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Karl Marx: flawed visionary sowed seeds of clarity and chaos

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Activists carry a a banner depicting Karl Marx during the traditional May Day rally in Paris this week. Picture: AP

Karl Marx, who was born on May 5, 1818, has not had much luck with centenaries.

When his first centenary was celebrated in 1918, the international socialist movement he had fought so tirelessly to create had been torn apart by World War I, with the revolutionary turmoil in Russia inducing further convulsions.

Now, as the world celebrates his second centenary, the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's adoption of a particularly brutal and corrupt form of market economy have shredded whatever remained of Marx's vision.

It would, however, be a mistake to simply add Marx to the list of great failures. Despite all the crimes perpetrated in his name, there is little doubt that his work not only changed the world but altered the way we understand it.

As Isaiah Berlin, who staunchly opposed communism, put it: "In the sharpness and the clarity with which (Marx's) theory formulates its questions, in the rigour of the method by which it proposes to search for the answers, in the combination of attention to detail and power of wide comprehensive generalisation, it is without parallel.

"Even if all its specific conclusions were proved false," Berlin concluded, "(Marx's) importance in opening new avenues of human knowledge would be unimpaired."

But while ignoring Marx's achievements would be a serious error, so would it be wrong to deny that his work contains the seeds of the horrors those who called themselves Marxists committed. Nor are those portents of future disasters merely peripheral aspects of his thought. Rather, they are integral to the answers he gave to the vast questions he posed.

At their heart, those questions involved nothing less than the nature and meaning of human history.

Karl Marx. Picture: Getty Images

Marx's great predecessor Immanuel Kant and, following him, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and GWF Hegel had taken the first steps in interpreting history as resulting from the interaction between the lives of the actors — that is, the men engaged in the struggle for attaining self-direction — and the consequences of their activities.

But far more clearly than his predecessors, Marx grasped the complexities that interaction involves. "Men make their own history," he wrote, "but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."

And he also understood that in this process of making history, the actors irreversibly altered both themselves and the opportunities and constraints with which future generations would grapple.

Having reached that understanding in his late 20s, better analysing that process and its determinants became his life work.

The approach he eventually developed combined a theory of social structure with one of social change. The structures, which involved a succession of economic, social and political regimes that went from antiquity through feudalism to capitalism, he called modes of production.

As for social change, it occurred when the social relations inherent in each mode of production — that is, its class structure — clashed with the dynamics that mode of production had unleashed.

Marx gave this approach myriad, often inconsistent, formulations, fuelling decades of controversy among his disciples. The difficulties he encountered are unsurprising: he was, after all, trying to reconcile human agency — our ability to change ourselves and the world — with the limits that broader economic and social forces impose, a challenge that consumes social theory to this day.

But while he never resolved that tension between freedom and necessity to his satisfaction — so that much of his writing remained a work in progress — he settled on a series of propositions that his followers, helped by the ambiguities that littered his texts, elevated into natural laws.

The first of those propositions was that history is a progressive process, with each stage of human development offering greater possibilities than its predecessors. Retrogressions were certainly possible; and it was by no means the case that improvement lifted all ships — on the contrary, progress had its victims, such as the working class in Victorian Britain, which could be made absolutely worse off by history's advance. However, for all the suffering, mankind could not help but build on itself, forever groping towards greater prosperity.

Second, while the roots of change lay in broad economic and social forces, and notably in technological progress, its agents were social classes.

There was, in each period, a dominant or ruling class whose power rested on its control of the means of production; over time, new ways of doing things inevitably eroded the power of that ruling class, favouring an emerging class in its place.

Every ruling class therefore created the conditions for its own demise and produced its own gravediggers.

Third and last, while every society had a complex of institutions that regulated social behaviour and defined collective beliefs, those institutions did little more than express the interests and outlook of the dominant class. To that extent, the state was essentially a vehicle of class rule, and concepts such as rights and legality only masked that reality.

Capitalism, Marx believed, brought those propositions into uniquely sharp focus. At the same time, however, it gave progress unprecedented impetus.

Thus, far from being the greedy defender of private property, as many early socialists charged, the bourgeoisie — capitalism's dominant class — was an epic hero of humanity's forward march.

"It has been the first," *The Communist Manifesto* proclaimed, "to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals …

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

Of all the modes of production history had known, only capitalism endlessly produced new needs; only capitalism, by harnessing science to economic ends, made incessant advance a constant feature of life; and only capitalism converted the whole world into a single market, fusing both capitalists and workers into global classes.

But capitalism was also distinctive in the extent and savagery of the transformation it inflicted on the subordinate class.

