

May Day 2018 and the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx

By David North
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May Day 2018 is invested with special significance, because we are celebrating not only the day of international working-class solidarity, but also the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. There is no element of exaggeration in the assertion that in the realm of philosophy, economic science, historiography, social theory and politics, Marx is the most significant figure of the modern era. There is not another thinker who has exerted such a great, enduring and progressive influence on the development of the social consciousness of the great mass of humanity and its struggle against oppression and exploitation. Marx's work initiated a new epoch in mankind's understanding of the objective forces that determine the course of historical development, and thus made possible the conscious struggle of the working class for the socialist transformation of society.

On the basis of his refutation of Hegel's objective idealism and the critical appropriation of its dialectical methodology, Marx was able to develop philosophical materialism and apply it to the study of man's socioeconomic and political evolution. Prior to Marx, even the most advanced thinkers—above all, Hegel and Feuerbach, the greatest of Marx's immediate predecessors—derived social and political relations from some sort of ideal inspiration, be it spiritual or intellectual. Even the great materialist thinkers of the 18th century, such as Helvetius and Baron d'Holbach, whose writings played a critical role in preparing the ground for the great French Revolution of 1789-1794, believed that the social and political environment was determined by "public opinion," that is, by thought. But the idealist conception that social relations are the product of thought is contradicted by reality. Human beings, in their real historical existence, are born into, confront and adapt themselves unconsciously to the prevailing social relations.

Marx, the greatest of all materialist philosophers, uncovered the real origin of man's thought and ideological conceptions, and, as Lenin later explained so concisely, proved that the "conclusion that the course of ideas depends on the course of things is the only one compatible with scientific psychology" (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 139-40).

In his initial elaboration of the materialist conception of history and its subsequent substantiation in the writing of *Das Kapital*, Marx identified—amidst the seemingly uncoordinated actions of countless millions of human beings, each pursuing what they believed to be their own best interests, driven by their individual passions, ambitions and contradictory aspirations—those objective forces, operating apart from and even independently of individual subjective consciousness, that underlie and determine the economic structure of society.

Marx rejected any resort to idealist subjectivism in explaining the development of consciousness. Even false conceptions of the nature of society are rooted in and are reflections of objective conditions that exist independently of individuals. Man's inability to perceive and comprehend, on the basis of direct observation, the exploitative character of capitalist social relations cannot be explained as a failure of the individual intellect. Rather, it arises from the "enigmatical character"

acquired by the products of labor when they assume the form of commodities. As commodities, Marx wrote, "a definite social relation between men" necessarily "assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital*, vol. 1, in *Collected Works*, vol. 35, pp. 82-83).

Marx and his life-long friend and collaborator, the genius Friedrich Engels, did not "invent" socialism. The term itself came into usage as early as the 1830s. Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier, in particular, have entered into history as the "utopian" precursors of Marx and Engels. These remarkable thinkers did not lack for brilliant insights into the defects of existing society and proposals for its more rational organization. But what was absent from their conceptions was an explanation of the objective socioeconomic processes from which socialism would actually emerge and the identification of the social force that would fight for its realization.

As Marx later recalled, he and Engels "proposed the scientific study of the economic structure of bourgeois society as the only tenable theoretical foundation" for the fight for socialism, and "argued in popular form that it was not a matter of putting some utopian system into effect, but of conscious participation in the historical process revolutionizing society before our very eyes" (*Herr Vogt*, in Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, vol. 17, Moscow: 1981, p. 79).

In explaining the significance of his theoretical work, Marx, with excessive modesty, identified three critical and interrelated achievements:

What I did that was new was to prove: 1. that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society* (*Marx Letter to Weydemeyer*, March 5, 1852, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, pp. 64-65).

As the bicentenary of Marx's birth has approached, there has been no shortage of assessments by academics and journalists of the significance of his life. The economic disaster of 2008 is still fresh in everyone's memory. Only incorrigible anticommunist reactionaries, blinded by hatred and greed, can deny the monumental scale of Marx's work. Even the phrase "Marx was right!" has appeared fairly frequently. The more intellectually conscientious academics have conducted painstaking research to refute attacks by conventional bourgeois economists on critical elements of Marx's work, such as the labor theory of value and his analysis of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline. Such serious intellectual work should be welcomed and encouraged.

However, even the more generous acknowledgments of Marx's genius are constrained by efforts to isolate his theoretical work from its practical political, i.e., contemporary revolutionary implications. One or another aspect of Marx's work is lauded as "relevant" to an understanding of present day economic conditions. But the appreciation of Marx, the economic theorist, is rigidly separated from *Marxism* as the theory,

program and practice of world socialist revolution. Much of the discussion of the “relevance” of Marx is dominated and distorted by this strict separation of the consideration of Marx’s economic critique of capitalism, from the recognition of the enduring significance of Marxism as the historical and contemporary international political movement of the most advanced sections of the working class for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system.

