

## *From the Conference Convener: Marx at 200*

“In accordance with Marx’s whole worldview,” writes Rosa Luxemburg in her discussion about the second volume of *Capital*, “his magnum opus [*Capital*] is no *Bible* containing ultimate truths that are valid for all time, pronounced by the highest and final authority; instead, it is an inexhaustible stimulus for further intellectual work, further research, and the struggle for truth”. Written at the turn of the twentieth-century, Luxemburg’s candid estimation of Marx’s *chef-d’œuvre* spells out how we should approach the German revolutionary’s work as we engage with him. Marx is no prophet; nor is he a source of eternal truths. He is, however, an inexhaustible wellspring of wisdom, who can be summoned into service in our struggles to create a better society. Luxemburg’s clear-sighted approximations on Marx’s legacy leaves it to subsequent generations to figure out what their own relationships with the German philosopher and revolutionary will be like. Two centuries after Marx’s birth in 1818, we see ourselves having to grapple with the long and intimidating shadow of Karl Heinrich Marx, either trying to coalesce around him or briskly fending off his troubling specter.

It will not be hyperbolic to describe the twentieth century as the Marxian century, for to do so will be to acknowledge that socialist and pseudo-socialist governments ruled more than half of the world’s population in the name of Marx. The Russian Revolution was fought in the name of the German revolutionary and it is through Lenin that Marx reached a large tract of the globe in the first half of the twentieth-century. Mao Zedong, too, drew his inspirations from the life and works of the German revolutionary, organizing Chinese people around the principles of Marx’s dictates. In Latin America, revolutionaries such as José Carlos Mariátegui, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro found the bearded revolutionary’s thoughts inspiring, invoking him to fortify their own arguments about politics. They too drew upon the rich fountains of his work and words. Aimé Césaire, George Padmore, and C. L. R. James from the Caribbean, likewise, engaged with Marx in their own creative ways. Their discussions on race relations had the inflections of the Marxian deliberations on class relations. It will not be an error to consider the tricontinental nationalist movements to be Marxian in spirit. Many of the figureheads of Asian, African, and Caribbean anticolonial movements were indeed inheritors of Marxism of one kind or another. The presence of semi-socialist welfare states all around the globe from the 1930s till the 1980s testifies to that reality.

It was in the 1970s, however, when the postwar boom had come to an end and a protracted global economic crisis had hit the world that both democratic socialism and more radical brands of communism began to retreat. As socialist and communist states in Eastern Europe and elsewhere fell in the late-1980s and early 1990s, Marx and Marxism began to appear anemic, unable to offer much to the world in need of an economic solution to the crisis. What also began to become clear was far too many of these socialist states were indeed heavily bureaucratized, entirely uninterested in the immiseration of the ordinary people. Utterly oppressive and violent, many of these governments had no idea about what

they were seeking to establish in the name of revolution. It was, therefore, easy for wave after wave of neoconservative and pseudo-liberal ideologies to bat away the emaciated left whose Soviet Union-infused Marxism was already wavering after the fall of the Eastern Block. In a changed historical reality, neoliberal political views gained traction among people as the narratives of development and progress began to circulate uncontested and corporations took hold of the democratic state.

The neoliberal optimism too has waned. A depleted planet and immiserated “surplus populations” have already exposed the underside of the conservative utopian dream of an eternal capitalist future. What is often erroneously seen as capitalism’s excesses – which are indeed as integral for capitalism’s survival as are its more humane features – have begun to trouble people. Since there has been no real growth in the global economy since the 1970s, the dominant mode of enrichment has been impoverishment and expropriation of vulnerable groups and classes. This accumulation by dispossession has led to extreme wealth on the one side and extreme poverty of a huge number of people on the other. Arundhati Roy has compellingly explored the relation between poverty and enrichment in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, echoing many of the explicit historical documentations of ordinary people’s misery in the nineteenth-century in Marx’s *Capital Vol. I*. Today, climatologists and natural scientists are overwhelmingly convinced that the process of human extinction has already begun. They have given a fancy name to this era as well: the Anthropocene (although some are more inclined to call this era the Capitalocene because it has been ushered in by capitalism). Its abscess-ridden body now available for close inspection, neoliberal capitalism has begun to show signs of decomposition. Meanwhile, the anachronistic grand-old Marx who had been hastily abandoned by political opportunists and postmodernists has showed up again. Are we witnessing the dawn of a new Marxian era? How are we to account for Marx’s work and words two centuries after his birth?

One cannot debate about the importance of Marx so long as one lives through the era of capitalism. He has been, till today, capitalism’s most notable critic. Discussions about the capitalist economy, its culture, its subjects, and society are incomplete without Marx and Marxism. How can one discuss a system without considering its most tenacious critic? Likewise, any discussion on democracy needs to incorporate its more radical other (socialism) as well, for not to do so will result in an undialectical and partial study of democracy. Marx did not believe in the separation between thought and action. His effort was to unify and embody them in such a way that one’s thought moved one to act upon the world to make it better. So long as Marx was devoted to the task of creating a world better than the one he inhabited, he remained a revolutionary. He was, also, an immensely gifted philosopher and political economist, the like of whom the world has rarely seen. As has been pointed out by Luxemburg, Marx was no prophet and some of his ideas appear dated today. Some of his most prophetic pronouncements have not come into fruition. Yet, there is immense risk in sidestepping Marx. One can only do so at one’s own risk, for to do so would sever one from one of the richest sources of knowledge that human beings have ever known. Marx and Marxism have been foundational in many branches of knowledge, especially in the humanities and social sciences, where not being familiar with Marx can

result in lamentable ignorance. The tenacity of Marx and the tradition that he birthed demands that we pay adequate attention to what has transpired since his birth more than two centuries ago, and thumb through the works he and his successors have produced.

This issue of *Crossings*, the journal of the Department of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), is a step towards that direction. Most of the articles published in this volume have come from a conference that took place on the premises of ULAB on November 30-December 1, 2018. Although more than sixty papers were presented in that international conference, only a selected few have made it to this issue. The paucity of the pages notwithstanding, the efforts to bring the disparate voices together is encouraging and enriching. Hope this will only expand our understanding of Marx, and contribute significantly to our academic growth. I express my deep gratitude to every single person involved in the conference and the publication of this volume.

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