
KARL MARX, HISTORIAN

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ADDRESS TO THE KARL MARX CENTENNIAL CONFERENCE
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Engels Sums Up Marx

"Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature," said Friedrich Engels on the 17th of March 1883 -- almost exactly a century ago -- "so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, arts, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case" ("Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx"). Speaking at Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery, Engels made his great collaborator's first claim to immortality the discovery of an historical law. According to Engels, Marx's second profound contribution likewise took the form of historical law: "Marx also discovered," he continued,

the special law of motion governing the present-day capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has created. The discovery of surplus value suddenly threw light on the problem, in trying to solve which all previous investigations, of both bourgeois

economists and socialist critics, had been groping in the dark.

In his eulogy for Marx, Engels repeated the main claims he had made in an article published five years earlier, while Marx was working on the second volume of Das Kapital. There, summarizing Marx's whole career, Engels spoke of the "revolution brought about by [Marx] in the whole conception of world history". He also said two other things unequivocally: **first**, that Marx's fundamental contribution to historical analysis was the uncovering of history's movement via class struggles based on the "particular material, physically sensible conditions in which society at a given period produces and exchanges its means of subsistence" and, **second**, that Marx's analyses contributed simultaneously and inseparably to understanding and to action ("Karl Marx," written in 1877). Engels left no doubt about it: Marx had devoted his life to the synthesis of historically-grounded theory and socialist practice.

Now, a century after Marx's death, a majority of the world's people live under one self-proclaimed version of socialism or another, and a great deal of historical analysis draws guidance, implicit or explicit, from Marx's thought. No doubt a resurrected Karl Marx would be startled, even indignant, at many of the ideas and practices now advanced in his name. The price of being a seminal thinker is to have one's seed produce many a mutant.

Some processes of the post-mortem century, to be sure, played

themselves out rather differently from Marx's hopes and expectations. Didn't he and Engels write in 1879 that "For almost forty years we have stressed the class struggle as the immediate driving power of history and in particular the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat as the great lever of the modern social revolution"? Twentieth-century revolutions based on peasants and rural workers were not exactly what he had in mind. Didn't they continue that "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself", and explicitly reject the view "that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves" (Marx & Engels, "Circular Letter" to A. Bebel, W. Liebknecht, W. Bracke and others, 1879)? Salvation by elites -- revolutionary or otherwise -- did not fit Marx's vision of the future. If Marx had predicted the coming century with precision, however, we would now have to consider him not merely a great thinker but a divinity.

Our business today is not worship of a dead god, but reflection on a living intellectual resource. I want only to point out how much of Marx's historical analysis has survived a century of research and criticism, how many of Marx's then-revolutionary theses we now take for granted, how few of Marx's major lines of historical inquiry turned out to be misdirected. I want, in short, to recall the superb historian that joined forces with the economic theorist and political activist.

My pursuit of these themes will be mercilessly schematic, and mercifully brief. Let me draw my illustrations from just two subjects about which Marx wrote repeatedly: the process of proletarianization, and political change in France from the late eighteenth century to his own time. In the analysis of proletarianization we see Marx using broad theories and concrete historical experiences to illuminate each other. In the treatment of political change in France we see Marx in a less explicitly theoretical mood, combining historical insight with vigorous commentary on the problems and prospects of his own time.

Proletarianization

At the center of Marx's analysis of capitalist development stands the creation of a proletariat -- of a class of people dependent for survival on the sale of their labor power to holders of capital. Marx's chief account of that creation appears in Das Kapital. Reading the account brings a few surprises. **First**, the enormous place assigned to rural areas and rural people in the process of proletarianization. Although Marx did present the factory wage-slave as the extreme form of proletarian existence, the bulk of his proletarians were actuallyiy villagers. In Capital, Marx described the separation of rural people from the land by landlords intent on gaining sole possession of the land, dictating the terms of its use, and thereby increasing the return from their holdings. To the extent that they employed hired labor to assure that return, and reinvested the surplus created by that

hired labor in the agricultural enterprise, landlords became agrarian capitalists.

Thus agrarian capitalists created themselves and rural proletarians in the same process. By that process rural proletarians became available as a cheap labor force for manufacturing. "The proletariat created by the breaking up of the bands of feudal retainers and by the forcible expropriation of the people from the soil," wrote Marx, "this 'free' proletariat could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufactures as fast as it was thrown upon the world" (Capital, chapter 28).

