

Polg, W.A. (2012). Karl Marx: A Wheel to Win
New York: Pantheon Hall,

Introduction

Is Marx Dead?

How can one describe Karl Marx? To call him a philosopher or political activist is accurate but such a characterization suffers from understatement, as much as saying the Grand Canyon is a ditch in the western United States. Moreover, a radical thinker and activist who lived in the nineteenth century would, at first, seem to be at best a footnote in history. After all, Marx never lived to see any successful socialist revolutions. Many who built socialist states in the twentieth century and claimed to be "Marxist" would likely have elicited Marx's criticism, if not outright scorn. As an individual dedicated to democracy, only the most jaundiced observer could claim that Marx would have applauded such human tragedies as Stalin's Russia or the hermit kingdom of North Korea.

Though often misinterpreted and misrepresented, the man from Trier is far from insignificant. In 1983, on the hundredth anniversary of Marx's death, an iconic poster issued by the French Communist Party, part of the governing coalition at that time, had his portrait with the caption: "Marx is dead." In response, Marx mockingly points to his open eye while saying "my eye." Time after time, people have pronounced Marx "dead" only to witness a rebirth of interest in his ideas. One is reminded of the reaction of French King Louis Philippe who exclaimed, on being told of the death of Napoleon's famous and devious former diplomat Talleyrand, "What did he mean by that?" Scholars, not to mention average people, have had the same reaction to much of what concerns Marx. What ideas remain relevant from this long-dead German revolutionary? Naturally, there is a spectrum of answers to this question, and the exploration of some will demonstrate Marx's historical impact.

One inevitably encounters difficulty in any attempt to fairly evaluate Marx's impact on history, politics, and society. Since his death, Marx has been treated alternatively as god or devil, depending upon one's political leanings. This meant that the real historical Marx was lost because, as Ernesto Che Guevara complained, "St. Marx" had been distorted and "turned into a stone idol." For others, Marx was the font of all evil in the contemporary world. British historian Robert Service blamed Marx, who lived in the nineteenth century, for most of what went wrong in the twentieth century. Service managed to blame Marx for not only Stalin but also Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Marx, being dead, was

unable to defend himself from such specious associations. In contrast, noted author John Berger asks how “is it possible not to heed Marx, who prophesied and analyzed the devastation [caused by capitalism]?”

Marx continues to have a presence in popular culture and has literary defenders. Award-winning mystery writer Berry Maitland set one of his first novels in London amidst a group of fictional descendants of the German exile. Although in most ways a conventional (yet still well written) British whodunit, Maitland ends with a speech by one of Marx’s mythical great-granddaughters. Arguing that his work was misunderstood and misrepresented, the fictional descendant maintains that Marx’s work would be vindicated in the future. Stating that he understood the impossibility of socialism in backward peasant nations, she continues that “he understood that it was only by passing through the complete cycle of capitalist development that a society would experience its inner contradictions to the full, and thus be capable [of achieving] true socialism.”

In order to analyze Marx, an author faces a task much like that of the nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle while writing about Oliver Cromwell, the leader of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. Carlyle wrote that doing justice to Cromwell involved first exhuming his body out “from under a heap of dead dogs.” From under dictators who have falsely claimed Marx’s heritage and reactionaries eager to pin all the world’s sorrows on him, Marx too has to be revived.

In a perverse way, the volume of abuse and false praise Marx has generated is a tribute to the once-obscure German intellectual who daily dragged himself to the reading room of the British Museum. There, he conducted factual research upon which he would base his theories. If his life and work had been without significant impact, it would be meaningless to recast the all-too-human Marx as an important historical figure. As he himself freely admitted, Marx was a product of his time and place in history. He was fond of saying that people make history, but not in the conditions or time of their own choosing. What makes Marx noteworthy was his ability to look beyond the immediate realities and envision future possibilities.

An unusually striking instance of this ability is his often-cited description of the emergence of a global market. While rampant nationalism blinded many to the ever more global nature of society, Marx was able to see a tendency toward globalization as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, as many of his contemporaries confidently predicted a future of peace and prosperity—an “end of history”—Marx saw that the contradictions of society were leading to war and depression. This was not because Marx was clairvoyant, but because he embraced new ideas as changes in reality dictated, that is something many writers and observers hesitate to do both now and then.

