

# Introduction – Bicentennial Marx

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Writing in the early 1990s, Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) opened one of their books by declaring,

Who now reads Marx? After the decade of leveraged buyouts, global concern for the ozone layer and above all the collapse of communism in ‘eastern Europe’, is there any writer now more dated, more of a ‘dinosaur’, than Marx? The 1980s have surely sealed Marx’s coffin for good and confined him and his monstrous works to the dustbin of history. (p. 1)

Reading these words in 2018, perhaps, it is now more shocking to be reminded that, as the twentieth century drew to a close and sociologists grew more preoccupied with documenting the heightening ‘reflexivity’ of modernity, Marx could have been so readily dismissed as outdated and irrelevant. Following the 2008 financial crisis and a decade that has witnessed the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, on many fronts it appears Marx has made a great comeback. His analysis of the internal contradictions of capitalism and its inherent tendencies towards crisis are now, once again, being widely studied as de rigueur social science (Harvey, 2014; Piketty, 2014; Varoufakis, 2013). His work continues to generate debate over the possible futures that lie before us, and especially in relation to the forms of economy and society that might take shape under the impact of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ (Stiegler, 2016). Moreover, with more interest being devoted to Marx’s concern with how human societies exist in a ‘metabolic interaction with nature’, and with the dawning ecological consciousness documented in his late notebooks (now made available through the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* [MEGA] project), Marx is being hailed as a pioneering ‘ecosocialist’ who may yet have much to teach us about how to live sustainably in an age of ever-accelerating climate change (Saito, 2017).

At the same time, however, many difficult questions remain concerning how we should read Marx. How can a theory forged under the experience of nineteenth-century British capitalism adequately inform the experience of ‘multiple’ and ever more

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intensively 'globalized' modernities in our times? More importantly perhaps, how should we now relate to the very troubled and often extremely violent history of the attempts to apply his thought to political action? Is it possible to reckon with Marx the author of the *Gundrisse* and *Das Kapital* without also reckoning with the history of Marxism and the mass starvations and genocidal persecutions of Soviet and Chinese communisms? How can we still take Marx seriously in light of the fact that his thought has so little to offer by way of an adequate analysis of the institutional development of the modern state and of the struggle for the realization of democratic forms of government? Indeed, how can a thinker that did not live to see the spread of women's suffrage and the twentieth-century advance of feminism, modern civil rights movements, contemporary environmentalism and the plethora of contemporary identity politics still have anything to teach us about the potential for collective thought and action to deliver substantive social change?

The articles in this special issue have been collected to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx and follow to some extent from a symposium on this held at the University of Kent in June 2018. Anniversaries are calendrical events of course and do not necessarily have a connection to unfolding historical processes or our efforts at theorizing them. However, for many people, and in most cultures organized around the passing of time, significant anniversaries are points of reflection, evaluation and thinking about the future. At the centenary of Marx's birth, the world was in violent turmoil and crisis as the First World War came to an end, succeeded by revolutions, counter-revolutions and declarations of independence across much of Europe and around the world. The Russian Revolution was followed by civil war that would end in the consolidation of Bolshevik rule and the formation of Soviet Russia. The violence of the latter, Max Weber is alleged to have said to György Lukács, would set back the cause of socialism by 100 years. Whether we should derive any comfort from this century having passed is not entirely clear and the contributors to this collection are, with good reasons, by and large hesitant about predicting the future of capitalism, though most agree that it is likely to be transformed in various ways over the coming decades. And 50 years later, the 150th anniversary coincided with the global events of 1968, and *L'homme et la société* published a special issue shortly before the Paris *événements* which featured writers such as Adam Schaff (in Poland) on Humanist Marxism, Lucien Goldman on the *German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Henri Lefebvre on the structure of *Capital*, Maxime Rodinson on Marxism and the nation, Isaac Deutscher on 'socialist man' and discussions of positivism, Freudianism and more. If we compare this with the present special issue, and insofar as either volume is representative of wider scholarship on Marx, we are more concerned here with political economy, where understanding the trajectory of capitalism, and implicitly at least, therefore the possibility of a socialist future, is seen as important to working out Marx's intellectual legacy and relevance in the twenty-first century.

