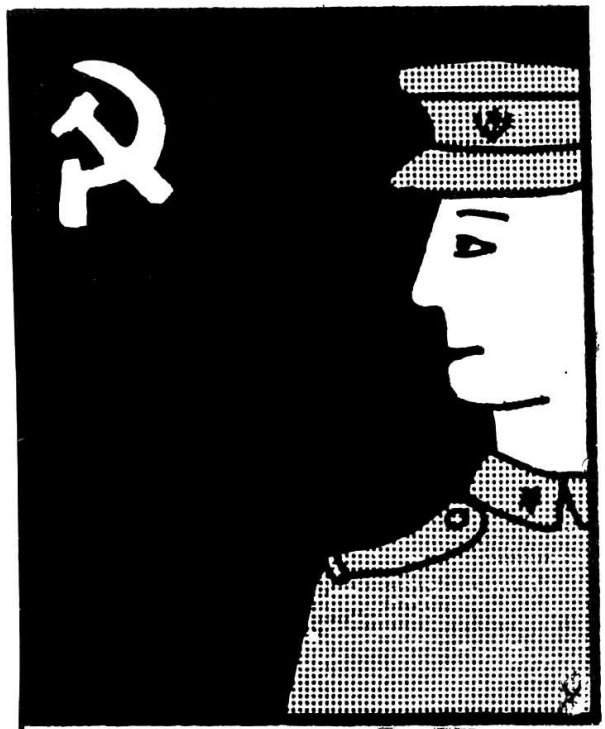


# Reflections on Marx:

## 100 years Later

by Jean-Yves Calvez



Karl Marx has been dead now for over one hundred years, and there are few men who are still remembered as he is after so long a time. Yet Marx's influence is said to be on the wane: a view expressed from time to time not only in countries like France, but also in Italy, where I presently live. It is also said, however, it is not Marx but Marxism that is in decline. Lucien Seve, a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party, resists both points of view. In a recent article published in Le Monde, Seve concludes: "The reason why people are still passionately interested in Marx is because Marxism continues to be a living and powerful element in the social reality of our times as well as in contemporary research".<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, one cannot help but notice how forcefully the argument must be stated, which indicates, perhaps, that the need for self-questioning is felt at times even in the Communist world.

What prevents me from coming to any definite conclusion in this matter is my own personal experience. In my lifetime I have witnessed not one but several partial eclipses of Marx's influence. By the end of the 1950's, following the great surge forward of the early post-war years, Marxism was undeniably in decline in France. Then came Louis Althusser.<sup>2</sup> With the civil disorders and political crisis of 1968, his influence rose again to new heights, only to suffer another decline shortly afterwards. Yet at the very time of its first decline in France (1955-60), I had the opportunity to witness its resurgence both in Latin America and in India. By that time, it had already passed through various stages in Latin America and was to pass through several more. About 1970, due largely to the disciples of Althusser, the conviction grew in that region that Marxism was a science unto itself and quite independent of both ideology and the philosophical presuppositions so often attributed (in this view wrongly) to Marx. This contributed greatly to a renewal of interest in Marxism not only among individual Christians but also among various Christian organizations; but there are signs that this tide, too, is now ebbing. For the above reasons I think it advisable to be wary, then, of making definitive statements about the decline of Marx's influence being an irreversible process.

Marx's influence is entwined with the worldwide political weight of a number of governments for whom the thought of Marx and his successors is State doctrine. The direction this thought has taken in the evolution of China in recent years is somewhat uncertain, if somewhat different from that of the Soviet Union and Cuba, at least for the moment. However, I am inclined to think that while more and more people today recognize the harmful effects of the various expedients and remedies issuing from Marx, he still retains the prestige and merit arising from his impassioned denunciation of the exploitation of those workers reduced to a state of subjugation by the industrial capitalism of mid-19th century Europe. This same strong voice is heard, - and not without reason - where similar conditions exist today. The danger is, however, that people will be encouraged by this to try again the remedies proposed by Marx, and with disastrous consequences.

