

Preface to the Second Edition

Marx in the twenty-first century. It has been over twenty years since the first edition of this book appeared. During that time the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire have collapsed, mainland China has transformed its still nominally communist economic structure into an aggressively fascistic version of capitalism. In the capitalist world, self-described Marxist parties have become noticeably weaker or have ceased to be potent political forces at all. In the last two decades, post-modernism (or whatever it has decided to call itself this week) seems to have replaced Marxism as the fashionable posture of discontented intellectuals.¹ Even many who in earlier decades might be expected to be familiar with and respectful of Marx's thought now simply repeat the timeworn slogans of uncomprehending rejection. It might not be an exaggeration to say that even the academic study of Marx's thought is widely regarded with contempt.

Under these circumstances it is a natural thought that a second edition of a book like *Karl Marx*, if it is worth issuing at all, would need fundamental revision if it is to address a twenty-first century audience. For the new edition I have made many small changes here and there, and have even added a sixteenth chapter, as well as this new Preface. But neither the many minor revisions nor the new chapter address, nor were they occasioned by, political and economic changes occurring at the end of the twentieth century. Fundamentally, the book continues to be – without the least hint of shame or apology -- just what it was in its first edition. It is a sympathetic (but I hope not uncritical) philosophical exposition of the thought of one of the nineteenth century's greatest philosophers. For Marx was someone whose intellectual achievements, in economics,

history, and social theory surely deserve to be called ‘philosophical’ in the most honorific sense of the term, in that these achievements respected no boundaries of discipline or research tradition, but resulted simply from following the empirical evidence, and the paths of independent thinking and theoretical construction, wherever they led.

Part of the reason why no more fundamental changes have been needed in this book is to be found in the deliberate limitations to which the book’s original aims were subject. My own sympathies with Marx’s position were plain enough, as was my own loathing toward capitalism -- not only as it was in Marx’s day but also as it has come to be during my own lifetime. (Since 1981 this attitude on my part has only intensified.) But there was no explicit attempt to relate Marx’s philosophy to “Marxism” in some later sense, or to social or political realities current in the late twentieth century, or even to assess the applicability of Marx’s theories to more recent stages of capitalism than those he knew. Rather, the purpose of the book was to explain Marx’s views from a philosophical standpoint, and chiefly to guard against common misunderstandings of Marx’s philosophical views. The chief purpose, as I said in the concluding remarks (which have not been altered a jot for this second edition) was to keep people – whether they are sympathetic or unsympathetic to Marx – from asking the wrong questions about Marx’s views, and from thinking that many things mistakenly said for and against Marx are relevant to their evaluation of his views when in fact they are not.

Reading and misreading Marx. One reviewer of the first edition (whom I will do the courtesy of not naming here) noted this limited objective and then wondered rhetorically whether it justified a book at all (deciding judiciously in the end that it did). In the course of the review, however, he then proceeded to demonstrate (though

unwittingly) that I had failed (at least in his case) even in my pitifully limited aim. For he displayed quite aggressively (and with no attention whatever to what my book had said about them) several of the very misunderstandings I had tried hardest to correct.

Readers of this book should know, to begin with, that Marx is not a particularly difficult or obscure writer. The best way for them to find this out, if they don't know it already, would obviously be to put this book down for a while and read some Marx instead. Marx would not have appealed as he has either to political fanatics or to literary minds if his writings were abstract and philosophical like those of Aristotle, or Kant, or Hegel, or even Hume. Marx's writing is engaged and passionate, and in places it can be extremely – even offensively, or tediously -- polemical. Some of Marx's early writings may be hard to read because they are terse, sketchy, not meant for publication. The opening chapters of *Capital* on value are abstract and comparatively difficult (as Marx warns us himself in his Preface). But they are not typical of that work, which – like most of Marx's writings about history and economics – is vibrant, clever, witty, combining a love of critical thinking with a love of empirical inquiry. As an economist, Marx learned a great deal from Adam Smith, and their writings have in common the constant presence of irony, either right on the surface or just beneath it. But there is in Marx none of Smith's patient, eighteenth century prolixity. The kinds of subtlety we find in Marx are likely to be missed not, as in Smith, because they are too softly stated, but instead because they are drowned out by the brassiness of his theoretical assertion or the explosiveness of his indignation.

The prose of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* sparkles with bitter wit, captivates with its clever allusions – historical, political, literary. Above all, it is riveting

in its intellectual energy, courage and honesty, as Marx struggles to understand and accept a set of political events that obviously challenged his entire view of the world. Marx is a writer who is constantly struggling with facts and theories of all kinds – Nietzscheans should admire him for the way he seeks out enemies. To read him in a dogmatic spirit, as if his writings were some sort of holy writ, is to miss what is best about him: the terrifying openness of mind represented by his own way of thinking and by the intellectual position into which he forces his readers – especially those who remain unconverted by his theories. This is why Marx should be loved by everyone with a philosophical mind. Those who have not read Marx in a way that permits them to enjoy these virtues in his writing owe it to themselves to do so.

Despite all this, there are probably no texts ever written, with the sole exception of scriptures purporting to convey divine revelation, that have been read with more consistent intellectual dishonesty than the works of Marx. When reading an author who writes about society and history, engagement of your passions and social or historical commitments does not necessarily stand in the way of reading honestly. Some such passions and commitments may even be a precondition for being a serious inquirer into the subject matter at all. So of course good writing about Marx might end up either passionately agreeing with him or passionately rejecting what he says. But misreading is almost guaranteed when it proceeds from agendas that preclude either reading a text sympathetically or reading it critically.