It is an irony of the history of Marxism that while, in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels predicted that, as a prelude to socialism, capitalism would bring the whole world within a common system of production and exchange, it was only with the collapse Soviet-type state socialism that the world entered a common global capitalist system. This was the point at which ideas of a 'borderless world' of free-flowing capital, commodities, images and cultures began to take hold. One consequence of this

post-communist condition after 1989 was a critical re-evaluation of the socialist project. Western Marxism was much more pluralistic and open to many theoretical and philosophical influences and engagements than Soviet Marxism. Yet the latter remains relevant to understanding the legacy and meaning of Marx since, for much of the twentieth century, around half the world's population lived under 'communist' regimes. Not only were these regimes systemically dysfunctional but were probably among the most homicidal states in human history. Karl Kautsky who accused the Bolsheviks of betraying 'Marx's civilized doctrine' said 'State slavery does not become Socialism merely because the slave drivers call themselves Communists' (Kautsky, 1946: 88). Not dissimilarly, David McLellan in our interview in this issue says that Marx's 'basic position on violence and revolution was that if you needed to resort to systematic violence in a revolution, it meant your revolution had come too early, it was premature'.

For much of the twentieth-century, Social Democracy and Communism represented two very different models of social and political organization. Yet the collapse of Soviet socialism, it was argued at the time, was not only a crisis for the Soviet model of 'socialism' but, according to Anthony Giddens (1999), 'a crisis for Western socialism too' because fundamental ideas about social welfare, state economic management, progressive taxation, public provision of services and the social democratic model of socialism also came to be seen as passé in the face of neoliberal globalization. This consensus was not to last, however, and Stephen Holmes (2001) wrote about the 'long post-communist decade' between the Fall of the (Berlin) Wall and the Fall of the Twin Towers which ended the 'heyday of happy globalization' and optimism that capitalism would create 'frictionless competition', bring prosperity to the poor, peaceful dialogue and progress towards democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, Thomas Oatley suggests that a contributory cause of the 2008 crash itself might have been the level of US borrowing to fund the Iraq War, which was a response to 9/11. As with the Vietnam War, he suggests, the budget deficit had consequences for the US macroeconomic and financial performance. This further fuelled the 'capital flow bonanza' and generated the asset bubble which prompted the great global crisis (Oatley, 2013). In any event, by the later 2000s with and especially after the global financial crash, globalization had taken on more sinister and threatening connotations, and as contributors to this special issue indicate, this has prompted searching questions about the relevance of the Marxist theory (or theories) of crisis and the future of the capitalist system.

Despite the 'return to Marx' noted here, the development of Marxist thought in the twentieth century was often critically engaged with the extent to which the world had changed in the decades after Marx's death. World wars, totalitarian dictatorships and genocides generated the shock that machines and complex organizations, the achievements of progressive technological transformation celebrated in the *Communist Manifesto*, were instruments of mass death and destruction. Adorno (1973) famously stated that 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (p. 320). While Soviet Marxism-Leninism maintained a naïve technological progressivism, Western Marxism, and especially of course Critical Theory, suggested that the very project of the domination of nature was the harbinger of destructiveness, in a way resonating with later critical ecology, noted above. Not only though did 'enlightenment' become 'mass deception',

but this in turn created a new organization of the circulation of the symbolic. The expansion of mass consumption and the deep penetration of commodity relations into cultural and psychical life transformed traditional Marxist understandings of consciousness and politics, and therefore the possibilities of liberation. For Adorno, the increasingly desperate task was to preserve some locus for critical thinking in abstract music and philosophy amid the onslaught of commodified culture, although he was later reprimanded by Habermas for giving up on the critical potential of democratic modernity. For both though, the classical agent of transformation and addressee of socialist theory, the revolutionary proletariat, had become fragmented and eclipsed in the wake of social complexity and commodification. More recently, Bernard Stiegler has developed some of these themes (drawing on much French social theory) and argued that the current social and political crisis calls for a new critique of political economy. The proletariat must, he argues, be reconceptualized as the economic agent whose knowledge and memory are 'confiscated by machines' and which are harnessing of the labour power of workers along with the attention and libidinal energy of consumers. This 'fundamentally and practically weakens the Marxist theory of class struggle' (Stiegler, 2010: 40), but the consumerist model undermines its own basis, tending towards crisis because it exhausts the libidinal energy which keeps it running. Ultimately, though this suggests that the system must change because it is failing, a claim which restates perhaps, rather than resolves, the difficulty Western Marxism has with identifying new agents of emancipation.

