

From Marx to Marxism: Histories of an Idea

An Interview with Gregory Claeys

by *Ophélie Siméon*

Two hundred years after Karl Marx's birth, Gregory Claeys takes a new look at the thinker's intellectual formation, wide-ranging posterity and continued relevance in the 21st century.

Books & Ideas: Recent biographies of Marx by Jonathan Sperber and Gareth Stedman-Jones¹ have tried to uncover the "historical" Marx, not the Marx of politicians and ideologues. On the contrary, you have chose to return to the history of Marx's ideas. As a historian of socialism, what is the specificity of your approach?

Gregory Claeys: My treatment of Marx attempts to position him in a well-established socialist position, grappling in particular with the failures of communitarian socialism (chiefly Owenism, for which Engels had some sympathy; and Fourierism), and by 1848 the more plausible prospect of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Marx shared with the Owenites and other early socialists the need to provide an image of the future, and the need to provide a critical standpoint on capitalism. The former was mostly satisfied with an (ill-defined) idea of the eventual state of communist society to come. The latter was first broached through Feuerbach's concept of species being (*Gattungswesen*) in 1843-44, and then replaced by an "ethics of becoming" in which the solidarity and sociability of the future was prefigured by the workers' movement and sense of commonality of purpose derived from the existing division of labour.

In my view Marx remained a utopian in many aspects of this project. In particular, he supported an idea of all-round development, and opposed specialisation and the division of labour between mental and manual work in particular. Marx is often approached as a

¹ Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (Liveright, 2013); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Allen Lane, 2016).

philosopher, as a political economist, and as a revolutionary. I don't deny that he was any of these things, but am seeking in the book to see his achievement as less of a clean break from all other forms of socialism than is usually conceived.

Books & Ideas: Your study of Marx's intellectual formation reaffirms the need to abandon the distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism. How can the redefinition of utopia cast new light on Marx's ideas?

Gregory Claeys: Marx, even more Engels, followed by Lenin, denied vehemently that the "materialist conception of history" had anything to do with imagined visions of "duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem"² which characterised the early socialists. In *Marx and Marxism* I credit Marx with offering a more rigorous formulation of historical analysis than most of his socialist predecessors, though as a previous book, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60* (1987) indicates, the Owenites in particular inherited some of the same sources for this viewpoint, namely the leading writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, who were central to Marx's new view.

Given the fact that the determinist theory Marx projected in 1845-46, in which an inevitable proletarian revolution was viewed as necessarily leading through the dictatorship of the proletariat to communist society, failed, the early rubric of "scientific socialism" now seems muddled and outdated. I thus describe Marx as a utopian firstly in the positive sense of being able to look into the distant future in order to see how capitalism might develop; and then in more neutral senses of adopting certain assumptions about the transformation would take place on the road to and in the future society. This includes assumptions about the improvements in human behaviour which would take place once private property was abolished, about the possibility of abolishing "politics" and the "state" once recallable workers paid a normal wage were the only administrators chosen, that no conflict would take place between a revolutionary "party" and any other branch of proletarian power (thus requiring no separation of powers as such), and so on.

Marx is thus portrayed as a utopian in a number of different senses of the word. The most relevant of these is his projection of a world in which machinery performs most labour and human beings are able to improve themselves in the resulting free time. This vision, by contrast to the proposal of solving the problem of "alienation" mooted in 1844, dominates Marx's later writings. It echoes the writings of earlier socialists, Robert Owen in particular. In this vision, the most basic forms of the oppression of human beings by other human beings has been abolished. This remains an immensely noble aim.

Books & Ideas: Though Marx has often been labelled a 'difficult' author, his popular appeal seems to belie this claim. Indeed, many of his concepts (such

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], tr. Samuel Moore, Penguin Classics, 2015, p. 27.

as the dictatorship of the proletariat, or religion as the “opiate of the masses”) have entered the vernacular. How do you explain this paradox?