The separation of Marx, the “economic theorist,” from the socialist revolutionary, has a long history. In the course of more than a century, countless efforts have been made to “trim Marx’s beard,” that is, to reconcile Marx with one or another form of bourgeois ideology and petty-bourgeois opportunist reformism. Eduard Bernstein seized on the opportunity provided by Engels’ death in 1895 to disassociate Marxism from socialist revolution and convert international socialism into a movement for social reforms. In the course of the 12th century, the revisions of Marxism assumed an increasingly reactionary character, serving more or less openly as a means of divesting it of any real revolutionary significance and converting it into an apologia for the national opportunism of the mass Social Democratic and Stalinist parties and trade unions.

The assault on Marx’s legacy was facilitated by the unrelenting efforts of petty-bourgeois theorists to undermine and discredit the materialist foundations of his theoretical work. As early as the 1890s, barely a decade after his death, various German professors were eager to reconcile Marx’s revolutionary morality, based on the logic of class struggle, with Kant’s supra-historical “categorical imperative.” From the very beginning of the twentieth century, reflecting the increasing influence of philosophical irrationalism upon broad sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, Marx’s insistence on the objective and law-governed character of the historical process came under attack.

Thinkers such as Georges Sorel and later Henri De Man claimed that workers required the inspiration of myths, not knowledge of objective laws governing the development of the class struggle against capitalism, to inspire the fight for socialism. Insight into unconscious psychological motivations, rather than the analysis and comprehension of objective economic forces, were declared to be essential for winning workers to the socialist movement.

The flight of petty-bourgeois intellectuals into irrationalism was combined with an attack on Engels as a vulgar materialist and positivist, who had supposedly concealed the individualist and humanist elements of Marx’s thought. The “Young Marx” of the *Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* was elevated above the “Old Marx” of *Das Kapital*. The main aim of the assault—which has persisted under the influence of Nietzscheism, existentialism, the Frankfurt School’s dilution of materialism with Freudian pseudo-science, and the irrationalist and anti-historical intellectual nihilism of post-modernism—has been to suppress the essential revolutionary content of Marx’s work.

The intelligence agencies of the capitalist state have not stood on the sidelines in the ideological war against Marxism. The British newspaper, the *Independent*, in an article published yesterday, calls attention to a recently declassified CIA research paper. The agency, it reveals, “read French postmodern theory, concluding that its questioning of the objective basis of reality could be used to undermine the Marxist doctrine of historical ... inevitability. Millions of dollars were pumped into front organizations such as magazines, publishing houses and favored academics, in order to push postmodern ideas and to create a center-left, thus demarcating the outer boundary of respectable ideas—anything beyond which could be denounced as dangerous and radical lunacy ...”

The separation of Marx, the theoretician, from Marx, the revolutionary, must lead to falsification, first and foremost of Marx’s biography. Marx, the thinker, cannot be understood apart from his political development and activity as a revolutionist. As Franz Mehring observed in his

biography of Marx, “There is no doubt that the incomparable stature of Marx is due not a little to the fact that in him the man of ideas was indissolubly bound up with the man of action, and that the two mutually complemented and supported each other” (*Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, p. xiii).

As early as March 1843, Marx wrote to Arnold Ruge: “Feuerbach’s aphorisms seem to me incorrect only in one respect, that he refers too much to nature and too little to politics. That, however, is the only alliance by which present-day philosophy can become truth” (Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, p. 400). This was not a passing phrase, but the key to understanding the essential relation between philosophy and politics in both Marx’s work and in the contemporary world.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question” (*Collected Works*, vol. 5, p. 6).

Philosophy, separated from revolutionary politics, the struggle against the oppression of man by man, is idle speculation, without progressive significance. But politics without a firm basis in revolutionary theory and knowledge of its development in the course of the long history of the international workers movement and the struggle for socialism, can lead only to impotent improvisations and outright betrayal.

Marx died on March 14, 1883 at the age of 64. Speaking at his graveside, Engels described his beloved friend and comrade-in-arms as a “man of science.” But, he added, “this was not even half the man.” Marx, Engels declared, “was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which *he* was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation. Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity and success such as few could rival” (Reproduced in *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, Moscow, p. 349).

Marx, the man, died 135 years ago. *Marxism*—understood as the application of dialectical and historical materialist methodology to the study of continuously changing objective socioeconomic conditions; as a science of revolutionary political perspective oriented toward the conquest of political power by the working class, the ending of capitalist exploitation, the abolition of the nation-state system and the establishment of a socialist society on a world scale—can only be properly understood in its relation to the historical development of the class struggle and international socialist movement.

