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Economics|Book Review

Jonathan Wolff on the inexhaustible desire to keep talking about Marx

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Illustration from The Communist Manifesto by Martin Rowson

November 2, 2018

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In this review

A WORLD TO WIN

The life and work of Karl Marx Translated by Jeffrey N. Skinner 768pp. Verso. £35 (US $50).

Sven-Erik Liedman

MARX AND MARXISM

544pp. Pelican. Paperback, £8.99. US: Nation Books. $27. 978 1 56858 897 1

Gregory Claeys

WHY MARX WAS RIGHT

224pp. Yale University Press. Paperback, £10.99 (US $16).

Terry Eagleton

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

Adapted by Martin Rowson 80pp. SelfMadeHero. Paperback, £12.99 (US $19.99).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

As Allen W. Wood observed in 1981, while it is easy to write an above-average book on Marx, it is hard to write a good one. The global outpouring of new volumes, editions and translations this year, the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, tests this claim to destruction. Too many books? Not for me. There can hardly be a subject so rich. Marx's writings, when combined with Engels's, will fill 114 hefty volumes. Only a tiny fraction was published in Marx's lifetime, and of that, far too much was devoted to the ponderous demolition of now forgotten rivals. Some of the most interesting works, such as the *1844 Manuscripts*, the *German Ideology*, and the *Grundrisse*, were only published decades after his death, sometimes in volumes coloured by ideological editorial decisions. Marx can be interpreted, reinterpreted, analysed, reduced, contextualized, medicalized, flattered, or diminished. He can be lauded for his vision, energy and influence, and condemned for exactly the same things. His vanity and catastrophic money management, but also his medical complaints (boils, liver) and family life of tortured devotion, constitute a tragicomic background to dry economic theory and sometimes petty political machinations. There are many Marxes, even more Marxisms, and therefore there is an unending potential for writing something new and original. But for thinking about Marx there is no time like the present.

If, despite gloomy forecasts, interest in Marx survived the fall of the Berlin Wall, the financial crisis of 2008 brought him back centre stage. Even more recently those of us sardonically shaking our heads at the naive Marxist analysis of capitalism's teenage critics gulped at the nakedness of Donald Trump's apparent determination to live up to the analysis of *The Communist Manifesto*: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie". Marx's theories of ideology, of alienation, of economic crisis and of class have rarely seemed so apt. Now you can say you are opposed to capitalism in the United States even outside your own four walls.

And so, the cry goes out: will no one rid us of this turbulent economic system? Will it be Marx? In his early writings he foresaw a future society in which alienation and class struggle would be transcended. For a brief moment, it looked as if the European uprisings of 1848 would be the path. But with their failure Marx realized that revolution must be on a longer fuse, and turned to the economic analysis of capitalism. The main fruit of this work was, of course, *Capital* Volume 1, published in German in 1867, and reprinted shortly after in several revised editions and translations. It was the only one of his major economic works published before he died. A vast mass of manuscripts, including the drafts of *Capital* Volumes 2 and 3, were left virtually untouched for the last fifteen years of his life. It is something of a mystery why this is so.

What, though, did Marx hope to accomplish with his economic writings? If I were his editor now, writing the catalogue copy, my first draft might be: "In this masterly volume of immense learning and erudition, Marx shows that capitalism has developed technology at a pace unprecedented in human history. In just a few short decades society has moved from the sluggish era of the horse and cart to the explosive energy of railways and steamships. But this achievement is also its doom. Capitalism's tragic fate is that it cannot cope with the growth it has stimulated, and will be riven by crisis after crisis until eventually it collapses. At the same time, it has created a class, the proletariat, who will lead a revolution that ushers in a new, classless, society, in which all human beings can flourish".

