

Karl Marx in the Context of His Own Times

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*I*nfluential thinkers from the past have been reinterpreted again and again in order to make their writings relevant to new generations and new social circumstances. In some cases, such reinterpretations have been dictated by political or religious movements in need of historical or theoretical justification. Probably no thinker has been subjected to more far-reaching reinterpretations than Karl Marx. Still today, his ideas are remarkably often connected with those of Lenin through the construct of “marxism-leninism,” which contains many elements that are alien to Marx’s thought. There are also many other interpretations of Marx that have insufficient support in his own writings.

However, in addition to being usable for various political purposes, Marx’s thought is a subject of considerable scholarly interest. In a scholarly analysis, it is necessary to understand his ideas in relation to the contexts in which they developed. We need to relate them to the societies in which he lived and to the social and theoretical problems that occupied him and his contemporaries. Not least, we need to know how his ideas connected with those of other thinkers in his own times—both academics and political activists. Of course, we cannot bracket off everything we know about what happened after 1883. However, we can look for connections with the many persons, movements, ideas, and courses of events that influenced Marx. In spite of the immense literature on Marx, there are many perspectives that have not yet been investigated. It is in this spirit that we have invited a group of prominent Marx scholars to approach, each in their own way, the theme, “Karl Marx in his own times.”

The first article in the collection, David Leopold's "Karl Marx and 'English Socialism,'" provides a new perspective on Marx's relation to Robert Owen (1771-1858) and the socialist and cooperative movement that he founded. In the Marx literature, Owen and his followers have often been dismissed as proponents of the "utopian socialism" that Marx rejected. But Leopold shows that Marx had a positive interest in Owen and several of his followers. He read many of their writings, and he thought highly of Owen as a person and saw great value in some of his writings, not least his criticism of the capitalist system. Owenite economic analysis of exploitation was well received by Marx. This article also points out several other interesting connections between Marx and the English society in which he lived for more than three decades. The common picture of Marx as an isolated German in London cannot be upheld.

Marx's only travel outside of Europe, his visit to Algiers in 1882, has attracted surprisingly little attention in most biographies. Marcello Musto's article "Algiers 1882: The Last Journey of Marx" tells the story in some detail. Marx had been recommended by his physician to rest in a warm place in order to cure his bronchitis. He followed the doctor's order to refrain from work during this period, but his letters show that this did not stop him from making social observations. He wrote to his family and close friends about abominable colonial abuses including torture, as well as the seemingly unrestrained socializing among Muslims from widely different economic circumstances. On his way back he stayed three weeks in Monaco, where he observed gamblers who did not understand that they were playing pure games of chance; it was "like watching a bunch of lunatics."

Prussian censorship and the Prussian state's relentless oppression of the democratic opposition belonged to the major experiences that shaped Marx's life. As a young man, he spent two intense periods as editor-in-chief on the journalistic frontline in Prussia, first fighting censorship and then the post-production persecutions that replaced it. After that, he never ceased to be a target of the Prussian police state, and he had to spend the rest of his life in exile. Sven Ove Hansson's chapter "Karl

Marx and Freedom of the Press" describes the various forms of oppression he was exposed to as an editor and writer, his fights for freedom of expression, and how he applied editorial principles such as the protection of sources and anonymous writers. It also gives an account of his arguments for an independent press and for newspapers cheap enough for the working class to buy.

In April to August 1844 Marx wrote three notebooks on a rather wide range of economic, political, and religious problems. Their publication in 1932 as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* had major impact on Marxist thought, not least due to the parts of the text that referred to alienation and alienated labor. But as Charles Barbour shows in his chapter "Moments of Motion: The Beginnings of Marx's 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,'" the 1932 edition was heavily edited in a way that gave the impression that this was a draft of a single work. A correct version of the three notebooks was published in 1982. It shows that this was a collection of notes, rather than a draft for a publication. Nevertheless, interpretations based on the 1932 version still have a strong influence. In his chapter Barbour shows how we can understand the three notebooks as records of Marx's "thought in motion" rather than as a well planned and coherently structured text.

Terrell Carver's chapter "Through a Telescope Darkly: Marx and Slavery" begins with a series of reflections on the difficulties involved in truly relating Marx to his own times. After that he discusses Marx's views on slavery, using a source that has seldom been referred to in that context, namely *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), which is Marx's satirical reply to Proudhon's book *The Philosophy of Poverty* from the previous year. Marx mocked Proudhon's claim that "every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad"—by applying it to slavery and describing the "good" sides of slavery. In doing so, he affirmed a causal connection between on the one hand slavery, on the other hand large-scale industry and world trade.

In her chapter "The Biopolitics of Laziness: Marx, Lafargue, and the Laboring Body," Maurizia Boscagli compares Marx's views on work and

leisure to those expressed by his son-in-law Paul Lafargue (1842-1911). In some of his early works, Marx conveyed ideas about work as human self-realization, but in later work, in particular *Capital*, his emphasis was on the oppressiveness of actual working conditions. When writing on the enforced idleness of the reserve army of unemployed, his focus was on the negative and coercive aspects of not working. In contrast, Paul Lafargue claimed in his book *The Right to be Lazy* (1880) that three hours of work a day would be sufficient, and the rest of the time should be available for workers to enjoy life and engage in unpaid activities. Lafargue can be said to take up and develop some themes on work and leisure that are also present in early texts by Marx. New perspectives emerge when we study Marx in relation to the contemporaries that he influenced and was influenced by.

