

# For A Marxism Without Guarantees

Stuart Hall

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In his address to the *ALR* Marx Centenary Symposium in Sydney and Melbourne in April 1983, Stuart Hall asked the audience to accept that there isn't any lost page of Marx's notebooks which will tell us where to go next. The following article is based on his addresses at Sydney and Melbourne, and was originally published in the *Australian Left Review*.

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I want to talk about Marx and marxism, and to suggest some things about his relevance to our contemporary situation.

I missed the 14 March, but a few days after that I went to Highgate Cemetery just to make sure that Marx was there, and I bring you the good news that he is. But there is a certain restlessness about the air in Highgate Cemetery, a sense that though the body is there, somehow the ideas are circulating worldwide, and that restlessness is, I think, justified because socialists, whether they are marxists or not, honour Marx because he provided something of the scientific and theoretical stiffening that we all need at least once every ten years. He is honoured also because he gave a very important demonstration of what it is like to hold to an emancipatory socialist politic – but most of all, and this is what I like Marx for – because he insisted on thinking critical and subversive thoughts.

He used to say that he hoped his own thought would be scandalous – a scandal and abomination above all to bourgeois professors. And I've taken that chastising note to heart.

I've been trying to learn from and argue with and to keep Marx at bay for more years than I'm going to tell you. Perhaps I should establish my credentials by saying a little bit about my first encounter with Marx. I was one of those clever boys in a clever colonial school, I'd been taught by a red-haired Scots footballer who stayed on in Jamaica because he liked the climate, and decided to teach us all history. In the sixth form he caught a whiff of anti-imperialism circulating in the corridors and he thought that it was his historic mission to inoculate us against the dangers of subversive ideas and to that end he had two vehicles or instruments at his disposal. One was a series of recordings of the speeches of Baldwin, for uplift, and the second was a series of pamphlets produced by the British Council on how awful Marx, marxism, stalinism, socialism and all that was. And he used to read alternately from Baldwin and these pamphlets and, because he was an extremely good teacher, he made them sound really quite interesting. The more this long process of inoculation went on, the more I thought there must be something in it, and I've been trying to think about that ever since.

That struggle with Marx, to keep Marx at bay so that he doesn't take over your head, which is his propensity, is made easy, I suppose, in the era of what people now call the 'Crisis of Marxism', because now you can start further down the line. There is no need to insist that there is a single, unified marxism; you have only to come into any public meeting and you can see the fifty-seven varieties. There is no need to insist that

his was a dogmatically finished and completed theoretical labour – anybody who dares to end the critical volume of his major work with a question: ‘What is class, then?’ and dies – is clearly not in the business of wrapping the whole thing up. Indeed the notion that somewhere back there is the *Book of Revelations* or Old Moore’s *Almanac* – a sort of litany that you look up when you are not feeling good, or to find out whether you should travel on Friday the thirteenth – a general book by which you guide and shape your life – is contrary to virtually every line that Marx wrote. He was irreligious, deeply secular, highly rationalist, critical, theoretical and historical. In my view, the crisis of Marxism liberates us for some future kind of marxism-work, though it disables us from some other kinds.

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When one talks about the dangers of marxist revisionism (I particularly like that phrase) it seems to suggest that, really to be tuned to the spirit of the old man, the working class ought to have stood still. It ought to look exactly like it did in the illustrations to Engels’ *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. As soon as it doesn’t look like that, we’re not sure if it’s there at all. We have to go round and try to find out where it is and why it’s gone there, and how come it hasn’t stayed in place. And yet, if marxism has anything at all about it, it is the insistence that it is dealing with an historical and dynamic system that Marx had never seen. Long before Marx ever hated capitalism he admired it and respected it. It had broken and shattered every other system of human history, it had surpassed it in its dynamic. And it was because he wanted to harness that dynamic of a major, massive world-historical productive system to somebody who deserved it more than the bourgeoisie, that he began to see what the negative side of capitalist relations were about. But he had the most profound respect for its capacity to break and shatter the fettering archaic relations into which people are born. Consequently, as it were, to make the test of the truth of marxism depend on the world standing still is, of course, to give ourselves all kinds of those necessary guarantees that we may think that we need to have, in order to convince ourselves that we are really on top of the historical process. But to carry that guarantee in our back pockets will prevent us from actually being able to come to terms with the real world.