Gregory Claeys: It is doubtful that most "Marxists" have ever read much of Marx, and much which is available to us today only became widely accessible in the second half of the 20th century. Much of Marx's popular appeal has lain through concise statements of his ideas by the later Engels (notably *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in 1880), and through the programmatic but eminently readable *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Academics and the more educated have tended to emphasise the "difficulty" of reading Marx by Hegelianising him as much as possible, in part to justify a ruling position for intellectuals in the wider scheme of ideas. The basic Marxian system can however be reduced to a few pretty simple propositions, which most have then further narrowed historically to one: the abolition of exploitation, or of a class of landlords (in countries where the peasantry predominated) or capitalists (in more industrialised countries).

Books & Ideas: Why was the Russian Revolution such a turning point in the history of Marxism?

Gregory Claeys: Marxism had made considerable headway in Western Europe by the end of the 19th century, notably in Germany, where the prospect of a peaceful transformation of capitalism (conceded by Marx and Engels at some points) was fairly realistic. Late in life Marx had been forced (by Russian admirers) to contemplate the possibility of a revolution in a country where capitalism was hardly developed, the proletariat was not a majority, and a lengthy process of industrialisation would be necessary if the economic base were to become sufficiently developed to begin to permit greater free time as well as affluence. Lenin of course declared himself a Marxist, and the eventual triumph of the Bolsheviks, and Lenin's interpretation of Marxism as an anti-imperialist doctrine, made Marxism the great alternative for 20th century critics of capitalism, imperialism and exploitation in general. But Lenin of course also altered Marxism considerably, imposing on it in particular an idea of democratic centralism, virtually dictatorship of the party over the proletariat, and of a small group within the party (the *nomenklatura*) over the rest, in a manner never envisioned by Marx. Never anywhere near Marx's ideal, the circumstances of the revolution moreover virtually necessitated the creation of a police state in conditions of civil war, and the elimination or neutralisation of those deemed enemies of the regime or the proletariat generally. This antagonism towards the bourgeoisie and *kulaks* or rich peasants resulted in their near-elimination as a class.

Books & Ideas: Marx's legacy has been forever tainted by the bloody track record of Leninism and Stalinism. As a result, revisionist accounts may fall prey to a wish to rewrite history, sometimes amounting to counterfactual rhetorics. How can historians avoid this pitfall?

Gregory Claeys: In my view, as a historian, telling the truth is always the highest priority. Making political capital out of the truth (or not) must be secondary. After 1991 the Soviet archives were opened up and the story hinted at by Solzhenitsyn was revealed in much greater detail. By 2010 or so the same hitherto-suppressed details about widespread murder and famine in China had also been revealed. The Cambodian catastrophe engineered by Pol Pot has slowly come to be similarly unveiled. It was helpful to me that my previous book, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford University Press, 2016), contained a lengthy section on these horrors. So I returned to Marx with a rich sense both of the disasters of some forms of 20th century Marxism-Leninism-Maoism etc had occurred, and thus without any reluctance to confront this legacy. I have long felt that the relative defeats of narratives of the left after 1991, particularly in face of neo-liberal ideologies, have been derived in part from a failure to confront these Stalinist and other catastrophes fully, and to acknowledge that they did flow in part directly from Marx. Conceding this allows us to see what can be resurrected from the tradition.

Books & Ideas: Marx has enjoyed a rather unexpected revival since the 2007-2008 recession. How is this renewed interest different from earlier incarnations of Marxism, and what does it tell us about Marx's relevance today?

Gregory Claeys: It is now nearly twenty years since large numbers of people (outside of China and a few other countries such as Cuba, Belarus and North Korea) have taken Marx seriously. The prolonged effects of the 2008 "financial crisis" have now gelled or fused with three other early 21st century developments: robotisation and the prospect of a life "beyond work"; massively increasing economic inequality; and environmental degradation on a scale sufficient to suggest that humanity's utter destruction may well occur within this century. Marx has much to suggest about the first two of these factors, but little about the third. Applying him, too, when the classical agency of revolution, the industrial proletariat, is now a declining class, is problematic. But the basic vision of a life in which both socially necessary labour has been minimised for the majority, machines having taken over much of the burden, and where oppression, coercion and exploitation have been essentially eliminated, remains immensely appealing.

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