

IN TRYING TO THINK what Marx would have made of the world today, we have to begin by stressing that he was not an empiricist. He didn't think that you could gain access to the truth by gleaning bits of data from experience, 'data points' as scientists call them, and then assembling a picture of reality from the fragments you've accumulated. Since this is what most of us think we're doing most of the time it marks a fundamental break between Marx and what we call common sense, a notion that was greatly disliked by Marx, who saw it as the way a particular political and class order turns its construction of reality into an apparently neutral set of ideas which are then taken as givens of the natural order. Empiricism, because it takes its evidence from the existing order of things, is inherently prone to accepting as realities things that are merely evidence of underlying biases and ideological pressures. Empiricism, for Marx, will always confirm the status quo. He would have particularly disliked the modern tendency to argue from 'facts', as if those facts were neutral chunks of reality, free of the watermarks of history and interpretation and ideological bias and of the circumstances of their own production.

I, on the other hand, am an empiricist. That's not so much because I think Marx was wrong about the distorting effect of underlying ideological pressures; it's because I don't think it's possible to have a vantage point free of those pressures, so you have a duty to do the best with what you can see, and especially not to shirk from looking at data which are uncomfortable and/or contradictory. But this is a profound difference between Marx and my way of talking about Marx, which he would have regarded as being philosophically and politically entirely invalid.

Consider these passages from *The Communist Manifesto*, which Marx wrote with Engels in 1848, after being kicked out of both France and Germany for his political writings:

Capitalism has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities. Capitalism has agglomerated population, centralised means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands.

Capitalism has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'.

Capitalism has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades. Capitalism has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.

Capitalism cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the means of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the capitalist epoch from all earlier ones. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed.

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.

# Marx at 193

## John Lanchester

Commercial crises put on trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire capitalist society. In these crises a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed.

It's hard not to conclude from these selected sentences that Marx was extraordinarily prescient. He really did have the most astonishing insight into the nature and trajectory and direction of capitalism. Three aspects which particularly stand out here are the tribute he pays to the productive capacity of capitalism, which far exceeds that of any other political-economic system we've ever seen; the remaking of social order which accompanies that; and capitalism's inherent tendency for crisis, for cycles of boom and bust.

I should, however, admit that I haven't quoted these sentences exactly as Marx wrote them: where I wrote 'capitalism', Marx had 'the bourgeoisie'. He was talking about a class and the system which served its interest, and I made it sound as if he was talking only about a system. Marx doesn't use the word 'capitalism'. The term never occurs in the finished first part of *Das Kapital*. (I checked this by doing a word search and found it three times, every time an apparent mistranslation or loose use of the German plural *Kapitalen* – in German he never talks of *Kapitalismus*.) Since he is widely, and accurately, seen as capitalism's greatest critic, this is quite an omission. The terms he preferred were 'political economy' and 'bourgeois political economy', which he saw as encompassing everything from property rights to our contemporary idea of human rights to the very conception of the independent autonomous individual. I think he didn't use the word 'capitalism' because that would have implied that capitalism was one of a number of competing possible systems – and Marx didn't believe that. He didn't think it was possible to move past capitalism without a fundamental overturning of the existing social, political and philosophical order.

He was right: no alternative has developed. Economics as a discipline has in effect become the study of capitalism. The two are taken as the same subject. If there were ever going to be a serious and sustained theoretical challenge to the hegemony of capitalism inside economics – a serious and sustained challenge subsequent to the one provided by what used to be called 'actually existing socialisms' – you'd have thought one would have come along since the near terminal meltdown of the global economic system in 2008. But all we've seen are suggestions for ameliorative tweaking of the existing system to make it a little less risky. We have at the moment this monstrous hybrid, state capitalism – a term which used to be a favourite of the Socialist Workers Party in describing the Soviet Union, and which only a few weeks ago was on the cover of the *Economist* to describe the current economic condition of most of the world. This is a parody of economic order,

in which the general public bears all the risks and the financial sector takes all the rewards – an extraordinarily pure form of what used to be called 'socialism for the rich'. But 'socialism for the rich' was supposed to be a joke. The truth is that it is now genuinely the way the global economy is working.