I see off that phase of classical marxism with a light heart. I don’t want it, I don’t need it – that’s not to say at all that one doesn’t learn from, that one doesn’t need and require, the deepest understanding that we can get of someone who profoundly understood the origins of the world we now inhabit.

But to have the sense that that world can only be understood by going to Marx as if his writings were indeed a sacred text, or a motto on the wall and all you need to do is embroider it a little and it will continue to come true, that marxism should be dead. I wish that it is buried also in Highgate Cemetery with the old man.

There are a number of ways in which I want to talk about the things in Marx that I feel to be important and relevant in understanding the world today. But first of all

I think I ought to establish some priority of the things in marxism and Marx that I particularly value. I want to do that very quickly, because I don't want this to be a kind of scholastic exercise, but to give a sense of what it is about marxism that I value so much.

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Above all, the fabric of historical materialism. Not every note and crochet and semi-quaver in it, but that broad understanding of historical development and especially of the material constraints in historical development, which ground that theory in some level of determinant relations, which don't simply pluck it out of the air, and watch it unfold according to our own hopes and dreams and ambitions. That is, I think, the essence of what is scientific about Marx. He is not scientific in the sense that the predictions always work out. He is scientific in the sense of providing us with some systematic entry into the understanding of historical development. That is the first massive achievement.

Secondly, I would say, the intrinsic modes of capitalist societies. This is not a penetrating insight into the capitalism of the second half of the twentieth century. If you expect Marx to have penetrating insights into the capitalism of the second half of the twentieth century, you do believe he is an old testament prophet; you do believe he can see the future – indeed a hundred years ahead; and that is not what he is and therefore that is not what one ought to go to Marx for. Nevertheless, one continues to live in societies which sometimes call themselves capitalist and sometimes don't – but look pretty capitalist to me. I'm able to say they are capitalist with some confidence and conviction because one gets from Marx some sense of what it is like to be in the distinctive epoch and age of capitalist societies and why that is different from being in some other historical epoch. And whatever are the major and massive historical changes that have taken place in the last one hundred years, the basic grammar of capitalism continues to survive in the era of international corporate capitalism as it did in the era of the textile entrepreneurs. In so far as I am able to understand that, I owe a debt to Marx. Indeed, in so far as anybody is able to really understand that, they owe a debt to Marx. And I enjoy the experience of people who hate Marx, hate marxism and believe it's all dead and gone but open their mouths about history, and speak another marxist truth. That is the unconsciousness of Marx operating at a level too deep for them to understand. It is also the fate of bourgeois marxists who think they have overcome Marx but who are, by that process, actually still in his grip. This I enjoy most, and I think it's the kind of historical irony Marx would have relished.

But I don't want to go on talking about what's good about marxism, because if it were all good we wouldn't be here together with our slightly furrowed brows, wondering if it is going to exist for another hundred years. So I want to go right to the heart of the matter, what's wrong with it then? What is this crisis about?

One has to remember Brecht's adage that you should always begin from the bad side not from the good side. If you want to cheer yourself up, you begin from the good side,

but if you want to be a dialectician, you begin from the bad side, because one of the other things that Marx gave us, deeply and profoundly, is not a theory with substance in it, but a method of thinking, which he called the dialectic. It is the awareness of the continual contradictoriness of the world, that every time you see something going forward in a good way, there's always some rotten consequence lying underneath it, which is going to walk around the block and kick you in the backside. That is the nature of history – it advances, and then it shafts you round the back.

You can always distinguish good marxists from good reformists, because reformists always begin from the good side – it wasn't so good then and now it's a bit better and it's going to be a bit better after that and on and on and on and up and up and up. That is exactly what Baldwin used to say on those recordings back in Jamaica. On and on and on, and up and up and up, was Baldwin's wonderful phrase and I used to see reformism taking us out of slavery and imperialism and on a steady escalating path but along comes marxism and it says 'You think you just won something, but just wait for the unintended consequences of the good things in the world' (because) 'unless you understand that advance and retreat are deeply implicated with one another, and that one has to have eyes in the side of one's head for the bit one didn't calculate, you aren't, as Hegel would say, thinking dialectically'.

