

# The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx

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Preface  
or  
A Message of Solidarity from the  
*Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism (HCDM)*

Wolfgang Fritz Haug  
(General Editor, *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*)

*An unfinished project cannot die, as long as the existential problems that it had  
begun to address have neither been solved nor rendered meaningless.*

“Foreword,” *HCDM* 1 (1994)

I

It is with great respect, mixed with a shade of envy, that an observer from the bridge of such an inflexible tanker as the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism (HCDM)* gets sight of a flexible liner like the present *Companion*. While the former will have needed more than half a century to complete its journey, the latter has reached its goal within a mere three years. But *suum cuique*, both follow their respective necessities. To deepen research, and to do so with a specific regard to practical historical experience linked to theoretical concepts, establishes the fundamentals of the Marxian universe.

The importance of giving access to the Marxian universe, now and to the many, cannot be exaggerated. The touchstone, for Antonio Gramsci linked to his central concept of hegemony, consists in opening up for a mass of people the possibility “to think coherently and in a unitary way about the real present world”; to succeed in this endeavor represents for him “a ‘philosophical’ fact far more important and ‘original’ than the discovery by a philosophical ‘genius’ of a new truth which remains the entailed estate of small groups of intellectuals.”<sup>1</sup>

Just what are the conditions in which our respective projects are being carried out? And what are the perspectives that each project brings to the socio-political and historical conditions they face?

II

In the year of Marx’s 200th birthday, no revolutionary movement seriously challenges the capitalist regime. The specter of communism has long ago stopped haunting

Europe, let alone the entire world. Never before has capitalism gripped humanity so globally, along with the earth, its habitat and the source of all material [*stofflich*] wealth. And never before have its irrevocably damaging effects on the eco-system set alarm bells ringing all over the globe like they do today.

In this situation, the specter of Marx seems to be pervading the world like some harmless classical author. Quite a few of the powers of triumphant world capitalism have entered into a serene rivalry of paying tribute to this specter: Marx's native city Trier, for example, but also (counter-intuitively) the Catholic church, as well as the culture industry. Long a staple of T-shirts and dorm-room posters, Marx has recently become (courtesy of Raoul Peck's 2017 film and the 2018 documentary drama starring Mario Adorf) a cinematic hero.

It's difficult to say how the Chinese exception fits into this global panorama: Adam Smith in Beijing, watched over in the name of Karl Marx. This is a true and contradictory enigma, one that unleashes neoliberal capitalism while at the same time carefully translating and editing the complete works of Marx and Engels on the basis of the MEGA.<sup>2</sup> Even the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* has made its first step on its way towards appearing in Chinese on the occasion of Marx's bicentenary,<sup>3</sup> and without any doubt, the present highly commendable *Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* will follow in that volume's footsteps. We cannot know what will result from these appearances of Marx in a China that bears little resemblance to the one his specter first encountered.

What we do know is that China, after a long process of economic experimentation with different approaches to socialism, has opted for a mixed economy, combined with what Lenin in his late years termed the retreat of the ruling Communist Party to the "commanding heights" of the State.<sup>4</sup> The world witnesses China's breathtaking ascent along this chosen path, still not exactly certain of what it is seeing.

### III

Why elaborate a *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* and why, on the other hand, develop a companion to Marx and not to *Marxism*? The reason for this can be seen in the tragic failures of Soviet-shaped European state socialism, whose memory is tainted by having met, to put it in Marx's words, "with something with which a good tragedy is not supposed to meet, namely, a dull ending."<sup>5</sup> One day, this last taint will be washed off by time and by a growing awareness that the USSR was the very first of the *early socialist* states,<sup>6</sup> whose protagonists had to act without previous experiences to guide them, let alone any blueprints of how to build socialism. In the first years, these early state socialists expected their leading role in the revolutionary process to shift to the West. Later, realizing that their expectations had been disappointed, they over-generalized their model as the absolute paradigm and proclaimed their "Marxist-Leninist" ideology as (according to Stalin) the universal "Marxism of the epoch."

Since Stalin's proclamation, being Marxist came after and secondary to being Communist. This order has held for most of the protagonists of an epoch of heroic struggles, an epoch characterized, under Stalin, by a regime of mass state terrorism and

despotism, and later by a situation of life-or-death-struggle against German fascist imperialism. After the collapse of European State socialism, its “brother parties” everywhere faded away, and with them, the figure of the Party Communist. Finally, in a world shaped increasingly by transnational high-tech-capitalism—ever more so since the outbreak of the Great Crisis from 2007 onwards—the figure of the “intellectual” Marxist gained new currency as an important and relevant “historical form of individuality,”<sup>7</sup> at least for the time being. This figure can be characterized as being Marxist without having to commit to Marxism in its full, historical sense. The kernel of truth in this paradox lies in the fact that the original (though always incomplete) fusion of Marx’s theory with the modern workers’ movement has dissolved, with the result being that Marxist theory has become unhinged from the organized class struggles and social movements that inspired it and were inspired by it. “Marxist Theory” as it exists today, is an abstraction compared with the richness of historically concrete Marxism, but a *real* abstraction in the precise Marxist sense of the term.

