Karl Marx and Capitalism – A remarkable exhibition at Berlin's German Historical Museum

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The German Historical Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum, DHM) in central Berlin is currently home to a remarkable exhibition, *Karl Marx and Capitalism*. It opened in early February and runs through August 21.

"Twenty years ago, if someone had said that the German Historical Museum would soon be showing an exhibition entitled *Karl Marx and Capitalism*, it would probably have provoked incredulous astonishment," explained curator Sabine Kritter at the exhibition's opening.

After the "failure of real socialism" (the misleading term applied to the former Stalinist East Germany, the German Democratic Republic), Marxism and Marx himself were seemingly finished and the word "capitalism" had been discredited as a combative polemical term, Kritter asserted. But against the backdrop of the financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008, increasing social inequalities and the enormous concentration of wealth, "there is a lively debate about Marx's theories in the public sphere, but also in the social sciences, in philosophy and in the cultural sphere."

For many today, Kritter said, the question was whether capitalism was capable of finding answers to these pressing social problems. "And that brings Marx, who was the first to try to figure out the mechanisms and interconnections of capitalism, back to the forefront as a social ... critic."

Polls registering opinions about Karl Marx, displayed at the entrance to the exhibition, attest to the high level of interest. Some 43 percent of respondents and 60 percent of 16-to-22-year-olds are convinced that Marx's critique of capitalism can help them better understand the problems of modern economic life. Visiting the exhibition, one is struck by how many young people are present.

The exhibition organizers have set themselves the task of considering Marx in his era and understanding his work first in its 19th-century context, as the preface to the catalogue states. From this, they hope to gain a better understanding of his impact on the 20th and 21st centuries. They succeed in the former, but not in the latter—for reasons we will discuss in the second half of this review.

Although the exhibition is confined to one large space, it provides a comprehensive look at Marx's life, his political and theoretical work, his role as a revolutionary and the dramatic changes of his time.

Those responsible have taken great pains and care to bring the subject to a wide audience. They use numerous means to do so: from short texts in German and English to portraits, sketches, paintings, interactive installations and reproductions of objects—such as an early version of the "Spinning Mule," a spinning machine that multiplied labour productivity—to a board game called "Strikes" that the Marx family used to play.

Numerous video and audio presentations reinforce the themes. Those who have the time can rent an audio guide, which features more detailed commentary as well as original quotes from Marx's works.

The exhibition is divided into seven thematic areas, framed by a prologue on the stages of Marx's life and an epilogue on his reception and historical influence.

"From the Critique of Religion to the Critique of Society" deals with the 1840s, when Marx, working closely with Friedrich Engels, broke with the critical idealism of the Young Hegelians and the mechanical materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach, developing his materialist conception of history and the perspective of proletarian revolution, which found their brilliant summing up in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

On display here, among other things, is a handwritten page from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), the eleventh of which reads: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."

"Jewish Emancipation and Anti-Semitism" deals with the anti-Semitism of his day. The exhibition proves that Marx, who occasionally used anti-Jewish stereotypes in his early writing "On the Jewish Question" and in private letters about Ferdinand Lassalle, was not an anti-Semite, but, on the contrary, consistently advocated the political emancipation of the Jews.

"Revolution and Violence" focuses on the two revolutions in which Marx himself participated—the bourgeois revolution of 1848, which spread throughout France and Germany to numerous European countries, and the Paris Commune of 1871. As editor-in-chief of the daily *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx played a leading role on the left wing of the 1848 revolution. In 1871, he supported and defended the Paris Commune as a leading figure of the International Workingmen's Association.

This thematic area is one of the most interesting in the exhibition, as it gives a sense of the tremendous momentum that the intervention of the masses into politics produced and the extent of the counterrevolutionary violence with which the rulers responded.

Marx extracted critical lessons from each revolution. From the revolutions of 1848-49, which resulted in defeat because of the cowardice of the petty-bourgeois democrats, he concluded that it was essential for the working class to organize independently of them and to make the revolution "permanent" "until all the more or less possessing classes were ousted from power." From the defeat of the Paris Commune, he concluded that the working class could not simply take over the bourgeois state apparatus, but had to build its own apparatus of rule. Both conclusions are hardly addressed in the DHM exhibition.