Agrarian capitalism, in Marx's analysis, promoted commercial and industrial capitalism. Marx portrayed a thoroughly-proletarianized countryside as the prelude to the concentration of capital and the growth of urban industry. "In the history of primitive accumulation," he declared,

all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labor-market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process (Capital, chapter 26).

As compared with the quintessentially urban accounts of industrial capitalism offered by many subsequent authors -- Marx's strong

emphasis on the countryside comes as a refreshing surprise.

The **second** surprise comes from Marx's challenge to Malthus. Unlike the many later historians who have accepted the idea of rural "population pressure" as an autonomous cause of proletarianization, Marx explicitly rejected two features of Malthus' analysis: 1) the treatment of the tendency of population to overrun resources as a general law rather than a specific feature of capitalist development, 2) the explanation of that tendency as a consequence of unrestrained sexual activity. Instead, Marx argued that the tendency of capitalists to convert the surplus value derived from other people's labor into fixed capital meant that the demand for labor power increased more slowly than capital accumulated.

Labor therefore became increasingly redundant. Redundant labor, Marx taught, promoted the holding near subsistence of the wage for those who worked. "The laboring population," he continued,

therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus-population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone (Capital, chapter

25).

Although Marx did not specify the demographic mechanisms involved with any exactitude, he clearly saw the rapid growth of rural population as a result, rather than as a cause, of capitalist influence.

Not all of Marx's analysis of proletarianization has survived th century-plus since he wrote it. The iron law of wages now seems to have more bend to it than Marx allowed. People forced off the European land by various forms of enclosure now appear to have been tenants, squatters, and land-poor laborers more often than land-owning peasants. Yet demographic and economic historians are only now coming to terms with the chief assertions of Marx's argument: that the crucial events of European proletarianization occurred int the countryside, happened as a result of capitalist accumulation, and in their turn promoted capitalist accumulation.

After nearly a century of fixation on a spurious "industrial revolution" supposedly driven by technology and based in cities, we are rediscovering the truth of Marx's chief assertions. We are learning that the European countryside was long more proletarian than the cities, that villages and small towns remained the prime sites of proletarianization well into the nineteenth century, that the fundamental shifts to wage-labor happened mainly in agriculture and cottage industry, that great surges of population growth accompanied the major waves of expansion in rural

wage-labor. Exactly how the population growth and the proletarianization interacted remains unclear; even there the Marxist formulation has by no means lost out. In general, Marx's analysis has proved more durable than any of its competitors.

French Politics, 1789-1871

Marx self-consciously used the material of economic history in constructing his general theories of proletarianization. For that reason, we may admire his contributions to economic history without being surprised that he made them. When it comes to political history, however, we face a field in which Marx undertook no major project of research and writing. His contributions there appeared as by-products of commentaries on contemporary politics, of programmatic writing, and of general theoretical treatises. As early as 1843, with his "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," the twenty-five-year-old Marx treated the French Revolution of 1789 as one of history's great turning-points. He subsequently made French political experience from 1789 onward a touchstone of his general historical work.

By the time Marx and Engels drafted the Communist Manifesto in 1848, France's eighteenth-century revolution had become Marx's model of a bourgeois revolution; the "lighthouse of all revolutionary epochs", he then called it. Marx drew on the French Revolution not only as a guide to the necessary conditions for revolution, but also as a template for the internal development of

a revolutionary process. As Alan Gilbert points out,

"Marx's strategy for the German revolution of 1848 evolved through a series of studies of the French Revolution. Pursued in the light of Marx's new materialist hypothesis, these studies led to a broad framework for communist policy: to transform a protracted democratic revolution into a socialist one" (Gilbert 1981: 44).

The revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848 and, eventually, 1870-71 provided the principal materials for Marx's successive conceptions of socialist revolution.

As it happens, the interpretation of the Revolution of 1789 to 1799 as a bourgeois revolution has come in for historiographical drubbing during the last quarter-century. The secure days of 1939, when Georges Lefebvre's sesquicentennial Coming of the French Revolution almost took the bourgeois revolution for granted, have long since disappeared. Critics have argued that capitalism had penetrated French life too little to provide a base for an aggressive bourgeoisie, that successful merchants, office-holders, and old nobles were merging into a class of landlords and rentiers heavily dependent on the crown, that the state's fiscal difficulties in the later eighteenth century point to a collapse of the state rather than to an assault by a rising class, that the people who actually seized power in 1789 and thereafter consisted disproportionately of officeholders and professionals rather than capitalists, and so on. With the recent

death of Albert Soboul, the most influential proponent of the classic bourgeois-revolution theme, the critics will probably gain ground.

