MARX AT 200: A SYMPOSIUM

Symposium at the GHI Washington, April 12, 2018. Organized in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Goethe Institut Washington, DC. Conveners: Warren Breckman (University of Pennsylvania), James Brophy (University of Delaware), Simone Lässig (GHI), and David Lazar (GHI). Participants: Ritu Birla (University of Toronto), Jürgen Herres (Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe), Jürgen Kocka (WZB/Berlin Social Science Center), Noam Maggor (Queen Mary University of London), Timothy Shenk (Washington University / New America), Jonathan Sperber (University of Missouri), Gareth Stedman Jones (Queen Mary University of London).

The 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth on May 5, 1818, occasions reflection on the strange mix of distance and proximity that marks our relationship to him. Two hundred years. Just to say it drives home that Marx belonged to an epoch that grows more and more remote, born as he was within living memory of the French Revolution and the first stirrings of the industrial age. Grasping Marx requires historical erudition and historical imagination, because his world is not ours. Trying to reach back to that historical figure, separated from us by many decades but also by generations of heroic myth-making and demonic vilification, is an estimable challenge.

Yet to say that Marx was born two hundred years ago is also to experience a shock, because his words still have the capacity to ring true, to take our breath away with their critical acumen, and to open new pathways for our thinking. Two hundred years after his birth, Marx is still good to think with. Of course, the political projects that claimed his name are long gone. Some commentators in the aftermath of the Cold War believed that Karl Marx would vanish with those regimes. Or, at most, put in Jacques Derrida’s sympathetic terms in the early 1990s, Marx might be dead, but his specter will continue to haunt us with visions of social justice and equality in a democracy not yet realized, but always à venir, always to come. Perhaps it is closer to the truth that Marxism in the postcommunist world may be thought of as a theory happily rescued from the burden of a failed experiment. But a theory of what and for what? Certainly the longstanding Marxist struggle to unite theory and practice seems dead, a victim of a much more fractured political, social and economic landscape than that in which Marx and his successors wrote. It may be that in the absence of the charged ideological environment of the short twentieth
century, we can recognize in Marx a “classic,” a thinker of enduring value with a unique perspective on perennial questions of fundamental human concern. To suggest this would, of course, send Marx spinning in his grave. After all, philosophers had hitherto interpreted the world; the point was to change it. Marx expected communism would abolish philosophy by realizing it. Yet we have to accept that Marx as philosopher lives on precisely because, as Theodor Adorno once claimed with characteristic melancholy, the moment of philosophy’s realization has been missed.

Yet if Marx was wrong about communism and maybe even about philosophy, perhaps he was right about capitalism. Or at least right enough that we can recognize value in his insights into the economic and social dynamics of his own epoch and, possibly, of our own. Or, perhaps not. To put the question in the provocative terms that the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce once asked of Hegel, what is living and what is dead in Karl Marx? To take stock of both Marx’s historical distance from us and his continuing capacity to challenge us seems a fitting undertaking on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his birth.

In the first session of the symposium, three notable biographers took up the question of the “historical Marx.” What were their guiding threads in organizing Marx’s life? What are the essential themes that shaped Marx’s political and intellectual career? And what contribution might the biographer make to ongoing theoretical and political engagements with Marx? Jürgen Herres, a researcher involved in the continuing work of the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), emphasized that historicization must mean not only positioning Marx in context, but also attending carefully to philological and editorial questions, an approach that has recently borne fruit in the MEGA’s valuable new edition of The German Ideology. Gareth Stedman Jones and Jonathan Sperber, authors of the two most notable recent English-language biographies of Marx, emphasized the imperative to return to sources, give balanced consideration to Marx’s ideas, political activities and private life, and recognize Marx as a “German.” Herres expressed a view that all three affirmed, that biographical knowledge does not bury Marx; rather it is a precondition for our theoretical grasp and our sense of the current and future potential of Marx’s legacy.

The second session, “Marx for Historians of Capitalism,” explored the relationship of Marx to the so-called New History of Capitalism.
What distinguishes the “new” history of capitalism from the “old,” and how should we situate Marx in this methodological and interpretive evolution? Ritu Birla argued for the pressing relevance of what she called the “Trans-Marx,” a figure able to inspire a global history of capitalism that must be interdisciplinary, recognizes sites that bourgeois capitalism allegedly did away with, acknowledges patterns of uneven development, and reactivates Marx’s attention to historical contingency. Noam Maggor maintained that Marx has not in fact been very central to the New History of Capitalism, which, true to its name, has focused less on labor and more on capital. Maggor sees gains in this historical approach, even as he plead for the importance of maintaining the kinds of larger frameworks inspired by Marx, but largely dispensed with by historians studying particular processes and agents. Timothy Shenk argued that the history of capitalism boom was the product of the 2008 financial crisis, when an intellectual elite primed by a post-Cold War consensus on the inevitability of liberal capitalism found itself confronted by a disaster that did not fit their understanding of how the world worked. The problem, from Shenk’s perspective, was that this historiographical current reflected too much of the mentality it set out to critique. Too often, it subscribed to an economism that made it impossible to deal satisfactorily with politics, an absence that has become especially glaring in our time of populist upheavals. Jürgen Kocka’s evening lecture on “Karl Marx and the History of Capitalism” wove together Marx’s dual status as historical figure and present resource to make a magisterial case for the ongoing significance of Marx for our understanding of capitalism.

Warren Breckman (University of Pennsylvania)