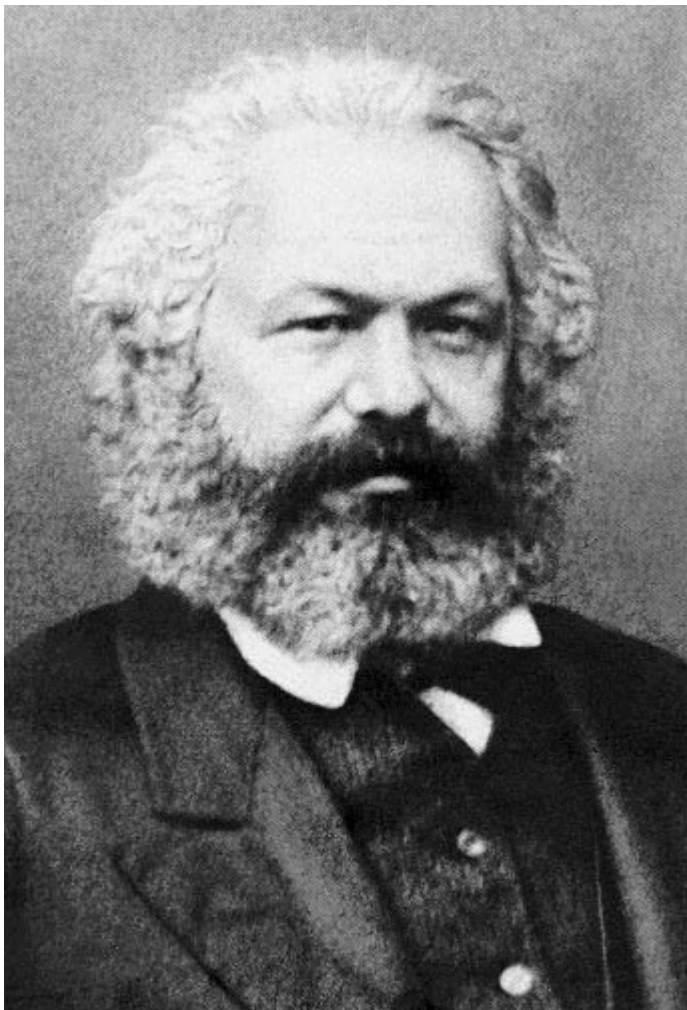


One Question Marx at 200

📅 7th May 2018 (<http://Stateofnatureblog.com/One-Question-Marx-200/>) 👤 [Cihan Aksan And Jon Bailes](http://Stateofnatureblog.com/Author/Cihan-Aksan-And-Jon-Bailes/)
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One Question is a monthly series in which we ask leading thinkers to give a brief answer to a single question.

This month, to mark the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth on 5th May, we ask:

How has Marx influenced your thinking?

Responses from: [Ursula Huws](#); [Sven-Eric Liedman](#); [Terrell Carver](#); [Jayati Ghosh](#); [Wolfgang Streeck](#); [Frigga Haug](#); [Lucia Pradella](#); [Neil Faulkner](#); [Lars T Lih](#); [Esther Leslie](#); [Guilherme Leite Gonçalves](#); [Michael Roberts](#).

Wolfgang Streeck

Professor emeritus of sociology. From 1995 to 2014 he was Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, Germany. His latest book is *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2519-how-will-capitalism-end>) (Verso, 2016).

As a student of sociology in Frankfurt at the end of the 1960s, I encountered Marx early. Unfortunately, however, nobody prevented me from getting in at the wrong end: the first chapters of *Capital*. This was too abstract for a twenty year-old from the provinces, with a pent-up need for concrete real-world experience.

It was only much later that I returned to Marx, when I was teaching at an American university, UW-Madison. There I became aware of the breathtaking complexity of Marx's Hegel-trained conceptual apparatus, which surpasses everything that was produced at the time and later in social science, and which is uniquely suited to observe and represent conflicts, dilemmas, or 'contradictions' in social life. On this background I realized why the attempt had failed and had to fail to develop a theory (and practice) of the social-democratic governance of 'modern' societies with the help of a functionalist sociology and empiricist political science.

This time, my entry was the historical chapters of *Capital*, especially on the working day and on 'primitive accumulation', as well as Marx's political writings. From them one could learn what sociological theory could and should do and how much our academic sociology had sacrificed in its functionalist-idealistic and post-modernist turns. When I tried in several books after 2008 to come to terms with the rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s and its human and political consequences, I benefited greatly from the Marxian template of a historical political economy, concerned with trajectories rather than snapshots.

The experience convinced me that sociology must avoid being reduced to micro- and survey research or to an aestheticizing system-functionalism à la Luhmann. It should let itself be reminded by Marx and his tradition of the central role of the economy as a historical driving force and political power centre – which mainstream sociology has downgraded to an 'economic subsystem', so it could turn it over to either standard economics or the 'Marxists' (to which Marx did not want to belong).