## *OF POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES*

There can be no doubt that the last hundred years have shown a positive side to the influence of Marx. It is not the only side, but it has often played a role in the combination of forces that have led, since the last stages of the 19th century, to important changes in the conditions of subjugated workers. In Communist countries, Marxism has, however, also re-duplicated many of the evils of capitalist exploitation to which Marx himself bore witness and were the subject of his analysis. It has also hindered the development of free trade unionism and impeded political freedom. On the other hand, it has favoured the development of social services for the majority. In the West, Marxist thought has often stimulated social change precisely because people wanted to avoid the consequences of following Marx's own prescriptions. These prescriptions or remedies have, in fact, resulted in grievous consequences, all of which are recognized and denounced today. I am not only thinking of the Gulag of Solzhenitsyn, but also of Enrico Berlinguer, General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, who has said that a social structure like that of the Soviet Union has "exhausted" its potential, and that he believes no Italian worker would want to reproduce it in Italy. Faced with such a prospect the French Communist Party decided several years ago to renounce the idea of a "dictatorship of the proletariat."

It is often argued that others have added to Marx's thought, and this is what has given rise to totalitarian distortions which sully the historic role of his ideas. This seems to me to be far from the reality.

## *REVOLUTIONARY STATES ACCORDING TO MARX*

To begin with, it is impossible to disregard the obvious signs of Marx's influence on state controlled economies, so characteristic wherever revolutions are carried out in his name. His vision of the future is pictured as "an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common and expending their many forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one unified social labour force".<sup>3</sup> Developing this description further, he becomes even more specific: "The social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of

their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution".<sup>4</sup> When he was younger, moreover, Marx had spoken out strongly against a "communal capitalism" that a "crude communism" would substitute for "private property".<sup>5</sup>

The revolutionary steps to be taken, which were listed by Marx in the Communist Manifesto, however, lead us in a direction other than that of free co-operation. They include "abolition of ownership of land and application of all land-rents to the public purpose...

Centralisation of credit in the hands of the State by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly. Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State... Equal liability of all to labour".<sup>6</sup> In this way so much passed into the hands of the State that little was left for Lenin to add. Of course, neither he nor Marx intended that State control or militarisation of the economy to be the ideal of the future. But once all this apparatus had been set up, it was hard to turn back. Above all, the spirit that motivates the crucial moment of today's revolution continues to dominate all our tomorrows.

### THE PROLETARIAT AND THE PARTY

Would it be true to say that it was Marx who formulated the specific role of the 'party'? I am referring to the kind of party described in the present constitution of the Soviet Union, a force superior to society rather than a political force within society, "the force that controls and guides society, the nucleus of its political system, of organisations of the State and of society" (Article 6



of the Manifesto). Thus the party is more important than the constitution. We know, moreover, that it is possible to imagine a party not yet in power that will be predisposed to play this exceptional role if it were to come to power.

Lenin has to take a large share of the responsibility for developing this concept of Party. This new kind of party is described in What is to be Done (1903) where Lenin helped to widen the gap between the proletariat and the party, the workers and the avant-garde (the avant-garde being composed firstly of professional revolutionaries, and secondly, of the cognoscente, those who manage society because of their superior knowledge and understanding of society). Marx himself wanted a party formed of the proletarian class, whom he imagined to be in the majority. He sees the identity of this class and its party virtually established. He speaks of the dictatorship of the proletariat and clearly not of the dictatorship of the party (of the proletariat). Nevertheless, the tendency to identify Communists with the proletariat has had a profound influence on subsequent developments. According to Marx, the proletariat has a key position that is not only decisive but unique in human history. Suppose, then, a group (a party) one day comes to believe that it has been identified with the proletariat - as an ideal and without reference to its numerical size - how can it not fail to appropriate to itself the unique role that Marx conceived for the proletariat?