The thematic area "New Technologies" provides an insight into the dynamics of technological and economic upheaval in the 19th century, which—starting in England—drove millions of peasants off the land and transformed them into proletarians.

Marx was aware that capitalism, as a system of exploitation, also

destroys the natural foundations or, as he wrote at the end of the first volume of *Capital*, "the original sources of all wealth: the soil and the labourer." This is shown in the theme "Nature and Economy."

"Economy and Crisis" looks at Marx's magnum opus, *Das Kapital* in German, and highlights economic developments, especially the Great Depression of 1857, which Marx studied in depth while working on *Capital*.

"Struggles and Movements" looks at Marx's role as an active politician, particularly his work at the head of the International Workingmen's Association, which was founded in 1864 and dissolved in 1876. Against a backdrop of rapid growth in the workers' movement, the First International played an important role in clarifying political perspectives and distinguishing the socialist workers' movement from Mikhail Bakunin's anarchism and other petty-bourgeois currents.

Among the most important exhibits here are debates between Marx, Bakunin and Lassalle, mounted from original quotes. Lassalle regarded himself as a socialist, but, unlike Marx, was prepared to support the bourgeois state and even met with Germany's chancellor Otto von Bismarck for secret talks. Unfortunately, these arguments can only be heard through one headphone at a time.

Marx's Reception and Impact

At this point, the exhibition falls off abruptly. The epilogue on Marx's "Reception and Impact" feels like a cold shower. A few pictures and posters hang in a small room, without explanation or context.

Images of Marx's original grave and a large memorial erected later are meant to document the difference between the "historical" and the "idealized, monumentalized Marx of the 20th century," according to the catalogue. Anti-communist posters produced by Hitler's NSDAP (Nazi Party) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) represent the hostility to Marxism.

Other photographs show images of Marx and Engels at demonstrations in Angola, Cuba and China. Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is also shown with a picture of Marx, as is a gathering of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge leadership with portraits of Marx and Engels in the background—as if the mass murderer Pol Pot, who pushed Maoist-style Stalinism to its ultimate conclusion and incited backward peasants against the working class and intelligentsia of the cities, had anything to do with Marx or Marxism.

Not present, on the other hand, is the most important event of the 20th century based on Marx's teachings, the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. And, as was the case in the Stalinist Soviet Union, there is a deathly silence about the most outstanding Marxist of the 20th century, Leon Trotsky. He apparently does not belong to the history of Marxism's impact from the DHM's point of view.

While the exhibition's "Epilogue" is as scanty as it is vacuous, the exhibition catalogue deals more intensively with Marx's impact. It contains a cacophony of individual contributions, ranging from interesting observations to clumsy anti-communism and postmodernist nonsense that one forgets as quickly as one reads it.

Literary scholar Patrick Eiden-Offe, for example, claims that Marx's "conception of the *one* proletariat" that "could be proclaimed the world-moving power" was a "monumental fantasy." This is despite the fact that the international working class today numbers in the billions and is intimately bound together by the global division of labour and digital communications, and that international wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few thousand billionaires!

Princeton historian Harold James calls the "so-called collapse theory" [of Marx] a "relic of the revolutionary aspirations of the 1840s" that demonstrated no connection to the rest of *Capital*. And this in the face of capitalism's deepest crisis since the 1930s and the 2008 financial market meltdown!

The unavoidable Gerd Koenen is not absent from the catalogue either. Koenen, who like a number of German historians, journalists and politicians has seamlessly evolved from a Maoist-style Stalinist into a rabid anti-communist, contributes an attack on Vladimir Lenin, whom he accuses of having unjustly "usurped" Marx and of being responsible for Stalinism.

On the other hand, there are also contributions such as that of Serbian-American economist Branko Milanovi?, who pays tribute to Marx and—despite many inconsistencies—observes that the "irreducible revolutionary core" in his thinking would "always appeal to those people who want to change the existing order of things." Milanovi? writes: "No amount of 'photoshopping' can transform the revolutionary Marx into a law-abiding, cautious and moderate leftist of today." As long as capitalism exists, he says, "Marx will be read as its most astute analyst."

