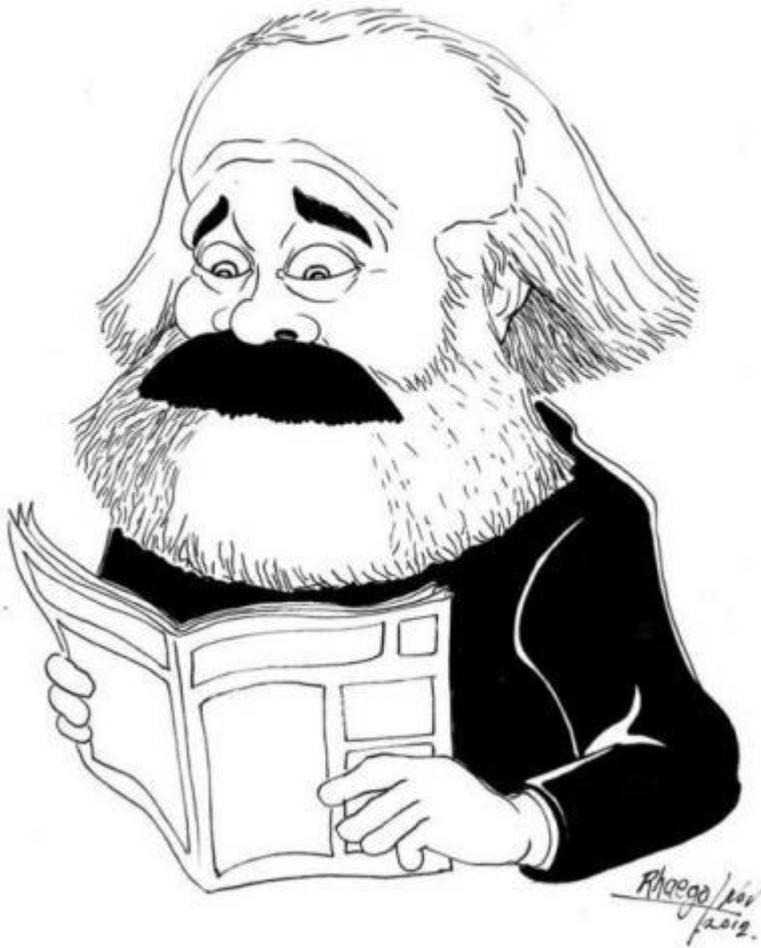


"Je ne suis pas marxiste" - Michael Heinrich



Michael Heinrich argues that Marx was not after a “Marxism” as an identity-defining “truth.” Rather, he was more interested in the critical business of undermining certainties.

Whoever visits the grave of Karl Marx at Highgate Cemetery in London encounters a gigantic pedestal upon which a gigantic bust of Marx is enthroned. One has to look up at him. Directly under the bust, “Workers of all lands unite” is written in golden letters, and further down, also in gold, “Karl Marx.” Below that, a simple, small headstone is placed within the pedestal, which names without pomp and gold those buried here: besides Karl Marx, there is his wife Jenny, his grandson Harry Longuet, and his daughters Eleanor and Helene Demuth, who led the Marx household for decades.

Marx selected the plain headstone himself after the death of his wife. Showing off was not his thing. He explicitly asked for a quiet funeral restricted to a small circle. Only eleven people took part. Friedrich Engels was able to prevent plans by the German Social Democratic Party to erect a monument to Marx at the cemetery. He wrote to August Bebel that the family was against such a monument, since the simple headstone “would be desecrated in their eyes if replaced by a monument”. (MECW 47, p. 17)

Around 70 years later, nobody was left to protect Marx's grave. The present monument was commissioned by the Communist Party of Great Britain and unveiled in 1956. Only cemetery regulations prevented it from being even bigger. The Marxists had asserted themselves against Marx.

"Je ne suis pas marxiste," stated Marx, rather annoyed, to his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, when the latter reported the doings of French "Marxists." Engels had circulated this statement numerous times, including in letters to newspapers – definitely for public consumption. Marx's distance from Marxists is also expressed in other comments. When he stayed in France in 1882, he wrote to Engels that "the 'Marxistes' and 'Anti-Marxistes'" [...] at their respective socialist congresses at Roanne and St-Étienne" had "both done their damndest to ruin my stay in France." (MECW 46, p. 339)

In any case, Marx did not aspire to "Marxism." But not only that; when the German economist Adolph Wagner was the first to deal with Marx's theory in his textbook and wrote of Marx's "socialist system," the latter, outraged, noted in his marginalia that he had "never established a socialist system." (MECW 24, p. 533) "Systems" and worldview "isms" were never his thing. One looks in vain for statements in which he stylizes himself as the founding father of an "ism." Besides seeing himself as a man of the "party" (by which he meant not a specific organization, but rather the totality of forces struggling against capitalism and for social emancipation), Marx saw himself as a man of science. *Capital*, which he regarded as "the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)" (MECW 42, p. 358), he counted among the "scientific attempts to revolutionize science." (MECW 41, p. 436) The emphasis on "scientific" is Marx's. And, when Marx wrote in the foreword to the first volume of *Capital*, "every opinion based on scientific criticism I welcome" (MECW 35, p. 11), that was not simply rhetoric. Marx was fully aware of the provisional nature and fallibility of scientific assertions. "De omnibus dubitandum" – "everything is to be doubted" – he wrote as an answer to the question as to his life's motto in a fashionable questionnaire that his daughter had presented to him. The enormous mass of manuscripts that he left unpublished, and the to some extent considerable revisions of already published texts bear witness to the fact that he did not exempt his own work from such doubt. In the history of Marxism, this work was often dealt with in a different manner.

