

**Greetings by Murray Smith to  
'Marx at 200' Conference,  
October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Brock University, Canada**

**Note: The following is a slightly edited version of the greetings delivered. A video of one session of the conference can be viewed on this website's Important Links page.**

On behalf of the Brock Socialist Club, the organizer of this event, I want to warmly welcome you all to our one-day conference commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. I'd also like to extend the sincere thanks of the Club to the Centre for Research in the Social Sciences and the Departments of History, Political Science and Sociology for their sponsorship and funding.

I've prepared some remarks to set the stage for what will follow, but I'm going to begin by reading the eulogy to Marx delivered at his gravesite by his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels in 1883:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

But that is not all. Marx also discovered the special law of motion governing the present-day capitalist mode of production, and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has created. The discovery of surplus value suddenly threw light on the problem, in trying to solve which all previous investigations, of both bourgeois economists and socialist critics, had been groping in the dark.

Two such discoveries would be enough for one lifetime. Happy the man to whom it is granted to make even one such discovery. But in every single field which Marx investigated -- and he investigated very many fields, none of them superficially -- in every field, even in that of mathematics, he made independent discoveries.

Such was the man of science. But this was not even half the man. Science was for Marx a historically dynamic, revolutionary force. However great the joy with which he welcomed a new discovery in some theoretical science whose practical application perhaps it was as yet quite impossible to envisage, he experienced quite another kind of joy when the discovery involved immediate revolutionary changes in industry, and in historical development in general....

For Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation. Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity and a success such as few could rival....

And, consequently, Marx was the best-hated and most calumniated man of his time. Governments, both absolutist and republican, deported him from their territories. Bourgeois, whether conservative or ultra-democratic, vied with one another in heaping slanders upon him. All this he brushed aside as though it were a cobweb, ignoring it, answering only when extreme necessity compelled him. And he died beloved, revered and mourned by millions of revolutionary fellow workers -- from the mines of Siberia to California, in all parts of Europe and America -- and I make bold to say that, though he may have had many opponents, he had hardly one personal enemy.

His name will endure through the ages, and so also will his work.

Two hundred years after the birth of Karl Marx, and a century and a half after the publication of the first volume of his great work, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, it should be obvious to all who are willing to consider his ideas in a spirit of scientific objectivity that Marx's analyses of the fundamental dynamics of the capitalist mode of production have been fully vindicated. We live in a world shot through with antagonisms, increasing irrationality and monstrous inequalities – a global society marked by an accelerating trend toward concentrated wealth at one pole of the capitalist class structure and acute misery at the other.

Just eight of the richest men in the world now possess more wealth than the poorest half of humanity (close to 4 billion people) – and this in a world in which almost 10 million people, most of them children, die each year from starvation and millions more from easily preventable diseases. A few hundred transnational corporations control the greater part of the world's marketed economic output. A decade after the worst economic crisis since World War Two, the crisis of 2007-09, the criminal Wall Street bankers who ruined the lives of so many have emerged richer and more powerful than ever. These individuals, along with their fellow capitalists, own and control the major

economic assets of an increasingly globalized economy, even as the majority of humanity is still compelled to either sell their ability to work for a paltry hourly wage or to eke out a miserable existence in even more precarious ways.

You don't need to possess the genius of Karl Marx to understand that this capitalist *class monopoly* over the ownership of industry, transport, finance, and commerce confers upon the capitalist class the ability to allocate the world's material resources and human labour as it sees fit. What's more, it gives the capitalists extraordinary and inordinate power in "non-economic" spheres of society as well. Among other things, the capitalists exercise effective control over *the means of ideological production*.

In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels wrote:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

Would Marx be surprised to learn that in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, still-capitalist world just six corporations control 95 per cent of the mass media in the U.S.A.? Would he be surprised that those six capitalist corporations deliver "news," "information" and "entertainment" tailored overwhelmingly to serving the interests of capital and designed to stupefy rather than truly educate and enlighten the mass of the population? Certainly not! Nor would Marx be at all surprised that the capitalist class has been cunning enough to cultivate a layer of the population that specializes in deflecting attention away from the oppressive, unjust, and irrational character of the capitalist system – not only journalists in their direct employ, but an army of intellectuals, academics and artists who work hard to keep discourse about society and politics within prescribed, essentially pro-capitalist limits, and who are well rewarded for doing so. And so, not surprisingly, the working-class majority of the population – as many as 90% of income-earners in a country like

Canada – is continuously and assiduously manipulated, and all too often effectively deceived, by those operating the capitalists’ “mental means of production.”

