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Interview with David McLellan July 2018

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Larry Ray and Iain Wilkinson

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Introduction

David McLellan, interviewed here, is a Fellow of Goldsmiths College, University of London and Emeritus Professor of Political Theory, University of Kent. Since the 1970s he has been one of the leading biographers, translators and commentators on Marx in the English-speaking world. He is the author of several books on Marx and Marxism, including *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*; *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*; *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*; *Marx before Marxism*; and *Marxism and Religion*. He has also published a biography of Simone Weil, books on the political implications of Christianity, and a lengthy article on contract law and marriage. He lectures widely around the world on these topics, frequently in China, and in 2018 addressed a conference in Nairobi on religion and world peace. In this interview, or conversation, with Larry Ray and Iain Wilkinson, in July 2018, David discusses the origins of his interest in Marx, the development Marx's thought and his critique of the Hegelians, Marx's critical method, Marx and religion, Marx on Russia, the role of violence in social change, the relevance of Marx's work today, and offers comments on some recent biographies. David has spent much of his intellectual career engaging with the meaning and legacy of Marxism and these reflections should generate reflection and debate on the significance of Marx and the possibilities of radical political change today.

Keywords

Karl Marx, David McLellan, Marx and religion, Marx's biography and contemporary relevance

Larry Ray (LR)

and Iain

Wilkinson

(IW):

At what point in your career did you develop a scholarly interest in Marx?

David:

Quite late on in a way and really by serendipity. My training in my BA at Oxford was in Greats, that is, Latin and Greek ancient history and a wee bit of Wittgensteinian philosophy. While I was there, one of my colleagues, Brian Harrison, went on a NUS trip to Moscow. He came back and said *that was very interesting, you should go, David*. So, I went the

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next year to Moscow and I'd never heard of Marxism, I think, before and people were talking about Marxism there and I thought, *well, this is quite interesting*. I think it lodged in the back of my mind. When I finished my degree, I wanted to become a Jesuit and my parents disagreed with this so the compromise was that I would take a year off and think about it and, if I still wanted to be a Jesuit, I'd go ahead. I got a job teaching in France and when I went there I thought to myself *what can I think about in France that would be of interest to me which I can't really do in England?* And there were two candidates; one was existentialism and the other was Marxism and I thought *I'll have a look at Marxism*, partly because it seemed more tangible and coherent and I liked that kind of thing at that stage, and also because there were a couple of books on Marxism by Jesuits – one by Jean-Yves Calvez which is still a good book, *La Pensée de Karl Marx*. I started reading Marx and particularly the *German Ideology* and it made a *huge* impression. I thought *this is marvellous, you know. This really makes sense of history*. So, after that I joined up with the Jesuits but that didn't work and I thought *well I'd better go back to Oxford and do a DPhil!* So, I went back to Oxford, to do my DPhil and I went around various people: Alasdair MacIntyre, Zbigniew Pelczyński and Isaiah Berlin. Berlin said *I'll take you on as a student. What do you want to do?* I said *well I'm very interested in Marxism. I'm interested also in Marxism and religion*, being a strong Catholic. He said *well why don't you do a thesis on the God Builders?*¹ And I thought ... *No, I don't want to ... This means learning Russian and all that kind of thing*. So, then he said *well why don't you write a thesis which is the opposite of Sidney Hook's books?* Sidney Hook had written a book, about how Marx cast off his Young Hegelians one after another, but my plan was to do it the other way around and ask what Marx learnt from all these people? So that's what I did my DPhil thesis on, which became my first book² and while I was writing this thesis I got a job at the University of Kent.

LR and IW: When did this all take place?

David: I finished my BA in 1962 and it was 62/63 that I was teaching in France, 63/64 when I was trying to become a Jesuit and '64 when I started my DPhil in Oxford, which I completed in '68.

LR and IW: So, was this sort of neglect of Marx, as you saw it at the time, something peculiar to Oxford or did you think that that more widely applied to the sort of status of Marx within British academia at the time?

David: Oh, the latter certainly. It wasn't just Oxford; it seems to me, looking back now, that there was very little interest in Marx and Marxism. Marxism at that time was confined to Soviet ideology and the British Communist Party. The early writings of Marx were not translated into English then. So, there wasn't an alternative Marx until a few years later. There was one book written about the early Marx by Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, and there was another

one by Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxism*, but they were very, very rare, those books.

LR and IW: So, what was the breakthrough moment for you or do you think that it was the success of your early work that pushed ~~this~~ forward your interest in Marx?