This, probably, was Marx's hope. Unfortunately, nowhere in his writings, published or unpublished, did he devise a clear account of capitalism's economic demise and its replacement with communism. What does he achieve? Perhaps that capitalism has a dirty secret. It is fundamentally unjust, surviving only through the exploitation of the worker. But Marx always distanced himself from moral critique. Could it be that he was, as he says, simply trying to "lay bare" the laws of capitalism? The Cambridge economist Joan Robinson remarked that Marx's dynamic, historical perspective is full of "penetrating insight". Yet that alone hardly seems to justify the cult of Marxism or his influence in the twentieth century. What, then, is the secret of Marx's success?

The story, if not the secret, is insightfully laid out in Sven-Erik Liedman's heavyweight *A World To Win*, which begins with a discussion of whether yet another vast book on Marx is needed in the light of Gareth Stedman Jones's recent, monumental *Karl Marx: Greatness and illusion*. Liedman appears shocked at Stedman Jones's tendency to emphasize illusion over greatness, and aims to redress the balance. He is a veteran Marx scholar. Not many can say, as he does, "I have carefully gone through everything Marx left behind", and his knowledge of the secondary literature is equally impressive.

This is a landmark publication and will, deservedly, become a standard reference point, even if there is an occasional awkwardness in Jeffrey N. Skinner's translation. Liedman brings out some underappreciated aspects of Marx's life. For example, contrary to the common assumption that Marx's work for a left-wing American newspaper, *the New York Daily Tribune*, was a rather minor aspect of his life, Liedman suggests that Marx

relied on it as a crucial source of income, and suffered severely when demand for his writing fell. I also appreciated the sensitive discussion of little Freddy, the illegitimate son of the family's maid and companion Helene Demuth. Engels accepted responsibility but Marx seems almost certain to have been his father. It is also fascinating to see the chronicle of Marx's obsessions in his later years with modern developments in mathematics, chemistry, biology and social anthropology. While neglecting his economic work, Marx also turned to the exhilaration of the Paris Commune of 1871, and controversies with other left-wing thinkers, until illness ground him down. Marx found France a fertile source for reflection and it was French politics that made him famous too; according to rumours he took an organizing role in the Paris Commune, a claim he denied in a letter to *The Times*.

Liedman does not shy away from difficult issues, such as Marx's apparent anti-Semitism, and, less often noted, his sexism. Nevertheless, in his account Marx seems much more flexible and subtle in his thinking than he does in the orthodox Marxist tradition, as it descended from Engels via Plekhanov. He is keen to correct what he calls widely held misinterpretations (although what you think is widely held depends on the company you keep). Perhaps it is inevitable in a work of this scope, but Liedman's tendency to dismiss decades of work by leading scholars with a cursory flick of the keyboard can send a shock through the system. Can it really be true, for example, that Allen Wood "has no grip on Marx's theory of alienation from the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology* onwards"? He is perhaps at his strongest taking us through the production and revision of Marx's texts, going into rare detail regarding developing and rejected drafts, different editions, appendices, forewords, afterwords and correspondence about texts, their production and their frequently disappointing reception, even despite multiple enthusiastic reviews by Engels. Yet we remain with our mystery. Why were the remaining volumes of *Capital* left in abeyance?

Gregory Claeys's *Marx and Marxism* is also a highly impressive work, published in the appealing relaunch of Penguin's Pelican imprint. The book is divided into two parts. The first is a clear, straightforward and incisive account of Marx's life and work, but even those who know these subjects well will find new nuggets. I learnt, for example, that Marx took forty-five volumes on his honeymoon, and that although only eleven people attended his funeral, 6,000 marched a year later. And, to my shame, I have to confess that I had not previously noticed that the demands of the *Communist Manifesto*, oddly, do not include nationalizing industry. Claeys is prepared to enter into, and express judgements on, scholarly debates, yet never at a level an undergraduate couldn't follow. This is so despite the compression of some of the discussion, most evident in the abrupt chapter endings, suggesting severe word count discipline.