The accumulating criticism will unquestionably compromise Marx's simplest portrayal of the eighteenth-century revolution as a bourgeois seizure of power. Yet much of Marx's analysis will remain. Despite enormous controversy over the character of eighteenth-century France, we are likely to end up seeing that the development of agrarian and commercial capitalism did, indeed, create the bases for the assault on the state. Although some people will continue to argue that various features of the Revolution actually set back the expansion of French capitalism, it is becoming clearer than ever that the revolutionaries cleared the way to capitalist property by dissolving communal rights in the land, proscribing a wide variety of corporate propertyholders, selling church and noble lands, and liquidating "feudal" dues, privileges, and banalities.

The question of who made the Revolution remains open; it is quite possible that when all the archival dust has settled, we will see that a connected network of merchants, officials, and professionals -- in short, of bourgeois -- actually replaced the monarchy's rule via a combination of centralized national bureaucracies, venal officeholders, dependent corporations, feudal landlords, and priests. Thus a sophisticated version of Marx's bourgeois revolution may well survive the critical onslaught.

In any case, Marx's treatments of French nineteenth-century revolutions remain classics. The Revolution of 1848, in particular, focused Marx's analytic powers. His Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte gives us an extraordinary combination of chronicle, analysis, strategic thought, and satire. Marx wrote the Eighteenth Brumaire as a series of articles beginning in January 1852. He started the writing, then, only weeks after Louis Napoleon's pre-emptive coup d'etat of December, 1851, as an effort to explain the destruction of 1848's republican and democratic revolution.

Marx succeeded brilliantly. The Eighteenth Brumaire treats us to a detailed analysis of the class structure, a remarkable discussion of the relationship of the state to the class structure, a treatment of the revolution's successive phases, a consideration of the reasons for the checking of the strong workers' movement that appeared in 1848, and -- not least! -- a witty series of comparisons between figures and events of the 1789 revolution and those of 1848 to 1851. The essay's very title recalls, to the disadvantage of Louis Napoleon, the contrast between his coup of December 1851 and his uncle's seizure of power in November 1799, the 18th Brumaire, Year VIII in the revolutionary calendar.

In a justly famous passage at the essay's very start, Marx reflected that:

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will;

not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language. Luther put on the mask of the apostle Paul; the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternatively as the Roman republic and the Roman empire; and the revolution of 1848 knew no better than to parody at some points 1789 and at others the revolutionary traditions of 1793-5.

On it goes, to a compact summary of the work accomplished by the first Revolution, to a discussion of the ways in which that work set the frame for nineteenth-century politics, including the politics of revolution, to a statement of the problem of explaining the collapse of 1848's hopes, to a chronological precis, to the analysis itself.

With the benefit of another 130 years of historical writing, we can find some flaws in Marx's analysis. He underestimated the

importance of wage-work and small-scale industry in the French countryside, lumping far too many people into his potato-sack peasants. He ignored the breadth of resistance -- both rural and urban -- to Louis Napoleon's coup, brushing aside a rebellion involving something like 100,000 people. Most important, he changed his estimate of peasant politics from the glimmers of radicalism and the possibility of a peasant-worker alliance in his earlier Class Struggles in France to the portrayal of a fragmented and reactionary class in the Eighteenth Brumaire. The earlier account came closer to the mark. These errors acknowledged and a century's further research digested, we still find in hand a fresh, challenging, and largely correct analysis of 1848. What is more, Marx's writings on nineteenth-century French revolutions still provide that boon for graduate students: proposals for further research.

Conclusion

With proletarianization and with French politics, we take up two of the finest examples of Marx's historical skill, but we certainly don't exhaust the catalog. His treatments of ancient economies, of feudalism, of alternative paths to capital accumulation, and many other topics show him operating as a reflective, critical, widely-informed historian. Not that we would want to confuse Das Kapital with the New Cambridge Modern History: If you want to look up the facts as generations of researchers have established them, try something later than Marx's

historical writings. But if you want to observe the coalescence of historical perception with theoretical penetration, you can do no better than the work of Karl Marx. Karl Marx: an intellectual virtuoso, at once revolutionary, economic theorist, and historian.

REFERENCE

Alan Gilbert, Marx's Politics. Communists & Citizens. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1981.