

Read Karl Marx!

A Conversation With Immanuel Wallerstein

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Karl Marx's writings are illuminating and much more subtle and variegated than some of the simplistic interpretations of his ideas, says sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein.

For three decades, neoliberal policies and ideology have been almost uncontested worldwide. Nevertheless, the 2008 economic crises, the profound inequalities that exist in our society -- in particular between the Global North and South -- and the dramatic environmental issues of our time have urged several scholars, economic analysts and politicians to reopen the debate on the future of capitalism and the need for an alternative. It is in this context that today, almost everywhere around the world, on the occasion of the bicentenary of Marx's birth, there is a "Marx revival": a return to an author in the past wrongly associated with Marxism-Leninism dogmatism and, then, hastily dismissed after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Returning to Marx is still indispensable to understanding the logic and dynamics of capitalism. His work is also a very useful tool that provides a rigorous examination addressing why previous socio-economical experiments to replace capitalism with another mode of production failed. An explanation of these failures is critical for our contemporary search for alternatives.

[Immanuel Wallerstein](#), currently a senior research scholar at Yale University, is among the greatest living sociologists and one of the most appropriate scholars to discuss the current relevance of Marx. He has been a reader of Marx for a long time, and his work has been influenced by the theories of the revolutionary born in Trier on May 5, 1818. Wallerstein has authored more than 30 books, which have been translated into several languages, including his very well known *The Modern World-System*, published in four volumes between 1974 and 2011.

Marcello Musto: Professor Wallerstein, 30 years after the end of so-called "actually existing socialism" there continue to be publications, debates and conferences all around the globe on Karl Marx's continuing capacity to explain the present. Is this surprising? Or do you believe that Marx's ideas will continue to hold relevance for those who are looking for an alternative to capitalism?

Immanuel Wallerstein: There is an old story about Marx: you throw him out the front door and he sneaks back in through the rear window. That is what happened once again. Marx is relevant because we have to deal with issues about which he still has a lot to say and because what he said is different from what most other authors argued about capitalism. Many columnists and scholars -- not only myself --

find Marx extremely useful and today he is in one of his new popularity phases, despite what was predicted in 1989.

The fall of the Berlin Wall liberated Marx from the chains of an ideology that had little to do with his conception of society. The political landscape following the implosion of the Soviet Union helped to free Marx from the role of figurehead for a state apparatus. What is it about Marx's interpretation of the world that continues to garner attention?

I believe that when people think of Marx's interpretation of the world in one concept they think of "class struggle." When I read Marx in light of the present issues, for me class struggle means the necessary struggle of what I call the Global Left -- who I believe endeavor to represent the bottom 80 percent of the world's population by income -- against the Global Right -- which represents maybe 1 percent of the population. The struggle is over the other 19 percent. It is about how to get them to come onto your side, rather than the other.

We live in an era of structural crisis of the world system. The existing capitalist system cannot survive, but nobody can know for sure what will replace it. I am convinced that there are two possibilities: one is what I call the "Spirit of Davos." The goal of the World Economic Forum of Davos is to establish a system that maintains the worst features of capitalism: social hierarchy, exploitation and, above all, polarization of the wealth. The alternative is a system that must be more democratic and more egalitarian. Class struggle is the fundamental attempt to affect the future of what will replace capitalism.

Your reflection on the middle class reminds me of Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony, but I think the point is also to understand how to motivate the mass of people, the 80 percent you mentioned, to participate in politics. This is particularly urgent in the so-called global South, where the majority of the world's population is concentrated, and where, in the past decades, despite the dramatic increase of inequalities produced by capitalism, progressive movements have become much weaker than they were previously. In these regions, the opposition to neoliberal globalization has often been channeled into support for religious fundamentalisms and xenophobic parties. We are increasingly seeing this phenomenon arise in Europe as well.

The question is: Does Marx help us understand this new scenario? Recently published studies have offered new interpretations of Marx that might contribute to open other "rear windows" in the future, to use your expression. They reveal an author who extended his examination of the contradictions of capitalist society beyond the conflict between capital and labor to other domains. In fact, Marx devoted a lot of his time to the study of non-European societies and the destructive role of colonialism on the periphery of capitalism. Consistently, contrary to interpretations that equate Marx's conception of socialism with the development of productive forces, ecological concerns figured prominently in his work.

Finally, Marx was widely interested in several other topics that scholars often ignore when they talk about him. Among them there are the potential of technology, the critique of nationalism, the search for collective forms of ownership uncontrolled by the state and the need for individual freedom in contemporary society: all fundamental issues of our times. But beside these new faces of Marx -- which suggest that the renewed interest in his thought is a phenomenon destined to continue in the coming years -- could you indicate three of Marx's most recognized ideas that you believe are worth being reconsidered today?