The second part of the book merges history, politics and theory, understandably with particular attention to the Russian Revolution, reminding us that although Stalin murdered his fellow citizens on a truly extraordinary scale, the precedent was already well set under Lenin. The discussion encompasses all significant twentieth-century Marxist developments and regimes, looking at how theory was modified, adapted, or

ignored in China, Cuba, Africa and East Asia, as well as the Soviet satellites, and in left-wing parties in democratic states. The book concludes with an elegant account of the seven stages of the history of Marxism, from infancy to decrepitude. Its range of learning and clarity of exposition make this study an attractive choice for those seeking a reliable, wide-ranging introduction to Marx and Marxism.

Terry Eagleton's *Why Marx Was Right* was first published in 2011 and is reprinted with a new preface. Its ten chapters each present a rather stylized, overblown, but recognizable criticism of Marx – Marxism is irrelevant; has led to gross misery; ignores human freedom; is utopian; and so on – with Eagleton's responses. The effect is like lobbing a deliberately provocative question at your world-weary, all-knowing, but rather witty uncle and hunkering down for the bravura, sometimes slightly evasive, response. The chapters have only a light dusting of textual references. Much of it is illuminating, but it is no primer, for a level of awareness of Marx is needed even to understand why the questions might arise. And the provocative style leads one to want to check various claims. Is it really true, as Eagleton asserts, that the word "proletariat" originally referred to "lower class women in ancient society"? (Not according to other sources.) Perhaps it matters little, other than such claims are likely to be reproduced in the next generation of student essays.

The cartoonist Martin Rowson's illustrated edition of *The Communist Manifesto* is, deliberately, the joker in the pack. Its depiction of the harshness of capitalism, using forbidding washed-out red-on-grey tones, was apparently accomplished with the assistance of the mouth atomizer, a labour-saving device that surely would have piqued Marx's interest. Rowson is not the first to attempt to illustrate Marx; it is harder than it sounds. After a few satanic mills, and grotesque moneybag capitalists, what do you do next? Rowson renders the four sections of the *Manifesto* in different styles. After a useful introduction, quotes from Section 1 of the *Manifesto* are supported with full-page images with an industrio- satanic aesthetic, while the "call-response" structure of Section 2 has Marx aptly displayed as a heckled club-speaker. Section 3, in which Marx and Engels tediously set out their differences from other left-wing views, is understandably rendered mute, depicted as a type of socialist statue park. A conventional cartoon format is used for the short Section 4, followed by a dystopian aftermath which makes apparent the need for profound social reform. The illustrations are almost unremittingly bleak, with the predictable, and to my mind slightly disappointing, exception of communism itself: depicted as a bucolic pastoral scene of dozens of mini naked figures having a jolly time fishing, getting down with the cows, and criticizing (without, presumably, becoming critical critics), while a vast industrial army marches out of a burning factory. Overall, though, Rowson has produced a thoughtful and well-executed volume, and the skill and wit of the images will be appreciated by those who turn the pages slowly.

Despite the considerable merit of these books, none of them solves the puzzle of Marx's career. Why didn't he push his analysis of capitalism to the stage where he could identify the mechanism by which it would break down? We can only speculate. One

possible explanation is that in the drafts that became *Capital* Volume 3 Marx has to face up to an issue that threatens the foundations of his economic analysis: the "transformation problem". Briefly, if all profit comes from the exploitation of labour then highly labour-intensive industries should be more profitable than those that use little labour. But they are not. Marx allows "values" to deviate from "prices" to address this problem, but most commentators think his maths was awry, and in any case once prices no longer directly reflect labour input, much of the intuitive appeal of Marx's economics drains away. Doing better remains a serious technical question in Marxist economics; it may be that Marx knew his own solution was half-baked, but couldn't see how to do better. In any case he seemed to lose confidence and heart in something. Yet his published writings show no signs of any such doubt, and it is this self-confidence, together with the depth of his analysis, that even today make him such an intoxicating read.