Marx advocated joining and strengthening an international working class movement whose historical destiny, he believed, was to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a higher and more human form of society. He hoped his writings would lend theoretical

insight to the movement and make it stronger. But Marx often emphasized that the movement was still in its process of formation, that it still had much to learn about itself, about capitalism and about its historic mission, and that it must change and develop along with historical circumstances. He consistently urged the movement to practice the most ruthless self-criticism, and avowed that learning from its own mistakes as its only hope in fulfilling its mission of universal human emancipation. Marx himself never identified the working class movement with an ‘-ism’ bearing his name. On some of those who used it, his comment was: “All I know is that I am not a ‘Marxist’.”²

When divisions between working class parties made it uncertain where such a movement was to be found, perhaps even calling into question the very existence of the movement Marx wrote about, fanatics treated dogmatic adherence to the letter of Marxian texts (or to one or another ‘orthodox’ reading of the texts) as equivalent to the genuine adherence to that movement. Mind-numbing devotion was regarded as the touchstone of proletarian solidarity and questioning the truth of what Marx wrote was equated with betrayal of the movement. Thus Marxism forfeited the critical spirit of science and the ability to adapt to changed circumstances that Marx regarded as indispensable. Self-styled ‘Marxism’ became a grotesque parody of that very religious way of thinking whose criticism Marx always regarded as the premise of all social criticism. Even outside the authoritarian regimes that considered themselves Marxist, it became habitual to read Marx’s texts with the assumption that everything stated in them must turn out to be infallibly true. As it does in biblical criticism, this constraint on how the texts were interpreted raised some of the shabbiest forms of intellectual dishonesty to the status of basic exegetical principles.

Critics of Marxism have long emphasized these points, but apologists for the existing order have often read Marx ways that are even more dishonest. For reading a text on the assumption that its basic message must be false is an even better guarantee of dishonest interpretation than reading it on the assumption that what it says must be true. There is a certain style of writing history of political thought where the aim is to determine how far the text or thinker under consideration agrees or disagrees with those principles and attitudes to which (it has been decided ahead of time) all people of good will must adhere. Marx is only one important social thinker who has been systematically misread in this way, but that style of misreading has perhaps been applied to him more flagrantly than to anyone else.

Marx encouraged people to view philosophical doctrines as expressions of class interests. This led him occasionally, and his followers even more often, to interpret the theoretical claims of philosophers more in light of the actual (if often contingent) deeds of those who might be regarded as believing them than in terms of what these claims say or even what they can reasonably be taken to mean. Whatever insight this way of interpreting philosophical doctrines may sometimes afford, it is obviously subject to irresponsible abuse of all kinds. Those hostile to Marx have not hesitated to practice such abuses regarding Marx that they would not practice on any other thinker.

Thus Marx is often read mainly to discover in his texts the supposed source of the misdeeds of his self-appointed followers in the Soviet Union or elsewhere.³ (I have heard it suggested, for instance, that the excessively harsh derisive polemical tone of Marx's writings makes him a fit target of blame for the atrocities committed in the Stalinist purges and the Cultural Revolution; it seems to me that the authors of these suggestions

ought to listen more closely to themselves before asking us to credit their judgments about when someone is being excessively harsh.) Such readers are uninterested in the questions Marx was addressing, still less in the historical context in which he addressed them. Their more or less open intent is to terrify us into accepting the message: “You must not think this way” (lest you become a monster). But this is no different from telling us: “You must not think at all” -- at least, not about whether capitalism is a justifiable social system.

Marx also viewed his own teachings as part of the practice of a historical movement, and seemed willing (or even eager) to submit to the judgment of history on that practice as the final test of their truth or falsity, since he apparently believed the movement he supported would inevitably triumph, and thus be vindicated by history. In this sense, he seems to have accepted the pronouncement Hegel famously quoted from Schiller: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*.⁴ It is perhaps only to be expected that those hostile to his teachings and to movements that claimed to be based on them should adopt these modes of thinking at least for the purpose of celebrating their triumph over him and those who claimed to be acting in his name. Marx’s belief that the victory of movements he favored was inevitable has often led hostile readers who (at least in their sober moments) don’t really believe in historical inevitability at all nevertheless gleefully to attribute inevitability to the defeat of movements bearing Marx’s name. Obviously the fact that Marx’s doctrines might countenance this procedure (especially if they are maliciously misread) does not constitute any intellectual justification for it.

Above all else, any text in the history of philosophy is an opportunity to learn something about the issues it addresses – both the issues as they were conceived then and

as they might be conceived now. We stand to learn from a text by exercising intellectual sympathy and attaining to the author's insights and equally by exercising critical judgment and exposing the author's errors. Reading a text with intellectual integrity means preserving the right perspective on these two simultaneous tasks. When excessive sympathies, antipathies or foreign agendas lead you to do otherwise -- perhaps with the equally misguided aims of venerating an author or punishing him -- the result is only that you punish yourself by failing to get out of the text what you might have gotten out of it.

Marx and the history of modern philosophy. In the subtitle to his little book *Ludwig Feuerbach, Engels* boasted that the German Working Class movement was the sole legitimate heir of German classical philosophy. This was no doubt a gross exaggeration, but it is true that Marx's philosophy, at least, stands in a determinate historical tradition and should be read in light of it. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Europeans tended to think of themselves as 'civilized' in contrast to most of the rest of the world, which (in their view) either remained in a condition of primitive savagery or languished in one or another form of arrested development. They saw their ways as the sole gateway to the human future. They rationalized their colonial exploitation of other parts of the world as the process of bringing 'civilization' to them. This complacent self-conception was challenged above all by Rousseau, who portrayed 'civilization' as at best an ambiguous achievement, arguing that it makes human beings less happy than animals or savages are, and corrupts us morally even as it perfects our capacities to reason, to know and to exercise control over the world. Rousseau's writings themselves are deeply ambivalent about the value of civilization -- emphasizing it has made us evil and unhappy, but also suggesting at times that it is only the transformation it

works on human nature that gives us a dignity that raises us above the animals and makes it possible for us to be moral beings at all. In the Enlightenment there were almost as many ways of reacting to Rousseau's challenge as there were of misunderstanding it. But one influential reaction was to maintain that civilization at its present stage is living, so to speak, on borrowed moral capital. That is, its defense against Rousseau's indictment cannot lie in what it has been thus far, still less in what it is now, but lies instead in what it might enable the human species to become in the future.