David: My interest in Marx really started in France, and I thought *this is so impressive, this view of the world, this view of history, that I want to continue thinking about it* but thinking about it in a context which at the same time involved also thinking about religion. That's why the whole notion of secularisation was of interest to me then which is why this book on the Young Hegelians and Marx discusses what he got from Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner and Moses Hess. And I think that was just the time when Marx's earlier writings were being translated into English and people – New Left people – were beginning to be interested in Marx, so I was just an early part of that wave. I just hit the right spot at the right time.

LR and IW: Okay, so thinking back to your interview with Alan MacFarlane, I think you said there that you turned to Catholicism in your second year at St John's, was it?

David: Yes, that's right. That was '59 when I became a Catholic.

LR and IW: How do you see the relationship between religion and Marxism?

David: Well, there are some left-wing Catholics who feel that Catholicism and Marxism are compatible. This is particularly Liberation Theology, which views Marxism as a kind of sociology, and feels that you can parachute on top of that, as it were, a morality or religion. But also, Austro-Marxists and people like Kautsky in the early twentieth century with a very materialist kind of Marxism felt there's a moral gap here and we can put a sociological materialist Marxism on one side and then get our morality from Kant as a self-contained rational thing and juxtapose them, as it were. Now I don't think that's possible because I think that Marx has a view of human nature which is extremely Promethean and really does exclude any appeal to what you might call transcendence of any sort so that these things are basically incompatible. Marx wasn't terribly interested in religion. He said it was the opium of the people, but he felt that religion was passé, had been dealt with by Feuerbach and he didn't pay much attention to the matter. But in as far as he did pay attention to the matter, he was uniformly negative about it!

LR and IW: Yet this sort of association between Marxism and religion has persisted. You mentioned Alasdair MacIntyre earlier on, and if we've understood him correctly, he has at times wanted to identify a sort of a concern with transcendence within Marxism, particularly with a view to Marx in aspiration and, building an alternative society to the

one which we find ourselves in, realising an alternative humanity to the one which we know now.

David: Yes, that's fair enough and I think that's true of the young MacIntyre. It's not true of the old MacIntyre who's got very Thomist and really rather conservative with communitarian views. I think that's true of a young MacIntyre, but those ideas of building an alternative society and so forth, yes, you could say that structurally they're the same, but the kinds of alternative societies you might build, and indeed where you might build them, I think are quite radically different in almost any form of Christianity and certainly in Marx's ideas, which are very this-worldly.

LR and IW: In terms of the relationship between religion or specifically Christianity and Marxism, to what extent is this one of complementarity? ~~That~~ Does religion addresses things that Marxist materialism ~~doesn't~~?

David: That's true though I would balk a bit at the word of complementarity. Maybe that's right if you mean by that that one fills a space that the other doesn't. I would say that, yes. But I think they're contradictory. I just don't think they're compatible.

LR and IW: But you've personally managed to find a way of combining them.

David: Not in the slightest, I'm not a Marxist.

LR and IW: But many people, as you said, many Marxists do, they have done.

David: Yes, but that's because if you're thinking about Marxists like those associated with Liberation Theology (such as Gustavo Gutiérrez), in as far as you could call these people Marxists, but particularly people that I've talked about like the Austro-Marxists (such as Max Adler) or Karl Kautsky, it's because they espouse a kind of Marxism which I think is, well I was going to say, inferior. I'm not sure if that's the right word, but it's a very restricted and materialist kind of Marxism which is why they're looking for some kind of morality. They feel that this is too sparse, too reductionist really. I suppose that would be the right word, a reductionist kind of thing and therefore they look to Kant.

LR and IW: So, your point, if we're understanding you correctly, is that you want to offer a more authentic portrayal of Marx and those other writers are exercising a creative licence with his work that goes a bit too far?

David: Yes, I think that's right. I'm interested and attracted by Marx as an intellectual genius, and I've spent a lot of my academic life, translating and trying to explicate Marx's thoughts, and also writing about the history of Marxism and the way in which people have interpreted this in one way or another. I'm quite critical, I suppose, of a lot of Marxist thought which seems to me to be too reductionist and not to give full weight to the kind of width and breadth and depth of Marx's own thought, which is difficult. I don't altogether blame these people because a lot of Marx's writings, and we may come onto that, simply

weren't available to them, particularly his early writings and the *Grundrisse* so if you've only got the *Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, well, I think you're bound to have a slightly narrower conception of what Marx is really on about.

LR and IW: As an aside, it's really important for us to remember the volume of literature which we have of Marx's own writing now to which other commentators including Weber, of course, didn't have access.

David: No, they didn't have this at all. And people like Weber had the Marxism of the Second International, which was that of the German Social Democratic party at that time, Eduard Bernstein and, mainly Karl Kautsky who was known as the 'Pope of Marxism'.

LR and IW: Thinking about the development of capitalism since the late nineteenth century, do you think Marx underestimated the capacity of the system to absorb crises rather than crises becoming a catalyst for radical social change?