This is what has happened to the notion of the avant-garde, and if it is not the direct result of his thought, his ideas at least serve to predispose one to its acceptance. In fact, according to Marx, "Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole..."; the consequence being that "in the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has had to go through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole".

### *THE "SCIENCE"*

Marx continues: "Communists have, over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding



the conditions, the path and the general results of the proletarian movement". The concepts "are in no way based on ideas or principles invented or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer", but express "the actual conditions... of an historical movement going on before our very eyes". Certainly one cannot blame a political party for claiming that it knows better than others how things really are, or for claiming that its views, based on reality, are not just the simple, noble, and personal views of one particular person alone. However, in Marx's case, this point of view hardened into a position that lays claim to possessing 'science' - a science in the sense of ultimate truth (which is hardly how the word 'science' is usually understood) - in a field where progress could only be made (up to the time of Marx) by resort to philosophical concepts which were open to general debate. This position had denied, and still denies, the kind of democratic expression which allows for raising or even asserting - albeit tentatively - points of view different from those already canonized as 'scientific'.

Marx himself probably did not go so far, and he didn't seem to be closed to dialogue. At the end of the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), he explains that his intention is to reveal the "result of conscientious investigation done over a period of many years" which, consequently, deserves attention; yet he adds: "But at the threshold to science, as at the door to hell, the command must be posted: *Qui si convien lasciar orgni sospetto. Ogni viltà convien qui che sia morta.*" ("Here should all mistrust be abandoned, and here perish even craven thought". - Dante.) Surely we should recognize that in matters of science there is no place for prejudice, and that it is necessary to keep an open mind at all times. Equally, other works by Marx show that he came to consider that the social dynamics in which he was interested could be determined with the same precision peculiar to 'the natural sciences'. This analogy has been taken a good deal further in the approach adopted by his successors.

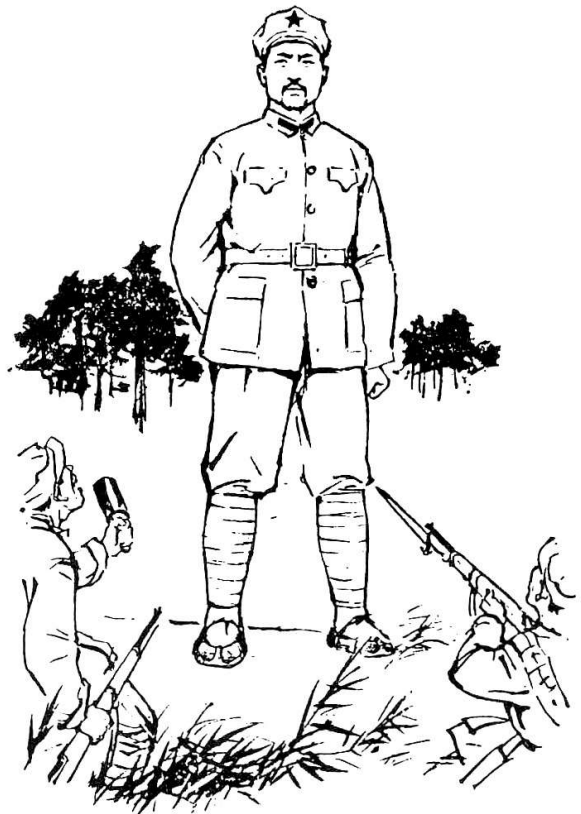
In addition, his successors were bound to be carried away by Marx's firm insistence on leaving things to 'material forces, to 'necessary' considerations, and that all that belongs to the order of 'consciousness' should be presented as dependent. The famous preface to the *Critique of Political*

*Economy* begins: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces". It goes on: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness".<sup>9</sup>

If some have quibbled about this word "determine", and made all sorts of distinctions about it - affirming, for example, that the movement of productive forces only determines "in the last instance", it does not alter the fact that Marx induced a scientific frame of mind into his successors, with obvious results. What is more serious is that even in the realm of politics, Communist parties, especially those in power, have claimed that they impose their views in the name of "knowledge" or of "truth" itself, which they "possess". However, it has been recognized since Plato's time that it is dangerous to lay claim to governing in the name of some truth or other, no matter what the people think of it. To me this is not an 'agnostic' remark; rather, it shows respect for the particular dynamics of the political relationship - and indeed of many social relationships in conditions of freedom.