Kant saw the matter this way when he declared that "Rousseau was not so wrong when he preferred to [civilization] the condition of savages, as long, namely, as one leaves out the last stage [of human history] to which our species has yet to ascend."⁵ Civilization, in other words, is not justified by what it has been or what it is – if we consider only that, the human race would have been better off without it. But it is justified by the future it makes possible for us. The challenge to the human race is to create that sort of future. Fichte too divided human history (past and future) into five ages.⁶ After an early, primitive "age of innocence," there came a long "age of authority" in which people were in shackles to despots, priests and dogmas of various kinds. He thought that the human race had just recently entered into a third "age of liberation" in which these shackles were being cast off and everything is submitted to the judgment of autonomous reason. This age is simultaneously the most hopeful and the most morally degenerate, because at the start, liberation from authority opens the way skepticism, indifference, greed and selfishness. It is our task in this age to struggle to bring about the fourth age, the "age of reason as knowledge, in which truth (rather than power, comfort or selfish vanity) will be the object of human striving. And then it will be a long, long

time before humanity will attain its fifth and final stage the “age of reason as art” in which rational beings will finally build a world worthy of the dignity of its creators.

A similar view of history is taken up by philosophers and social theorists in post-Revolutionary France. Saint-Simon viewed the present as a ‘critical’ age, in which individuals are estranged and alienated from themselves and from one another, and is to be followed by an ‘organic’ age in which humanity is to be reintegrated into a community based on a common rational world-view. The same picture lies behind Auguste Comte’s division of history into an earlier ‘theological’ age, a ‘metaphysical’ age of abstractions and arguments, leading to rival philosophical theories and endless disputes about the unknowable, and a future ‘positive’ age in which science, concerned only with empirical facts, will bring about rational agreement underpinning consensus and a social order governed by an impartial concern for the common good of all.

We would badly misunderstand Kant and Fichte, at least, if we emphasized their rosy vision of the future (perhaps condescending to it as an illusory hope). For neither philosopher spends much time conceiving of or anticipating what is to come. Rather, as followers of Rousseau, the point they mean to drive home is how intolerable we ought to find the present age, and the consequent urgency of the demand on us to create something in the future that could possibly redeem it. What they are trying to express above all is a sense of sublime ambivalence toward the historical present – the monstrous possibility and limitless freedom it offers us in combination with abysmal evils that earlier stages of history would have been unable even to conceive.

Hegel continues the Enlightenment picture of the modern historical predicament, but in contrast to Kant and Fichte, he gives it a new urgency by regarding its resolution as

having already been achieved, or at least as historically imminent. Hegel saw the distinctive feature of modern society as the emergence of a new kind of social order, distinct both from the private, natural society of the family and public, rationally ordered spiritual unity of the state, in which individuals participate freely, expressing their individual subjectivity and creating a public order with its own kind of natural, unintended rationality. This order was what Hegel called “civil society” (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). In this title, the term *bürgerlich* was to be understood not in the sense of the French word *citoyen* (signifying a member of a political state) but in the sense of the French word ‘*bourgeois*’.⁷

Civil society is at bottom a political-economic order, that is, a third thing alongside the *polis* (or nation state) and the *oikos* (or family). Like the family, it is thought of as a ‘natural’ outgrowth of people’s private behavior, rather than a consciously humanmade social order. And yet it is for all that also a public order, with public norms of conduct and, like the state, subject in principle to people’s collective rational control. To speak of ‘political economy’ is therefore to suggest the nature of civil society in the something of the same way that jazz pianists, in creating a dissonance by striking two adjacent keys, suggest the quarter-tone between them that derives from the music’s African antecedents. Civil society is a sphere in which individuals satisfy their needs through freely chosen life-activities. This means for Hegel that civil society provides a realm in which the distinctive principle of the modern world -- the subjective freedom of the individual -- can meet with satisfaction. The success of Adam Smith and other representatives of the new science of political economy convinced Hegel that civil society, though a realm of

subjective freedom, was also an inherently rational realm, out of which there emerges a distinctive kind of human community.

For Hegel, however, this new form of community is not a merely accidental result of individual human actions, and its members are not to be thought of merely as self-interested economic agents. Built on the basis of the economic order is a genuine human society, a rational order human beings create, and in which they are to live as in a community. The members of civil society actualize their individual freedom only by having determinate ethical identities, and the sense of meaning in their lives is sustained by the way they contribute in determinate ways to the lives of others and to the larger life of their community. Hegel is therefore concerned with the way in which civil society educates its members to their callings within it, shaping their free personalities, and also with the social forms through which people sharing a common profession express their identity not only as bourgeois, in general, but as collective contributors to a determinate branch of civil society's activity, having a common task to perform for civil society as a whole and common responsibility to discharge it with honor and dignity.⁸ Civil society thus provides the basis for a new form of state or rational community, in which the whole of human nature – its drive for individuality as well as its drive for rational community – can reach satisfaction.

