

## MARXISM?



**RECENTLY** I contemplated embarking on a scholarly work about the Marxist canon, the body of work attributed to Karl Marx, assembled largely by interested parties in Moscow, and a few other places, over the last hundred years or so. Then I reflected on my lack of skills in German and French, and realised that I am utterly unfitted for this task. And, yet, I'm still concerned about the provenance of much that is

attributed to Marx, and the suspicion that many texts have been spatchcocked together for contemporary political purposes – purposes that were current at the time when various editorial decisions were made.

Consequently, I very much welcome the efforts of Dr Ben Lewis and others at Marxism Translated at patreon.com. The focus of their enterprise is to make available in English many of the discussions which took place amongst Marxists in the German labour and socialist movement in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth.

Reflecting on this excellent initiative, I remember calling myself a Marxist long before I'd ever read a word of Marx. I also remember in my youth buying a great tome, *The Fundamentals of Marxism Leninism* (produced and translated by Stalinist scholars in Moscow and London), and not reading that either. I suspect that my tardiness in paying close attention to what Marxism might mean was, and is, quite widespread amongst those keen to call themselves "Marxists".

The notion of "Marxism" has a wonderful vagueness – it's a portmanteau term, a bag into which we can pack all of our dissatisfactions with commercial or capitalist society. Amongst intellectuals Marx's stricture of 1845 on the necessity of action, is more honoured in the breach, as Marxist lecturers have often paid more attention to securing academic sinecures than attempting to overthrow capitalism:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it.

XI<sup>th</sup> thesis from Theses on Feuerbach, 1845, *Ludwig Feuerbach and The End of Classical German Philosophy*, 1888, edited by Frederick Engels.

Among workers, students, and other activists, Marxism has often become a talisman for those committed to battling for the oppressed and exploited

rather than a serious commitment to determining the nature of capitalism in a thorough-going manner. Both traditions, that of speculative academics, and that of fiercely engaged activists, appear to share a similar disregard for establishing a coherent idea of what Marxism might actually mean.

There have, of course, been a legion of serious and erudite writers in the field of Marxism for well over a century, explicating Marx's ideas, and subjecting his texts to thorough examination and criticism. However, much of this work, shares a similar fate, to that of the master, in not being read at all, or not being read with sufficient attention.

These problems have recently come to the fore in the contemporary battles over social justice, Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and many other popular causes, where people happily identify themselves as Marxists as if the writings of Karl Marx in some sense ratify or enhance their view of what's wrong with society. This is now having a 'feedback' effect in the work of Douglas Murray, Jordan Peterson, Konstantin Kisen & Francis Foster, at Triggernometry, and in the prognostications of many other YouTubers fighting manfully against woke and social justice warriors, who seem to know as little of Marxism, as those they accuse of being Marxists.

The splendidly baggy label of 'Cultural Marxism' is now thrown around as a means to hitching the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, most left-wing academics in the humanities, *Old-Uncle-Tom-Cobley-and-All*, together in harness. Apparently, 'Cultural Marxists' are committed to the overthrow of all that is good in Judeo-Christian civilisation. Clinical Psychologist, Jordan Peterson, explains that the dynamic struggle between capital and labour observed by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* has now morphed into the binary struggle between broadly fraudulent notions of 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' deployed by the enthusiasts of identity. For a man as intellectually

demanding as Peterson, this slovenly approach to intellectual history needs some explaining.

This problem appears to have arisen because Marxism is no longer buried under the weight of communism, or ‘actually existing socialism’, that collapsed in most places during the counter-revolution of 1989-91. Before then, the enemy of the right, and of bourgeois liberals more generally, was ‘communism’. Marxism was rarely mentioned. Now that communism, or ‘actually existing socialism’ has retreated to Havana, Pyongyang, Hanoi (and Caracas, at a push), Marxism has become the tag of choice for all concerned. Both the ‘friends of the oppressed’, on the one hand, and the enemies of *wokism* on the other, talk loudly and often of Marxism.

This doesn’t really matter that much, except that it does rather tend to derail the project of all those with a serious interest in thinking about commercial society, and the difficulty inherent in overcoming capitalism, in a manner capable of securing the overwhelming support of the majority of people who live, day-by-day within a system organised entirely around buying and selling everything from food grains to labour power.

