

## **Karl Marx's 'Capital'**

WITH THIS ISSUE we commemorate the centenary of the publication of Karl Marx's greatest work, *Capital*. Probably no other book in all history has ever had so profound an influence on the shape of the world as this monumental study of the nature of the capitalist system. Within fifty years of its publication, its critique of capitalism and its signposting of the scientific road to socialism had inspired the leaders of the socialist revolution in Russia, and ushered in the first socialist state over one-sixth of the earth's surface. Today, 100 years from its publication, the communist movement, which draws much of its understanding of the world and the process of social change from this major work of the greatest of communist teachers, now exists in force in every part of the earth, including a socialist camp which now embraces one-third of all mankind. This great movement itself is testimony to the world-shaking influence of Marx's *Capital*.

Marx came to his vast, detailed study of political economy not as a remote academician, but from a life of practical revolutionary political struggle. When he sat down to his ten-year study, largely in the British Museum, which was to end in the manuscript for Volume I of *Capital*, he had already done as much as any man alive for the cause of socialism; he had been a socialist propagandist and journalist of outstanding ability, with a string of books on philosophy and economics and innumerable articles on current political events to his credit. He had founded workers' organisations including the First International and taken part in the illegal work of the Communist League. Together with his life-long collaborator, Friedrich Engels, he had written the fundamental principles of the communist movement in one of the most vivid pieces of political pamphleteering of all time, the Communist Manifesto. He had crossed swords with censors and been deported for revolutionary activities from several countries of Europe. When *Capital*, Volume I, finally saw the light of day 100 years ago, it was the peak of an already outstanding revolutionary career, but not by any means the end. By the time of his death sixteen years later, he had completed the preparatory studies for Volumes II and III of *Capital* (published after his death), taken active sides with the revolutionary workers of Paris in the defence of the Paris Commune of 1871, and added a great deal to the library of master works of Communism which still guide the movement today.

At his graveside, Engels said:

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.

Marx contributed so much to our understanding of the world, that it is difficult today to even attempt to summarise it. But two great discoveries stand out in significance from all the rest. First his discovery of the law of development of human society:

‘The whole previous view of history’, Engels writes, ‘was based on the conception that the ultimate causes of all historical changes are to be looked for in the changing ideas of human beings; and that of all historical changes, political changes are the most important. . . .

Now Marx has proved that the whole of previous history is a history of class struggles; that in all the manifold and complicated political struggles the only thing at issue has been the social and political rule of social classes, the maintenance of domination by older classes, and the conquest of domination by newly arising classes.

. . . From this point of view all the historical phenomena are explicable in the simplest possible way, with sufficient knowledge of the particular economic condition of society . . . And in the same way the conceptions and ideas of each historical period are most simply to be explained from the social and political relations of the period, which are in turn determined by these economic conditions.

It was on this basis that Marx was enabled to show the socialist movement that the age of capitalism willy-nilly prepared the way for the next epoch, the age of socialism; and that the manner of the transition was being determined by the fact that

historical leadership has passed to the proletariat, a class which . . . can only free itself by abolishing altogether all class rule, all servitude and all exploitation.

Thus Marx unlocked for the socialist movement the scientific understanding of how society could and would be changed to socialism; he transformed the socialist movement from a utopian crusade to a scientific attempt to take control of and direct the forces of social change as the chemist controls and directs the forces of chemical change.

Much of this original and revolutionary ideology had already been developed and written by Marx before *Capital* was complete. His dialectical and historical materialist conception moulds the whole of *Capital's* analysis of our own epoch. But in the course of his economic studies in the preparation of *Capital* Marx developed and proved the second of his great, world-shaking discoveries. Basing himself on the theories of the classical economists Ricardo and Adam Smith, that

human labour is the only source of value, Marx delved deep into the reality of the capitalist mode of production, to reveal finally the real nature of relationships between worker and employer.

'Ever since political economy had put forward the proposition that labour is the source of all wealth and all value, the question became inevitable: how is this then to be reconciled with the fact that the wage worker does not receive the whole sum of value created by his labour, but has to surrender a part of it to the capitalist? Both the bourgeois economists and the socialists exerted themselves to give a scientifically valid answer to this question, but in vain, until at last Marx came forward with the solution.'

The solution is not capable of short explanation here. For those who would understand, both *Capital* itself and simpler expositions by students of Marx are now universally available to be read. Marx proved beyond doubt that the worker produces what he termed 'surplus value' for the capitalist who employs him, by working 'surplus time' over and above the time required for him to create the full value of his labour. This surplus value, created by the wage labourer at the point of production in the factory and workshop, Marx shows to be the source of all the rent, profit and interest which accrues to the entire capitalist class.

'This proved that the acquisition of riches by the present-day capitalists consists as much in the appropriation of unpaid labour of others as that of the slave owner or the feudal lord exploiting serf labour. . . .

'This also removed the last justification for all the hypocritical phrases of the possessing classes to the effect that in the present social order right and justice, equality of rights and duties and a general harmony of interests prevail, and present-day bourgeois society no less than its predecessors, was exposed as a grandiose institution for the exploitation of the huge majority of the people by a small, ever diminishing minority.'

Thus Marx fathered the modern socialist movement, its thinking and its beliefs; it is the theory of Marx, brilliantly developed by many of his successors, which has brought socialism from the realm of dreams into the realm of reality. *Capital* is the fountain head and still the greatest single work of all Marxist thought.

It is as valid—perhaps more valid—for our times as it was for the age when it was written. For this is the age when every road leads to socialism. And there can be no steady leadership along that road without the aid of the burning searchlight which Marx's *Capital* threw upon it 100 years ago, and still throws with undiminished brilliance today.