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What Marx Was Really Saying

By Douglas Lain

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Within a few weeks of its publication in late May, the essay “Karl Marx Was Right,” by Truthdig columnist Chris Hedges, was viewed over 170,000 times. It is fair to say that the piece’s popularity is due partly to renewed interest in Marx’s work. Since the Great Recession of 2007, the image of Karl Marx has returned to the scene of political and economic debate. But among popular audiences, his careful analysis of capitalism has not. The Marx we encounter online is akin to the Mark Twain or Albert Einstein—pick your favorite historical figure—we

meet in memes that litter Twitter and Facebook. That is, they do not represent the man's work in its full complexity.

Take, for instance, a video titled "Political Theory—Karl Marx," produced by Alain de Botton's organization, School of Life. In it the narrator describes Marx's theory of alienation by saying that under capitalism, workers don't "see themselves in the objects they have created"; that is, they merely bring into being what others created through imagination. What Marx actually said is that under capitalism, a worker's labor is used against him. In his "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," Marx wrote that "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates."

Marx's theory wasn't about feelings. It wasn't psychological. It was about how the phenomena of private property, profit, rent and wages intrinsic to capitalism function to create class divisions and impoverish and debase workers.

Elsewhere on YouTube, The Curious Classroom says in "A Brief Introduction to Marxism" that "Marxism views capitalist society as being based on a system that encourages inequality because the rich will always need someone to do the work that they don't want to do." Again, Marx did not say this. Rather, he argued that capitalism is premised on the existence of a class of people who own nothing but their bodies and their capacity for labor, and that economic production under this order necessarily entails the exploitation of workers through the forced extraction of their labor.

There are many reasons why Marx is often misinterpreted or even ignored by those purporting to revitalize and explain him. The one that concerns me here is that, as mental processes go, intuition—the act of quickly and instinctively feeling one's way to a conclusion—is far easier than careful, conscious reasoning, including when it comes to politics.

I am not free of this impulse. I became a leftist while studying philosophy at Portland State University, but the two pursuits didn't merge until later. In studying philosophy I was told that all the conclusions reached by all the philosophers were wrong. From Plato to Wittgenstein, every philosophical system conceived and written down had ended in failure. If the same fate awaited any complex reasoning I would develop, it seemed to me that I would have to find truth in a different way. It wasn't through careful reasoning that I would find it, but by testing my ideas in the everyday world.

I was secure in this approach for a number of years. But when the economic crisis struck in 2007, it became clear that the answers life was throwing before me were not good enough.

As Congress debated a banking bailout, I felt as insecure and frightened as I had six years earlier, after the attacks of 9/11. In some ways, it was worse. The difference was that, in regard to 9/11, I felt confident that I knew what an airplane was, what terrorists sought to do, and what oil supplies and religious fundamentalism were. I was ignorant of the causes of the economic crisis, a more abstract catastrophe. What was a mortgage-backed security? And how could such an exotic thing be responsible for the calamity we were watching unfold on CNN? In the break

room at work, it appeared that none of my colleagues had a clue, and the leftist commentators on Pacifica and NPR seemed as conflicted and confused as we were.

Confusion about the causes and dynamics of the crisis has persisted since then. And though the star of Marx has risen above it, in most discussions it has shed no light.

What's most ironic is that one of the reasons the image of Marx is more popular than Marx's ideas—one of the causes of this very common turn from thinking to intuition—is the popularity of a specific misinterpretation of Marx.

Marx is known to have railed against philosophers. In his "Theses on Feuerbach," he wrote that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world ... the point is to change it."

Many readers have interpreted Marx to have meant that, rather than worry about abstract ideas and explanations, we should simply act to make revolution. In May 1968, student protesters spray-painted walls with the slogan "Structures don't take to the streets!" By that they meant that many academic theories are irrelevant. The students felt that theories and explanations were cut off from life and action, and therefore of no use.

But again, the students were not in agreement with Marx. The aim of Marx was not to dispense with philosophy but to realize it. He wanted not to abandon theory and thought, but to put critique into action.

Today, if we wish the resurgence of Marx to include his ideas rather than just his image, we will have to do more than intuit what is right in his work. We will have to read his work critically, which is to say we will have to struggle against the habit of thinking by feeling.