Historically speaking, the popularizations among Engels' later works, above all his *Anti-Dühring*, constituted the point of departure for the construction of "Marxism." But it's somewhat one-sided to make Engels into the "inventor" of Marxism, as the publishing house Propyläen did when they gave the German translation of Tristram Hunt's Engels biography the subtitle "The Man who Invented Marxism." The original English edition has the more accurate title "The Frock-Coated Communist." It was only under pressure from Bebel and Liebknecht that Engels confronted in the 1870s the views of the German university lecturer Eugen Dühring, who was increasingly winning adherents in German social democracy. Since Dühring claimed to have assembled a new comprehensive "system" of philosophy, history, economics, and natural science, Engels had to follow him into all these areas, but not without emphasizing in the preface that his text "cannot in any way aim at presenting another system as an alternative to Herr Dühring's 'system'" (MECW 25, p. 6) But this hint was of no use. Historically, *Anti-Dühring* became the point of departure for precisely that "system" that became famous under the name "Marxism." Its first important representative was Karl Kautsky. Until the first World War, Lenin also followed it without any critique.

Whereas Engels still made fun of Dühring's claim to a "final and ultimate truth" (MECW 25 p. 28), now such a pretension, along with all the fantasies of omnipotence based upon it, was made by many Marxists: "Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true." The flattenings invested in social democratic Marxism before the first World War were continued in the Marxism-Leninism that became a canonical doctrine in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death.

Just to be clear: my intention is not to discredit every analytical and political achievement of Kautsky, Lenin, and many other Marxists. If one wishes to evaluate these achievements, one has to take each case individually. What I'm talking about are those philosophical simplifications that are presented as "Marxism," those mixtures of simple materialism, bourgeois ideas of progress, and vulgar Hegelianism which are presented as "dialectical materialism" and "historical materialism" – terms that one seeks in vain in Marx's work.

Now, modern, enlightened, undogmatic Marxists will immediately object that cults of personality aren't their thing, and that the old, dogmatic Marxism isn't either. Only their own enlightened standpoint should count as "Marxism," everything that is unpleasant – from determinist conceptions of history to the reduction of gender relations to a "secondary contradiction" to the Stalinist gulag – is supposed to have nothing to do with the true, real Marxism. However, if one asks what constitutes real Marxism, the air suddenly becomes thin, and that's not a coincidence. If one attempts to substantively flesh out the term "Marxism," one is necessarily confronted with a dilemma. If one inserts too much content, then the determination becomes too concrete and easily ends up contradicting subsequent science. "Lysenkoism" is only the most well-known example of this. But if one leaves things at a vague, general level, then there is a danger that what is presented as Marxism remains at the level of platitudes: everything real is material, history develops through contradictions, etc.

For some Marxists, Georg Lukács counts as the one who cut the Gordian knot. Even if some individual results of Marx's theory proved to be false, according to Lukács, his "method" remained: maintaining "materialist dialectic" as a research method was supposedly the core of "orthodox Marxism." Even disregarding the fact that there is little agreement among Marxists as to what actually constitutes this dialectical method that people so readily speak of, it's also not any kind of real recommendation for a method to cling to it even if it leads to incorrect results. I'm in no way contesting that there are reasonable concepts of materialism and dialectic. However, I doubt that one can put together the foundations of an ontology or an all-encompassing method from them.

If one cannot offer a substantive determination of Marxism, there always remains the possibility of using the term in a purely descriptive way. Thus, one definition for the keyword "Marxism" is that "Marxism encompasses all practices which in the last 150 years positively, or in the sense of a continuity, refer to the works of Karl Marx as well as the authors and activists who have subsequently referred to Marx." A few sentences later, there is talk of the "harassment of Marxism at the hands of Stalinism and Fascism." Apparently, Stalinism is not counted as part of Marxism, although it definitely positively referred to "the works of Karl Marx," and most contemporaries never doubted that Stalinism was part of Marxism, among them not a few critical spirits, such as Ernst Bloch. If one retroactively excludes Stalinism from Marxism, understood in a descriptive sense, then one proceeds in a manner no different from Stalin, who also attempted to erase those who fell out of grace from historical records and old photographs.