In the opening article to this special issue, Gerard Delanty contends that while Marx's theory still holds relevance for analysing contemporary processes of capitalist accumulation, it does not provide us with an adequate framework for analysing significant variations in contemporary conditions of capitalism, and, most importantly, how these are shaped in response to, and in reaction against, contrasting states of democracy around the globe. In drawing this matter to a focus, Delanty takes up a post-war tradition of analysis that is now often associated with debates emanating from the works of Polanyi, Castoriadis and Habermas. Here we are provided with a short survey of recent accounts of possible scenarios for the interrelationship between capitalism and democracy in the twenty-first century in a bid to mark out the terrain for 'thinking about how the future of capitalism might be addressed'. In this context, Delanty notes that, while contemporary social scientists are all inclined to portray capitalism as inherently unstable and self-destructive, opinion varies when it comes to assessing the overall condition and consequences of its current crises. As far as the end of capitalism is concerned, along with many others, Delanty argues that we are dealing with a story that essentially concerns the degree to which democracy may yet operate to check its destructiveness; in notable contrast to the unremittingly pessimistic assessments of Wolfgang Streeck, he holds that this remains a credible possibility, and one that he still favours as most likely.

Jack Barbalet here argues for the contemporary resonance of Marx's account of capitalist development at the periphery of the global capitalist system by considering primitive accumulation in two distinct phases of China's history – comparing limitations in imperial China with its success in post-1980s China. He argues that the economy of China is a pertinent case against which to measure Marx's account of primitive accumulation because it offers two contrasting historical examples of capitalist development,

one in which capitalism failed to emerge beyond a rudimentary form and the other in which capitalism is effectively world-dominant. In the process, he argues that the structure of *Capital* volume 1 is problematic. In particular, the section ‘So-called Primitive Accumulation’ discusses the origins of capitalism but appears at the end of the volume rather than the beginning. Even more anomalous, the forecast of the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class is in the penultimate chapter. The final chapter, on ‘The Modern Theory of Colonization’, is regarded by commentators as enigmatic, if they refer to it at all. Barbalet, on the other hand, aims to show that Marx considered the structure of *Capital* over a number of years and that his discussion of Wakefield’s theory of colonization is part of an account of the continuing centrifugal re-generation of capitalist relations beyond the sites of mature capitalism. He addresses the failure of commentators from Mehring to Harvey to appreciate the logic of *Capital*’s chapter structure.

In the article by Sasha and Graham Scambler, attention is directed more to how Marx might inspire a critically engaged ‘action sociology’. They share in the view that the economic and political turmoil that has followed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis has inspired a new appreciation for the relevance of Marx’s analysis of the terrifying instability of social systems held in thrall to the logic of capitalist market forces and processes of capital accumulation. Their main concern, however, is how these components of Marx’s thought might yet be applied to some form of emancipatory action. Here they argue that in order to render Marx’s thought more intellectually palatable and to make it better geared for praxis, it should be blended with the dialectical critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. In the process, they also develop a programme for an ‘action sociology’ engaged with analysis and praxis towards a better society.