David: The difficulty answering that question, as with a lot of these questions, is that Marx says different things at different times. It's clearly true that throughout his life, not so much in his later years but in the first two-thirds of his writings, he was *constantly* underestimating the capacity of capitalism to survive crises and to continue and he seems to think, particularly when he was writing the *Grundrisse*, capitalism would collapse imminently (that was why he was writing it so fast) and in 6 months' time the whole thing would be dead. And that sort of view is quite common in Marx. On the other hand, he says things like capitalism is never going to end until it has exhausted all its capacity for extracting surplus value and the implication of that is that it could be a very, very, very long time. So, I think in his more, let us say, sober moments, Marx would have been very loath to predict the imminent or even soon collapse of capitalism. I think that if *per impossibile* he were around now, he wouldn't be entirely surprised at the longevity of capitalism.

LR and IW: When you think about the length of the time span of the ancient world or of feudalism, if capitalism had collapsed in the nineteenth century it would have passed very quickly, wouldn't it?

David: It would have been very, very quick. As you say, feudalism, the ancient Greek or Roman mode of production based on slavery, and also the Asiatic mode of production, all these lasted for centuries and centuries, so it would have been almost a flash in the pan, a couple of hundred years really, not much more anyway if capitalism had collapsed sometime in the nineteenth century.

LR and IW: What led Marx to this, if you like, greater awakening to the dynamism of capitalism if at first in the *Grundrisse* you see him as slightly naive, if you like, about its longevity.

David: I think, and this is to some extent an informed guess, it's partly old age, that is, we all mellow as we get older. I think more substantially

it's probably his own experience, of his expecting imminent capitalist crisis in 1848 and then in 1858, for example, and finding that it just didn't work as he'd expected so he learns from example. Marx was quite a practical ... in that sense a practical evidence-based thinker a lot of the time and so I think he learnt from example.

LR and IW: Is this why so much editing and re-writing went into *Kapital*?

David: That's absolutely right, and it's because he was very keen on the evidence and there's so much to accumulate, which is one reason why he starts in whenever it is – 1850 or something – saying *I'm writing this now*. It's always, *I'm going to finish in a couple of months' time* and the thing was never finished and I think it's one of the aspects of Marx's work that is maybe insufficiently emphasised these days, that it is *unfinished*. Nothing is finished. *Kapital* isn't finished. Even the *Communist Manifesto* isn't really finished because you can see the last little bit there, he had to send it off from Brussels to London and he just scribbled, about 20 lines saying, the revolution was imminent. But particularly in his economics, he's constantly redrafting it because he's constantly looking for new evidence and information to feed into what he's writing. And as he's writing, he's finding new conceptual problems as in *what really is the relationship between value and price and how do I get into this kind of thing?* And you can see also in the last decade of his life when he's thinking a lot about Russia, he's very keen on Russia. He learns Russian and he is producing enormous quantities of notes, which never get written up although he writes some letters to the Russian Marxists about this. Also, a book has just come out about Marx's writings on the environment.³ He got very interested in the environment which is, I must say, a bit of a revelation to me. But partly because of old age (he wasn't terribly well in the last decade of his life) he never got round to actually writing this up. So, as you say, Engels had to pull volumes two and three of *Kapital* together and there's a lot of work going on now, particularly in Germany, about editions of *Kapital* and Engels is cast in rather a sinister role as half re-writing Marx's thesis.

LR and IW: ~~Do you think when it comes to contemporary scholarship, perhaps readers of Marx need to be taken through a course to understand how he's writing and how his manner of enquiry, if you like, to understand more about his methodology in order to be able to read the works and hear how he's thinking or appreciate how he's thinking?~~ Arguably, it is unfair to read him as though there's something much more digested in his work than necessarily he himself understands to be the case.

David: I think that's true for his economic writings. I don't think it's really true for what you might call his political writings. Take something like a brilliant piece of work, such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he's just asking the question how does it come about, that in what should be a bourgeois society you get this

autocracy suddenly emerging. The result is a scintillating political/sociological analysis. That is accessible. Obviously, you need to know a bit about the historical references but you don't need to know about methodology for that kind of thing, but I think for reading particularly his unpublished writings like the Paris Manuscripts or the *Grundrisse* and also, I think for *Kapital* you do need some initiation into the way in which Marx is approaching these sorts of things and the kind of methodology which he has and assumes.

LR and IW: Do you think there was anything to hand, for readers of Marx in that regard?

David: You mean explaining Marx's method and ...?

LR and IW: Yes, it seems that often, you know, if you think about a book like David Harvey's *Companion to Marx's Capital*, it's not really intended as a guide on how to read Marx.