The financial system in its current condition poses an existential threat to Western democracy far exceeding any terrorist threat. No democracy has ever been destabilised by terrorism, but if the cashpoints stopped giving out money, it would be an event on a scale that would put the currently constituted democratic states at risk of collapse. And yet governments act as if there is very little they can do about it. They have the legal power to conscript us and send us to war, but they can't address any fundamentals of the economic order. So it looks very much as if Marx's omission of the word 'capitalism', because he foresaw no alternative within the existing social order, was an instance of his crystal ball functioning with particularly high resolution.

Marx puts great pressure on the question of where value comes from, how commodities are exchanged and what money is. It's a very simple question but not one that had been asked with such clarity before; it's also the kind of question no longer asked at a professional or institutional level because

the current order of things is taken so much for granted. But it is a very basic and important question, or two questions: what is money and where does its value come from?

There are many hundreds of pages on this subject in Marx, and many tens of thousands in commentaries and analyses of his work, so my summary of his views is of necessity cartoonishly compressed and simple. Marx's model works like this: competition pressures will always force down the cost of labour, so that workers are employed for the minimum price, always paid just enough to keep themselves going, and no more. The employer then sells the commodity not for what it cost to make, but for the best price he can get: a price which in turn is subject to competition pressures, and therefore will always tend over time to go down. In the meantime, however, there is a gap between what the labourer sells his labour for, and the price the employer gets for the commodity, and that difference is the money which accumulates to the employer and which Marx called surplus value. In Marx's judgment surplus value is the entire basis of capitalism: all value in capitalism is the surplus value created by labour. That's what makes up the cost of the thing: as Marx put it, 'price is the money-name of the labour objectified in a commodity.' And in examining that question he creates a model which allows us to see deeply into the structure of the world, and see the labour hidden in the things all around us. He makes labour legible in objects and relationships.

The theory of surplus value also explains, for Marx, why capitalism has an inherent



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tendency towards crisis. The employer, just like the employee, has competition pressures, and the price of the things he's selling will always tend to be forced down by new entrants to the market. His way of getting round this will usually be to employ machines to make the workers more productive. He'll try to get more out of them by employing fewer of them to make more stuff. But in trying to increase the efficiency of production, he might well destroy value, often by making too many goods at not enough profit, which leads to a surplus in the market which leads to massive destruction of capital which leads to the start of another cycle. It's an elegant aspect of Marx's thinking that the surplus theory of value leads directly and explicitly to the prediction that capitalism will always have cycles of crisis, of boom and bust.

There are obvious difficulties with Marx's arguments. One of them is that so many of the contemporary world's goods and commodities are now virtual (in the digital-oriented sense) that it's not easy to see where the accumulated labour in them is. David Harvey's lectures on *Capital*, for instance, the best beginning for anyone studying Marx's most important book, are of immense value but they're also available for free on the internet, so if you buy them as a book – you can take in information much more quickly by reading than by listening – the surplus value you're adding to is mainly your own.

This idea of labour being hidden in things, and the value of things arising from the labour congealed inside them, is an unexpectedly powerful explanatory tool in the digital world. Take Facebook. Part of its success comes from the fact that people feel that they and their children are safe spending time there, that it is a place you go to interact with other people but is not fundamentally risky or sleazy in the way new technologies are often perceived to be – that VHS, for instance, was when it was launched on the market. But the perception that Facebook is, maybe the best word would be 'hygienic', is sustained by tens of thousands of hours of badly paid labour on the part of the people in the developing world who work for companies hired to scan for offensive images and who are, according to the one Moroccan man who went on the record to complain about it, paid a dollar an hour for doing so. That's a perfect example of surplus value: huge amounts of poorly paid menial work creating the hygienic image of a company which, when it launches on the stock market later this year, hopes to be worth \$100 billion.