Carl Hughes and Alan Southern pick up the theme of Marx’s work on machines, which has been highlighted by debates about the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’. They argue that in Marx’s initial formulation, the machine, while it consumes other forms of raw material just as the labourer consumes food, does not appear as the means of labour in the same way as that of the individual worker. They consider how this connects with contemporary debates around the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its re-shaping of the world of work. They argue that this needs to be placed in the broader context of the crisis of capitalism, the tendency towards objectified labour and the view that automation, the ‘Uberization’ of the economy, is likely to sharpen the contradictions between capital and labour. Whether we are entering a time of ‘post-capitalism’, or a post-work period, warnings of job loss associated with the convergence of robotization, big data digitization, bio-tech and Artificial Intelligence indicate that the tension and complexity of decreased labour inputs and a value system defined by labour could become more acute. They draw on Marx to stimulate ideas for investigating and analysing what the Fourth Industrial Revolution means for labour and how the neutrality of the technologies remains to be socially shaped. Tentatively, they suggest that better understanding of these processes will aid social researchers, political actors and trade unions to provide a voice for organized labour and political change.

The potential for Marx’s thought to operate as the stimulus for critical thinking about prospects for social and political change is also a major theme in Gregor McLennan’s survey of the current vogue for ‘postsecular’ thinking in contemporary cultural studies. Here McLennan is particularly interested to explore the foundational premises of critique, and especially where this is applied to religion. He argues that debates over the

condition and value of postsecularism have, via the work of Wendy Brown, created space for a renewed appreciation of the subtlety of Marx's critique of religion, and especially his recognition of the potential of religious culture to inspire protests against people's alienated social condition. Nevertheless, he suggests, we should not allow this to divert us from realizing the value of Marx's analytical, socio-naturalistic approach to understanding religion. In this light, McLennan urges us to resist the moralistic and largely approving tone of many discussions of religion's 'revival', and rather, take this as an encouragement to renew our commitment to the resources of *science* as the means to develop social understanding and the pursuit of progressive politics. Indeed, here he argues that an avowedly secular and scientific critique of religion remains among Marx's and Engels's most important contributions to critical sociology.

Many of the issues addressed by contributors here arise in our interview with David McLellan. In his review of Thomas Kuczynski's new translation of *Das Kapital (the Definitive Version)*, William Outhwaite notes that Marx's *Capital* is a classic example of a book project getting out of control. Originally planned to be in six volumes, only the first appeared in Marx's lifetime, and he was still tinkering with revisions for new editions and translations at the time of his death. McLellan likewise emphasizes that Marx constantly sought evidence for his theses, undertaking multiple revisions, with the result that his work 'is unfinished. Nothing is finished'. This should make us cautious about attributing to Marx firm or dogmatic ideas about the nature and trajectory of capitalism and especially the timescale for any socialist transformation. Indeed, his motto was '*de omnibus dubitandum*' we should doubt about everything. Furthermore, the 'sketch of Western development' that Marx and Engels (rather hurriedly) provided in the *Manifesto* was subsequently qualified to allow in principle for different developmental paths particularly in non-Western societies. McLellan talks broadly about the development of his interest in Marxism, along with his religious conviction, offering a contrasting view on Marx and religion to that of McLennan here. Referring back to the once bitter disputes between Althusserians and others on the 'epistemological break', McLellan draws on his famous work on the *Grundrisse* to reaffirm the continuity of themes across Marx's work. The *Grundrisse* is currently sited, as we have seen, as a source for theorizing 'immaterial labour' and cognitive capitalism' although McLellan expresses some doubts as to whether there is much basis for optimism that this provides a foundation for initiating a communist society. In the end, though, McLellan insists on the relevance of Marx's analysis for understanding the current capitalist conjuncture, even if not offering a very practical guide to action.

One conclusion from these diverse contributions is that the 1980s did not 'seal Marx's coffin', but on the contrary his spectre is still haunting the deliberations of social theory and global powers. This is not, however, the only spectre stalking us today. In one of Marx's most poignant passages, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, he comments, rather pessimistically, how the 'tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' and people 'anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past' adorning 'borrowed clothes'. Such borrowing, often reclaiming the 'glories of empire' (whether in 1851 or in the delusions of the present day), can also be the harbinger of violence and destruction. We are entering dark times, as Hannah Arendt depicted the 1940s, as social divisions, global and national inequalities intensify, fascism, populism

and ethnonationalism are reasserting themselves. The need for a critical, theoretical, historical and practical understanding of the contemporary crises remains as urgent as ever.

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