David: No, it isn't that. No, nothing springs readily to mind, partly because I think it might be quite a difficult thing to do, to write something like that which was an introduction and available to an intelligent undergraduate to get it. It wouldn't be easy to do that, I think.

LR and IW: Well, there were debates over Marx's methods, weren't there. For example, the Althusserians thought they understood Marx's method.

David: There were lots of books about Marx's method, yes, and they usually don't agree with each other. This is not what you're asking, I suppose, but there is another question about contemporary relevance. Marx is a nineteenth-century figure and that's 150 years ago or something like that, and two out of the three most recent biographies of Marx that have come out in the last 5 years want to say quite clearly Marx is a nineteenth-century figure who can be understood only in nineteenth-century terms. The first one by Jonathan Sperber says he's got nothing to say to us today.⁴

LR and IW: Do you hold with that view?

David: I do think Marx is relevant. I don't agree with those, particularly those two recent biographies by Sperber and Gareth Stedman-Jones⁵ which contend that he's essentially a historical figure

LR and IW: They are commanding an enormous amount of attention, those two books at the moment, being used as authoritative texts to say *well this is what Marx was like ... we're closer to the real Marx through the readings that they offer*. So, I think for you to offer an alternative view on their conclusions is very important. What is it that you would underline as particularly relevant for today in Marx?

David: I would say, and not just in order of importance, firstly I've been struck recently in reading what Marx has written about Russia and also the different versions of *Kapital* and particularly the French edition which he altered quite considerably, and said it had a separate scientific value. I mean there he's at pains to point out that *Kapital* is a discussion of the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and he says

this doesn't necessarily have lessons for the rest of the world and therefore he's thinking about the question of whether it's possible for other countries to bypass capitalism. This was obviously of interest to Russian Marxists at that particular time, that's why they're asking him. And his answer to this is rather ambivalent, and this occurs, you know, when I go to China and talk to people in China about this. They say *well I know we've got quite a lot of capitalism in China but that's because Marx said you've got to go through capitalism before you arrive at socialism*. And I say, *well, yes, up to a point, but you do have stuff in Marx which says it might be possible to build an alternative society not on the shoulders of capitalism, but by a pre-capitalist social formation of one sort or another or the kind of village community which he much praises in Russia*. So, there are pictures of societies in Marx that are not abolished by capitalism but can be kept alive as an alternative to capitalism. I mean I think that's one aspect which is really quite important. I think another one is the whole notion of ideology, which I've thought a bit about. It is as relevant obviously now as it ever was. Where do people's ideas come from? What is the material basis for the ideas that people have? What are the dominant ideas? Why are these ideas dominant? Whose interest do they serve? And particularly whose material interest do they serve? This notion of Marx being a kind of master of suspicion of dominant ideas of one sort or another is as relevant as it ever was. Also, people have thought that Marx is part of that very nineteenth-century view about growth and progress and particularly that economic growth is going to bring about the salvation of society in one way or another. But Marx was concerned even in *Kapital* with the way in which the natural environment is just going to be exhausted so Marx's views about the environment are quite relevant these days.

LR and IW: There's an element in your question about political action. Do you think he retains a relevance as a guide to political action?

David: I would say not very substantially. It's not his fault but he wasn't terribly successful in the late 1840s and around 1850 and, although he did sterling work, the First International petered out after not too long. It is alas true that although Marx has on his gravestone the 11th thesis on Feuerbach about interpreting the world and changing it, he has been much better at interpreting the world than changing it. I mean not just him but his followers as well so it is difficult to see how when you say a 'guide to political action' that you could have a look at Marx and say, well, yes, it does look from this as though this is what we should be doing, because I don't think that's possible. It's one of the reasons why I'm not a Marxist, that I can't find any Marxist political party to whose programme I could subscribe and I don't think you could be a Marxist any more than you could be a Christian or Muslim, without belonging to a group. It's not something you can

do on your own just as an individual so in that sense I suppose I don't think that Marx in any direct way could be an inspiration for political activity. Obviously if you are politically active you can learn a lot from Marx along the lines that I've just been talking about and bear that in mind.

LR and IW: The German Social Democratic Party at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century was trying to do that, wasn't it? This was central to Kautsky's *Agrarian Question* – which tried to provide a materialist basis for answering questions such as 'Can you offer the peasants anything or are the peasants doomed to disappear?' 'What is the relationship between the peasantry and the proletariat?' And the dispute over the Woman Question; what's the party's position on feminism? Is feminism a bourgeois movement? Do we need a separate socialist feminist movement? And there were attempts to take class analysis and ask what implications does this have for political practice?

