

## MARX AND HISTORY

How does Marx stand one hundred years after his death? If we look at the literature written and read by intellectuals, and the polemics among Marxists, the answer is: not too firmly. In the past they disputed about the political and ideological significance of Marx' theory. Today some of the most basic propositions of the old gentleman are queried even among people claiming to be Marxists, from the materialist conception of history to the labour theory of value. People ask with increasing frequency what precisely has survived in Marxism. So it is important to establish, at the outset, that today—unlike the situation even thirty years ago—nobody seriously doubts that something of Marx *has* survived, indeed that a great deal has survived. If this were not the case, there would not be such passionate argument about the matter. For there is no argument about thinkers who are dead.

No one today asks what has survived of the thought of Herbert Spencer, who, at the time of Marx' death, was by far the most celebrated philosopher and sociologist in the world, a man whose name was familiar to any educated person from Santiago de Chile to Tokyo. For nothing has survived. Whoever visits Marx' tomb in Highgate cemetery can verify this. For, almost opposite Marx' grave is the tomb of Herbert Spencer. It is utterly forgotten. Hardly anyone knows where it is, and only people with some knowledge of nineteenth-century history or the history of sociology even know

who he was. Only they smile when I joke about the posthumous combination of Marx and Spencer, which curiously anticipated the name of the well-known firm of Marks and Spencer, familiar to every native and tourist who goes shopping in Britain.

Marx is indeed alive. True enough, the world has changed greatly since 1883, and it is reasonable to ask ourselves how much of Marx' work has become obsolete in consequence. Yet for a historian the first duty on the occasion of the centenary of his death is not to enter into these questions, but to underline the enormous importance of Marx for us, and the enormous influence he has had on the historical sciences. There can be no doubt about this influence. First of all, there are today many more historians who adhere to Marxism than there ever were before, not only in Socialist countries, where rejection of Marxism is difficult, if not impossible, but also in the West and in the Third World. Nor do I wish to stress the fact that—to quote a non-Marxist—Marxists have succeeded in the last few decades in “gaining entrance to the strongholds” of the universities. I simply wish to quote two examples. In the index of the survey of “new historical studies” in Europe and North America in 1978 by George Iggers (*International Handbook of Historical Studies. Contemporary Research and Theory*, London, 1979) there are more entries for Marx than for Ranke and Max Weber, to say nothing of others; and I can count, if I am not mistaken, at least 55 names known to me as Marxists. The second example is the great work of probably the most celebrated historian of the postwar period, Fernand Braudel's *Civilisation matérielle, Economie et Capitalisme, XV-XVIII siècles*, (Paris, 1979, 3 vols.), whose theme and title themselves testify to the central importance that the basic questions of history associated with Marx have even for non-Marxists. Marx' name occurs more often than that of any *French* author, and whoever knows France knows that such national modesty is unusual in that country.

The influence of Marxism on historical science is not self-explanatory. For though the materialist conception of history represents the core of Marxist theory and even though everything Marx wrote was imbued with history, Marx himself hardly concerned himself with history in the manner of professional historians. Engels seems to have been more interested in the past as such and even wrote, or at least projected, some works that libra-

rians would catalogue under the heading of “History”: for example, the *Peasant War in Germany*, the pamphlet on the Mark, *The Origin of the Family* and some projects on German and Irish history. In fact, his historical studies allowed Engels to correct the theses of Marx on certain problems of feudalism, for example, on the disappearance of serfdom (as was acknowledged by Marx).