First of all, Marx explained to us better than anybody else that capitalism is not the natural way of organizing society. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, published when he was only 29 years old, he already mocked bourgeois political economists who argued that capitalist relations "are natural laws, independent of the influence of time." Marx wrote that for them "there has been history, since in the institutions of feudalism we find quite different relations of production from those of bourgeois society," but that they did not apply history to the mode of production they supported, they represented capitalism "as natural and eternal." In my book [*Historical Capitalism*](#), I tried to make the point that capitalism is what has occurred historically, as opposed to some vague and unclear idea espoused by several mainstream political economists. I argued several times that there is no capitalism that is not historical capitalism. It is as simple as that for me and we owe a lot to Marx.

Secondly, I want to stress the importance of the concept of "primitive accumulation," meaning the dispossession of the peasantry from their land which was at the foundation of capitalism. Marx understood very well that it was a key process of constituting the domination of bourgeoisie. It was there at the beginning of capitalism and it still exists today.

Finally, I would invite greater reflection on the subject "private property and communism." In the system established in the Soviet Union -- in particular under Stalin -- the state owned the property but it did not mean that people were not being exploited or oppressed. They were. Talking of socialism in one country, as Stalin did, was also something that never entered anybody's mind, including Marx, before that period. Public ownership of the means of production is one possibility. They can also be cooperatively owned. But we have to know who is producing and who is receiving the surplus value if we want to establish a better society. That has to be entirely reorganized, compared to capitalism. It is the key question to me.

The year 2018 marks the bicentenary of Marx's birth and new books and movies have been dedicated to his life. Is there a period of his biography that you find most interesting?

Marx had a very difficult life. He struggled with severe personal poverty and he was lucky to have a comrade like Friedrich Engels who helped him to survive. Marx did not have an easy life emotionally too and his persistence in trying to do what he thought of as his life's work - the understanding of the way in which capitalism

operates - was admirable. This is what he saw himself doing. Marx did not want to explain antiquity, nor define what socialism in the future would look like. These were not the tasks he put for himself. He wanted to understand the capitalist world in which he was living.

For all his life, Marx was not merely a scholar isolated among the books of London's British Museum, but always a militant revolutionary involved in the struggles of his epoch. Due to his activism, he was expelled from France, Belgium and Germany in his youth. He was also forced to go into exile in England when the revolutions of 1848 were defeated. He promoted newspapers and journals and always supported labor movements in all the ways he could. Later, from 1864 to 1872, he became the leader of the International Working Men's Association, the first transnational organization of the working class and, in 1871, defended the Paris Commune, the first socialist experiment in history.

Yes, it is true. It is essential to remember Marx's militancy. As you recently highlighted in the volume [*Workers Unite!*](#), he had an extraordinary role in the International, an organization of people who were physically distant from each other, at a time when mechanisms of easy communication did not exist. Marx's political activity also involved journalism. He carried that on through much of his life, as a way of communicating to a larger audience. He worked as a journalist to get an income, but he saw his contributions as a political activity. He had not any sense of being a neutral. He was always a committed journalist.

In 2017, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Russian Revolution, some scholars returned to the contrast between Marx and some of his self-styled followers who were in power during the 20th century. What is the main difference between Marx and them?

Marx's writings are illuminating and much more subtle and variegated than some of the simplistic interpretations of his ideas. It is always good to remember the famous *boutade* in which Marx said: "If this is Marxism, what is certain is that I am not a Marxist." Marx was always ready to deal with the reality of the world, not like many others who dogmatically imposed their views. Marx changed his mind often. He was constantly on the search for solutions to the problems he saw that the world was facing. That is why he is still a very helpful and useful guide.

To conclude, what would you like to say to the younger generation who have not yet encountered Marx?

The first thing I have to say to young people is that they have to read *him*. Do not read *about* him, but *read Marx*. Few people -- in comparison with the many who talks about him -- actually read Marx. That is also true of Adam Smith. Generally, one only reads about these classics. People learn about them through others people's summary. They want to save time but, actually, that is a waste of time! One must read interesting people and Marx is the most interesting scholar of the 19th

and 20th centuries. There is no question about that. No one is equal to him in terms of the number of things he wrote about, nor for the quality of his analysis. So, my message to the new generation is that Marx is eminently worth discovering but you must read, read, read *him*. Read Karl Marx!