Those responsible for the exhibition attempt to justify this cacophony by blaming Marx himself for it. "Like Marx's work itself, the history of his impact was and is ambivalent," write curator Kritter and academic advisor Jürgen Herres in the "Introduction to the Exhibition"—an assertion that runs like a thread through the catalogue and exhibition.

This is doubly wrong.

First, there is hardly any other thinker who developed and deepened his worldview as clearly, straightforwardly and consistently as Marx. His thought underwent an evolution, but that is something entirely different from "ambivalence."

Marx's thinking shifted most sharply and rapidly in the years 1843 to 1848, when—in close collaboration with Engels—he broke with Hegelian idealism and developed the basic features of the world view to which he adhered throughout his life. He extended philosophical materialism to history and social relations and proved that socialism of necessity results from the law-governed unfolding of the inner contradictions of the capitalist system.

Marx did not limit himself to recognizing that history was a history of class struggle. This had been discovered by others before him. Marx proved that the existence of classes was tied to certain historical phases in the development of production, that the class struggle necessarily led to the rule of the proletariat and that this itself formed only the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.

Throughout his life Marx remained true to his maxim, developed in the debate with Feuerbach, that it was not enough to interpret the world in various ways, but the point was to change it. He saw "in science a great lever of history, a revolutionary force in the truest sense of the word," as Engels pointed out at Marx's gravesite. "The struggle for the liberation of the class of wage laborers from the fetters of the modern capitalist system of production was his true vocation."

It is in the nature of Marx's revolutionary worldview, which sees society in constant flux and scientific knowledge as an unending process of penetrating the objective world, to be continually evolving. There is hardly a political or social event, an economic development or a scientific discovery that Marx did not follow closely and use as the basis for further deepening his views. This, too, is made clear in the exhibition.

One of the better contributions in the catalogue, written by American historian James M. Brophy, defends Marx against the charge of "Eurocentrism." He describes the interest with which Marx studied the history of the American Revolution, followed US political and economic developments, hailed the abolition of slavery as a "world event" and foresaw the rise of the United States as the leading capitalist power at a very early date.

The progressive recognition of a changing world, as already noted, is

something quite different from equivocal ambiguity. To claim that Marx's "ambivalent impact on history"—that is, the fact that political figures as diverse and sometimes deeply reactionary as Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Chavez adorned themselves with his quotations and images—is due to the alleged "ambivalence" of Marx's work is the height of falsification. Instead of pursuing the question as to whether these figures correctly invoked Marx or whether they twisted and abused him, the great originator and pioneer is blamed for all the later falsifications of his work.

Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky

This historical lie culminates in the claim, also made by Herres and Kritter, that "Lenin and later Stalin" transformed "Marx into the founder of a coherent system—scientific socialism." It is the familiar and utterly false attempt to equate Lenin, the leader of the first victorious proletarian revolution in world history, with its subsequent gravedigger, Stalin.

Lenin—along with Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and a few others—counted among Marx's most creative students, defending the revolutionary spirit of his teachings against an older generation that made its peace with capitalism and openly switched sides in the First World War. Those who read his works are always surprised by the meticulous care with which he drew on the writings of Marx and Engels.

Drawing on the lessons Marx had drawn from the defeat of the Paris Commune, Lenin understood more acutely than any other contemporary the importance of the subjective factor, of perspective and leadership in socialist revolution. That is why he insisted on a party in which opportunist currents—unlike the practice of German Social Democracy, for example—had no place.

Lenin's analysis of imperialism was an ingenious deepening of Marx's analysis of capitalism. The Bolshevik leader conceived of World War I as the form of the very "collapse" which Marx had long predicted. Imperialism embodied the "highest stage of capitalism" in which many tendencies that Marx analyzed had reached their conclusion. Monopolies had replaced free competition, finance capital dominated over industrial capital, the world was divided among the great powers and could only be redivided by force.

Lenin audaciously concluded that the war had simultaneously created the objective conditions for the proletarian revolution. On this, he based the outlook and perspective of the Bolshevik Party, which proved their correctness only three years later by leading the working class to power in Russia.

Here, Lenin's genius encountered that of Trotsky's, who, also drawing on Marx, was the first to recognize that the Russian Revolution in the 20th century could not simply follow the pattern of the European revolutions of the 19th century: first a bourgeois-democratic revolution and then, decades later, a socialist one.

