in Britain and France were stuck at close to subsistence levels. It can be difficult now to appreciate the degree of immiseration in the nineteenth-century industrial economy. In one period in 1862, the average workweek in a Manchester factory was eighty-four hours.

It appears that wage stagnation is back. After 1945, wages rose as national incomes rose, but the income of the lowest earners peaked in 1969, when the minimum hourly wage in the United States was \$1.60. That is the equivalent of \$10.49 today, when the national minimum wage is \$7.25. And, as wages for service-sector jobs decline in earning power, the hours in the workweek increase, because people are forced to take more than one job.

The rhetoric of our time, the time of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, Brexit, and popular unrest in Europe, appears to have a Marxist cast. Sanders’s proposals to reduce inequality are straight out of Piketty: tax wealth and give more people access to knowledge. Trump, since he admires authoritarian personalities, might be pleased to know that Marx supported free trade on a “the worse things get” theory: by driving wages lower, free trade increases the impoverishment of the working class and leads more quickly to the revolution. In the terms used everywhere today, on the left, on the right, and in the press: the system is “rigged” to reward “the élites.” Marx called them “the ruling class.”

How useful is Marx for understanding this bubble of ferment in the advanced economies? I think we don’t yet know very well the precise demographic profile of Brexit voters and Trump and Sanders supporters—whether they are people who have been materially damaged by free trade and immigration or people who are hostile to the status quo for other reasons. That they are basically all the former may turn out to be a consoling belief of the better-off, who can more easily understand why people who have suffered economic damage would be angry than why people who have nothing to complain about financially might

simply want to blow the whole thing up.

Still, in the political confusion, we may feel that we are seeing something that has not been seen in countries like Britain and the United States since before 1945: people debating what Marx would call the real nature of social relations. The political earth is being somewhat scorched. And, as politics continues to shed its traditional restraints, ugly as it is to watch, we may get a clearer understanding of what those relations are.

They may not be entirely economic. A main theme of Stedman Jones's book is that Marx and Engels, in their obsession with class, ignored the power of other forms of identity. One of these is nationalism. For Marx and Engels, the working-class movement was international. But today we seem to be seeing, among the voters for Brexit, for example, a reversion to nationalism and, in the United States, what looks like a surge of nativism.

Stedman Jones also argues that Marx and Engels failed to appreciate the extent to which the goal of working-class agitation in nineteenth-century Britain was not ownership of the means of production but political inclusion, being allowed to vote. When that was achieved, unrest subsided.

Voting is no longer the test of inclusion. What is happening in the rich democracies may be not so much a war between the haves and the have-nots as a war between the socially advantaged and the left-out. No one who lives in poverty would not trade that life for a better one, but what most people probably want is the life they have. They fear losing that more than they wish for a different life, although they probably also want their children to be able to lead a different life if they choose.

Of the features of modern society that exacerbate that fear and threaten that hope, the distribution of wealth may not be the most important. Money matters to people, but status matters more, and precisely because status is something you cannot buy. Status is related to identity as much as it is to income. It is also, unfortunately, a zero-sum game. The struggles over status are socially divisive, and they can resemble class warfare.

Ryan, in his book on Marx, makes an observation that Marx himself might have made. "The modern republic," he says, "attempts to impose political equality on an economic inequality it has no way of alleviating." This is a relatively recent problem, because the rise of modern capitalism coincided with the rise of modern democracies, making wealth inequality inconsistent with political equality. But the unequal distribution of social resources is not

new. One of the most striking points Piketty makes is that, as he puts it, “in all known societies in all times, the least wealthy half of the population has owned virtually nothing,” and the top ten per cent has owned “most of what there is to own.”

This is probably not true of tribal societies, and it does not seem to have been true of the earliest known democratic state, Periclean Athens (at least, for the citizens). But inequality has been with us for a long time. Industrial capitalism didn't reverse it in the nineteenth century, and finance capitalism is not reversing it in the twenty-first. The only thing that can reverse it is political action aimed at changing systems that seem to many people to be simply the way things have to be. We invented our social arrangements; we can alter them when they are working against us. There are no gods out there to strike us dead if we do. ♦

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