The proletariat — a term Marx likely derived from French economist JCL Simonde de Sismondi — was entirely deprived of ownership of, and control over, the means of production.

It was also uprooted from traditional social structures, and ground down into a "dot-like isolation" that was offset only by the bunching of workers in ever larger slums and factories. It was therefore uniquely motivated to overthrow a system that ensured "the more riches the worker produces, the poorer he becomes".

However, it was not the contrast between the development of the highest level of enrichment and of needs, on the one hand, and the peak of individual impoverishment on the other that would bring capitalism to an end and initiate the transition to communism, history's next and final stage.

Rather, it was the fact capitalism would eventually be unable to manage the tension between the decentralised nature of capitalist decision-making and the increasingly social character of capitalism's technological prowess, which made social co-ordination of production and distribution both possible and necessary.

Capitalism therefore laid the basis not just for overcoming exploitation but also for moving from a system that was inherently anarchic to one that, for the first time, stripped production and social intercourse of their independent character and subjugated them “to the power of individuals united”.

That this teleological vision is riddled with flaws hardly needs to be said. Historically, however, what proved even more important than any analytical errors was that it could readily be used to justify the atrocities of regimes that claimed to be undertaking its implementation.

To begin with, although Marx’s vision promised an eventual disappearance of the state as class antagonisms withered, it was thoroughly statist.

Who would own the means of production? The state. Who would plan their use? The state. And who would determine the distribution of the social product and so control the fate of every man, woman and child? The state.

To make matters worse, this all-powerful state was not one that admitted of pluralism. Marx had emphasised that politics was simply the expression of class conflict. As a result, once the abolition of private property had eliminated social classes, there was no need for politics — and any political opposition could be dismissed, and suppressed, as counter-revolutionary.

It was Joseph Stalin who, in the run-up to the terror of the 1930s, pushed this to its logical conclusion. The previous exploiters, he argued, would become increasingly desperate as socialism advanced; they would therefore fight back ever more intensely, which meant that repression had to become even more relentless as the final stages of communism approached.

The alleged historical inevitability of these processes further served to excuse the abuses. Errors were surely regrettable, but they were merely the froth on the tidal wave of progress, hastening what history’s laws mandated.

As Leon Trotsky chillingly said, in accepting the resolution that eliminated the scope for disagreement within the Bolshevik party, “the party in the last analysis is always right (because) history has not created other ways for what is right to be realised”.

The difficulties all the socialist states experienced in trying to make central planning actually work only accentuated the repressive tendencies. Marx thought technological advance would render production “transparent”, facilitating its central control. In reality, it made economies more complex and unpredictable, and hence more reliant on market processes to guide them and absorb constant change.

As a result, far from allowing “big industry, free of the pressure of private ownership, (to) develop at an increased rate … (and) produce enough goods that the needs of all (society’s) members will be satisfied”, the move to a planned economy induced chronic shortages and widespread discontent, inciting yet more repression.

How Marx would have reacted to those outcomes is unknowable. But there is no reason to believe he would have ignored them. Stubborn as he was, there is an element of truth in his claim that he always took criticism seriously and never shied away from uncomfortable facts.

Nor did he ever regard what he wrote as rules that could define, once and for all, the way to a better world: he was not, he said, “writing recipes for the kitchen of the future”.

In each of those respects, Marx had greater honesty and integrity than many who took his name. Fundamentally, he was an intellectual steeped in the tradition that stretched from Socrates through Shakespeare and Spinoza to his day. Watching “progressive” students at Stanford, perhaps America’s premier university, shouting “F..k Steve Bannon, f..k the Western canon” in protest at a lecture Bannon was presenting on Western civilisation would have moved him to rage.

But that doesn’t mean he would have abandoned his dreams of dramatic social change. Always anxious to be in the thick of the battle, always fighting to develop and steer the socialist movement, Marx was imbued with what Hannah Arendt called the revolutionary spirit: “the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning, the high spirits which have always attended the birth of something new on earth”.

Now that spirit seems as extinct as the Soviet Union. But as well as allowing us to better understand Marx’s many errors, its passing might also allow us to better see his strengths. The edifice the orthodox Marxists built around him in the Soviet era was not a monument — it was a mausoleum. And while the image of Marx they painted was a caricature, so was that which many of the adversaries of communism painted in response.

Freed by that mausoleum’s collapse, it is now possible to re-engage with Marx’s insights and in that light reassess the dialectic between freedom and necessity that lies at their heart.

Truly great thinkers and truly great works have something to say to each generation; but each generation must learn to hear them anew. As Marx turns 200, those who are willing to listen will find him as wrongheaded and inconsistent, and as scintillating and profound, as any of the giants who have shaped our world.