#### IV

The first Marxist who explicitly reflected on the inevitable difference between Marx and Marxism was Antonio Labriola. Just a year after the death of Engels, Labriola writes: “Even the Marxist theories (I speak about the real ones<sup>8</sup>) are from now on partly inadequate for the new political-economic phenomena of the last 20 years.”<sup>9</sup> In the last, unfinished essay he wrote on the materialist conception of history, Labriola refers to imperialism as

the watchword of the day, the undisguised crusade. The inner economic revolution has changed all the terms of trade in foreign politics, and competition has become truly global [...] the axiom of the liberal society [...]. No wonder that the politics of conquering, of supremacy, of subduing, of intervention from country to country, and of war, be it actually waged or only threatened, is the powerful inner drive and the decisive instrument of the bourgeois-capitalist expansion.<sup>10</sup>

And since Labriola, generation after generation, Marxist theorists have continued to reckon with the same transformative energies and power of capitalism. In order to stay with Marx, one has always had to go beyond him. This was and is the general way in which Marxism arises under the specific new conditions of each era. As long as conflicts and crises demand a Marxism, its genesis inevitably meets the “dialectics of fidelity and treason.”<sup>11</sup> Going back to Marx in order to stick as much as possible to the founding impulse, while at the same time constantly stepping beyond him: this is our tricky dialectical task.

In today’s jargon, we can call these founding impulses the Marxian source code. In Marxist words, we may call it the philosophy of praxis, to use the concept with which Labriola at the end of the nineteenth century went beyond Marx, where he was later to be followed by Gramsci. We seem to have, over time, lost the key to what Labriola called “the practical reversal [Marx: *Umstülpung*; Labriola: *capovolgimento*] of the theory of cognition which is immanent to historical materialism.”<sup>12</sup>

This is why we need a companion to Marx; and hence the necessity for traditional Marxism to undergo a historical-critical catharsis together with an effort of bringing things up to date (*aggiornamento*). Our task is to translate the questions related to and raised by Marx into the concrete language of our epoch.

## V

May this *Companion* reach many and stimulate their political-intellectual appetite for more! Because after having read *about* Marx, the proof of the pudding is to *read Marx himself*. Each one of us has to experience the luminosity and the wealth of food for thought that can be found in Marx. One has to give time to Marx himself, to encounter Marx not just to engage in political agitation, but to explore the way a body of thought makes possible meaningful human development. There is a similarity then, between Marx and Aristotle (a figure Marx himself revered); both created bodies of thought that, continuously updated, continue to remain fresh and necessary across the centuries. Even if there are no easy recipes for change offered by Marx today, what we find in his work is the outline of a coherently rational and global human project, a project that might, in the end, be the only one that is actually sustainable.

## Notes

- 1 Gramsci, A. *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana, Torino: Einaudi, 1975, notebook 11, §12, note IV: 1377–8 (my translation).
- 2 *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (historical-critical complete edition of Marx and Engels's publications, manuscripts and correspondence). Cf. the entry "MEGA" (including the Chinese equivalent) in *HCDM* 9/I, 2018: 388–404.
- 3 MAKESIZHUYI LISHI KAOZHENG DA CIDIAN 1, Beijing 2018 (Chinese edition of the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, Vol. 1, May 2018).
- 4 Cf. the entry for "Mischwirtschaft" (Mixed Economy), in *HCDM* (HKWM) 9/I, Hamburg: Argument 2018, columns 1016–45 by Rösler, B. Röttger and T. Heberer, and W. Haug, B. Jessop, D. Weber and T. Heberer's "Kommandohöhen" (Commanding Heights) in *HCDM* 7/II, 2010: 1218–43.
- 5 *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975: 34.
- 6 Cf. B. Kagarlitzky's entry "Frühsozialistische Staaten" (Early Socialist States), in *HCDM* IV, 1999: 1069–78.
- 7 Cf. L. Sève's entry "Historische Individualitätsformen" (Historical Forms of Individuality) in *HCDM* 6/I, 2004: 281–93.
- 8 "Marxist," for Labriola, here still means the writings of Marx and Engels.
- 9 Labriola, *Epistolario III*, ed. Gerratana/Santucci, 1983, letter 878: 715 (my translation).
- 10 Labriola, *Saggi sul materialismo storico*, ed. V. Gerratana and A. Guerra, new edition, Rome, 1977: 346 (my translation).
- 11 Cf. W.F. Haug, "Marxistsein/Marxistinsein" (Being a Marxist), in: *HCDM* 8/II, 2015: 1898.
- 12 Labriola, *Saggi*, "III. Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia," nr. IV, 206 (my translation).