This was, in effect, Hegel's answer to the Rousseauian challenge. By creating this new kind of social order, the modern age gives rational form to the seemingly monstrous individual freedom it has unleashed. Yet Hegel was aware at the same time that there were many living in the modern world – indeed, the majority, and a majority whose way of life was essential to the modern way of life – to whom civil society does not, and

cannot, offer the kind of subjective freedom and dignity that it actualizes in the life of the bourgeois. These are the ‘rabble’ (*Pöbel*), who are not ‘professional men’ (*Gewerbsmänner*) with a definite estate (*Stand*) in civil society, but instead earn their livelihood through wages attached to employment that is always precarious, and offers only a marginal version of the freedom and social participation that makes possible self-actualization in the modern world.⁹ Because the rabble sense their exclusion from civil society, Hegel says that they lack the ethical ties to it, and also the self-respect that comes from achieving a determinate position in modern society through one’s own choice and one’s own labor. The mentality of the rabble is instead one that regards civil society as owing them a living without their having to work for it, because they regard the ethical life of civil society itself as hollow, its rights and its sense of human dignity empty and meaningless.¹⁰ Hegel observes too, with some alarm, that this rabble mentality is found in modern civil society also among the wealthy, who regard the rights and dignity of individuality as meaningless because they do not have to work for their own living are aware that in civil society anything can be bought. ”The disposition of the master over the slave is the same as that of the slave.”¹¹ Though Hegel is troubled by what he sees as this ethical corruption arising out of the subjective freedom of civil society, this does not prevent him from viewing the modern world as essentially rational, an order with which the philosophical reason of an educated individual can reconcile itself and be at peace.

Both the Hegelian view that there is an imminent resolution to Rousseau’s deep ambivalence about the modern world and Hegel’s perception of the exclusion of the ‘rabble’ from the freedom of modern life help to shape Marx’s theory of modern society. Marx could not help but see the grotesque contrast between the self-actualized

individuality and community promised by the Hegelian vision of modern society and the lives of the majority who are excluded from it. This contrast shapes his new version of the Rousseauian challenge, and also leads him to see the Enlightenment resolution to it as possibly within our historical reach. Marx also raises the Hegelian theory of modern society to a new level of empirical specificity and sophistication. The growth of industrial society, its scientific theorizing by Smith and classical political economy enables him now to grasp what is essential to Rousseau's "civilization" in essentially economic terms, under the concept of capitalism. Just as Rousseau regarded social inequality as fundamental to the corruption of the civilized condition, so Marx conceives the fundamental evil of capitalism as class oppression. Where Rousseau sees deceit and 'living outside oneself' as characteristic of civilization, Marx regards ideological illusion and alienation as characteristic evils of capitalism.

Marx and Adam Smith. Rousseau and Hegel are major precursors of Marx from a social point of view. Regarding the economic analysis of capitalism, there is only one theorist (either before or since) who compares with Marx regarding the comprehensiveness, depth and realism of what they say about the modern economic order. This theorist is Adam Smith.

Every Marxist should be an admirer of Smith, but an admirer of Smith who summarily rejects Marx's theory of capitalism has thereby forfeited the sense of reality for which Smith is most admirable. Smith is usually seen as a defender of capitalism (or "commercial society", as he calls it), but he was more aware than is usually appreciated of some of its dangers and defects (even at a time when they had yet to ripen into the social ills Marx documented). As recent scholarship has shown, Smith was very much

aware that modern commercial society was based on multiple irrationalities and self-deceptions – excessive vanity, irrational risk-taking and individual dissatisfaction with life – and that the collective prosperity of modern society that he celebrated is even a systematic product of factors making for individual misery.¹² His views on this score were very much akin to the views of Rousseau and Kant. And he argued, for instance, that social remedies (chiefly, publicly supported education) were needed to protect the intelligence and character of poor workers from the “mutilation” wrought on them by their conditions of labor.¹³

There is an important and basic difference between Smith’s conception of “commercial society” and Marx’s conception of “capitalism”. Smith understands commercial society as a determinate social form in which the human possibility of a social division of labor has been facilitated through exercise of the human propensity to truck and barter the products of labor. The dominance of capital over labor, of those who own the means of production over those who employ them, is by no means a defining feature of commercial society. But for Marx this is precisely the defining feature of capitalism, which is seen as a determinate form of the basic feature of all developed forms of society – all forms of what Rousseau would have called “civilization” – namely, the oppression of some classes by others. But in capitalism, class oppression has finally taken a direct -- that is, a directly *economic* form – a form in which the relation of oppressor to oppressed is directly seen as a function of their roles in social production, rather than, say, as a consequence of natural superiority of birth, military or political force, or social arrangements instated by the will of God. Thus for Marx as for Smith, the commercial form of modern society has something fundamentally liberating about it. For

it now enables people to grasp their relations with other human beings in their true form. The issue between Marx and Smith is whether commercial society, involving commodity production and the trucking and bartering of self-interested economic agents, represents these human relations in their true, liberated form, or whether commercial society itself is merely the form assumed by the latest and most naked form of class oppression, which must give way to a different manifestation of co-operative social production before the liberation of humanity, the common value shared by Smith and Marx, can finally be attained.

Smith's defense of modern commercial society over pre-modern society rests on several claims, rooted in Enlightenment values that Marx shared. Smith argues that the spread of a division of labor and markets reduces the price of food and other basic necessities of human life, thus raising the living-standards of the worst-off. Commercial society is conducive to the rule of law, to the personal independence of workers and to their development of traits conducive to rational self-government. And trade increases friendly relations between nations and peoples. Smith thinks that these tendencies belong generally to the expansion of commercial society, so that as long as it expands its influence, they represent general tendencies of capitalist society that can be projected indefinitely into the historical future.¹⁴

These would all be excellent arguments for commercial society if their factual basis were sound. The force of Marx's indictment of capitalism is that they are not empirically sound. The historical tendency of capitalism is not toward greater benefits for the worst off, but for increasing polarization of wealth and power. For large numbers of workers, capitalism means working conditions that dehumanize them, destroying their health,

ruining their minds, and making them slaves to their bourgeois oppressors. The spirit of capitalism untrammelled leads to every form of rapacity and corruption in economic life and social life more generally. The growth of capitalism in the wealthier nations of Europe is accompanied by their imperialist expansion into other parts of the world, which is incompatible with their living on equal terms with those they colonize and despoil.