David: Yes, I suppose that's what I'm saying. If you're looking at class and if you're looking at ideology, all of this, you can find marvellous things in Marx but then you've got to go and apply them in particular and Marx himself has got nothing particular to say about the Woman Question. You don't get much feminism in Marx really so it's for people like August Bebel to try and work it out, and latter-day Marxist-feminists of course in our generation. Equally on the agrarian question I think Marx's basic view of the peasantry is pretty dire, so like Kautsky when he's talking about the agrarian question, you have to really reformulate this a bit and take a different view rather than a direct reading of Marx. But then, again, it's because when Marx is thinking about the peasants he's really thinking about France, and the very reactionary nature of the French peasantry in Brittany and places like that, which is why he feels that they are not a progressive force and can never be so until they are in some ways proletarianised.

LR and IW: What about violence? Did Marx have a sufficiently good understanding of violence? He advocated revolutionary change at least in some circumstances. Did he pay enough attention to what happens when you unleash violence?

David: Well I think in one way, no, he didn't. One of the difficulties in answering the question is the word for violence ... *Gewalt* in German is a much wider notion of force and power, whereas 'violence' implies something which really is physical. But the answer is, I think, that Marx didn't pay much attention to violence. It wasn't something which bothered him and which he thought it worthwhile thinking about. Of violent acts, like the assassination of Alexander II 1882 by the *Narodnya Volya* he said *good for them, that's absolutely splendid*. But then he goes on to say this is just the way that Russians go about things inevitably because of their history, so end of story. Also, he associated a lot of violence with anarchism and Bakunin. But his

basic position about 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. You shouldn't have started it in the first place, because if a revolution is going to be successful, and particularly a proletarian one, it's because it is a revolution backed up by the vast majority, or the majority, of the population. And Marx was terribly optimistic about these things; you simply won't need violence. Okay, you expropriate people and that might be thought to be a certain form of *Gewalt* anyway but not violence in the sense we are talking about. Marx talks about *Gewalt* and violence an awful lot. *Kapital* is shot through with analyses of violence of one sort or another in the initial stages particularly, and indeed in the latter stages of capitalism. That's when he's really thinking about violence and he associates it with past modes of production and because they are for the advantage always of a minority which controls the mode of production, they need to resort to violence from time to time to keep going and often to start off, but he simply doesn't feel that that's going to be necessary in the future because of the reasons I've just sated.

LR and IW: Do you think he still had that view after the Paris Commune? I mean some people have said the Paris Commune was a sort of turning point in Marx's thinking. It showed that it was going to be difficult to successfully stage a revolution.

David: No, I don't think that. Marx's comments on the Paris Commune in his writing *The Civil War in France* are penned very soon after the bloody end of the Commune and on the principle of *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum* he can't really say what I think he probably thought, and does say from time to time, at the time, that *this is not going anywhere*. This is not really a revolution, he thinks it's an insurrection, in a capital city produced under circumstances where the government has gone into exile, the Prussian army is at the gates of Paris, there's just no way is this a revolution, this is not what you should be doing and he's not surprised that it ends bloodily. Although he's very defensive about the commune and feels that the way it organised itself might be an example for successful revolutions when the time would come. In decades afterwards, we might well learn lessons from the way they organised themselves as fairly decentralised democratic forms of election and revocation and mandation and all that sort of thing. He wasn't negative about the Commune but in terms of its being a revolution, he didn't think that that was at all an example to be followed.

LR and IW: Do you think he was a particularly compassionate man?

David: No, I don't think he was a particularly compassionate man. I think [was](#) less compassionate than probably most people are. If you ask who might he be compassionate about, he's very compassionate

about German workers in Paris in 1844 which is about the only time, I think, when he seems to have spent a long time with genuine proletarians, and I think he's very struck by these sorts of people in the way he writes about them in the Paris Manuscripts. But it is true that later on he (it's not necessarily a criticism, I suppose) but he's not the sort of person who mingles with the working class. I mean you do get, I suppose, compassion in a way in lots of passages of *Kapital* where he's talking about the oppression of the working class, the way in which people are systematically deprived of fulfilling their capacities, and just instrumentalised in one way or another – the whole talk about the idea of commodities and alienation. In that respect, which is not exactly a theoretical one, but it's not face-to-face with people either, he certainly does have a lot of compassion for individuals. For his wife, again, he feels terribly. He wrote a beautiful love letter to his wife and was very fond of his daughters and very compassionate about them and trying to make sure that they married, in a Victorian kind of a way, the right person, so that he says they don't have the kind of life inflicted on them which I've inflicted on my wife. I hesitate about compassion because I think Marx was, like a lot of very clever people, a very arrogant man, and very intolerant of people he disagreed with.