All the same, Marx also understood that “social being determines consciousness” and insisted that there is much more to “social being” than the bourgeoisie’s ideological dominance. For capitalist social reality is riddled with contradictions and rife with needless suffering. It imposes great burdens on the working-class majority, and those burdens must give rise to struggles that challenge the interests, ideas, and values of the capitalists ... and even lead to a revolutionary socialist consciousness amongst the *avantgarde* of the working class. It is precisely for this reason that the capitalists rely on *a huge apparatus of repression* – cops, spies, professional soldiers, courts, and prisons, an apparatus that serves as the last line of defense of the capitalist social order and that constitutes the core of the capitalist state. As Engels put it, the state is ultimately an “armed body of men,” tasked with repressing the mass of the population and with preventing social revolution at all costs.

The capitalist state is rarely under the immediate and unmediated control of *specific* capitalists. The job of administering it, at least in its liberal-democratic form, is usually assigned to political parties, which in our time are mostly controlled by capitalist elites. Mainstream politicians of all stripes bow to the demands of various and sometimes competing capitalist interests and, above all, to the imperatives and “logic” of a system based on the exploitation of wage labour, the dispossession of small commodity producers, and the reckless plundering of the natural world. In the context of the capitalist nation-state system, these politicians preside over governments and state apparatuses geared to safeguarding and advancing the interests of their “own” capitalists – even if this means unleashing wars of aggression against colonial or semi-colonial peoples or prosecuting wars against other “great powers.”

Today, with a view to saving their beloved system, to perpetuating *their* “way of life,” the capitalists and their political servants are preparing a Third World War, one that could easily turn thermonuclear. Marx and Engels observed in *The Communist Manifesto* that the outcomes of past class struggles had either been the inauguration of a new, more progressive mode of production or the “mutual ruin” of the contending classes. They would certainly not be surprised that 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity, equipped with incredibly

lethal *means of destruction* and still burdened by the increasingly anachronistic as well as antagonistic social relations of capitalism, is now facing a momentous choice: global socialism or total annihilation.

It's been said by some critics that Marx should be faulted for not having anticipated the acute ecological crisis now facing humanity. Of course, as with the prospect of a nuclear apocalypse, Marx could not have predicted *the full extent* to which capitalism would exacerbate what he saw as a growing "metabolic rift" between human civilization and the natural world. But there is no question that he grasped the potential of the capitalist system to not merely subordinate human need to private profit and wealth, but to despoil and destroy the *natural conditions of production*. How indeed could it be otherwise? After all, as Marx was the first to fully theorize, capital can only measure "wealth" with a single yardstick: the measure of *money profit, rent and interest*, and this is so because these are the necessary forms of appearance of the *surplus value* extracted from living wage-labour – the surplus value that is capital's lifeblood. The capitalist system is *compelled*, in other words, to measure wealth in a fashion that is at once rooted in class exploitation and deeply antagonistic to non-human nature.

Marx understood profoundly well the great perils to humanity that capitalism breeds. And yet he also understood that there are *limits* to the ability of this increasingly irrational system to "fool all of the people all of the time," to borrow a famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln. Capitalism does indeed spawn its own gravedigger, a global working class with an objective interest in seeing social reality for what it is and consequently in *revolutionizing* human civilization along socialist lines. As capitalism displaces more and more living wage-labour from material production – substituting increasingly sophisticated technology for living workers and consigning many to the status of "surplus population" – it is to be expected that the working-class majority *will* discover its revolutionary vocation. This is the faith of Marxist socialism – the assurance that in due course the international proletariat will unite in struggle to achieve a world in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

Humanity *can* transcend capitalism, the final stage of its class-antagonistic prehistory, and it *must* do so to survive. But for this to happen the working class – the class with "nothing to lose but its chains" – must seize the reins of political power,

establish a vibrant socialist democracy and a collectivized, rationally planned global economy, and reset all of the mechanisms of social and economic production and reproduction to meet the needs of the many. Only then can the iniquities of class society, its myriad oppressions and injustices, be swept away once and for all. And only then can the imperative goals of *real* human development, world peace and ecological sustainability be truly secured.

Marx believed that world socialism will be the beginning of a fundamentally new chapter in the story of humanity – a chapter in which, at long last, human beings will realize a mode of existence in which human individuality can develop unhampered by either material hardship or social antagonism. I happen to think he was right about that!

Thank you, and I hope you will all enjoy today's proceedings.