



Karl Marx, Alive

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Celebrating 200 years of Karl Marx has been rather more ebullient than his symbolic burial around 1989 and the 'End of History' would have led one to expect. Of course, globalized capitalism pure and simple, without a competing socialist world system and self-confident domestic social democracies to tame it, was bound to produce exactly the conditions under which Marx becomes acutely relevant. The geo-capitalist rise in the 21st century of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' lends further paradoxical support. The Party sent a massive statue of Karl to his native city of Trier. The managers of this sleepy city have also begun to realize that there might be money and 'local development' in the great man's musealization. This, in the country that inherited, and then deliberately destroyed, the 'really existing socialism' of the German Democratic Republic only thirty years ago.

In academia the story is not dissimilar: A proliferation of new intellectual energies and alliances around Marx's work has arisen. The last decades have seen the emergence and consolidation of a spatialized and urban Marxism (David Harvey as symbol), a cultural Marxism (Jameson and Hall), a Lacanian Marxism (Zizek), a Jesuit Marxism (Badiou), an autonomous Marxism (Negri), an environmental Marxism (Jason Moore has become the key Anglo reference), Marxian value theory (Postone, Heinrichs) and an info-techno Marxism (Paul Mason). All this in addition to the ongoing political Marxisms, World System Theories, and Third World Marxisms of the 1970s New Left. There is now even a thoroughly intelligent East European postsocialist Marxism (Gáspár Miklós Tamás as banner). A scientific blockbuster (over a million copies sold) carries the suggestive title 'Capital in the 21st Century'. Thomas Piketty remains an avowed non-Marxist but he clearly understood the compelling force of the Marxist imaginary in the present conjuncture.

Again, seen from the dominance of postmodern theories in the 1990s and early 2000s, this is all quite a surprise. Activist 'cultural Turnists' of the 1990s have openly revoked their anti-Marxian record (William Sewell and others). Gareth Stedman Jones, once engaged in breaking down the dominance of E.P. Thompson in the New Social History, has just produced a major

and rich intellectual-political biography of Karl.[i] Jones now contents himself with making the unsurprising point that Marx, for all his understanding of political economy and philosophy, tended at crucial historical moments to underestimate the force and possibilities of liberal democratic politics. To crown it all: the full annotated works of Karl Marx are finally going to be published, a decades' long international collaboration coming to fruition at 200.

The self-contented postmodern lull is long over. Big questions of history, humanity, and the earth are on the agenda again. Politics and capitalism have become more turbulent than the political center can manage. The globalization of capital, the power of finance, the rise of plutocracy, social stagnation and polarization, the rise of new world hegemons, and, in the West, the continued political dominance by default of a dead neoliberalism are ushering in a renewed radicalization on both Right and Left. The center is cracking, and not only in the Euro-American world. As always, it tends to align with authoritarianism, Bonapartism, and restoration of social hierarchies, rather than make genuine concessions to the call for radical democratic change. In this predicament, the Marxian critique of political economy, of capitalism, class, labor, and alienation informs contemporary sensibilities far beyond the circle of Marxists proper.



China's gift of a large statue of Karl Marx to his birthplace, the city of Trier, attracted a great deal of attention at both ends of Eurasia. (Jiangsu Story, 05.05.2018)

Marxist anthropology is reborn and is doing reasonably well. But it is hardly noticed, let alone sought, by the philosophers and political economists who run the established Marxist shows. I know of just two Marx commemorations lately in which anthropologists played a role. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation event in Berlin was not one of them. (The the single proposal for a Marxist anthropology panel was rejected.) And so I attended, with Chris Hann, the event organized by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies and the Hamburg Institute for Social Research in Hamburg on May-3-5, opened with a keynote by Thomas Piketty (who funnily enough almost shares a birthday with Marx).

I once moved from a sociology department to anthropology as a consequence of boredom with the naturalized Euro-centrism – no, much worse: North-Western Europe centrism -

inscribed into the intellectual horizon of that department. This particular conference, organized by economic sociologists, was a bit of a déjà vu. Tradition-modernity polarities and universalist temporality formed its basic framework. Lots of good work was presented: Piketty's new, slightly Bourdieusian, research on mass higher education, the transformation of Left politics and the rise of the populist Right; Wolfgang Streeck's Polanyian-Marxian reading of transformations in capitalism; Beckert and Krippner on Marxian and non-Marxian value, respectively; Fourcade on the rising 'artificially intelligent classes,' among other contributions. But, in spite of the Chinese gift of a statue of Marx to the city of Trier, there was hardly any concrete sense of a fully globalized capitalism, no discussion of the rise of China and the BRICS, no reflection on the globalization and multiplication of the blue collar proletariat, the various types of globalized *precariat*, and of course the surplus populations. The world as an uneven capitalist space hardly existed. The conference in a way acted as if André Gorz's 'Farewell to the working class' had by now become an obvious fact. There were very useful papers on credit-monies (Aaron Sahr) and technology, monopoly, and rent-taking (Kean Birch), important issues that extend and update Marx's understanding of capitalism. Axel Honneth gave a sympathetic and convincing critique of the manner in which Hegel's economic notion of civil society lingers on in Marx's *Capital*. Participating scholars generally sought to position themselves constructively toward Marx, respectfully even, refusing any vocal rejections. But the sheer universalization of capital accumulation, the globalization of capital and the working class, the new military and technological imperialisms, the incorporation of the state in the accumulating contradictions of capital, the rise of financialized and highly speculative extraction, all basic themes that Marx and Marxists more than other classical traditions in the social sciences have worked out or anticipated, eluded this conference in a fundamental sense. Not to mention the rise of China and the end of Western dominance. Moreover, this China is intellectually a direct (even though paradoxical and partial) heir to none other than Karl Marx himself, as well as to the political heritage of Marxism. Marx is actually much more alive these days than the West feels comfortable recognising.

More than respectful critique, Marx at 200 might have deserved a sharper engagement with his work from the point of global capital, global labor, and universalized capital accumulation in the 21st century. Economic sociology, to judge from the materials presented at this conference, appears unjustifiably locked into the discussions of the last century.

Referenzen

[i] Gareth Stedman Jones. 2017. Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion. London: Penguin