LR and IW: Is there an ethical dimension in Marxism and what does a Marxist ethics look like? Now that's rather a formal way of putting it but you've started to address the fact that it's quite complicated, ~~if you really want to be very serious about trying to understand how he's moved and how he's motivated to see what it is that, you know, I suppose at a set of moral concerns.~~

David: Yes, it is and there's been a lot of debate about this. Marx himself from time to time dismisses morality as essentially bourgeois. And he says in the introduction on the general address on the foundation of the First International (he's writing to Engels) *well, I had to put in, you know, a few words about truth and trust or something. But they won't do any harm.* So clearly dismissive about this kind of thing. But again, you have to understand that when he was talking about morals he was alluding to ~~what the current kind of~~ moral precepts, which he felt were all class-based. But at the same time, it seems to me impossible to say that Marx himself didn't have a moral view of society. *Kapital* is just dripping with all sorts of moral judgements and they're all based in my view around his notion of human nature, although that whole idea is a very controversial one because for thinkers like Althusser he just doesn't have a concept of human nature. The fourth thesis on Feuerbach says something like human essence is just the ensemble of social relations and that's it. Norman Geras wrote a very good book, a very short book, which I thought refuted this idea completely.⁶ But then you have to ask yourself, if Marx has a theory of

human nature, what is this human nature and is it unchanging? Now clearly, it's not unchanging because that would run contrary to the whole of Marx's view about things and if it's not unchanging, what holds it together as human nature? And, well, you can talk about human capacities, for labouring or for thinking which people always do all the time, but clearly, he has a view of human nature as something which is developing towards what can be fully realised in a communist society with the abolition of the division of labour. There's a lot in the Paris Manuscripts and also in the *Grundrisse* and something to a small extent in *Kapital* as well about what a fully developed human being might look like, that's what we're tending towards. Not just hunting in the morning and shooting in the afternoon and fishing and reading Hegel after dinner but that sort of thing. He often talks about a many-sided individual human because he feels that people have, most people anyway, have rather different capacities which they could fulfil in different ways, rather than the division of labour which anchors them down to a single thing. So, in that respect I think you must say that Marx had a moral theory based upon a particular view about human nature and this spills over into questions – about which there's pretty extensive literature – on justice, where the question is rather sharply put: does Marx have a concept of justice which is transhistorical is the real question. Or does Marx think that each particular mode of production, each particular type of class-based society has its own concept of justice; that is, there's bourgeois justice here and that's just bourgeois justice. Do we need any justice in a socialist society? Do we need that kind of a concept, at all? I tend to think that Marx did have a transhistorical notion of justice but it's quite a controversial question. It's just a version of this larger question about morality as to whether each one is just specific to a particular age, or whether there's any criteria by which you can measure one age against another. Now it seems to me that if you believe in any sort of progress you're almost *bound* to have something which is transhistorical.

LR and IW: The idea of alienation from species being suggests that there are species attributes – creativity, productivity or whatever – that if you're unable to fulfil then you're not realising your humanness.

David: I think that's right. This notion of *Gattungswesen*, which comes from Feuerbach, is evident in the Paris Manuscripts. It does occur once, I think, in the *Grundrisse*. But it doesn't occur at all in *Kapital*, which is why then some people have talked about the break in Marx. But the reason why it doesn't occur in *Kapital* is partly because it is presupposed and he's writing a critique political economy whereas the Paris Manuscripts are sometimes called economic and *philosophical* manuscripts. Well, *Kapital* is continuing the economic bit of that which doesn't contain all this critique of alienation and species being at all.

I think that Marx probably felt that it would be counterproductive to have talked about these sorts of things. He mentions this when he's discussing Hegel in *Kapital*: *I didn't want to talk too much about Hegel but then on the other hand some people were treating Hegel as a dead dog so I thought ...* He doesn't talk about Hegel in the body of *Kapital* but in the Preface (2nd German edition of 1873), where he refers to standing Hegel on his head, but nevertheless says that Hegel's dialectic really is something which is path breaking and ~~Five~~ taken it over. But he doesn't want to spell this out there because he feels that this would alienate his readership.

LR and IW: Actually, looking at the *Grundrisse*, your edited edition was an important intervention in the whole Althusserian debate and debate about continuity or not in Marxism and Althusserian versus humanistic readings of Marx. What's the relevance of the *Grundrisse* now, do you think?

