

Karl Marx 2.00

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How should we think about Karl Marx on his 200th birthday? His big influence on the politics of the world is universally acknowledged, though people would differ on how good or bad that influence has been. But going beyond that, there can be little doubt that the intellectual world has been transformed by the reflective departures Marx generated, from class analysis as an essential part of social understanding, to the explication of the profound contrast between needs and hard work as conflicting foundations of people's moral entitlements. Some of the influences have been so pervasive, with such strong impact on the concepts and connection we look for in our day-to-day analysis, that we may not be fully aware where the influences came from. In reading some classic works of Marx, we are often placed in the uncomfortable position of the theatre-goer who loved Hamlet as a play, but wondered why it was so full of quotations.

Marxian analysis remains important today not just because of Marx's own original work, but also because of the extraordinary contributions made in that tradition by many leading historians, social scientists and creative artists — from Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht to Piero Sraffa, Maurice Dobb and Eric Hobsbawm (to mention just a few names). We do not have to be a Marxist to make use of the richness of Marx's insights — just as one does not have to be an Aristotelian to learn from Aristotle.

There are ideas in Marx's corpus of work that remain under-explored. I would place among the relatively neglected ideas Marx's highly original concept of "objective illusion," and related to that, his discussion of "false consciousness". An objective illusion may arise from what we can see from our particular position — how things look from there (no matter how misleading). Consider the relative sizes of the sun and the moon, and the fact that from the earth they look to be about the same size (Satyajit Ray offered some interesting conversations on this phenomenon in his film, *Agantuk*). But to conclude from this observation that the sun and the moon are in fact of the same size in terms of mass or volume would be mistaken, and yet to deny that they do look to be about the same size from the earth would be a mistake too. Marx's investigation of objective illusion — of "the outer form of things" — is a pioneering contribution to understanding the implications of positional dependence of observations.

The phenomenon of objective illusion helps to explain the widespread tendency of workers in an exploitative society to fail to see that there is any exploitation going on — an example that Marx did much to investigate, in the form of "false consciousness". The idea can have many applications going beyond Marx's own use of it. Powerful use can be made of the notion of objective illusion to understand, for example, how women, and indeed men, in strongly sexist societies may not see clearly enough — in the absence of informed political agitation — that there are huge elements of gender inequality in what look like family-oriented just societies, as bastions of role-based fairness.

There is, however, a danger in seeing Marx in narrowly formulaic terms — for example, in seeing him as a "materialist" who allegedly understood the world in terms of the importance of material conditions, denying the significance of ideas and beliefs. This is not only a serious misreading of Marx, who emphasised two-way relations between ideas and material conditions, but also a seriously missed opportunity to see the far-reaching role of ideas on which Marx threw such important light.

Let me illustrate the point with a debate on the discipline of historical explanation that was quite widespread in our own time. In one of Eric Hobsbawm's lesser known essays, called "Where Are British Historians Going?", published in the *Marxist Quarterly* in 1955, he discussed how the

Marxist pointer to the two-way relationship between ideas and material conditions offers very different lessons in the contemporary world than it had in the intellectual world that Marx himself saw around him, where the prevailing focus — for example by Hegel and Hegelians — was very much on highlighting the influence of ideas on material conditions.

In contrast, the tendency of dominant schools of history in the mid-twentieth century — Hobsbawm cited here the hugely influential historical works of Lewis Bernstein Namier — had come to embrace a type of materialism that saw human action as being almost entirely motivated by a simple kind of material interest, in particular narrowly defined self-interest. Given this completely different kind of bias (very far removed from the idealist traditions of Hegel and other influential thinkers in Marx's own time), Hobsbawm argued that a balanced two-way view must demand that analysis in Marxian lines today must particularly emphasise the importance of ideas and their influence on material conditions.

For example, it is crucial to recognise that Edmund Burke's hugely influential criticism of Warren Hastings's misbehaviour in India — in the famous Impeachment hearings — was directly related to Burke's strongly held ideas of justice and fairness, whereas the self-interest-obsessed materialist historians, such as Namier, saw no more in Burke's discontent than the influence of his [Burke's] profit-seeking concerns which had suffered because of the policies pursued by Hastings. The overreliance on materialism — in fact of a particularly narrow kind — needed serious correction, argued Hobsbawm: "In the pre-Namier days, Marxists regarded it as one of their chief historical duties to draw attention to the material basis of politics. .But since bourgeois historians have adopted what is a particular form of vulgar materialism, Marxists had to remind them that history is the struggle of men for ideas, as well as a reflection of their material environment. Mr Trevor-Roper [a famous right-wing historian] is not merely mistaken in believing that the English Revolution was the reflection of the declining fortunes of country gentlemen, but also in his belief that Puritanism was simply a reflection of their impending bankruptcies."

To Hobsbawm's critique, it could be added that the so-called "rational choice theory" (so dominant in recent years in large parts of mainstream economics and political analysis) thrives on a single-minded focus on self-interest as the sole human motivation, thereby missing comprehensively the balance that Marx had argued for. A rational choice theorist can, in fact, learn a great deal from reading Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*. While this would be a very different lesson from what Marx wanted Hegelians to consider, a commitment to doing justice to the two-way relations characterises both parts of Marx's capacious pedagogy. What has to be avoided is the narrowing of Marx's thoughts through simple formulas respectfully distributed in his name.

In remembering Marx on his 200th birthday, we not only celebrate a great intellectual, but also one whose critical analyses and investigations have many insights to offer to us today. Paying attention to Marx may be more important than paying him respect.

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