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So let's start from some of the bad side. What is it that Marx didn't or couldn't or wasn't in a position to understand? He wasn't in a position to understand modern industrial corporate capitalism because he wasn't alive in it. He saw the origins rather than the further development of modern industrial capitalism. The idea that the forms of capitalist organisation and exploitation should change so profoundly over a hundred years but make no difference to Marx is impossible to sustain for very long. Of course there is a great deal about modern industrial corporate capitalism on a global scale, which has forms of organisation and complexities of operation, that are not written in the law of value in the form that Marx gives it in *Capital* and elsewhere.

Secondly, Marx did not see, and therefore did not understand, the forms of modern imperialist capitalist relations. He saw the drive which capitalism had toward the construction of a world market, but the idea of a world productive system with a vast new complex international division of labour, which makes the poor of the third world into the proletariat of the first and which binds nation and nation together in a set of the most complicated and deeply implanted social and economic relations, is a world Marx did not confront. Consequently, there is a whole range of things about the relationship between the proletariat, or the working class or productive labour in the advanced world and the forms in which it connects to the poor and the oppressed – indeed to other apparently non-marxist classes like the old peasantry – in the underdeveloped world which we will not find adequately explained in Marx.

And about the state Marx is vivid, brief, sketchy and wrong a lot of the time. He was most wrong about the tendency of the state to wither away. I can't find a

single state that looks in the remotest like withering away. I just see them all growing and growing and growing – the liberal capitalist state, the monetarist state and the minimalist state, the law-and-order state and the socialist state. Especially the socialist state. They all just keep on, like topsy, growing and growing. So the notion that there is some unalterably inevitable law that will enable us to seize the relations that we want to transform through the state is wrong. The state is not going to say: ‘Cheerio, I’m off, mission accomplished, it’s all yours. Here is where history begins. I belong to necessity and I’m going right now while you press on to freedom’.

Marx began to see at certain points in his life the coming of the state and the way in which the politics of modern societies would be condensed in the state, and the nature in which the state would draw the radii of power in modern societies together. He glimpsed that, but the modern state of modern developed societies, whatever their political complexion, was a problem which continued without Marx’s understanding.

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Now, you put those three points together, you will see that the notion that we can be marxists by simply carrying the sacred texts in our back pocket, is another proposition that doesn’t stand up very long. I’ve not finished the catalogue yet, though, so don’t feel too secure.

Marx was wrong about the nature, speed and direction of class polarisation and the tempo and forms of the class struggle. Now, that’s pretty big stuff after all. One of the texts that most marxists, or people who call themselves marxists, would think of as a founding text of marxism is the *Communist Manifesto*. That is the book of class polarisation and of the increasing tempo of the open class struggle, and I love it just like you do, but it is basically and fundamentally incorrect. The class struggle has not followed that increasing deepening of the tempo and simple polarisation that is the wonderful vision of the *Communist Manifesto*. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t other things in the *Communist Manifesto* that are correct, but its thrust does in many ways disable us for the multiple ways in which social and other forms of class struggle appear in modern society. And it does give us a mistaken guarantee of the increasing rapidity of our movement toward revolutionary insurrectionary revolution, which especially the history of the modern developed industrial capitalist world has not satisfied. So I suggest that when you want inspiration, you take a *Communist Manifesto*, which for the hundredth year has been reproduced in a very beautiful edition, and read it. But I advise against taking from it what I call the ‘Sinai Vision’ of socialism, where the waters part and you go through, or the ‘Jericho Vision’ where you march around the wall seven times, blow the trumpet and WHACK down go the walls and the seat of power is revealed.

I advise in this way because in modern society we don’t know where that seat of power is. What do you get hold of? Do you get hold of a radio station, television, parliament house? Do you discover the addresses of the ministers? We don’t know

where the massive power of the modern state actually lives any longer. The notion that this complex thing, which Gramsci says has fortifications and trenches deep into civil society and everyday life, is going to appear and we're going to pop it on the head and that's going to be it, is a very profound misunderstanding. It is not only a misunderstanding, it unprepares us for the character, for the real character, of the struggle we have to conduct.