Marx himself wrote nothing that was published under the title “history”, except for a series of polemical articles, written in the 1850’s and aimed at Czarism and Lord Palmerston. They are not among his most important works; indeed, the *Secret Diplomatic History of the 18th Century* could practically be thrown into the waste-paper-basket. What we call the historical writings of Marx consist almost entirely of political commentaries and newspaper articles. The great works, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* and *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* are inspired contemporary journalism. They were written during the events they analyse or immediately after. The fact that their permanent historical value is undoubted, testifies not only to the genius of Marx but also to the extraordinary power of the materialist conception of history. The articles which Marx wrote, principally as a newspaper correspondent in the 1850’s to earn his livelihood, also contain much historical material that he collected and analysed as a background for his daily correspondence, as, for example, on the British Empire in India. These articles certainly hold interest for the Marxist historian, not only because they shed light on Marx’ opinions on various events and problems of history—or at least on a period that has become history for us—but also because they are examples of the application of the materialist conception of history to the analysis of particular historical events. They not only show, to use Ranke’s phrase, “how it really was,” but at the same time, “why it really was.” However, they were not conceived of as history as professional historians see their discipline. One might add that their value is uneven.

Thus I repeat: Marx did *not* write about history in the professional sense, or did so only incidentally. Obviously, his writings illustrate many of his views on specific problems of the past in particular and the process of historical development in general. Some of his observations have significantly influenced later historiography. I am thinking, for example, of the continuous and lively

discussion on the relation between Protestantism and capitalist development, which derives originally from a few incidental references in *Das Kapital*. However, what revolutionized historiographic science after the death of Marx was not the ensemble of his particular or even general observations on historical process but the materialist conception of history as such.

“This conception of history,”—I quote Marx and Engels from the first draft of *The German Ideology*—“thus relies on expounding the real process of production—starting from the material production of life itself—and comprehending the form of intercourse with and created by this mode of production, i.e. civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the State, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality etc., etc., arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis; thus making possible the depiction of the whole thing in its totality (and therefore also the reciprocal action of these various aspects on one another).” (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. V, p. 33).

Here we already have practically the same formulation of the materialist conception of history which Marx and Engels contrived to maintain for the rest of their lives. This conception, formulated by Marx during the controversy with German philosophers and ideologists in the 1840’s was to act like a charge of dynamite on historical science. This was not because it tried to substitute itself for history but, on the contrary, because it scientifically defined its function and tasks. Let me quote again from *The German Ideology*.

“Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development, of men... When the reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy (*die selbständige Philosophie*) loses its medium of existence. At best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of human beings. These abstractions themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming

the epochs of history into shape.” (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *ibid.* p. 37). And again, “In every single case empirical observation must show empirically and without any mystification and speculation the tie between social and political organization and production.”

However, this “real history” was of only casual interest to Marx, and he gives only a few words to the “summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of human beings”—for example, in the famous Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*—although in the *Grundrisse* Marx discussed such problems at greater length. Even his main work, *Das Kapital*, cannot be read strictly speaking as a history of capitalist development. That was not its object. Hence, we find large and obvious historical lacunae in the work of Marx that later work by Marxist historians has tried to fill. For example, we find in Marx no concrete and coherent analysis of the historical passage from feudalism to capitalism in the West. Marx used history but not as a historian.

What interested him was not the past as such but the whole process of human development that prefigured the future. For this reason, he made the study of advanced capitalism, of “bourgeois society [as] the most developed and complex historical organization of production,” the pivot of his analysis. Earlier societies thus enter into this analysis as fore-runners. “The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape.” Pre-capitalist societies can be understood only through the analysis of capitalism. This analytical orientation which Marx sought to elaborate in his Introduction to the *Grundrisse* poses some major methodological questions, which are still far from clarified. I mention this only to stress that Marx, in spite of his great historical erudition and his profoundly historical theory, is not to be considered simply as a professor of history.

The relations between Marx and history are therefore not at all simple. A century of polemics and of Marxism as an ideology of parties, movements and States has not made it easier to see them with any clarity. To take an example. Certainly Marxists have made an enormous and probably decisive contribution to the present flourishing field of the history of the working class and the workers’ movement or, still more generally, to the history, neglected by older academic historians, of the common people; but this

has little to do with the materialist conception of history. It is due to the fact that Marxist historians, as politically involved persons of the left, are naturally interested in these themes and have a particular sympathy for them. However, these themes could be of equal interest to non-Marxists. Indeed, they are, so that at present such themes are, within a populist and theoretically nebulous left, at least as popular as among Marxists. The fact that today riots and rebellions are studied more than ever is undoubtedly due to the influence of Marxist historians who have put these phenomena at the center of the discussion, but what is Marxist in their work is not the fact that they write about Spartacus and not, shall we say, about Julius Caesar, but *how* they write of *both* Spartacus and Caesar.