Now, the most notable thing about Marx’s work was his close study of commercial society. What, in the middle of the nineteenth century, he called “bourgeois society”, and the “bourgeoisie”, in our day, we call capitalism and capitalists. He started out on his great project in working on the critique of political economy – using an in-depth study of those who were attempting to understand the development of commercial society from the work of Adam Smith in the 1770s to that of Ricardo, and Malthus, in the early 1800s, as a way of attempting to articulate a more thorough-going understanding of capitalism.

We must bear in mind, exactly how difficult it was to trace and understand the nature of the vast expansion of production and productive

powers, that Marx and his immediate forebears, witnessed. The agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century, together with the development of machines driven by steam engines from the 1780s onwards, and of steam locomotives and railways from 1830, upended society and all previous ways of understanding relations between master and man. The development of big industrial cities like Birmingham and Manchester, and the radical transformation of life in their hinterlands, profoundly disrupted all previous ways of describing the social order.

So it was that Karl Marx made the study of bourgeois society, and of the social relations of production that arose with it, his life's work. In many ways his analysis and observations have stood the test of time, proving him to have been remarkably prescient, in other respects the development of capitalism has proved him wrong and upset a number of his assumptions about its future course.

Marx was full of admiration for the way in which the bourgeoisie was developing what he called "the productive forces". He understood the emergence of capitalism as a thoroughly positive development, one which opened up the potential for human emancipation, if only the new industrial working class could use their vast numbers, and concentration in factories and cities, to put an end to their exploitation. He hoped that the workers might, by using their pivotal position in social production, be able to reorganise life for the benefit of society at large, rather than the private profit of the bourgeoisie.

Now, almost a hundred and forty years after his death, we know how catastrophic all attempts to realise Marx's project have been. We can also see exactly how similar capitalism is, and in what ways it is radically different nowadays, from the society and social relations Marx wrote about in volume one of *Das Kapital*, in the 1860s (or in

volumes two and three, assembled and edited by Engels in the 1880s).

It is extremely unlikely that Marx would have endorsed anything like Black Lives Matter; he was not detained by notions of equality or social justice, and it is certain that his views on Jews, and Judaism, would get him expelled from Keir Starmer's Labour Party in the twinkling of an eye. His disregard for what he called 'non-historic peoples', or indeed the lupen proletariat, would not endear him to any of our contemporaries, any more than would his lack of attention to the situation of women.

What is vitally important about Karl Marx is the attempt that he made to understand capitalist society, its relations of production, and the novel manner in which free workers were exploited, by paying them the full value of their labour power, in wages, while appropriating what he called "surplus value" in the profits that accrued to the bourgeoisie, when what had been made by the worker was sold.

Of course, Marx was influenced by a wide range of observations and philosophical concerns, and it would be a fool's errand to attempt to compose a checklist of things that socialists would have to endorse, or reject, in order to earn the right to call themselves Marxists. We certainly do not need an eschatological approach to ends or towards our 'sacred' texts. However, it does continue to matter who we call Marxists, and are able to identify those that do not pass muster as such.

Marxists are those who continue to have an abiding interest in analysing and understanding how commercial society works, and determining the manner in which exploitation and class relations manifest themselves today, and how oppression actually occurs.

Consequently, the woke, the critical race theorists, social justice warriors, extinction rebels,

and many others, who seek to identify what's wrong with capitalism, in 'whiteness', in progress and growth, in inequality, or in the manner that multiple identities are ignored or denigrated, are quite evidently not Marxists, whatever else they may claim to be. These ersatz 'Marxists' already know exactly what's wrong with capitalism, and they passionately believe that shifting the ideological biases of our culture will create the power to transform society – ideological shifts – 'cleaning up' speech and language, and ruthlessly challenging accompanying assumptions, rather than fundamentally altering the nature of the social relations of production, is the priority of all social just warriors.

These are important distinctions and it is vital that socialists do not allow either the anti-woke YouTubers, or the puritanical guardians of identity, to drop the name and practice of Marxism back into the bloody ditch dug deep for it by Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Castro, and Pol Pot.