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There is also inevitably in Marx, though not especially in Marx, but more in marxism, a notion of the inevitability of the crisis and of the overthrow of capitalism itself. Let me say that about this, marxists should walk on their hands and knees in contrition at least once a month. From Marx's early look at 1848 onwards, we've all thought it is going to happen faster than it has. There's one point where Marx and Engels said: 'Well, I'm sorry, it's not the death throes of capitalism, it is the birth pangs'. But between the death throes and the birth pangs of capitalism is a whole history, much longer than my life or yours. We can hardly say of this: 'I'm sorry and I got it wrong, I thought it was going but it was only just beginning'. This is something for which we all need a little of what used to be called 'recognition of errors and abuses'. We need a little text at the end in the margin, to say: 'I'm sorry, I do confess to the international proletariat, I wasn't right about it'. It's no laughing matter, of course. After all, in the period from 1917 to 1921, the marxist movement also thought it was looking at the last – not only the highest but the last – stage of capitalism, and it mistook the capacity of that system to reconstitute itself and restructure itself, on a profoundly new and expanding basis. On that basis we made errors in the capacity to construct socialism in one country which has proved to be one of the most serious barriers in the socialist movement to the construction of socialism in our times.

So our history is not only indexed by the incorrect deductions that are sometimes drawn about it, it is also marked and shadowed by the practices in error which we have taken as a result of misunderstanding the whole thing only too well.

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I have tried to talk about some of the things that confront us in the second half of the twentieth century about which Marx said things, about which marxism has argued and debated, and which are critical to our understanding of how the modern world works. The idea that you could launch yourself into political activity in the modern world without understanding how some of those things really are, is inconceivable. But I want to say a word about something which is rather different from the substantive areas in which we cannot expect to find the keys in Marx's work. And something about the whole marxist approach or the marxist method, the marxist way of working. Though these problems and holes and weaknesses do not occur in Marx everywhere,

they are sufficiently there for us to have to reckon with them when we try to use Marx as an instrument for understanding and analysing the world.

There is that tendency to find, in what is revealingly called by marxists ‘the economic’, the guarantee of the end of political and social struggles, the method of thinking that sees the economic as his or her majesty. (I’m sorry I got into the habit of saying his or hers. The economic is always his.) His majesty, the economic, according to this tendency, would – at some important part of history – detach itself from the complicated historical, political and ideological integument in which it functions, and would stride ahead of us, and lay out the end product of the different struggles that we are engaged in. We cannot see to the end, but his majesty, the economic, who wrote the script, including our confusions and our blindnesses and errors, has taken account of the whole thing and is now able to say ‘You press on because in the end, socialism is inevitable’.

But we live in a world in which socialism is not inevitable. We live in a world in which there are socialisms that are caricatures of socialism, and the thing that is most inevitable in our world, in a logical calculation, is its termination. Barbarism, which is the other alternative which Marx offered us, is much closer in the age of nuclear weapons, of thermo-nuclear warfare, and of the frozen blocs of Soviet communism and western capitalism, than is socialism. So the notion that there is some logic inscribed exclusively in the logic of capital, and forms of the struggle but the end product, or the notion that every other contradiction in the society really begins with the contradiction between capital and labour are not true.

All of us know in our heart of hearts, that, for example, the contradictions of patriarchal relations saw off ‘primitive communism’, and it saw off feudalism and it saw off early capitalism and it looks like it’s going to see off modern capitalism as well. It is ancient in relation to the conflict between capital and labour. If you want to argue that various social contradictions, which frequently lead to vigorous and popular social movements in the world, do not exist in society outside of the structuring articulations of the way in which modern life reproduces its material conditions, that is to say they cannot exist outside of the articulation of class and class struggle, I agree with you. But if you say that the class struggle and its principle contradiction generates all the others, so that not only do we know the end of the story but we also possess the key, I do not.

The idea that there is a key which can be put in the ignition lock and turned so that we will all fall about – men will love women, blacks will love whites, the unemployed will love the employed and vice versa, is wrong. All these and other things which have divided and marked and intersected the apparent unity of the working class given by its economic position, are not going to be resolved and locked up by the end of a single and homogenous and predictable process. That law of inevitability has done serious damage to marxism. It has done serious damage to the marxist movement, because it has created a policy of inevitability. And it has created institutions which depend on the politics of inevitability. It has disarmed us, in relation to the complex new forms



and arenas in which modern forms of social struggle, including the class struggle, has to be or have to be preserved.