When you start looking for this mechanism at work in the contemporary world you see it everywhere, often in the form of surplus value being created by you, the customer or client of a company. Online check-in and bag drop at airports, for example. Online check-in is a process which should genuinely increase the efficiency of the airport experience, thereby costing you less time: time you can spend doing other things, some of them economically useful to you. But what the airlines do is employ so few people to supervise the bag drop-off that there's no time-saving at all for the customer. When you look, you see that be-

cause airlines have to employ more people to supervise the non-online-checked-in customers – otherwise the planes wouldn't leave on time – the non-checked-in queues move far more quickly. They're transferring their inefficiency to the customer, but what they're also doing is transferring the labour to you and accumulating the surplus value themselves. It happens over and over again. Every time you deal with a phone menu or interactive voicemail service, you're donating your surplus value to the people you're dealing with. Marx's model is constantly asking us to see the labour encoded in the things and transactions all around us.

**L**AST YEAR the National Geographic ran a feature on 'the world's most typical human being' to commemorate the birth of the world's seven billionth person. The single uncontentious point about this person is the fact of right-handedness. (Actually, though handedness isn't contentious, it is quite interesting, since the average rate of left-handedness runs at about 10 per cent, but seems to be higher in societies that have a higher level of violence. No-

body knows why, but that isn't surprising since the reason some people are born left-handed isn't understood.) That he is a he is a relatively recent development. More male children are born than female ones, in the ratio of 103-106 to 100, because male children have a higher rate of infant mortality and to balance the gender ratio of the species you need more male babies. But modern medicine has in most parts of the world sharply decreased infant mortality and now the difference in birth rates is feeding through into other demographic distributions, which have historically had more women than men because women live longer, again for reasons which aren't understood. In addition, and much much more darkly, rising prosperity and technological abilities have led to huge disparities in birth rates, which can only be to do with the selective abortion of female children. The sex ratio in many parts of Asia in particular has risen way past biologically possible levels. In China and India, census data indicate that the level is nationally around 120 to 100. By 2020, China will have between thirty and forty million more men than

women under the age of 19. To put that figure in perspective, forty million is the total number of American men in that demographic bracket. So, within eight years, China faces the prospect of having the equivalent of the whole young male population of America permanently single. One of the dark things about this is that 'son preference', as it's dryly called in the literature, rises with income and with modernisation – which means it's been rising sharply. That amounts to many tens of millions of missing girls.

So he's a he. He earns less than £8000 a year. He has a mobile phone but not a bank account. That fits Marx's model of how capitalism would play out: he doesn't have a bank account because the typical worker is a proletarian who's got nothing to deposit in a bank; he doesn't have any capital; he has to sell his labour for the best price he can get. He is 28 – that's the median age of the world population, the guy in the middle. And if you say the world's most typical person belongs to the world's most numerous ethnic group, it follows that he is a Han Chinese. So this representative human in 2012 is a 28-year-old Han Chinese man, no bank account but a mobile, earning on average less than £8000 a year. Guess how many people fit those exact criteria today? Nine million. We can even guess his name: Lee, or Li, the most common surname in the world. There are as many people called Lee as there are people in the UK and in France added together.

I don't think Marx would have seen anything in that picture to disprove his model, to use a word he would have disliked. He foresaw the development of a proletariat who did most of the world's work and a bourgeoisie who in effect owned the fruits of their labour. The fact of the proletariat being in the developing world, in effect shoved out of sight of the Western bourgeoisie, does nothing to disprove that picture – an 'external proletariat', it's sometimes called. Take as a case study of this process the world's most valuable company, which at the moment is Apple. Apple's last quarter was the most profitable of any company in history: it made \$13 billion in profits on \$46 billion in sales. Its bestselling products are made at factories owned by the Chinese company Foxconn. (Foxconn makes the Amazon Kindle, the Microsoft Xbox, the Sony PS3, and hundreds of other products with other companies' names on the front – it's not much of an exaggeration to say that it makes every electronic device in the world.) The company's starting pay is \$2 an hour, the workers live in dormitories of six or eight beds for which they are charged rent of \$16 a month, their factory in Chengdu, where the iPad is made, runs 24 hours a day, employs 120,000 people – think about that, a factory the size of Exeter – and isn't even Foxconn's biggest plant: that's in Shenzhen and employs 230,000 people, who work 12 hours a day, six days a week. The company's answer to a recent scandal about suicide rates was to point out that the suicide rate among Foxconn employees is actually lower than the Chinese average, and that it turns away thousands of applicants for jobs every day, and both of those facts are true. That's what's really shocking. These conditions are equal to or better than most of the equivalent