If Marxism is being called to account for what it might imply about the state of the world a century and a half later, then it is also fair to ask how capitalism at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century measures up to the claims Smith made for it. During the first three quarters of the twentieth century, political victories by labor [have] lessened many of the terrible conditions Marx documented in European capitalism. This might be seen as disproving both Smith and Marx, since it might be taken to show, contrary to Marx, that capitalism could exhibit the progressive tendencies Smith celebrated, but only through political checks on the economic mechanisms that Smith thought would produce these tendencies naturally.

Yet in the last quarter century, and especially after the demise of socialism as a perceived alternative to capitalist society, these trends have dramatically reversed themselves. Labor movements and political parties in prosperous capitalist nations have become weaker, or else have had to betray the working class in order to remain in power. Conditions around the world, especially between dominant capitalist countries and the impoverished nations that lie mostly south of them on the globe, is not becoming more friendly, or more equal or better governed by relations of law and justice. Nor is it true that capitalism tends to foster rational self-government on the part of those subject to it. Increasingly, people in impoverished nations have flocked to various forms of traditional

religious superstition whose appeal consists chiefly in the manner in which they relieve individuals of the responsibility for thinking for themselves and rationally directing their own lives.

The following facts seem relevant: According to recent estimates, the ratio of the top quintile of world incomes to the bottom quintile was 30 to 1 in 1960, 60 to 1 at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, and now by some estimates stands at 135 to 1. All estimate that it is still growing, and at a record rate.¹⁵ This increase is not solely, or even chiefly, due to the improvement of the situation of the best off fifth of the world's population. As Thomas Pogge recently reports: "Worldwide, 34,000 children under age five die daily from hunger and preventable diseases. Roughly one third of all human deaths are due to poverty-related causes. Two out of five children in the developing world are stunted, one in three is underweight. Some 840 million people are today chronically malnourished, 880 million without access to health services, one billion without adequate shelter, 1.3 billion without access to safe drinking water, 2.6 billion without access to basic sanitation."¹⁶

Judged by Adam Smith's own reasonable criteria, his arguments in favor of the spread of commercial society are today the reverse of persuasive, and Marx's indictment of capitalism seems, on a worldwide scale, more convincing than ever.

Marx's ambivalence toward capitalism. Marx's deepest attitude toward capitalism, however, is the same as that of Rousseau, Kant and Fichte toward the civilized condition – it is one of profound *ambivalence*. However dismal Rousseau's outlook for the future of civilization may be, he regards the civilized condition as the only one in which we can develop our faculties, govern our lives through reason, achieve virtue and the dignity of

moral freedom. Those who read Rousseau as simply repudiating the civilization around him miss not only an essential part of his message, but also the part of it that connects him vitally to the Enlightenment tradition that accepted that message.

We likewise miss a crucial part of Marx's message if we ignore his praise for the awesome achievements of the bourgeoisie in erecting the capitalist social order. The first part of the *Communist Manifesto* is above all a paean of praise to these achievements, without which, in Marx's view, no possibility of any higher society would have been thinkable. The bourgeoisie has overturned and revolutionized all previous social forms, created forces of production not only quantitatively more massive but of an essentially new and higher character than any previous civilization that has ever existed. It has created a worldwide nexus of trade, and with it a world culture, giving an essentially universal, cosmopolitan character to all social relationships. In revolutionizing all previous social forms it has done away with all traditional modes of thinking, melting all that was solid, profaning all that was holy, and making it both possible and necessary for human beings to face soberly their real condition and their real relations with their own kind.¹⁷

For Rousseau, what civilization does for us above all is provide us with the capacity to see clearly the evils of civilization. Likewise, for Marx perhaps the greatest accomplishment of capitalism is that it puts us in a position to understand clearly how monstrous and intolerable capitalism really is. For it is only this which enables us to grasp the material conditions created by capitalism as a world historical problem in need of a radical solution. "Therefore mankind sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only

when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are in the process of formation.”¹⁸

For Marx, capitalism will continue to be the dominant form of society as long as it can continue to develop the forces of production. Or, to state what is only the dark side of the same truth, humanity will be condemned to the oppression and alienation inseparable from capitalism as long as capitalism’s ability to develop these forces persists. Marx optimistically believed that capitalism’s instabilities, its periodic crises and internal irrationalities, meant that its period of dominance is coming to a close, that we can already foresee its end. If, however, Marx was wrong about this last point, the conclusion that would follow is only that humanity is condemned to a longer apprenticeship of servitude and misery at the hands of capitalism than he thought.¹⁹ Attempts to put an end to capitalism prematurely would then be doomed to failure, at least in the short run. Hegel would have been wrong in regarding the liberation of humanity as imminent, and the period in which we must live in a society about which a thinking person must be deeply ambivalent would then be indefinitely extended, as the earlier Rousseauians, such as Kant and Fichte, had thought. It would be a profound mistake, however, to think of this eventuality as discrediting Marx’s theory of capitalist society, and certainly erroneous to see it as providing any sort of defense for it against the charges that it is fundamentally a system of inhumanity and unfreedom, a system of alienation, oppression and exploitation more naked, and on a larger scale, than the world has ever known.

Marx and the fall of the Soviet Union. What re-evaluation of Marx’s philosophy of history is actually required in light of the events of the late twentieth century, especially the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire? This was an empire that was ostensibly

grounded on adherence to the doctrines of Marx and some of his followers, especially Lenin and his Russian successors. In our culture, however – I mean Western capitalist, and especially American culture – this question can be taken either literally or metaphorically – that is, it can be a way of asking one or more other questions that are not really about Marx’s theory of history, or not even about anything Marx said or thought at all. To people in our culture, however, the metaphorical questions often feel more literal than the literal ones.