#### ATHEISM

It is also necessary to talk about atheism. Atheism is quite the order of the day in Communist countries. Even allowing for some religious observance, Christians are denied the freedom guaranteed to non-believers, and there is still discrimination in many occupations. Atheism is taught in state schools,



with rare exceptions. It is party policy as it is State policy. The situation is obviously more complex nowadays when it comes to the various Communist parties that are not in power.

I do not want to give the impression that all this started with Marx. Leaving aside Engels, whose comments on religion have had a certain influence, Lenin is also an important source of Communist thought on this subject. His own attitude came about through a well-known clash with some socialists who were believers or open to belief and were called 'God's Builders', to which his book *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* testifies. However, Marx could not, and cannot, be discounted, in view of his discussion of religious alienation in 1843-44. Although other writings of Marx belonging to this period remained unpublished for a long time, those on religious alienation were published, and have long exerted a profound influence on many people.

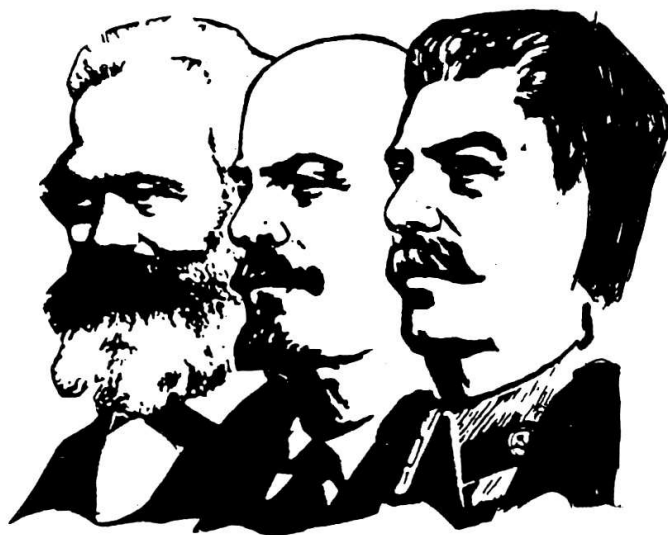
This critique of religious alienation, in fact, triggers every other critique - economic, social and political. "Error, in its profane form, is compromised once its celestial *oratio pro aris et focis* (prayer for country and home) has been refuted. Man, who has found only his own reflection in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a supernatural being, will no longer be disposed to find only the semblance of himself, only a non-human being, here where he seeks and must seek his true reality". And again: "It is the task of history, therefore, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world"<sup>10</sup> From that was to develop the typical Marxist suspicion of all religious reality as being only the reflection of schisms and alienations experienced in this clearly secular life. Religion would be seen as a means of disguising, and so of strengthening, unjust situations and interests: an illusory compensation. These ideas of Marx, abstractions made from 'diamat',<sup>11</sup> have contributed greatly to keeping atheism alive among Marxists.

### ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY

These observations pose another problem concerning Marx's thought. In 1845 or a little later, according to Louis Althusser for example, Marx made a radical break with



philosophy, after which he was to leave us only a scientific heritage. But once this debate had started, it was not difficult to find a lot of philosophy as well in Althusser's reconstruction of Marx's scientific works. I do not want to dwell on this, but I would like to consider for a moment or two a fairly modest example from Marx himself.