Engels once wrote that with every advance in the natural sciences, materialism must change its form; that is, it must incorporate into its understanding of the material universe the latest advances in physics, chemistry, evolutionary biology, and mathematics. In like manner, Marxism, as a science devoted specifically to the study of capitalist society, develops through the continuous examination of critical changes in the capitalist mode of production on a world scale *and* through participation in, and the critical assimilation of, the experiences of the class struggle on an international scale. All invocations of “dialectics” that exclude this critical element of Marxism, that ignores or glosses over the lessons of the revolutionary struggles of the past century, are nothing but an exercise in empty phrase-mongering and petty-bourgeois political charlatany.

The celebration of the bicentenary of Marx’s birth is of genuine revolutionary political significance only to the extent that it is based on the whole historical development of Marxism. In the course of the 20th

century, the working class passed through monumental historical experiences: of imperialist wars, of revolutions and counterrevolutions. Marxism does not exist in the abstract, or as a set of conclusions formulated more than a century ago. Rather, it exists as the real movement that represents the continuity of the conscious struggle within the international working class to develop the program, perspective and practice of world socialist revolution. In 1938, Leon Trotsky founded the Fourth International, in revolutionary opposition to the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, whose betrayals had led to catastrophic defeats of the working class.

In the course of 80 years, the Fourth International has passed through tumultuous struggles, not only against the counterrevolutionary parties and organizations of the Stalinist and Social Democratic bureaucracies, but also against the many forms of opportunism, centrism and pseudo-leftism that reflect the pressure of the capitalist class and imperialism upon the working class. It is in the struggle against all these forces that the Fourth International, led by the International Committee, has defended and developed Marxism.

As we celebrate May Day 2018, there are growing signs that a new period of mass revolutionary struggles by the working class has begun. As is usually the case, the emergence of the working class onto the scene of history comes as a surprise—above all to the representatives of the pseudo-left and the anti-Marxist academics whose intellectual and political conceptions are based on the total rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force and, therefore, a no less total belief in the permanence of capitalism.

But all that is “irrational,” all that exists in defiance of the needs of the progressive development of human civilization, is “unreal.” That is, it is condemned by virtue of its own insoluble contradictions to historical oblivion. This sentence has been imposed by history on capitalist society. It must be carried out. Has there ever been another ruling class that has displayed such obvious signs of social parasitism, political disorientation, intellectual exhaustion, and moral breakdown? Compared to today’s international mafia of oligarchs, who control and consume a vast portion of the wealth produced by the labor of billions of people, the bourgeoisie of Marx’s era appear almost as a respectable fraternity of philanthropists. The claims of decrepit reformists like Sanders and Corbyn that the capitalist oligarchs can be persuaded with sweet phrases to accept a more equitable distribution of wealth is nothing less than delusional. As Trotsky once asked, how are tearful appeals to the decency of the rich better than prayers for rain? There is no way to settle accounts with the class that owns and controls the means of production and the global financial networks, along with gigantic military machines, intelligence agencies and police forces except through socialist revolution. But is this possible?

“At a certain stage of their development,” Marx wrote, “the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution” (*Marx Engels Lenin on Historical Materialism*, Moscow: 1972, p. 137). These words, in the most profound and immediate sense, define the historical situation that confronts present-day capitalism.

For all their wealth and power, the ruling elites stagger from crisis to crisis. The ascendancy of Trump in the United States is the most visible and ghoulish expression of the universal degeneracy of the capitalist class. But the ascendancy of Trump is of not only symbolic significance. Throughout the 20th century, and especially in the aftermath of World War II, the United States functioned as the ultimate guarantor of the stability and survival of the world capitalist system. It is incapable of playing that role any longer.

For the past quarter-century, American capitalism—seeking to offset, through military operations, the consequences of its protracted economic decline—has become the epicenter of geopolitical and financial instability.

Within this situation, the resurgence of class struggle in the United States has immense historical significance. The upsurge of class struggle within the United States will imbue the international working class with renewed confidence in the possibility of defeating imperialism, and thereby accelerate the process of global working-class radicalization.

The laws of history, Trotsky proclaimed upon founding the Fourth International, are more powerful than the bureaucratic apparatus. That prognosis is now being vindicated. The working class is in the process of throwing off the shackles imposed by the old reactionary trade unions and their allies among the cynical organizations of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left and its myriad forms of reactionary identity politics. The real progressive and revolutionary struggles of this epoch will be based on the universal emancipatory aspirations of the working class, not on the selfish strivings of one or another fragment of the upper-middle-class for identity-based privileges.

On this historic May Day, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, the International Committee of the Fourth International proudly proclaims that Trotskyism is the Marxism of the 21st century! We appeal to all our listeners throughout the world, to the hundreds of thousands of readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*: Join our ranks! Build new sections of the Fourth International! Participate in the fight for the victory of the working class and the establishment of a new and truly humane society, based on the genuinely socialist principles of international solidarity and the equality of all mankind.

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