Let us begin, however, with the literal questions. The most literal question of all might be whether the failure of twentieth century attempts at socialism disconfirms Marx’s theory of history. It is initially implausible in general that Marx’s own theories could have been directly disconfirmed by what happened in (or to) nominally socialist societies, since those theories were chiefly concentrated on capitalism. The isolated nineteenth century utopian experiments in socialism did not interest him much, and his theory of history does not deal with them. Marx advocated socialism, but said very little about it for the obvious reason that during his lifetime it existed only in people’s heads and not in the historical world. Marx’s theories were mainly about capitalism, not about socialism.

More specifically, however, one literal question might be: What did Marx think about the prospects for socialism in Russia? Would he have predicted the success of socialism in Russia? Even though Russia did not yet have a fully developed capitalist economy at the time Marx wrote about it, he did encourage Russian revolutionaries to create a socialist society there, and he thought that in this way Russia might avoid the disastrous ups and downs that had accompanied capitalist industrialization in other

countries. But Marx thought that a socialist revolution in Russia would occur in association with socialist revolutions in the capitalist nations of Western Europe. As G. A. Cohen has argued, Marx would not have expected socialism to succeed in Russia in the conditions under which it actually arose there.²⁰ Marx advocated a socialist revolution in Russia, and expected it to succeed, but only if the revolution there were accompanied and supported by socialist revolutions in Western Europe. Cohen argues that Marx's historical materialism would imply the failure rather than the success of a socialist revolution in one relatively backward country. Cohen seems to me to show conclusively that events of the late twentieth century in Russia did not falsify any prediction he made, or that he would have been disposed to make. On the contrary, as Cohen concludes, if the Soviet Union had built an attractive form of socialism in the absence of socialist revolutions elsewhere, this might have been much better for the inhabitants of the traditional Russian empire and even much better for humanity as a whole, but it would have falsified Marx's theory of history.

Another (less specific, but still literal) question might be whether events in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century might in other ways disconfirm the Marxian materialist conception of history as a whole. Marx's materialist theory divides human history into stages, each of which is characterized by a certain mode of production in material life. A mode of production is determined most fundamentally by its historical stage in the development of society's productive forces. The use of these productive forces is held to determine a set of social relations of production, which consist in different social roles in the productive process and different degrees of power and control over the conditions of production, the process of production, and also its fruits. Relations of production thus

divide human beings into classes with conflicting interests. The dynamics of history, on the Marxian theory, depend fundamentally on the struggles of these class interests, and their correspondence to the ongoing development of the productive forces. The materialist theory understands political and legal struggles, and also philosophical and religious struggles in society as a function of these struggles between class interests.

The question then is how far the collapse of the Soviet empire tends to prove or disprove this theory of history. It seems to me that it has no significant tendency to do either. The central claims of Marx's historical materialism do not seem to be either much confirmed or much disconfirmed by the way the Cold War ended. The idea that human history is divided into stages by the degree of economic development may be controversial, but many accept it who would not want to consider themselves Marxists at all. For instance, we find a Wal-Mart version of this idea in the so-called "Third Wave" theory of history, publicized a few years ago by Alvin Toffler and even championed by the likes of Newt Gingrich.²¹ Many who wouldn't touch Marxism with a ten-foot pole have in effect suggested that twentieth century developments in human economic capacities are precisely what undermined the Soviet system.²² Whether such accounts are correct or not, they present an explanation for the failure of the Soviet Union which is fundamentally Marxian and historical materialist.

Of course Marx made dramatic and confident, if somewhat vague, predictions about modern society and the changes it was to undergo, many of which now seem to be just wrong. He predicted the overthrow of capitalism by the working class movement, and that a communist society would be established in its place. Those who regard the collapse of the Soviet empire as refuting Marxism probably think that it does so by discrediting

these predictions. But that thought is extremely shortsighted in a couple of different ways. First, in order to see the fall of the Soviet Union specifically as falsifying Marx's historical predictions you have to buy into a large piece of Soviet cold war propaganda. You have to think that the hopes of communism and of the working class movement rest entirely on the success or failure of the Eastern European Soviet system. For roughly the last three quarters of the twentieth century, however, it has been quite evident to all who had eyes to see that it would take a revolution within the Soviet Union at least as radical as the revolution of 1917 before Russia could have any communist or socialist system worthy of the name. Rational hopes for a genuine and desirable alternative to capitalism, such as they have been for well over half a century, would have to be placed chiefly in the possibility of democratic social revolutions in those countries where Marx himself expected such revolutions – in the countries where capitalism always was, and still now is, dominant – namely, the countries of Western Europe. If Marx's hopeful prediction of the overthrow of capitalism stands refuted by events in the twentieth century, then these events occurred outside the Soviet Union and much earlier than 1990. It is not the collapse of Soviet socialism that poses a challenge to Marx's predictions, but the resilience of capitalism, which also made it possible for capitalist powers to derail twentieth century experiments in socialism.

Second, and more importantly, there is much more of interest in Marx's theory of capitalism than his predictions of its imminent demise. What is most basic and substantive in it is a class analysis of the dynamics of the capitalist economy and the use of this economic analysis as a key to understanding modern society generally. The Marxian analysis understands classes relationally, and specifically in terms of relations of

exploitation. Social exploitation in general may be thought of as a relation in which the exploiting agent makes use of vulnerabilities of the exploited agent to advance the ends of the exploiting agent. The Marxian concept of capitalist exploitation understands the vulnerability in question to be a decisive bargaining advantage possessed by those who own the means of production over those who must live only through the sale of their labor power to the owners of these means. Marx proposes to understand the modern market system not in terms of a formal analysis of voluntary exchanges between economic actors seeking to satisfy their utility functions, but in terms of the dynamics of the power relations between antagonistic classes. Orthodox neoclassical economic theory treats inequalities of wealth and power as accidental in relation to the fundamental mechanisms of the market. According to it, what is essential to capitalism might be preserved within a market in which private property was so distributed that all people shared more or less equally in wage labor and in ownership of the means of production. For Marx, however, what is essential about capitalism is the antagonistic relation between exploiting and exploited classes. The capitalist market system, as a historical reality, cannot exist without class oppression. Fantasies about a possible egalitarian market system may certainly exist in the minds of apologetic theorists and would-be reformers, but they have no existence in reality. Understanding modern capitalism in this way, Marx provided theories of capital accumulation, the trade cycle, and a great many other matters that are obvious facts of economic life in modern society. He also suggested class analyses of political, religious and other social phenomena. Some of these analyses now seem outdated or irrelevant, but others surely are not, even if they remain controversial.