David: Well I think now ... a very broad answer to your question would be that the relevance the *Grundrisse* now shows that if you're looking at the whole of Marx's work, the Paris Manuscripts are very early and very sort of scribbled out, in a hasty kind of way and *Kapital* is looking at a specific critique of political economy and if you want the richness, I think, of Marx's ways, go to the 800 pages of the *Grundrisse*. My edition of the *Grundrisse* is 150 pages or something, but was very quickly followed by a translation of the whole thing, in Penguin, and there's a whole wealth of speculation there. Another thing is that the *Grundrisse* does link the early and the late Marx together and showed that there is some kind of continuity. It's not strictly speaking a progression because these are slightly different types of work, but they do form a continuous sort of whole. And there are rather imaginative passages in the *Grundrisse* about automation, about machinery and so forth that have led some people into speculations which I think are slightly wild, but nevertheless they certainly can provoke the imagination. I don't really like the work of Hardt and Negri and I suppose in a slightly different vein Žižek might come out of that too, and all this talk about immaterial labour and general intellect. But what it nevertheless does show is that there are passages which are not really connected together but which really do make you sit up and think about the contemporary relevance of this.

LR and IW: How significant is the passage 'Fragment on machines'?

David: Marx certainly has some pertinent comments to make about the impact of automation and the current re-structuring of labour relations. Some commentators have extrapolated from Marx's remarks on machinery in the *Grundrisse* to outline a whole new strategy for world politics. I have in mind here the enthusiasm in the early years of this century for the trilogy of Hardt and Negri.

Concepts such as ‘immaterial labour’, ‘cognitive capitalism’ or ‘general intellect’ have been used to claim a new relevance for Marx. The rise of the service sector, automation and the decline of manual labour, and the spread of IT have been said by mainstream economists and sociologists to present insuperable difficulties for Marx’s theories and presage the demise of socialism. On the contrary, say Hardt and Negri, the remarkable foresights of Marx in the *Grundrisse* encourage a reading of contemporary capitalism in which immaterial labour is increasingly outside the control of capital. Indeed, according to them, the potential for self-management and social co-operation present in immaterial labour ‘seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’. I do not share this optimism about the emergence of a ‘general intellect’ or world multitude as the initiators of a communist society. In an era of zero-hours contracts and an increasing precariousness of the tenure and duration of jobs, Marx’s remarks on the reserve army of labour and so on seem more relevant.

LR and IW: Marx’s expectation was capitalism would give way to a better society. Can we still be optimistic? Or are we heading for dark times as Hannah Arendt described the 1940s?

David: Anybody who makes any attempt to predict a specific future is a bit of a fool. But I’m not optimistic. I do think that one of the really big problems that is going to face not me, because I’ll be long dead by then, and maybe not even my children but certainly my grandchildren is ecological crisis of one sort or another, of different ways of running out of resources – no water left or whatever it may be. That sort of crisis can be met in various political forms but the one political form which won’t meet it is in any form of liberal parliamentary democracy because it’s far too short term. You could have a very authoritarian, a kind of fascist regime, if you like, that would be able to cope with this in some way. By far the best way of coping, of course, would be a socialist regime, but it requires the kind of alternative forms of society that Marx was thinking about when he was thinking about Russia. Marx said the communists write on their banners (in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) ‘from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs’, and if you start thinking about a society which is based upon need rather than upon want, because wants are infinite and needs are not (it’s not that needs don’t change but they’re not infinite) a society based upon need would be a society far less wedded to notions of economic growth and so forth. But I’m not particularly optimistic. I would certainly have hope, but hope is a different concept from that of optimism, which is much too facile.

LR and IW: Do you think we should be a little bit more circumspect when it comes to associating Marx with optimism then and maybe also say

that he was hopeful? Clearly, he's aware of radical contingency and ~~some kind of possibility for us~~ but at the same time, particularly in these writings you mention, ~~what~~ you're suggesting is that he's able to be far more circumspect when it comes to how he relates the conditions which he's experienced ~~in~~ the particular context in which he's been writing to developments taking shape elsewhere in Europe or in the world at large.

David: I think that's right, and I think he was much more circumspect during the last 15 or 10 years of his life. But a lot of Marx's writings nevertheless are imbued by that very nineteenth-century view of progress, that things really are getting better all the time, with peaks up and down, and all that kind of Darwinian view of onwards and upwards. A lot of Marx's writings are imbued by this. But at the same time, he can say, 'socialism or barbarism' which he does, if I remember rightly, in the *Communist Manifesto*. So, he's not saying that socialism is inevitable, that this is going to come, there's no question about it. Some of his writings certainly give that impression but then I think he rode back a bit on that in the last decade and a half of his life where he's saying, *well, you know, my investigation into this particular question is really based upon my studies of Western Europe and I don't really know enough about the rest of the world* so he's a bit more tentative about this. But he does seem to think that barbarism is certainly a possibility and socialism is not inevitable.

LR and IW: Is there anything you would like to return to from the questions or thoughts that flashed through your mind which you think we should perhaps visit in a little bit more detail? Perhaps the post-2008 crisis?