Let me suggest some theses for discussion, in order to clarify the influence of Marx on historical science.

*First*, this influence has made itself felt in three ways: through Marxist historians, who have, however, always been in the minority (except in socialist countries and, in recent decades, in large parts of the so-called Third World); through anti-Marxist historians who partially accept the questions of the materialist conception of Marx and the Marxists but arrive at different answers (a typical case would be Max Weber); and finally, also through the large and increasing ranks of ex-Marxist historians, who almost always remained marked in some way by their Marxist past. In fact, when a new question arises in history we look at history itself in an entirely different way, whatever the answer at which we arrive. For example, both in France and England there is at present a strong reaction against the variants of the Marxist interpretation of the respective bourgeois revolutions which until a short time ago dominated historical research in the two countries, in other words, against Christopher Hill and Albert Soboul. However, what prevails at present is not the return to a pre-Marxist history of these revolutions but the critique of Marxist theses or the development and modification of these theses. The pre-Marxist past is dead beyond revival.

Finally, we may add that even leaving aside the disputes between Marxists and anti-Marxists, many elements of Marxist origin have penetrated into general history, radically changing it. To cite only two: the role of classes—independently of how we evalu-

ate it—and the social roots of ideas, of the problematic of “base” and “superstructure.” It would thus be unthinkable today to consider the Protestant Reform purely in terms of a history of ideas or religion. One might, of course, argue that this transformation is not necessarily Marxist. Marxism has been only one factor, even though a decisive one, among those which have contributed to the growing accentuation of economic and social elements in history. This was already evident before 1914. Conversely, today a simplistic economic determinism is much more typical of some bourgeois historians than of Marxists. The specifically Marxist contribution is however incontestable. It is not by chance, for example, that the master of the French school of the *Annales*, Fernand Braudel, who originally showed little interest in Marx, today treats a characteristic theme of Marxism, that is, the development of capitalism, and is much more open with respect to some Marxist theses, for example, those of Immanuel Wallerstein.

My *second* thesis is that Marx himself influenced historical science in three ways: first, through the materialist conception of history as such, which may be summarized in the sentence, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but on the contrary their social existence their consciousness.” Second, through his model of the development of society as passing through a series of social formations determined by production, that later developed into capitalism or disappeared. Finally, through the numerous observations found in Marx’ writings regarding the most varied concrete problems of the past or of society in general. This multiplicity of stimuli coming from Marx naturally presents not only advantages but also disadvantages. Thus it has led to lengthy, time-consuming and often useless controversies about particular views of Marx and Engels which have no necessary relevance to the materialist conception of history as such. For example, we can answer “yes” or “no” to the questions whether there has been an Asiatic mode of production or whether there has been only one such mode. Both answers are compatible with the materialist conception of history.

This multiplicity of stimuli contained in Marx leads me to my *third* thesis, namely, that in the course of the past hundred years Marxists as well as others have been stimulated in different ways by Marx depending on their own interests and the problematic of



the moment. Each generation discovers not only Marx but its own Marx. This has meant not only that from time to time different texts of Marx move into the center of a discussion—this is the case of *The 18th Brumaire*, which used hardly to be mentioned in debates on historical materialism in the time of the Second International—but also that different aspects of Marxist thought have been emphasized. The first historical reception of Marx naturally emphasized the dependence of the superstructure on the “economic” base (perhaps it is worth recalling this today). Later, when it was no longer possible to doubt that, for example, the English Revolution could not be understood *only* in terms of Puritan ideology, it was Marxists who reminded us that this ideology was not only the reflection of social developments but an important autonomous factor in history. Today, some Marxists are particularly active in the study of ideology and myth. At present, for example, the attention of many Marxist historians seems to be particularly concentrated, and for obvious reasons, on the autonomous role of the State.