## Human Revenue

James Meek

**T**HE PRIVATISATIONS are joining up. First it was gas. Then telecoms, oil, electricity, public housing, water, the railways, the airports. There are moves afoot to obliterate the concept of the council house; NHS hospitals are to be privately run, built and managed; now David Cameron wants to get private companies and foreign governments to 'invest in Britain's roads. What does it all mean? The episodic character of privatisation – one sector being sold, then a pause, then another – has hidden a meta-privatisation that's passed the halfway point. The essential public good that Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and now Cameron sell is not power stations, or trains, or hospitals. It's the public itself. It's us.

The commodity that makes water and roads and airports valuable to an investor, foreign or otherwise, is the people who have no choice but to use them. We have no choice but to pay the price the tollkeepers charge. We are a human revenue stream; we are being made tenants in our own land, defined by the string of private fees we pay to exist here. If it's not obvious that we're being sold to investors, it's partly because the idea of privatisation is sold so hard to us, in a way that is hypnotically familiar. First, the denigration of the existing service, as if a universally accepted truth is being voiced: the schools/hospitals/roads are crumbling/failing/second-class. Then, the rejection of government responsibility: we've no money/bureaucrats are incompetent. Finally, the solution: private investment.

And that investment does come, and things get shinier. Surely if the private sector weren't replacing our old sewers, and won't replace our old motorways and power stations, we'd need to pay higher taxes instead? The truth is that we already do pay higher taxes. They just aren't called

taxes. Our water supply system is being upgraded because of a huge water tax increase. But it isn't called that. It's called 'the water bill'. As Chris Giles explained recently in the FT, water bills have gone up by nearly twice as much as inflation since privatisation. We pay a rail tax: it's called 'fare increases'. We pay an energy tax in the form of higher electricity bills, and so on.

By packaging British citizens up and selling them, sector by sector, to investors, the government makes it possible to keep traditional taxes low or even cut them. By moving from a system where public services are supported by general taxation to a system where they are supported exclusively by the fees people pay to use them, we are taken from a system where the rich are obliged to help the poor to a system where the less well-off enable services, like a road network, that the rich get for what is, to them, a trifling sum.

Will there be a revolt? There was one in the 1990s, on the Isle of Skye. Ostensibly, the private sector was going to build something the people of the island would not have had otherwise: a road bridge to the mainland, replacing the old ferry. The islanders understood what was actually happening. They were being sold as revenue stream. Instead of the bridge being built from a tiny fraction of the government budget, it was built by a private firm, which had been promised that it would be able to gouge the islanders with hefty tolls. Less general tax for British taxpayers: a huge private tax for Skye islanders. A long campaign of civil disobedience ended in victory for the islanders when in 2004, against the tide of history, the bridge was nationalised. Skye is a small island. Britain is a big one. The plan's the same. Let's see what happens.

manufacturing jobs in China, where most of the world's goods are made, and that life is widely seen among Chinese workers as preferable to the remaining alternatives of rural life. And all this, in an irony so large there is almost no word to encompass it, in the world's biggest and most powerful notionally Communist state. I don't think you can describe these as 19th-century labour conditions, but they come very close to fulfilling Marx's model of an alienated proletariat whose labour is sucked away from it and turned into other people's profits. Our 28-year-old Mr Lee can easily be imagined as working at one of those plants.