Given the advanced nature of capitalism on a world scale and the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie, which feared the working class far more than tsarist reaction, the democratic tasks of the revolution could only be resolved by a workers' government supported by the peasantry. Once in power, however, the working class would have to move to socialist measures to secure its rule. Socialism, in turn, could only be accomplished on a world scale. The revolution thus had a "permanent" character.

Stalin attacked head-on these foundations of the October Revolution developed by Lenin and Trotsky. In 1924, shortly after Lenin's death, he promulgated the nationalist doctrine of building "socialism in one country," which was irreconcilably opposed to the theory of permanent revolution and contradicted everything Marx, Engels and Lenin had ever said or written.

Stalin spoke for a Soviet bureaucracy growing stronger in the state and party, which saw nationalized property as the basis of its privileges and was increasingly hostile to revolution. In the years that followed, the Stalin regime expelled Trotsky's supporters from the party and exiled them. Finally, in the Great Terror of 1937-38, it murdered all but a few of Lenin's and Trotsky's comrades-in-arms. Hundreds of thousands fell victim to the terror. Stalin had more communists killed than Hitler. In 1940, Trotsky himself was murdered by a Stalinist agent.

Internationally, the policies Stalin imposed on the Communist Parties led to devastating defeats that further isolated the Soviet Union and thus strengthened the bureaucracy—in China in 1927, in Germany in 1933 and in Spain in 1936-38, to name only the most important. In 1943, Stalin dissolved the Communist International.

If Stalin and the bureaucracy nevertheless invoked Marx and Engels, built monuments to them and elevated Marxism to the level of a state ideology, they did so because, as a parasitic canker on the workers' state, they had no ideology of their own. Just as they had usurped power in the workers' state, they also usurped Marxism, purged it of its revolutionary content and transformed it into an ideology of rule. For this reason, Marx would have fought them with all his might.

The exhibition organizers avoid these questions since they would have led them into potentially explosive terrain and brought them into conflict with authorities today.

In part, they have simply declared Marx to be a "19th century thinker" with little contemporary relevance. That is the viewpoint of US historian Jonathan Sperber, who developed the initial concept for the exhibition. In the preface to his 2013 biography of Marx, Sperber contended that the "view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas shaped the modern world" was outdated. It was perhaps "more useful to understand Marx as a backwards-looking figure projecting the circumstances of the first half of the 19th century into the future, rather than as a sure and prescient interpreter of historical trends."

Others, like curator Kritter, acknowledge the relevance of Marx's work, but do not understand it as a coherent worldview, a socialist perspective, or guide to political action, but rather a collection of isolated remarks, observations and insights on various topics that are still of present-day interest.

Trotsky explodes and refutes this interpretation. That is why his name cannot be mentioned in the exhibition or the catalogue. But anyone who wants to understand "Marx's reception and impact" in the 20th century cannot avoid the figure of Trotsky. His masterpiece, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), remains to this day the finest Marxist analysis of Stalinism. Trotsky's writings on Britain, China, Germany, France and Spain in particular provide deep insight into the problems of the labour movement, the treacherous role of the Comintern under Stalin and the causes of Hitler's and Franco's victory.

Like Marx, Trotsky did not leave it at interpreting "the world in various ways." The Left Opposition to Stalinism, which he led politically, and the Fourth International, which he helped found in 1938, continued the struggle of the First, Second and Third Internationals for world socialist revolution and built on their vast heritage.

Today, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, embody the continuity of the Marxist movement. The *World Socialist Web Site*, published by the ICFI, is the only publication on the planet that daily examines political events from a Marxist viewpoint, draws political conclusions from them and fights for a socialist perspective in the international working class.

The perspective of the world socialist revolution, which Marx established, has a burning relevance today. Capitalism has nothing left to offer except social inequality, authoritarian forms of rule, war and environmental destruction. Workers everywhere are beginning to rebel

against it.

We recommend that anyone interested in Marxism and seeking a socialist way out of the capitalist crisis visit the exhibition at the German Historical Museum. It provides a valuable insight into the historical emergence of Marxism. But a visit to the exhibition should only be an introduction to a deeper study of Marxism—the strategic lessons of the 20th century as analyzed in the writings of Trotsky and the ICFI—a regular reading of the WSWS and active participation in the work of the Socialist Equality Party.