What real effects has Marx had on contemporary historical science? As Iggers says, “the extraordinary multiplicity of historical and sociological contributions by Marxist scholars [does not authorize] generalized observations on Marxist scientific production.” None the less, some sectors may be singled out in which the influence of Marx is particularly evident. Among them are the history of non-European societies, especially Oriental, classical antiquity, a field which has always exerted an exceptional attraction on eminent Marxist scholars—among Marxist work by contemporaries, Moses Finley, Jean Pierre Vernant and more recently, G. de Sainte-Croix come to mind—and general history of slavery. Marxist influence is particularly evident in social history, which has flourished greatly in recent decades. Pre-history, that is, the history of the origin of class societies and of the State, has recently been greatly developed. Nor is it surprising that scholars in this field should think of Marx, who showed so great an interest in it. It is obvious, however, that the influence of Marx is especially found in economic history, because academic economics, since the end of classic political economy, neglected the problem of economic development so long and so systematically as to leave its treatment in practice to the Marxists or those who accepted the



importance of the questions which preoccupied Marx. As late as 1969 the Nobel Laureate, Sir John Hicks, who cannot be suspected of Marxist sympathies, noted in his *Theory of Economic History* that since “there is so little in the way of an alternative version that is available” to the application of “the Marxian categories” in their various versions, it was not surprising that many of those who undertook the task of organizing the material of history with the help of the social sciences, or in this case, economic science, turn to these categories. We, however, are less surprised than Sir John Hicks that “one hundred years after *Das Kapital*, after a century during which there have been enormous developments in social sciences, so little else should have emerged”.

A specific example may illustrate the nature of the Marxist impact on the general course of historiography: the “seventeenth century crisis”. Between the mid-1930’s and the late 1940’s medievalists recognized that the economic expansion of the High Middle Ages was followed by a period of economic and demographic regression in the 14th and 15th centuries, thus confirming the non-linearity of the growth of Western capitalism. No doubt the serious crisis of capitalism in the 1930’s helped to sharpen the vision of historians for phenomena of recession. In his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) Maurice Dobb was the first to try to integrate this “crisis of feudalism” systematically into a Marxist schema of transition from feudalism to capitalism. A lively debate among Marxists followed. One by-product of this debate in the early 1950’s was the suggestion that the expansion of the 15th and 16th centuries had been followed by an analogous setback. Only after this “seventeenth century crisis” had been overcome (in part by the consequences of the “English Revolution”) did an unbroken advance towards the Industrial Revolution become possible. Even though phenomena of recession had been noted by some historians, notably in France, it is fair to claim that the suggestion that European, and perhaps world history, should be re-written in the light of a “seventeenth century crisis” emerged largely from the debate among Marxists, and entered general international historiography through the stimulus of Marxists. Indeed, the international debate on this question began in a journal founded by young Marxists and, at the time, often viewed—mistakenly—as a Marxist organ.

What I want to stress is not the value of this thesis, which remains debatable, but the remarkable speed with which it made its mark on the historical world. It immediately led to a vigorous international debate, which still continues, and has already been surveyed in a number of books. Can we really speak of a seventeenth century crisis? The question is still debated, though I have the impression that economic historians, on the whole, have accepted the idea. If there was such a crisis, how widespread was it? There have been attempts to extend it as far as Mexico and China. Has the—or rather a—Marxist interpretation of the crisis been generally accepted? Certainly not, but there can be no doubt that the Marxist stimulus has profoundly modified historical studies on the seventeenth century. It has not necessarily made a Marxist interpretation of history more convincing. (There are, incidentally, also Marxist historians who remain sceptical about the seventeenth century crisis, especially in the USSR). But inasmuch as today a serious history of the seventeenth century which does not come to grips with the question of the “crisis” is no longer conceivable, the strength of the Marxist influence is undeniable.