Marx’s Ongoing Influence

Marx remains an important thinker, even as his once-famous contemporaries have faded into obscurity. In 2005, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio’s poll of listeners found Marx to be “history’s greatest philosopher” despite campaigns by *The Economist* and *The Financial Times* to promote Adam Smith and then, in desperation, David Hume. The same year, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* put him on their cover with the title “A Spectre is back.” In a curious and little reported incident in October 2007, Marx’s name came up during a talk to 5,000 New York businessmen by Alan Greenspan. The former head of the US Federal Reserve caused murmurs of disbelief when he noted that the egalitarianism Marx supported could “be a solution to today’s income inequality.” Since the start of the economic crisis during the latter part of 2008, more and more references have been made to Marx and his work, including billionaire George Soros stating, “I’ve been reading Marx and there is an awful lot in what he says.”

Best-selling American author Barbara Ehrenreich, in an op-ed piece in the *Chicago Sun-Times* joked that 2008 was the 160th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the international bourgeoisie had decided to commemorate the event by collapsing world capitalism. On October 4, 2008, the British business weekly *The Economist* contained a color portrait of mainstream conservative French President Sarkozy eagerly reading Marx’s *Das Kapital* and quoted him as declaring, “Laissez-faire [free-market capitalism] is finished.” By April 2009, the *Financial Times* was even claiming that now the French President “likes to be photographed clutching a copy of *Das Kapital*.”

By the end of 2008, Britain’s *Guardian* had reported that “Karl Marx is back,” while Berlin’s Dietz Publishing’s sales of Marx’s writings have soared 300 percent. This was not simply the result of the proletariat looking for answers as the German economy began to deteriorate, since even the federal German finance minister admitted to *Spiegel* that “certain parts of Marx’s theory are really not so bad.”

The Irish Times noted that since the 2008 economic crisis Marx “has suddenly become popular again.” In London, a center of the capitalist system, readers of *The Times* were asked in a poll if Marx “had got it right.” By late October, over half answered in the affirmative. “Karl Marx was never so right as now,” claimed Portugal’s only Nobel laureate Jose Saramago in late 2008. The influence in fiction continued as *Das Kapital: A Novel of Love and Money* *Marxien* was published in French in early 2009. This homage to Marx includes a professor at the New School in New York who is reduced to driving a taxi. This drop in lifestyle does nothing to alter the character’s views, as he explains to a passenger how “the fundamental truth Marx grasped early and chose to grasp as a tragedy. We sell the time of our lives for wages. It’s not just that time is money. It’s that life, which is energy exercised over time, is exchanged for money. Life is money; energy is money; time is money. Money is the universal solvent . . .”

If the March 20, 2009, *New York Times* is correct, Marx's work will venture into what well may be a new medium. The newspaper reported that Chinese Opera director He Nian wrote an adaptation of *Das Kapital* that was performed in Shanghai in 2010. Somewhat unexpected was the report in the April 2009 issue of *Le Monde diplomatique* on sales in Germany of Marx's *Das Kapital* but not that Marx or that *Das Kapital*. Reinhard Marx, a former bishop in Karl Marx's birthplace of Trier and now archbishop of Munich, shares more than merely the famous last name. Choosing to name his book on Roman Catholic social doctrine after Karl Marx's economic opus, Archbishop Marx writes in the preface to "dear Karl Marx." After telling the older Marx that "he was not completely wrong," the archbishop argues that society must be reformed so Marx can "rest in peace." Not that the good archbishop is a socialist. He argues "if we do not meet the challenges of our time, Karl Marx will return from the grave, and that must not happen." In the same year, Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has repeated spoken out in defense of many of Karl Marx's ideas and even Pope Benedict XVI has spoken of Marx's "great analytical skill."

Jean-Marie Hattrey, a French economist, has noted that the business press, from the *Financial Times* and the *Economist* to the *Wall Street Journal*, has all admitted Marx's relevance by the end of 2008. Hattrey observed that "one might draw up an impressive list of publications at the service of capitalistic interests that draw upon Marx's critique of capitalism to try and find their way through the erratic movements of their own system." In 2009, *The Atlantic Times* business section commented: "The writings of Karl Marx long consigned to the dustbin of history, have taken on a new relevance In grasping capitalism's susceptibility to crisis; Marx was right on the money."

While still vilified by many, Marx has been accepted as one of the classic critics of industrial capitalism. Many times Marx, as well as his ideas, has been declared dead. After the people who made these pronouncements were long forgotten, a new generation decides to have another look at Marx. Although this could be a form of nostalgia, it could be because, as historian Eric Hobsbawm argued in 2008, "Marx remains a superb guide to understanding the world and the problems we must confront." Maybe Alain Minc, successful businessman and good friend of the conservative French President, said it best: "If Marx imposes himself as one of the 'unsurpassable' thinkers of our time, the reason is . . . mostly, that he was the first to detect the dynamics intrinsic to capitalism." Of course, it could be that Archbishop Marx is right about the socialist Marx. If capitalism fails to change, Dr. Marx, or more accurately his ideas, will return from the grave.