The challenges to Marx's account of where we would be now come when you look in closer detail. If you look at a large picture of the world, much of what he predicted has come true. We have an affluent bourgeoisie which is international but which in the Western world forms the majority of the population, and a proletarian workforce largely in Asia. Add to that the regularity of economic crises, the growing concentration of wealth among the already wealthy and the increased pressures that are everywhere apparent on the international bourgeoisie – the squeezedness we read so much about. There's a general sense that there are no longer any safe havens, that there's no escaping economic change, that capitalism moves at a pace faster than humans themselves can move. If you are a welder but your daughter has to be trained as a software engineer in order to get work, that's probably something you and your society can adapt to; if you are a welder and you have to retrain as a software engineer halfway through your productive career, that just isn't so easy. And yet changes of this scale are what is implied by developments in modern labour markets. This is exactly what Marx meant when he foresaw a world in which 'all that is solid melts into air.' It is therefore not too hard to convince yourself that Marx's predictions were right at a certain level of broad-brush impressionism.

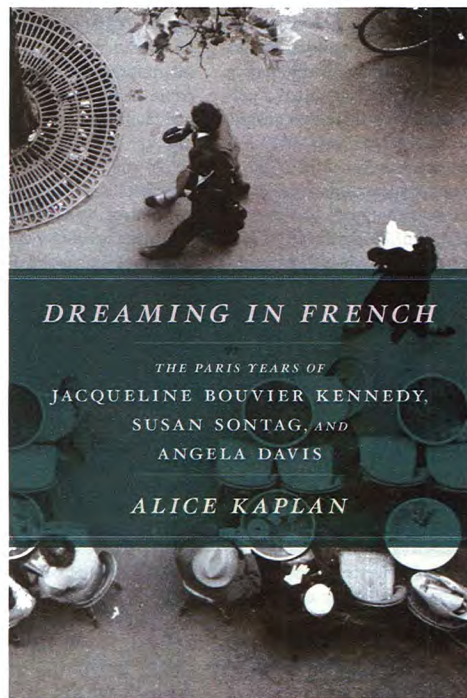
**T**HE MOST OBVIOUS mistake in his version of the world is to do with class. There is something like a classic Marxian proletariat dispersed through the world. But Marx foresaw that this proletariat would be an increasingly centralised and organised force: indeed, this was one of the reasons it would prove so dangerous to capitalism. By creating the conditions in which labour would be sure to organise and assemble collectively capitalism was arranging its own downfall. But there is no organised global conflict between the classes; there is no organised global proletariat. There's nothing even close. The proletariat is queuing to get into Foxconn, not to organise strikes there, and the great danger facing China, which is in a sense where the world's proletariat now is, is the inequality caused by fractures within the new urban proletariat and the rural poverty they're leaving behind. China also has tensions between the coast and the centre, and increasing problems with corruption and maladministration that erupt regularly in what are known as Mass Group Incidents, MGI – basically anti-authority riots which occur

regularly all over China and seem never to be reported in the Western mainstream media. But none of these phenomena is to do with class, and given the emphasis put on organised class struggle in Marx's work you have to file this under predictions which haven't proved true.

Why not? I think for two main reasons. The first is that Marx did not foresee, as no one else did and I don't think anyone could, the variety of different forms of capitalism which would evolve. We talk of capitalism as one thing, but it comes in many different flavours, involving different models. The contemporary welfare state – housing and educating and feeding and providing health-care for its citizens, from birth to death – is a development which challenges the basis of Marx's analysis of what capitalism is: I think he would have looked hard at the welfare state and wondered whether it fundamentally undermined his analysis, just because it is so different from the capitalism Marx saw operating in his day, and from which he extrapolated. Perhaps he would argue that what has happened is that British society in its entirety has become part of a global bourgeoisie, and the proletariat is now in other countries; that's a possible argument, but not one that's easy to sustain in the face of the inequalities which exist and are growing in our society. But Scandinavian welfare capitalism is very different from the state-controlled capitalism of China, which is in turn almost wholly different from the free-market, *saave-qui-peut* capitalism of the United States, which is again different from the nationalistic and heavily socialised capitalism of France, which again is not at all like the curious hybrid we have in the UK, in which our governments are wholly devoted to the free market and yet we have areas of welfare and provision they haven't dared address. Singapore is one of the most avowedly free-market countries in the world, regularly coming top or near top of surveys for liberalisation of markets, and yet the government owns most of the land in the country and the overwhelming majority of the population lives in socialised housing. It's the world capital of free markets and also of council flats. There are lots of different capitalisms and it's not clear that a single analysis which embraces all of them as if they were a single phenomenon can be valid.

