

## Karl Marx, 200 years later

Today is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, the author of *Das Kapital* and the leading spirit of the International Workingmen's Association (known as the First International). In the words of Oscar Wilde, the Irish playwright and writer, "An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all." If this statement is true in the case of only one thinker in the history of ideas, that person would certainly be Marx.

If Marx had not decided to change the world, he would have been remembered today only as a name on a gravestone in Highgate cemetery in London. Thus, there is no question why a thinker like Marx was at the same time a great influence on the most important thinkers of the twentieth century and a victim of a terrible misunderstanding for all those who made a revolutionary prophet out of him.

### Not of gulags, killing fields

For over a century the fate of Marx's thought was tied to that of Marxism. Even today, three decades after the fall of the Soviet empire, many still blame Marx for the cruel atrocities that happened around the world in the name of Marxism.

### Karl Marx in five core ideas

However, to think and to repeat that Marx is responsible for the Stalinist gulags or the killing fields of Pol Pot in Cambodia would be nothing but pure nonsense. No doubt, he would have been one of the first victims of Stalin, Pol Pot or any communist dictator. As such, the responsibility for the horrors of communist totalitarianism would be on the shoulders of no other ideology than Marxism-Leninism, which turned the materialist and historicist philosophy of Marx into a revolutionary eschatology and in many cases into a thermodynamics of terror. As Voltaire says majestically, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities."

Despite what happened in the past hundred years in the communist countries, Marx remains an important thinker and a central figure of the modern canon around the world. In other words, he should be read closely, with precision and patience. As such, any loosely philosophical approach or iconic view of Marx would turn the critical edge of his analysis of modernity and capitalism into wrong principles of a wrong struggle.

This is not to say that Marx provides us with all the answers to all our problems. Marx knew it himself and that is, most probably, one of the reasons why his writings were so complex and so antithetical. On the one hand, Marx is a philosopher who believes in the autonomy of human beings, since he affirms that human beings make their own history, that the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves. On the other hand, he is obsessed by the Hegelian idea of making a total system, dominated by the universal law of social transformations in history. It was precisely this second Marx, the theorist of historical materialism, who was elevated by Engels, Lenin, Stalin and many others as a prophet of a secular religion called socialism. But, the great mistake of several generations of Marxists was to consider Marx's philosophy of history as a readymade revolutionary recipe for action.

### Must-read Marx

Raymond Aron, the French sociologist of the 20th century, once said: "It is really no more difficult to present Marx's leading ideas than those of Montesquieu or Comte; if only there were not so many millions of Marxists, there would be no question at all about what Marx's leading ideas are or

what is central to his thought.”

As a matter of fact, Marx’s critical attitude in regard to the economic, social and political realities of his time was far from being just a medical prescription for future revolutions.

On the contrary, for Marx thinking rigorously and critically was an important matter. Marx walked almost daily to the British Museum to study the works of classical philosophers and economists rather than spending his time with the masses on the streets of London or Paris. The British Museum was the place where he was able to get away from the everyday debates of revolutionaries and ideologues and find a sanctuary where he could examine the social and economic causes of human misery.

## Marx and Marxists

“I am not a Marxist,” Marx is said to have said, and it’s appropriate to distinguish Marx the philosopher and the economist from Marx the ideologue. Marx would have certainly never approved the statement of the Russian revolutionary, Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, that “Marxism is an integral world outlook”. The truth is that Marxist revolutionaries such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, etc. adapted those ideas of Marx which suited best the needs of their revolutions and bureaucratic powers.

After 1917, the mythological charisma of Lenin followed by Stalinism inflicted on the communist parties around the world prevented any objective assessment of Marxian philosophy. For more than seven decades, in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, any allusion to Marx the philosopher and the author of the *Manuscripts of 1844* would have provoked indifference or for the most only a bitter laughter.

When Soviet communism fell apart towards the end of the 20th century, nobody could say what would be the destiny of Marx beyond the demise of Marxist regimes. For a long period of time Marx was read and practised as the founder of a new faith. For some his church continues living on the ruins of the political and economic system he inspired. For others who suffered the communist regimes or simply believed in an anti-communist crusade, Marx continues to be a dangerous mind who should be banned from our schools and universities.

But now that the statues of Marx were torn down bitterly and indistinctively as those of Lenin and Stalin, what really remains of him for future generations of readers? The answer could be: a critical mind with the great intellectual courage of a Socratic gadfly who continues to defy our way of thinking and living in a market-driven world. If that is the case, then we should celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of a major thinker of human history who has found his place in the pantheon of great philosophers next to Kant, Schelling, Fichte and Hegel.

*Ramin Jahanbegloo is Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, Jindal Global University, Sonapat*

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