On the whole, the theory Marx presented in *Capital* is far more relevant to present day social reality than we have any right to expect from any theory that is a century and a half old. This point is not altered very much by the events surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union, simply because Marx wrote far more, and far more centrally, about capitalism[,] than he did about communism, or even about phenomena he hopefully interpreted as attempts at communism (such as the short-lived Paris commune of 1870). Marx never described or prescribed any system like those that prevailed in Eastern Europe in the 20th century. These systems never abolished commodity production, or the class structure of society; their pretense to democratic rule by the working class was always a sadly -- or laughably, or offensively -- transparent sham. The fate of these experiments in rapid industrialization under ruthless state capitalism, in countries with virtually no tradition of civil rights or representative institutions, and their failure to withstand the assaults of a stronger Western empire hostile to them, is no more directly relevant to questions about the rightness or wrongness of Marx's theories concerning capitalism than it was a credible controlled social experiment in the viability of socialism.

Fall of the Soviet Union as metaphor. But by the time the fall of the Soviet Union is seen as a final, decisive refutation of Marxian prediction of the fall of capitalism, we have already left behind the literal questions behind and entered into the realm of the metaphorical questions. The questions that we are supposed to regard as answered concern whether capitalism itself, as it presently exists, ought to be, or ever can be, overthrown or radically transformed. Declaring Marx to have been refuted by history is just a metaphorical way of rejecting in a complacent spirit of historical finality, the

slogan of the global justice movement: “Another world is possible.” In its place, we are to put the slogan: “There is no alternative.”

It is necessary to do all this by way of metaphor because if the real question were taken literally, the certainty of the desired negative answer is readily seen as all too tenuous. Is capitalism destined to be the permanent economic form of society forever? (Is history really at an end?) To assert confidently that it is would surely be to say more than any sober-minded person could claim to know.²³

Is another world possible? Of course it is. We all know it is. That’s precisely why the slogan was chosen by the global justice movement, to expose the fatuous arrogance of those who shortsightedly assume there is no alternative to the triumph of global capitalism. There is never “no alternative” – except, of course, for those who don’t want there to be any. The question is only how long it will take historical conditions to present human beings with an alternative, and what alternatives there eventually will be. Marx’s claims that the downfall of capitalism is inevitable must always be understood as inferred from his more basic thesis that nothing in human affairs is eternal or unalterable. If there is anything at all that is certain in human affairs, it is that nothing is permanent. Existing social forms are always eventually overrun by the process of history. “There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement – *mors immortalis*.”²⁴

But hasn’t the failure of the Soviet Union exposed socialism as an empty dream – something that can never be brought about in a form that would be stable, viable and attractive to intelligent people? That dream was supposed to have been the essence of

Marxism, and that is what is supposed to have died and to have been finally discredited. But human dreams, when they represent the permanent enlightened interests of many, many human beings, never die. They have a way, sooner or later, of coming back, of being reborn, Phoenix-like, from the ash-heap of history; and if their basic idea is cogent enough, and the human interests they represent are powerful enough, they can never be regarded as finally killed or discredited. Those who think of the idea of socialism as finally discredited must see no significant human interests in its favor, no persisting basis for its appeal. Such blindness as that can only be willful.

After the First World War, the Allied powers attempted a radical realignment of the nation states of Europe in an attempt to establish an international order that would bring a stable and lasting peace to that region of the world. Within a few years, it became clear that they had not succeeded. Less than twenty years later, Europe went through another terrible war, which might very well have been taken to prove with historical finality that the goal of a European Union was hopeless and wrongheaded. But half a century later, such a peaceful order in Europe is now a reality.

The failure of an ambitious historical aim in one age is not necessarily proof that it will not eventually be achieved in another age. The failure, under unfavorable conditions and with powerful international opposition, of the attempt to bring about socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, does not show that socialism cannot succeed at a later time and under more favorable circumstances.

The peculiarly American metaphor. Here in the United States especially, there is always also another even more tenuous and more extravagant metaphorical meaning to all questions about whether Marx has been finally refuted by history. Early in the

twentieth century, the Progressive movement attempted to bring stability to American capitalism through state regulation. Part of this movement also involved an attempt to use the powers of the state on behalf of the working classes, not exclusively on behalf of the owning and exploiting classes. The New Deal and subsequent liberal democratic policies up into the 1960s were a continuation of the aims of the Progressives. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, there has been a strong counter-movement in American society to halt Progressive trends and even to roll back the most humane achievements of the early twentieth century.²⁵

Capitalist triumphalism employs the idea that Marx has been discredited metaphorically to promote this anti-Progressive movement. All goods, however public in character – electricity, even water, are to be privatized. Any state action that aims at curbing the power of the wealthy over the poor, even the most modest state regulation undertaken merely in the interests of a stable capitalist economy, are regularly greeted with the exclamation: “If that could work, then Karl Marx would have been right and the Soviet Union would not have lost the Cold War.” This is downright silly, of course, since Marx did not advocate the sorts of moderate social change sought by twentieth century Progressives and their liberal followers. But because Marx is the most influential of those who pointed to the defects in untrammelled and rapacious capitalism, such remarks prove rhetorically effective in our ignorant and bigoted nation to associate his name with any attempt to promote interests other than those of the owning and managing classes, or even with attempts to regulate the capitalist economy in the interests of maintaining the long term stability and legitimacy of the system Marx wanted to overthrow.