David: Well there's an awful lot of commentary on Marx's economics and you might well ask 'what has Marx's critique of political economy, Marx's economics, have to say to us, if anything, about the current world economic situation?' We've just had a big financial crisis in 2008. Well, what would Marx say about that? Now, I think that's quite a reasonable question to ask and one reason why I don't feel very competent to answer it is because I find Marx's economics rather difficult to fathom, particularly, the early bits of *Kapital*. Marx himself says, to Mrs Kugelmann, *don't bother about the first chapters, just get on to the working day*. The first part is very difficult and commentaries written by scholars such as Ruben and his followers I find very arcane.⁷ I can't really make much sense of them, of all this about the relationship, which Marx himself had difficulty with, between value, exchange value, value and profit. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that if you're looking at the world economy and the whole move from what you might call industrial capital to finance capital, financialisation of capital which led to all this crisis in 2008, the huge boom in credit, I think reading Marx and particularly on the falling rate of profit and that kind of thing, I think there is something

there. People have looked at this and said yes it is falling/no it isn't falling, but if you suppose that it was falling, and I've certainly read things which plausibly seem to say that as the '70s went to the '80s the rate of profit was declining, then a smart capitalist would move their money out of producing things and not make money out of things but make money out of money, and did they make money out of money! And I think that looking at that sort of thing from a general Marxist perspective is the right way to look at it. But at the same time, I'm simply not an economist so I find it difficult to manoeuvre in that kind of area.

LR and IW: What comes over really strongly in your overall account of Marx is that we need to work at understanding the process of his thought and the process of his writing, because what you seem to constantly be alerting us to is the fact that there's thought in progress, work in progress, if you like there's a reflexivity in Marx where at the same time as he's committing himself to forms of analyses and value, he's also aware of his own material circumstance, his own historical location.

David: Yes, a dearth of information.

LR and IW: So, there's a labour that has to go in to kind of how we account for him and venture, you know, tentatively to summarise how he thinks and what he's committed to.

David: I think that's true and I think it's particularly true of his economic writings. Marx, to the ordinary person in the street, as it were, probably seems terribly dogmatic, laying down the law about all sorts of things and intolerant and, as I've said, there's some truth in all that, particularly in his political writings. But I think in his economic writings in the very broad sense, he's constantly, as you say, very self-reflexive and he thinks *I haven't got enough information here*. In the Victorian parlour game that he played with his daughters his favourite motto was 'de omnibus dubitandum' *we should doubt about everything*. Well, I think that applies to his own writing, that he is doubting his thinking all the time; *I haven't got it quite right yet. I need some more information. I can refine this a bit*. Which is why of course he puts off writing, almost forever.

LR and IW: It makes me wonder whether (and Foucault wouldn't like this) but it sounds to me like that they're kindred spirits in having that commitment in their thought.

David: I think that would be right, certainly, yes.

LR and IW: In his biography of Marx, Francis Wheen⁸ said Marx kept getting distracted, following pointless causes and he kept putting things on one side. For example, embroiled for several years with David Urquhart's conspiracy theory about Palmerston being a Russian agent.

David: I think that biography of Wheen's is pretty good on this. It's very well written as you'd expect from somebody who seems to write half

Private Eye! Well researched too. He told me that he'd spent three years on it. And he's right, I think, that Marx produced a big book about some nonentity called Vogt who around 1860 had slandered Marx and you get 300 pages about him! When he's supposed to be writing this stuff. Yes, he could get very, very distracted like that, Wheen's quite right about that. Partly I think because he probably enjoyed this kind of thing, he got a real kick about, you know, slagging people off, and it's a damned sight easier than thinking about value!

LR and IW: If you're distracted it implies that you are deflected away from being reflexive. If you're reflexive you're kind of not able to be distracted, you're in a loop where you're constantly churning things over and over in your mind and not able to resolve them.

David: Yes. Well I don't know about 'constantly', but, yes. I mean he didn't always take long to write things. He could do a very quick draft. The German Ideology's another example. You've got this marvellous part on Feuerbach that's about 90 pages long and 300 pages, on Steiner which is turgid.

LR and IW: He's an immensely complex man, isn't he?

David: Yes!

LR and IW: Really there were a number of personalities that are in him that come out at different times.

David: Definitely. Yes, that's right. Very, very complex and sometimes almost contradictory. So difficult to define.

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Notes

1. A group of Bolsheviks, particularly associated with Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) who proposed 'God-building' (*bogostroitel'stvo*) – a secular Communist religion with new rituals and symbolism. Although rejected by Lenin, the idea reappeared briefly in 1962 at the All-Union Conference on Scientific Propaganda in Moscow (Pospelovsky, 1987).
2. See McLellan (1970).
3. See Saito (2017).
4. See Sperber (2013).
5. See Stedman-Jones (2017).
6. See Geras (1983).
7. For example, see Rubin (1990 [1928]).
8. See Wheen (1999).

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