

The Telegraph

Why would anyone be a Marxist now?

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The extraordinary thing about Marxism is not its destructiveness – though, with 100 million deaths on its account, it is by far the most lethal ideology ever devised. No, the truly extraordinary thing is that, despite that monstrous record, it remains intellectually respectable. As Kristian Niemietz of the Institute of Economic Affairs observes: “Marxists are pretty much the only thinkers who accept no responsibility whatsoever for real-world approximations of their ideas.”

Two hundred years have passed since Karl Marx was born among the sloping vineyards of the Moselle Valley, and he is still in vogue. A statue, sponsored by China, was unveiled for the occasion. Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, attended the ceremony. The shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, spoke at a communist festival called Marx 200. Half-clever academics the world over spent the week telling each other how “pertinent” Marx’s critique of capitalism still was.

Pertinent, I suppose, in the sense that it infects our entire political discourse. People unconsciously quote Marx all the time. Whenever you use the word “exploit” in an economic sense, or the word “bourgeois” or, come to that, the word “capitalist”, you are drawing directly on the tetchy old scrounger’s theories.

Even the class enemy has adopted chunks of his world-view. Consider the headlines in what Marx would have seen as bourgeois-capitalist newspapers, such as the Financial Times (“Why Karl Marx is more relevant than ever”), *The Economist* (“On his bicentenary, Marx’s diagnosis of capitalism’s flaws is surprisingly relevant”) and *The New York Times* (“Happy birthday, Karl Marx, you were right”). The *NYT* article, typically, makes just one elliptical reference to Communist countries: “There is still a great deal to be learned from their disasters, but their philosophical relevance remains doubtful.”

To see quite how outrageous that statement is, imagine it in any other context. Suppose a columnist were to argue that fascism, as an idea, had never properly been tried, and that we shouldn’t judge it by the unfortunate record of those regimes in the 1930s that called themselves fascist. There would be uproar. Readers would point out, correctly, that it was disgusting to try to separate fascism from the 17 million deaths it caused, a record surpassed only by – well, only by communism. Yet, somehow, Marxism continues to be judged as a textbook theory, disconnected from its actual consequences.

Those consequences were monotonously predictable. Show me a communist regime and I'll show you labour camps, firing squads and torture chambers. It was the same story every time, from Albania to Angola, from Benin to Bulgaria, from Cuba to Czechoslovakia.

Why? Because the only way to enforce an ideology at odds with human nature is through a police state. The bearded prophet plainly had some inkling of what would be required when he wrote, in *The Communist Manifesto*: "The one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, is revolutionary terror."

It's true, of course, that there is no perfect example of a Marxist state, any more than of a capitalist state. Surely we can agree, though, that South Korea, with all its blemishes, is closer to the capitalist ideal than North Korea. Yet while the flaws in South Korea – inequality, corruption and so on – are held against free markets, the horrors in North Korea, including famines and systematic torture, supposedly tell us nothing whatsoever about Marxism.

These days, the fashionable way to defend Marx is as (in McDonnell's words) "a great economist". Even if that were true, it would be a bizarre thing to say, rather like defending Nero as a great musician, or Osama bin Laden as a great theologian.

In fact, though, Marx was a hopeless economist, who struggled to grasp that goods did not have an intrinsic value, and that prices were a consequence of demand rather than of bourgeois greed. Listen to the drivel he wrote in *Das Kapital*: "The sum of the values in circulation clearly cannot be augmented by any change in their distribution, any more than the quantity of the precious metals in a country can be augmented by a Jew selling a Queen Anne's farthing for a guinea." (His anti-Semitism is something else we are expected to overlook.)