Let us take the key formula in *Das Kapital*, the mechanism brought to light in the first few chapters. Usually when goods are exchanged, said Marx, you give value for value. In capitalist production, on the other hand, a particular piece of merchandise is brought into play - the work force. The capitalist buys it at its face value, but when this merchandise is put to work its value increases. Added value. It all follows.<sup>12</sup> But what's wrong with that, you may say, if all philosophy or ideology is discounted? Should we not say how marvellous it is, this productive machinery that appreciates in value? Marx issues a further warning. "Be careful," he says, "a glut will follow (the tendential law of the falling rate of profit)." But if you do not have a lofty idea of man and society, why should this prospect matter - if it is, after all, only machinery that you are talking about?

In fact, it is quite clear that Marx did not stop there. In describing the labour force, he tells us about the aggregate of those "mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form... of a human being", indeed, the "living personality".<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a little further on in *Das Kapital*, he does not hesitate to use a vocabulary that clearly goes beyond pure science, in the sense of natural science: "expropriation", "expropriators", "usurpers", who are themselves eventually expropriated. To say all that

requires something like a philosophical conception of man. Marx makes this clear in his earlier works, where there is too much moral indignation, indeed too much indignation pure and simple, for anyone to be talking about pure science.

I remain convinced, therefore, that Marx neither forgot nor sacrificed anything of the philosophical conception of man expressed in his earliest works. It is also true that, in putting Marx back on his feet by returning him to his philosophical conceptions (philosophical in fact if not in name, despite his 1845 announcement of the certain death of philosophy — actually German idealist philosophy), I am returning him to a confused body of thought. There are those, Christians among them, who would prefer to keep Marxist science or social analysis quite separate from it?

Marx in his philosophy appears to be a humanist, and in some ways this is true. But it is an atheist humanism, traces of which can be found without doubt in *Das Kapital*, at least in the asides on religion, which is not strictly his subject. It is a precarious and unreliable humanism as well, because it is written in the context of naturalist, materialist and determinist views, notwithstanding the dialectical corrective; a humanism of such a kind that Marx, among others, could believe that a final class struggle would put an end to all the class struggles which have accompanied or, as he puts it, "been woven into history until now". This is a mechanistic view of things, history writing itself as a simple play of forces. Is it really humanist? In any case, Marx seems to deny that freedom can know or extend itself in a new social creation.

#### VOLUNTARISM AND ECONOMISM

A further comment on the class struggle seems appropriate when Marx is re-read. The class struggle has been much vaunted over the past few decades, and we have been invited, indeed incited, to join it, though more by people of leftist *tendencies* than by the Communist Parties. This means that for many of our contemporaries there is a sufficiently voluntarist context for the idea of the class struggle. Marx does not deny this, and writes at length about revolution. For him the proletariat, after being united into a ruling class, "sweep away by force the old conditions

of production" (*Communist Manifesto*). However, Marx is unquestionably more lyrical on the subject of discontinuing and ending the antagonism between the classes than on their conflict. He is also, especially in *Das Kapital*, quite 'economic' in his view of the outcome of the revolution: "Expropriation is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself... Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation"<sup>14</sup>

Let us recognise here that, where Marx is concerned, the quarrel between the *economic* interpretation with its quietist tendencies and the political interpretation with its voluntarist tendencies has never been settled. There is support for both in his work. What matters is that he does not really show the connection between developments caused by economic events and human intervention. He offers no real criterion for the moment of action.

#### UTOPIA: 100 YEARS LATER

Moving on to more general impressions of Karl Marx, we can say that his attraction has endured because of his seeming to impart a scientific guarantee to what is seen as a vast, liberal utopia, the latter being the more alluring of the two. Now, for the present at least, utopia seems to be even further away. Some people still preach revolution according to Marx, and they want to see the measures for State control which he conceived put into action - and they hope for something good to come out of it. On the other hand, who believes that, "in the course of development", class distinction having disappeared, "public power will lose its political character", will no longer be able to oppress, and the proletariat will have "swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonism and of class generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class"?<sup>15</sup>

At the end of his life at least, while writing the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), Marx realised that there had to be a "political period of transition" between the revolution that would overthrow the capitalist society and the advent of the Communist society. On the other hand, he never seems to have envisaged a historical cataclysm.