Marxism and the real world. Marx was impressed by the way in which an aristocratic society based on hereditary orders or estates had been abolished through the bourgeois revolution in modern Europe. He thought that society was on the brink of an analogous revolution, in which economic class oppression would likewise be abolished. Those who reject his vision have always been torn between the idea that what Marx was seeking has already been accomplished by modern capitalist society and the idea that it never can be accomplished, because it represents a kind of unattainable ideal or fantasy, a transposition to earth of some religious vision such as the idea of a Kingdom of God. Yet no sane person could think that Marx's hopes have already been realized in present day capitalism. And those who see Marxian communism as a form of religious illusion must think either that the present order of things is so near to perfection that anything better would have to correspond to a religious fantasy, or else that the social inequality and class oppression characteristic of capitalism are such fundamental and ineradicable features of human life that it would be laughably unrealistic to hope that they will ever be abolished. The blindness to reality apparent in the first thought, and the reprehensible cynicism represented by the second, are so obvious, when the thoughts are taken literally, that it is necessary to present them indirectly, as the metaphorical meaning we are to draw from the final defeat of Marxism.

Marx never thought that the end of capitalist class exploitation will end all human suffering or discontent. It will not turn human beings into angels or alter the basic facts of the human condition. Our condition will always be one of absurdity, anxiety, mortality, foolish hopes, and eternal strivings. No one who rejects a religious view of the world, as Marx did, could ever think otherwise. Yet there is no need in the nature of things for a

social system to magnify the absurdity. Human beings do have the collective power to reduce the effects of cruel chance to a minimum, rather than enshrining them and ramifying them in an inhuman social system that actually celebrates our most terrible human failings: greed, indifference to others, complacency, self-deception. Like the abolition of slavery or serfdom, the abolition of capitalism will merely remove one systematic, socially caused source of human misery and mutual hostility between people.

The last quarter of the twentieth century would seem to confirm rather than refute Marx, insofar as, after roughly fifty years in which there was a narrowing in the gap between rich and poor, the past thirty years or so have seen that gap widen, and it is still widening – it is even now being forcibly widened at an accelerating rate by the dominant political powers. Political power too has come to be distributed less equally, both through the takeover of our nominally democratic governments by the corporate kleptocracy, and in the form of the growth of extra-democratic, even extra-political power, in the form of the political hegemony over states of so-called multinational corporations that operate beyond the bounds of any form of democratic political control.

The same weaknesses in human nature that make people greedy and selfish also make the same people shortsighted, imprudent and prone both to acting on irrational fears and to taking unwise risks. Hence the fact that, as its defenders often proclaim, capitalism harmonizes with what is worst in human nature does not necessarily support their conclusion that it is invincible or that there is no alternative to it. For there are other sides of human nature too: people are sometimes decent and rational, not always greedy and shortsighted. And when a sufficient number of human beings have strong enough reasons to improve their conditions of life, they sometimes eventually do succeed. Capitalism

exploits and oppresses most of the world's population at the beginning of the twenty first century in very much the same way Marx described it as doing in the middle of the nineteenth century. A great many more people now than in the past have good reasons to seek a better way for the human race to labor and to live. That is fundamentally why another world is still possible.

Capitalist triumphalism, moreover, is remaking our world so that it is more like the brutal world Marx wrote about than it is like the twentieth century capitalist world that sought at times to reform itself under the threat of socialism. Those who identify capitalism with 'democracy' are blind to the forces within capitalism which have always stood in the way of realizing the idea of democracy in the political realm, and even now are threatening to erode and destroy what minimal degree of democracy capitalist societies have achieved. Sources of mass-communication are ever more concentrated in a few hands, whose chief interest, beyond that of making profits, is to shape a political world in which there is no limit on the profits they can make. Multi-national corporations, supported by a system of international treaties designed to promote 'free trade' increasingly operate beyond any constraints that could be imposed by even the most formally democratic institutions.

The propaganda put out by each side in the Cold War was headlined by the claim that if the other side ever won final victory, the result would be a world historical calamity for the human race. The West won the Cold War chiefly because its claim on this score eventually – and with good reason -- came to be almost universally believed. Events may now be proving, however, that the East may *also* have been right in its corresponding claim, though as yet perilously few seem to be aware of it. For we are now witnessing the

growth of a regime of world capitalism, supported by unfettered American military might, that seeks to impose a hegemony of capital over labor throughout the world, and threatens to take away the freedom even of the people in those few privileged nations that receive the relative benefits of capitalist oppression. The United States, standing at the head of these privileged nations, is now ruled by an increasingly despotic regime, contemptuous of world opinion, of the basic interests of the vast majority of its citizens as well as of their rights as human beings, which was appointed through judicial misconduct rather than elected. Yet in this country the electoral process itself, including the dissemination of public information, has been so long corrupted by propaganda in the interests of corporations and the wealthy that even this last fact hardly even matters any more. The formal institutions of representative government no more represent democracy than the capitalist wage bargain represents a free exchange between equals.

Only a worldwide movement of people who think about the world roughly as Marx did will be capable of reversing the present downward spiral in the affairs of humankind. It makes no difference whether such a movement calls itself ‘Marxist’ (just as Marx himself never thought that the working class movement had to bear his name, like a corporate logo). As things presently stand, it would be immediately fatal to any movement in this direction if it identified itself dogmatically with some self-appointed ‘Marxist’ faction out of the past. But it can only increase the chances of such a movement if more people reacquaint themselves with what Marx wrote and begin think both sympathetically and critically about it, correcting the many misunderstandings that have long been perpetrated by enthusiasts and detractors alike. That is reason enough for reissuing a book like *Karl Marx* at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