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So, you might want to ask, what is it we are celebrating? I seem to be more convinced about the holes in the theory. I seem to be talking about a big can that is spouting water on all sides like a leaky boat, and yet come along telling you that it's still worth thinking and talking about. Yes, I do. But I want to say in what terms I make that assertion. I make it because I know of no other categories that begin to enable us to understand some of the most fundamental areas and relations of modern society. If I want to understand its economic dynamic, if I want to understand the nature of some of its most profound antagonisms and contradictions, if I want to understand what are some of its most basic and profound formations, the categories of Marx seem to me to be superior to any other.

Secondly, Marx has a hard, difficult historical lesson and story to teach us which, though we intone his name so frequently, we equally frequently forget. This is the nature of historical determinacy of things, the fact that there is no development, no social struggle, no social contradictions which proceed exclusively according to the will of men and women. We come into struggles, to forms of life, which operate on a given terrain. In part, what we do and how far we can go are inscribed in the historical constraints of the given terrain on which we operate. We are unlikely to be able to find twenty-second century solutions to twentieth century problems. We are given in the determinacy of things. History sets the terrain, it establishes the parameters, within which struggle and survival take place. It gives us the objective determinants of forms of social struggle and it constrains bitterly, sometimes deeply, sometimes it woundingly constrains the possibilities of constructing new forms of life. When you look at socialist societies in the third world, arising from the depths of poverty and attempting to construct socialism, you know that history is a hard taskmaster, that it has established the limit and constraint in which those people are likely even to begin to sniff material prosperities, success and the opening of opportunities in our and their lifetimes. It is [through] the attention to the hard taskmaster, of history, that Marx gives us the sense of the limits within which we struggle.

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On the other hand, the thing which bourgeois critics of Marx [hate] most, namely that he claimed to be both a scientist and to be involved in the struggle, is exactly what begins to unlock that understanding of Marx that I'm trying to set before you. This is the Marx who makes us attend to the determinacy of things, but does not pretend to know what the end result of them is, that is to say the Marx who establishes the questions we ought to ask about the modern world but does not pretend to have all

the answers. It is the Marx who sets the agenda of problems, and who gives us the categories, the tools of thought with which to begin to understand them, but it is not the Marx who saves us from hard work. It is not the Marx who only asks questions when the answers are known.

Frequently what is so disabling about the work of some marxist writers is that you know what is going to be said at the end before the investigation has begun, that the questions are phoney, that such writers are functioning on a closed terrain. We all know the kind of investigation which does not enter into an open space as Marx did. Marx voyaged in unknown territory. He had the temerity to write down 'I'm beginning to understand this new system that just began the day before yesterday, historically, and [to] think I understand some things about it'. He did not say that he knew it all. If he knew all the answers surely he would have said what class was, instead he took time out and nature struck. That is not an excuse for the notion that he did really know it but he just didn't get to it. You have only to look at his notebooks which are absolutely full of pages copied out from other people's work. It's a thing of wonder that some marxist scholars have been reading these notebooks and thinking that Marx wrote this or that when in fact that notes are just another bit of Adam Smith that struck Marx as quite good.

The notion that Marx is a kind of super brain that descended out of Trier in Germany at a certain moment, that he knew everything, that he wrote everything that he could see to the end of history and he just unfortunately happened to die in 1883 is really going back to the Marx who must be Old Moore, an Old *Almanac* writer, an *Old Testament* prophet and we just mistook him. Such a Marx ought to be up from the Highgate Cemetery, he ought to have risen on the second day at least. He ought to be passing amongst us because we need him. But if we do not feel good with that religious marxism we must opt for another, a story without an end, a narrative which doesn't have a conclusion.

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That means we have to do something for ourselves, we have to discover what the class struggle is in the 1980s and 1990s, we have to discover what the relationship is between the peace movement and the working class, and we have to accept that there isn't actually any secret lost page of the notebooks that will tell us where to go next. There really isn't. The only Marx worth celebrating then is the Marx who is interested in thinking and in struggling on an open terrain, the Marx who offers a marxism without guarantees, a marxism without answers.

Good heavens, if someone teaches you where to begin, isn't that enough?

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Stuart Hall was a Jamaican-born British Marxist, and founder of the *New Left Review*, and of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. He was a professor of

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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