Marx regarded his pronouncements not as opinions, but as scientific truths. Yet almost all his forecasts turned out to be wrong. Free markets, he predicted, would destroy the bourgeoisie, concentrating wealth in the hands of a tiny number of oligarchs. In fact, free markets enlarged the middle class everywhere. The revolution, he said, would occur when the proletariat became sufficiently self-aware, first in Britain and then Germany. In fact, as working people in those countries became more educated, they became more attached to private property. Capitalism, he averred, was on its last legs. In fact, when he wrote that, markets were already working their magic: the income of the average British family increased by an incredible 300 per cent during the miserable cadger's lifetime.

The only way to explain the enduring appeal of Marxism is as a dogma. The more at odds it is with common sense, the greater the opportunity for devotees to flaunt their faith. Marxists like to dismiss religious people as gullible fools who have lost touch with reality. They should look in the mirror.

All human civilisation depends on falling prices

There was an odd item on the BBC this week, fretting about the proposed Sainsbury-AsdaSDA merger on the grounds that managers were promising a ten per cent fall in shop prices. A report

was beamed in from a barn in Gloucestershire, suggesting that such a fall, far from being a cause for celebration, would hurt small family farms.

I suspect that that fear is misplaced. The savings would come largely from economies of scale and, in any case, supermarkets buy mainly from big agri-businesses, not family farms – despite the cosy names they sometimes use on to label their own-brand products. Still, even if lower prices for consumers meant lower prices at the farm gate, would that be a bad thing overall?

We hear the same argument trotted out against leaving the Common Agricultural Policy: “cheap food” has become almost a swearword in some Remain circles. We heard it, too, in support of the Scottish Government’s introduction of minimum alcohol pricing.

Yet the story of human civilisation is, in a sense, the story of falling prices. Marian Tupy of the Cato institute has compiled the figures, and they reveal an uncelebrated and largely unremarked miracle. A hundred years ago, it took the median worker an hour and 18 minutes to afford a pound of butter; now the time is ten minutes. In wage hours, the price of flour has fallen by 88 per cent, eggs by 92 per cent. It’s true, of course, that these efficiency savings were accompanied by a decline in the number of people employed on the land. Yet they were also accompanied by a rise in overall living standards, as former farmworkers found better paid jobs.

Does that strike you as cold-hearted? Am I putting too much emphasis on the price-tag? After all, there is more to life than disposable income. It would be an unusual person who found greater happiness in a large bank balance than in, say, a country walk, or a Beethoven symphony, or time with the children. But what do you suppose enables these pleasures? It’s because you can switch on the dishwasher instead of scrubbing away at the plates that you have time for the walk. It’s because you can drive to work instead of walking and taking two trams that you can listen to the symphony. It’s because you no longer have to work six days a week to feed the kids that you have time to play with them.

Today’s staples were yesterday’s luxuries, derided in their time as symbols of a decadent and materialistic society that had lost its soul. It’s what every generation thinks. And yet, as we have become more leisured, we have become more literate, less violent, better able to see things from each other’s perspective. Our expanding circle of understanding rests, rather unglamorously, on the increasing specialisation that pushes down the cost of living. Let’s try not to be so snotty about it.

The truth will out

The Gunpowder Plot was a cataclysm for Catholics, bringing about centuries of sectarianism. Even now, November 5 is one of the few dates the English remember.

Many Catholics were horrified when they heard what had happened – not just from revulsion at terrorism, but because they knew what would follow. More than two centuries were to pass before they were deemed, in the phrase of the time, to have “proved their loyalty”. So it is to the credit of the collateral descendants of Father John Gerard, a Jesuit, that they have made the BBC alter a documentary that unfairly portrayed him as having blessed Robert Catesby and his conspirators in advance.

When the same accusation was made of the drama *Gunpowder*, the BBC defended it on grounds that “Shakespeare’s plays are replete with examples of historical inaccuracy”. True. And yet, as this column often points out, he had uncannily apt words for every situation. Try these from Richard III, written a decade before the plot: “Catesby, thou art sworn as deeply to effect what we intend as closely to conceal what we impart.” No, I don’t know either. There is sorcery in Shakespeare.