The fact that it's not easy for Marxists to determine what "Marxism" actually is, is also Marx's fault. One has to admit, he didn't make it easy for them. His work consists not only of a number of texts that he published, but also numerous manuscripts that were unpublished in his lifetime. All of the fundamental theoretical projects that Marx pursued remained unfinished. Unpublished manuscripts such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 or the omnibus from 1845/46 that became known as *The German Ideology* are unfinished and fragmentary. Many of the published texts are either provisional summaries, such as the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, or are part of unfinished projects such as the first book of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) or the first volume of *Capital* (1867/1872). Political analyses such as the *18th Brumaire* (1852) or *The Civil War in France* (1871) deal comprehensively with their respective topics, but the theory of the state and politics that Marx aspired to are touched upon only implicitly and incompletely. Marx not only left

behind one unfinished project, he left behind a number of unfinished projects. No wonder that the discussion of these projects, their respective range, their gaps, and their relationship to each other has provided rich material for debate, and still does.

Furthermore, Marx's posthumous works were only published little by little (and are still being published). Every generation of readers was confronted with a different oeuvre of Marx, and on multiple occasions in the 20th Century, it was proclaimed that now – finally – one would get to know the real Marx. However, the posthumous works were usually strongly revised by the respective editors before publication. That was already the case for the second and third volumes of *Capital* published by Engels, and it's even more so the case for the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* published in the 1920s and 1930s. The texts of Marx and Engels were published for the first time completely and without such editorial interventions in the second *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) published since 1975, but at the moment only half of it abides.

In the historical development of the various Marxisms, however, the texts of Marx and Engels play a limited role anyway. Early on, people were satisfied with a few striking formulations, such as that about history always being a "history of class struggles", or of "communism" as "the real movement that abolishes the present state of things." The contexts in which Marx made these statements, and how they might have been modified by later developments of Marx's theory – were of less interest. For Marxism, Marx was not interesting as a thinker who was constantly learning and developing his theoretical conceptions, but rather as somebody who produced final truths – "Marxism."

Many modern, enlightened Marxists also maintain a certain distance toward an exact engagement with Marx's work. Frequently, it is emphasized that one does not wish to "conduct philology," but rather deal with Marx politically. Not infrequently, however, the distancing from philology serves primarily the goal of maintaining undisturbed one's own notion of Marx's theory and Marxism. If, for example, one refers with regard to the concept of praxis in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, which many regard as the central concept of Marx's theory, to the specific context of the debate with Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians, which robs the *Theses on Feuerbach* of their status as a foundational document, or if one emphasizes that in the case of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's actual engagement with capitalism begins afterward and even rejects some of the theses of the manifesto, then one does not make many friends. The same is the case if one notes that not every statement in *Capital* is carved in stone, that for example there are indications that in the 1870s, Marx might have regarded more critically the "law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall" formulated in the 1864/65 manuscript of the third volume of *Capital*. Then this is all decidedly too much "philology."

Again, to be clear: the fact that the critique of capitalism is not exhausted in philology is banal. However, the fact that if one wishes to work with Marx's concepts, one has to first appropriate them critically and not just in a superficial textbook manner, is just as banal. But more often than not, it is precisely such a critical appropriation that is lacking.

One final point: among critical social scientists, and in particular the Assoziation für kritische Gesellschaftsforschung [Association for Critical Social Research – translator's note], Michel Foucault enjoys a certain popularity. His analyses of the relationship between power and knowledge are enthusiastically referred to. However, Marxists – even the modern, undogmatic ones – have a hard time conceiving of Marxism as just such a power-knowledge complex. At the conference organized by the AkG, Marxism as a means of domination was not a topic of discussion.

It was discussed with regard to Marxism in the GDR. But it's not just Stalinism and the history of authoritarian communist parties that belong to this topic, where the history of Marxism is always also a history of exclusion and domination. In left groups and in university seminars in the West, the

supposed certainties of “Marxism” also produced numerous demarcations between that which was considered “still” or already “no longer” Marxist, what was included or excluded from discourses and social practices.

Even if some would like to think so, the microphysics of power do not stop where (western) Marxism begins. The “short summer of academic Marxism” (Elmar Altvater) that existed in West German universities in the 1970s, and which some still miss, was to a large extent a pseudo-prosperity which rested upon discursive effects of power. In order to demonstrate that one was cutting edge, one knew – regardless of what the topic was – to at least throw in a short reference to “the contradiction between use value and exchange value.” A lot of analyses of Marx’s theory and subsequent contributions building upon it were composed in this period that are worth reading, but also a huge amount of nonsense.

Marx himself, in any case, did not seek final certainties. He was far more interested in the critical business of undermining certainties in order to open up new spaces for thought and action – in which it’s not immediately clear what the correct result will be.

In contrast to the “Marxism” that Marx rejected, with its identity-defining certainties, this critical, unfinished Marx has an extremely stimulating and subversive effect. Which of his analyses and concepts are useful, what can help to change the world, and what can’t, is not fixed for all time. One will always have to constantly discuss and make new judgements: “De omnibus dubitandum.”