One of the ways this plays out is in the variety and complexity of our interests in this system. In February all the workers in Foxconn had their basic pay increased by 25 per cent overnight. That wasn't because of a feat of organisation and protest on the part of the workforce: it was because of an article about working conditions there in the *New York Times*. Ethical pressures from the West are one of the most potent forces for improving factory conditions in Shenzhen. Another example, well known in the medical world but not much outside it, concerns Mectizan, a drug developed to treat river blindness by the American company Merck. (The initial samples that contained the chemical used to make the drug came from a golf course in Japan.) The drug was developed at considerable cost in 1987, and then given away, free, in perpetuity, with the effect of saving many hundreds of thousands of people from blindness, and also saving

FROM CHICAGO



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many more from starvation because it allowed 25 million hectares of previously uncultivable land to be turned over to agriculture. You can just about squeeze that into a Marxist model by describing it as a publicity stunt, but I don't think that analysis works, not least because hardly anybody in the Western world has ever heard of it.

That's something Marx didn't predict and it touches on something else that couldn't have been foreseen. That's the diversity of our interests and roles in contemporary capitalism. Marx talked about people, indeed classes, as being divided into workers and owners of the means of production, and he made some allowance for the fact that we are 'bearers' of these roles, different aspects of which might be in play at different times, with the result that a proletarian may find himself competing against other proletarians even though their class interests are aligned. The fact is that in the modern world our selves are far more fragmented and contradictory than that. Many workers have pensions invested in companies whose route to profit lies in cutting to a minimum the number of workers they employ; one of the things that led to the credit crunch was pension funds' search for higher stable returns to pay the pension liabilities of future generations of retiring workers, so that in very many cases we had a situation in which people lost their jobs because of losses incurred in the attempt to provide future security for the same workers. Most of us are wage slaves, beneficiaries of the welfare state, funders of that state, at the same time as being current or future pensioners who, in that capacity if in

no other, are textbook bourgeois owners of the means of production. It's complicated; and the intense ethical pressures which can intermittently be brought to bear on companies are a symptom of that complexity and multiplicity of interests. It's very striking how seldom companies defend themselves using the simplest – and under classic capitalism most truthful – answer to criticism of their behaviour: our ethical role is to make a profit for our shareholders, provide employment and pay our taxes. That's it. The other stuff is for government. But they never say that, perhaps sensing that we all intuit the fact that our interweaving and internally conflicting interests make the world more complicated than that.

**C**OMPLICATED though Marx's model of the world is, the modern world is more complicated still. This exerts great pressure in one more area, one Marx would have recognised through a favourite saying that comes from Hegel: quantity changes quality. What this means is that you can have an explanatory system which accounts for certain phenomena – in this case, the way capitalism produces things which run against its own main current of accumulation and exploitation – while the broad direction of travel remains the same. But a point comes when the phenomena mount up, and stop seeming like isolated contradictory examples and look instead like a basic challenge to the central ideas. Something like this has happened with the countercurrents that run inside capitalism.

Take the most basic statistical measures of life, infant mortality and life expectancy.

Life expectancy in Britain in 1850, the year *The Communist Manifesto* was first published in English, was 43 years; that's lower than today's life expectancy in Afghanistan, which is in turn lower than in any country that hasn't been hit by the Aids epidemic. UK life expectancy is now over eighty and rising so sharply that buried in the statistics is a truly strange fact: a woman who is eighty today has a 9.2 per cent chance of living to be a hundred, whereas a woman of twenty has a 26.6 per cent chance. It may seem weird that the person sixty years younger has a three times better chance of making it to a century, but what it shows is just how fast progress is being made. Infant mortality, which is often taken as a proxy for a whole set of things (level of medical and technological development, strength of social ties, degree of access to care for the poor, a society's acknowledgment of the needs of strangers), is something in which Marx would have taken a keen interest. In Victorian Britain it was at the rate of 150 deaths per thousand births. Today, UK infant mortality is 4.7 per thousand. That's an improvement of 3191 per cent. (Many countries have done better than us and have lower rates; we're only 31st in the world – the lowest of all being in the place where everyone lives in council flats, at 1.92 per thousand.) The global infant mortality rate is 42.09 per thousand, a third of the British rate in Marx's day. Aids has a terrible effect on these figures: Botswana, for instance, has a life expectancy of 31.6 years, but according to UN data, if you remove the impact of Aids that goes up to 70.7 years.

