

Marxism, AI and *Der Spiegel*'s fear of revolution

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When *Der Spiegel*, one of Germany's most influential news magazines, feels compelled to put Karl Marx on its cover, things cannot be going well for capitalism. The August 6 cover features a portrait of the revolutionary under the headline "Marx sensed it"—for a cover story on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the economy, society and democracy.

"Is the end of capitalism that Karl Marx prophesied approaching?" ask authors Simon Book and Nicola Abé right at the outset of their article. In doing so, they raise the burning question weighing on workers and young people worldwide, given their experience of an economic system that now has nothing left to offer them but world war, social inequality and fascist dictatorship.

Through AI, automation is now, for the first time, also affecting intellectual and academic labor on a large scale. The article laments: "Until a few years ago, education was considered a reliable ticket to a materially secure life. Today it is unclear what a school-leaving certificate or a university degree are still worth." Stanford University, it notes, puts the decline in employment among young people in AI-exposed occupations at 16 percent.

As early as 1848, Marx and Engels noted in the *Communist Manifesto* that capital converts "the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science" into its paid wage laborers. Today that process is reaching completion: as the promise that education secures a professional future collapses, so does a central mechanism of capitalist stability.

Accordingly, the protagonists of the article are laid-off tech workers and unemployed university graduates. Workers in car plants, warehouses, slaughterhouses, hospitals and delivery services, whose wages and working conditions have been under attack for decades and are also threatened by further automation, do not receive a mention anywhere in the lengthy piece. Yet capitalism objectively links the fate of both groups, as it now proletarianizes ever larger sections of the academically trained layers of society as well.

Objectively, millions of engineers, software developers and university graduates today face the same question as workers in the factories: capitalism has nothing left to offer them but poverty, war and dictatorship. But how can this be overcome? The answer requires a serious engagement with Marx.

That it is precisely this conclusion which unsettles the editors of *Der Spiegel* becomes clear from their own argument. The article quotes sociologist Mathias Albert: "But with AI, aimlessness is turning into hopelessness. We all know that it is not the parties of the centre that benefit from this, but the political extremes." Their concern is directed, not least, at a growing interest in Marxism.

How acute the editors consider this danger to be is shown by the fact that editor-in-chief, Dirk Kurbjuweit, felt it necessary to supplement the cover story with a commentary headlined, "Marx or Musk? Neither," in which he explicitly states: "The answer to this is not Marxism. In practice, it has created its own catastrophes."

What is meant here is Stalinism. But equating Marxism with the crimes

of the Stalinist bureaucracy is intended precisely to prevent Marx's analysis from becoming the basis of a political program. The Stalinist bureaucracy was not the executor but the gravedigger of the October Revolution: it murdered an entire generation of revolutionaries and progressively restored capitalism—a process that culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Marxism was defended and developed further by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International, who led an implacable struggle against Stalinism.

The fact that Kurbjuweit, one of the most zealous journalistic advocates of German rearmament, feels compelled to draw this line at all is revealing. A Marx who merely "sensed" something remains harmless, but a Marx whose analysis becomes the basis of a political program poses a mortal danger to capitalism.

For what Marx analyzed more than 150 years ago is today becoming concretely tangible for every worker, above all through the development of AI. The productive forces have outgrown the social order within which they are confined.

A technology created out of the collective labor and knowledge of the whole of humanity, one that could ease everyone's work and help solve the most pressing problems, is controlled by a tiny financial oligarchy and deployed to destroy millions of jobs, generate target lists for bombing raids and build up an apparatus of repression.

The decisive question is which class controls this tool and in whose interest it is deployed. The "end of capitalism" thus turns from an abstract question for passive readers into an active task for a consciously acting working class.

The social vantage point of the *Spiegel* article, however, is that of affluent upper middle class layers who have spent three decades profiting from precisely the development that ruined the working class. While real wages stagnated and the German government created a low-wage sector, this layer saw its share prices, property values and investment portfolios rise.

The article does not take the financial oligarchy to task for exploiting people, but because its greed threatens to destabilize the system itself. It cites a warning from economist David Autor: if in the future only a handful of people were to benefit from the system, "then that would not be stable. Democracy would be very difficult to sustain in a world in which most people had nothing left to give."

The proposals that follow are of a piece with this outlook. Alongside calls for state regulation, the article discusses at length and with approval the ideas of billionaire Nicolas Berggruen: a fund into which every company in a country would pay shares, and a compulsory savings scheme that would invest citizens' money "in companies that become ever more profitable through AI." *Der Spiegel* hails this as "a kind of redefinition of capitalism" and goes so far as to write: "More socialism to save capitalism—Karl Marx would be thrilled."

Marx never advocated a program to "save capitalism"; rather, he demonstrated that this system is destroyed by its own contradictions and

that workers must take control of the means of production. Berggruen's proposal leaves ownership of the means of production untouched: the corporations remain in private hands, tied to profit, while employees are handed shares in their own exploitation.