Today for many people, including Communists, an actual Communist society, the decline of political power and of the State, the total reconciliation with nature, and, indeed, the transformation of the economic society into an "association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" are no longer concrete terms, but, at best, vague regulating ideals. But we have moved a long way away from the Marx who always clung to Hegel: this is more obvious than ever today and will give rise to more unease in the future.

### READING MARX TODAY

Marx's work is still, first and foremost, an important economic analysis, even if the limits of some of his central concepts can be perceived; for example, his attempts to determine objectively the value of labour-power. By this is meant the amount of time spent on "social labour" in relation to the reproduction of that labour-power. It soon becomes obvious in fact that, in speaking of social labour, we have to leave out of account the concrete characteristics of actual labour. So we find ourselves in a vicious circle. What is the standard for measuring concrete labour? We have to return to the market place where concrete works are actually compared, though the process is distorted by diverse market conditions.

And yet, despite such reservations, it is still interesting to follow Marx's progress: his description of how added value exceeds the value of the labour force and of reproducible products consumed in the work process, his explanation of the circulation and movement of added value and profit, his conclusions about the future. New factors, of course, have modified the capitalistic system since his time. Some of the changes are technical, but there have been two very significant changes (in Western economies, for example): the growth in the power of the trade unions, and the widespread intervention of public authority. Bearing all this in mind while re-reading *Das Kapital*, we can no longer accept Marx's account of the future without reserve; all the same, he perceived with great acuteness the relationships between the various aspects of economic life in the capitalist system.

Many features of his philosophy are still worthy of our attention. True, he imprisons man in a very confined system with no transcendent dimension and no relationship to God. But how sensitive he is to the alienation that constantly threatens to divide man from his work. Equally, how sensitive he is to the correlation between the quality of human relationships and the quality of the relationship of man with nature; likewise, the relation between the quality of family relationships and the quality of interpersonal relationships in other sectors of social life. One thinks in particular of what he wrote about labour and "alienated labour". Not all that he says in this area is original, but his vision still makes an important contribution to any comparison between man at work and the animal acting only on instinct.



In short, it is hard to see how anyone can read Marx again without criticising him extensively, whether as an economist or as a philosopher, a century after his death. A century of profound influence and success, but one that is also marked by the ill-effects of some of his proposals. Still one has to read and re-read him. He remains so alive in the economic, political, and cultural realities of our day.

I know it is not always possible to speak of Marx with the calm tranquillity of a dispassionate observer. I have, rather, brought out here aspects of his work in order for us to understand why, for many, the present reality of Marx stands for crushing oppression. And I readily conclude on this note, for among them I have many colleagues for whom Marxism means discrimination and oppression, and I, myself, feel near to them at this time.



## NOTES

1. *Le Monde*, 25 November 1982.
2. He caused a revival of interest in Marx with a new interpretation, *Pour Marx*, published in 1965. *Lire le Capital*, a collected work under his direction, appeared in the same year.
3. *Capital* (trans. Ben Fowkes), vol. I, p.171. Harmondsworth: Penguin/London: New Left Review, 1976. (Pelican Marx Library).
4. *ibid.*, p.172.
5. *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p.89. Moscow: Progress/London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977.
6. 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' in *Selected Works*, vol. I, pp.126-27. Moscow: Progress, 1969.
7. *ibid.*, pp.119-20.
8. *ibid.*, p.120.
9. *ibid.*, pp.503, 509.
10. *A Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (ed. Joseph O'Malley), pp.131, 132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
11. 'Diamat' is an abbreviation used in the Soviet Union to mean 'dialectical Materialism', i.e. official, popularised Marxism.
12. *Capital*, vol. I, p.270.
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*, p.929.
15. 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' in *Selected Works*, vol. I, p.127.