

Some thoughts about Karl Marx

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The following text is the conclusion of an interview with René Berthier conducted in several parts between April and May 2018 by monde-nouveau.net, on the occasion of the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth. It addresses the debate between anarchism and Marxism.

What can we take from Marx today?

A great deal. But once again, we need to clarify what we are talking about. Let me explain.

There is the legacy of Marx viewed from an ideological perspective. I am particularly thinking of those who today strive to show that Marxism, as a theoretical corpus, remains the only instrument for analysing and understanding the functioning of the capitalist system. For them, Marx remains the ultimate reference, and all their activity consists of attempting to demonstrate that the situation we live in today can be explained solely through Marx. These individuals are essentially engaged in a kind of exegesis aimed at showing that Marx has said it all; they believe they can find in unpublished manuscripts of Marx truths that have yet to be articulated. This is scholasticism. It somewhat resembles the work of monks in the Middle Ages.

Thus, 150 years after the publication of Volume I of *Capital*, this work remains, for them, the essential reference for understanding the society in which we live. They engage in meticulous work to prove, including through mathematical formulas, that *Capital* has said it all. Similarly, 170 years after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, this book remains the guide for defining a political line. This is absurd. Since the *Manifesto* and *Capital*, the world has changed. This is obviously a reflection that also applies to anarchist authors.

Personally, I believe that this legacy is obsolete. Hegel says somewhere that all philosophy is merely the philosophy of its time. One could study Plato in his time and recognise his contribution to the evolution of thought, but there was no need to be a Platonist. Or something like that. We should do the same with Marx. The contribution of his thought is historically dated. While the reference to his thought may still be useful today as a “framework for analysis,” it remains that our understanding of the world around us must also rely on many authors who, after him, have provided tools. To name a few, I would mention Max Weber, Gurvitch, Schumpeter, Chomsky, and many others more recent than I can’t recall at the moment. And do not tell me that since Marx there have not been economists capable of providing analytical tools. I want to point out that among English-speaking anarchists, the level of critical reflection on Marxism, anarchism, and economic analysis is significantly higher than what can be observed in France.

But to return to the ideological legacy, most of the concepts attributed to Marx are done so abusively. It was not he who invented the concept of class struggle, that is to say, the idea that the division between those who own

the means of production and those who are excluded from it creates insurmountable contradictions. Proudhon, to name just him, preceded him, and there are others.

The question of the dictatorship of the proletariat, another key concept, is somewhat of a con because Marx hardly ever discusses it and never founded his doctrine on it. He mentions it a couple of times in his youth, around the 1850s when he was still influenced by Blanqui, who spoke of the dictatorship of the plebs or something like that. After that, Marx only mentions the dictatorship of the proletariat again 25 years later, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which was *not intended for publication!* The dictatorship of the proletariat is a notion that was exaggerated by Engels, who even goes so far as to say that the Paris Commune was the dictatorship of the proletariat, when in fact it was quite the opposite.

The same goes for historical materialism. Marx never speaks of historical materialism; it is Engels, once again, who exaggerated this concept. Marx claims nothing more than to have developed a *materialist conception of history*, which is already quite significant, but again he is not the inventor of this idea.

And so on.

Those who insist that Marx and Engels invented scientific socialism forget that it was Proudhon who first used the term and that socialism, that is to say, a political doctrine, can in no way be “scientific”. If Marxism is a science, then the postulates upon which it is based must be subjected to the same fate as the postulates of any science: to be examined in light of the experimental method, to be refutable, and to be surpassed by new postulates.

I was saying that there is the ideological legacy of Marx. There is also his political legacy. His political legacy is German social democracy. I know, one should add Bolshevism, but personally, I do not consider the Bolsheviks to be Marxists, which means, I insist on this point, that I categorically contest the attitude that attributes to Marx the intellectual responsibility for the concentration camp horrors of the supposed Russian communism. The Bolsheviks are people who used Marx's texts opportunistically, but if I had to classify them, I would place them under the category of "populists".

No, Marx's political legacy is German social democracy. But this legacy is skewed by the fact that structurally, German social democracy is thoroughly imbued with Lassallean positions, and that Marxism is actually a doctrine that has superimposed itself on this Lassallean structure. This question deserves to be developed, but I think that is enough for today. I would conclude by saying that the real Marxism, that of German social democracy and the Second International, is a terrible failure.

That's terrible what you're saying. So there's nothing to be gained from Marxism?

Of course there is. Marxism is a social doctrine that has many points of convergence with anarchism. The problem is that Marxists do not seem very willing to admit this, so no dialogue is possible. Of course, I wouldn't go so far as to say with Maximilien Rubel that Marx was a theorist of anarchism. Rubel put forth this thesis in the 1970s, I do not know if he has revisited it since. But around the early 1990s, if my memory serves me right, I interviewed him on Radio Libertaire and

asked him to elaborate on this thesis. He systematically evaded my questions, saying it was not interesting, which leads me to think he had abandoned that idea. He told me he was now much more interested in Proudhon, but again, he did not provide any details. Years later, I reread the marginal notes Marx had written on Bakunin's book, *Statism and Anarchy* – which Rubel had commented on, by the way – and I found that Marx seemed to draw strangely close to Proudhon. This is a question that deserves to be seriously explored.

The points of convergence between anarchism and Marxism are a fascinating subject to study; there is much to say about it, but one would need a good faith interlocutor. However, the Marxist current continues to do what Marx did: refuse debate and distort reality. I recall the condescending smile of that prominent Trotskyist activist when I tried to explain to him the similarities in the presentation method between *The System of Economic Contradictions* and *Capital*. That day, I understood the feeling James Guillaume must have experienced when he confronted the arrogance of the Swiss social democrats at the Olten congress: you anarchists are nice but a bit silly; we socialists are the custodians of scientific socialism.

Before concluding, could you elaborate a bit on the idea of a possible conjunction between Marxism and anarchism?

In my opinion, this is a false problem. We can perhaps talk about the debate between Marx and Bakunin, between Marx and Proudhon. While Marxism is a doctrine formulated by one man, anarchism is too diverse; it covers a field of thought and action that is too

varied. Frankly, I do not see what debate there could be between Marx and Malatesta, for instance. Bakunin paid tribute to Marx's theoretical contribution, and that was a sincere opinion. If we stick to the "fundamentals," as they say, namely Proudhon and Bakunin, anarchism and Marxism are very close theoretically, even if they fundamentally diverge on issues of strategy and organisation.

Therefore, while anarchism and Marxism have developed separately – at the level of doctrine and theory – this development has stemmed from identical concerns but with the formulation of different conclusions. If a certain number of anarchists refuse to consider that anarchism and Marxism arise from identical conditions, this refusal hinders both the understanding of the points on which they converge and also prevents a genuine perspective and understanding of their differences. This could be the subject of another interview...

Yes, well, we'll see, we'll see.

Before finishing, I would like to say one last thing. In the realm of Marx's critique, there are those who rejoice in the general disaffection towards Marxism, seeing it as proof of the relevance of liberal thought. The anarchist critique of Marxism must not be situated on that ground. Libertarians must in no way howl with the wolves and support the critiques of Marxism made by the enemies of the working class, the adversaries of human emancipation. Our critique of Marxism is a critique *from within*; it takes place "between us," I would say; it is a family matter, even if it is sometimes vigorous. This is the position that Bakunin clearly defended.