What exactly workers are supposed to have a stake in becomes clear from a glance at the balance sheets of the major AI companies, which are running up huge losses. The value of these firms often derives not from goods sold and profits realized, but from what investors were last willing to pay. The corporations mutually finance one another. The chipmaker takes a stake in the AI company, which uses that same money to buy the chipmaker's chips. The AI company rents computing capacity from a cloud provider, which in turn orders processors from the chipmaker.

The article even prints a graphic placing the AI boom alongside the canal speculation of the 1830s, railway mania and the dot-com bubble. Every one of these booms ended in a crash, yet the *Spiegel* authors propose channelling workers' savings and pensions into the AI speculative bubble as well.

Should the astronomical returns promised to investors by the AI firms ever be realized, they would ultimately have to be squeezed out of the working class. The article even explicitly invokes Marx's analysis of living human labor as the sole source of the surplus value from which capitalist profit is derived:

Human labor, as Karl Marx already described, is a central element of our economic system: capitalists invest money. With it, they buy – alongside machines and means of production – human labor power. In the end, the commodity is worth more than the employees' wages and the cost of the factories combined. That is how the capitalist makes a profit and grows ever somewhat richer.

Yet the article carefully avoids the consequences of this insight. For an individual company, replacing living labor with machines and AI can generate enormous extra profits: it cuts costs, raises productivity and gives it an advantage over its competitors. For capital as a whole, however, this process sharpens a fundamental contradiction. Only living labor creates new value; chips, data centers and power lines merely transfer the value that the labor of their production has invested in them.

The more capital flows into machinery and plant relative to living labor, the greater the pressure on the rate of profit becomes. Marx identified the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as a central contradiction of capitalism, one that repeatedly drives the system into crisis. The entire wave of AI investment rests on the promise of enormous profits through a massive increase in productivity. At the same time, it sharpens precisely the contradictions that Marx analyzed.

How immediate the question of ownership and class is when it comes to AI is shown most starkly in its use for conducting war and state repression. It is precisely here that the *Spiegel* article leaves out a central question. In nearly 40 minutes of reading time meant to supposedly make readers aware of the dangers of AI, its use in warfare and in suppressing political opposition is practically absent. Drones in war zones appear only in a list extolling the technology's capabilities, sandwiched between phone translation and X-ray imaging—without a word of criticism.

Yet this use is already a reality. AI systems belonging to the US corporation Palantir generated more than 1,000 targets within the first 24 hours of the US-Israeli war of aggression against Iran, in violation of international law, and assisted in the abduction of Venezuelan President Maduro. Similar systems are being used in the genocide in Gaza. In the United States, the same corporation is equipping ICE immigration agents in hunting migrants, and against students and workers who have protested the Gaza genocide.

This serves as a model for Germany. Defense Minister Pistorius describes Ukraine as a laboratory for future European warfare, and in Erding the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) is developing autonomous, AI-controlled weapons systems in partnership with start-ups. The same infrastructure is being built up domestically: police forces in several German states are already working with Palantir's analysis software Gotham, the "Security Package 2.0" empowers the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and Federal Police to carry out automated data analysis and biometric matching, and AI-assisted video surveillance is being rolled out in several cities.

Anyone who explains the dangers of AI while passing over its current use for war and dictatorship is not doing so by accident. The social standpoint that *Der Spiegel* represents is inseparably bound up with the policy of war and the state apparatus that suppresses the growing opposition to it.

What the article finally presents as "the counter-movement" amounts to nothing more than neo-Luddite machine-breaking and abstention from technology. It ends with a call for passive waiting: "Who consumes? Who rebels? Who rules? The questions are quickly asked. The answers will take time."

This false alternative—adaptation to AI controlled by the oligarchy, or rejection of the technology—leaves the decisive question untouched: who controls the technology, and in whose interest is it deployed?

The answer lies in the working-class taking control of the technology and deploying it to improve living and working conditions, instead of for war and profit.

What is needed is the expropriation of the corporations that own this technology—the AI companies, the cloud providers, the chipmakers and the major online platforms. They must be transferred into social ownership and placed under the democratic control of the working class. Not nationalization (*Verstaatlichung*), which would hand the apparatus over to a capitalist state that is rearming and carrying out mass deportations. Decisions on the use of these systems must be made by those who create them and whose lives they are transforming.

This would clear the way for what this technology is actually good for: research and medicine, an education system that benefits every child, the elimination of the most mind-numbing and dangerous jobs, and tackling the climate crisis. The precondition for this is the conquest of political power by the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has drawn practical conclusions from this insight. With Socialism AI, it is deploying the most advanced technology of the present day not against the working class, but for it: workers and young people gain direct access to the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and Plekhanov, as well as to more than 125,000 articles from the *World Socialist Web Site*, and can engage with them in dialogue at any time, from anywhere, and in any language.

Socialism AI replaces neither the political struggle nor the party that must lead it. But it is a step in the political arming of the working class for the tasks posed by *Der Spiegel*'s cover story: the expropriation of the oligarchy and the establishment of a socialist society.



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