At what point do data of this sort represent a challenge to Marx's ideas? These data mask significant inequalities – the notorious example in London is that if you take the Jubilee Line from Westminster towards the east, male life expectancy goes down a year every stop for the next eight stops – but leaving that aside, the very broad picture is that pretty much everyone lives longer and enjoys better health. If that is true, can it be true that capitalism consistently and reliably immiserates? Can it be true that the system is destructive, if people who live under it quite simply live longer? Take the Millennium Development goals, announced at the turn of the new century, and setting targets to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters by 2015 from a starting point of 1990 (the books slightly cooked by setting the starting point ten years in the past), halving the number of people who live in absolute poverty, doubling the percentage of children getting at least a primary education. Can an achievement on that scale be ignored? If a system does that, can you say that it produces nothing but immiseration? Marx himself said that there were moments when the capitalist mode of production could transcend itself, as in the invention of the joint stock company. Further evidence of this possibility for self-transcendence would have exerted great pressure on his intellectual models.


A final challenge to Marx's model, and also to his picture of the future, comes from something he did see very clearly and prophetically, the extraordinary productive power of capitalism. He saw how capitalism would transform the surface of the

planet and impact on the life of every single person alive. There is, however, a crack or flaw close to the heart of his analysis. Marx saw the two fundamental poles of economic, and social and political, life as labour and nature. He didn't see these two things as static; he used the metaphor of a metabolism to describe the way our labour shapes the world and we in turn are shaped by the world we have made. So the two poles of labour and nature don't stay fixed. But what Marx doesn't allow for is the fact that nature's resources are finite. He knows that there is no such thing as nature unshaped by our assumptions, but he doesn't share our contemporary awareness that nature can run out. This is the kind of thing which is sometimes called ironic, but is closer to tragedy, and at its heart is the fact that the productive, expansionist, resource-consuming power of capitalism is so great that it is not sustainable at a planetary level. The whole world wants to have a First World bourgeois lifestyle, and the whole world can see what that looks like by glancing at a television set, but the world can't have it, because we will burn through its resources before we get there. Capitalism's greatest crisis is upon us, and it is predicated on the unavoidable fact that nature is finite.


This is a point that Marxists for the most part have been reluctant to address, and for a very good reason: the problem of resources in the world today, whether food or water or power, power in all senses, are to do with inequitable distribution and not with the total supply. There is more than enough of all those things for all of us. Writers and activists in the Marxist tradition have tended to stress that point, and they're right to do so, but we need also to face the fact that the world is heading towards ever greater consumption of and demand for resources on the part of everybody. Everybody simultaneously. That fact is capitalism's most deadly opponent. To give just one example in relation to one resource only, the American average consumption of water is one hundred gallons per person per day. There isn't enough fresh water on the planet for everyone to live like that.

So the question is whether capitalism can evolve new forms, in the way it has so far managed to do, and come up with property and market-based mechanisms which deflect the seemingly inevitable crisis that will ensue, or whether we need some entirely different social and economic order. The irony is that this order might in many respects be like the one Marx imagined, even if he saw a different route to getting there. When Marx said that capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction he wasn't talking about climate change or resource wars. If we feel a natural gloom and despondency at the prospect of the difficulties ahead, we should also take comfort in the fact of our imaginative adaptability and the ingenuity which has brought us so far so fast – so far, so fast, that we now need to slow down, and don't quite know how. As Marx wrote, towards the end of the first volume of *Capital*, 'man is distinguished from all other animals by the limitless and flexible nature of his needs.' Limitless needs we see all around us and they've brought us to where we are, but we're going to have to work on the flexible part. □


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