I cite this example for two reasons. First, because it illustrates the capacity of historians inspired by Marx’ ideas to raise or reformulate questions which, as the debate on the seventeenth century crisis demonstrated, are *immediately* recognised as crucial within the wider historical world, whether or not the Marxists’ answers are accepted or rejected. And secondly, because it indicates the manner in which Marxist historians apply Marx’ ideas, and raises the problem how far a sharp dividing line between Marxist and non-Marxist historical science is possible or desirable.

For in fact, while Marx’ and Engels’ texts contain a number of concrete historical observations which still stimulate historical research and debate—for instance the proposition that a capitalist world market dates back to the 16th century in the *German Ideology*—no suggestion of a seventeenth century crisis is to be found in the classic texts. The idea arose in the course of the attempts by Marxist historians to elaborate Marx’ ideas on the origins of capitalism into a *history* of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, a history which, for reasons suggested above, Marx himself did *not* set out to write. In short, the idea arose not so much out of attempts by Marxists to defend the texts of Marx

against attacks, or to support them against criticism with new interpretations, but rather out of attempts to advance Marxist ideas beyond Marx' own texts. This does not mean that Marxist historians would wish to revise Marx' ideas, though no serious Marxist historian will hesitate to disagree with historical statements by Marx which subsequent research has proved to be untenable. It simply means that living Marxism begins where quotations from Marx are no longer enough. Great thinkers are alive not only because they continue to be read and quoted, and because each generation comments upon and reinterprets their texts, but above all because the questions they have raised retain their significance, and because their theories and methods continue to provide a framework for further enquiry. Marxism remains a programme of research. In this sense Marx is alive for science today, as none of his contemporaries is, with the exception of the other great Charles of the nineteenth century, Darwin.

Naturally, different answers may be given to the questions raised by Marx. It is not the diversity of answers in itself which distinguishes non-Marxist from Marxist historiography. In the debate on the seventeenth century there is no unanimity either among Marxists or among non-Marxists, and on certain points coalitions of scholars from both sides are opposed to united fronts of scholars from both sides. For scientific debate, in history as elsewhere, has three characteristics. While it is inseparable from ideology, it is not *only* ideological. It is, in theory, universally accessible and governed by methods and criteria of research which are universally accepted. There is no science that is *exclusively* proletarian, bourgeois, German, Black or feminist, i.e. a science accessible only to the groups in question and convincing only for their members. In the third place, scientific debate is never concluded, since the solution to every problem produces new and unsolved problems. Where debate is definitively concluded, science is at an end. That is why Marx can influence and has influenced non-Marxist research. Both are concerned with an objectively existing reality, even though this reality is only visible through contemporary systems of understanding and models of thought—or even through the lenses of different ideologies.

All this still leaves plenty of room for debate between the Marxist conception of history and non-Marxist conceptions, and,

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obviously, for the struggle against politically reactionary ideas disguised in academic or scientific costume. Some of us have been engaged in such debates and battles for a considerable time. They can and must continue. I do not even doubt—and as a Marxist I cannot—that the principal impetus for the penetration of Marxism into historical science was political. Almost all intellectuals who have become Marxist, and therefore, as historians, Marxist historians, have done so initially because political conviction drew them to the cause identified with Marx. The point of departure for any history of Marxism and its intellectual influence is the history of the mass socialist movements and of the politicization of intellectuals. But since Marxism is not *only* ideology and political identification, we must go beyond this point of departure. Marx's influence is not measured by the number of historians who describe themselves as Marxist, nor by how many accept the interpretations which are put forward in the name of Marxism. It is measured by the fact that today it is often difficult to know whether a book has been written by a Marxist or a non-Marxist, unless the author declares his or her ideological position.

Perhaps the day will come when no historian will any longer bother about making this distinction. In practice we are still far from this Utopian condition, and will remain so for the foreseeable future, given the ideological and political conflicts and the class struggles of our century.

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