

MARX WAS (MOSTLY) RIGHT by Dr. Marilyn Sewell

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First Unitarian Church
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OPENING WORDS

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.

-Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil

Last time I preached, I preached about God. And now today I'm preaching about Marx. Why don't I just attempt some big topics? Last spring when I decided on this topic, I thought, "What a great idea! A chance to read Marx!" That was, of course, before I actually read Marx. God is easier to understand. And funnier. Marx is decidedly not flinny. Even his children called him "the Moor." My analysis of the man Marx, who read every day from 10 to 7 in the British Museum, is that he should have gotten his head out of those books and had more flin.

I began studying social work in the 1970s, and it was then that I first understood that an economic system is not just a given, but actually the product of human choices. We choose to divide up the pie the way we do. That sounds so simple, but I didn't get that until I heard a speech by an academic social worker named David Gil, from Brandeis University. I was so impressed with Gil's message that I later flew up to Brandeis to consider taking a Ph.D. with him.

But I decided against that, and so here I am today, a preacher and not an academic social worker, but still passionately interested in questions of justice. And here we are, talking about Karl Marx, one of the greatest economic and philosophical thinkers of the modern era. But difficult to read. Listen to this passage from Marx's *Grundrisse*, written in 1857: "The concrete is concrete because it is the sum-total of many determinations, i.e., unity of the manifold. In thought, therefore, it appears as a process of pulling together, as result not as starting point, although it is the actual starting point and thus also the starting point for perception and representation." You might think this passage would be somewhat clarified if it were read in context. It would not.

My motivation for wanting to take a look at this seminal material was to see if Marx shed any light on the current economic system in our own country, to see where his theory seems to be sound and where it is wanting. I want to be clear now that we're not talking about Marxism. In fact, Howard Zinn tells the story that when Marx was living and studying in London, he was beleaguered by a young German "noodnik" who hovered around him, implying that every word that Marx said was holy, and starting Karl Marx Clubs. Finally one day Marx said to the young man, "Thanks for Inviting me to speak at your Karl Marx Club. But I can't. I'm not a Marxist." In fact, he said it in French: "Je ne suis pas Marxiste." Many groups have taken Marx's name, but have not necessarily been true to his ideas.

First of all, the man. Who was Karl Marx? He was born in Prussia in 1818, one of nine children of a prosperous Jewish lawyer who converted to Christianity, probably because Jews were denied advancement in the professions. Marx's father was the son of a rabbi, and Marx's mother was the daughter of a rabbi. Marx himself was confirmed at the age of 15 and seems to have been for a time a passionate Christian. He attended several universities, including Bonn and the excellent Berlin University, where he became classical scholar, specializing in philosophy. He received a doctorate from Jena University, but his radical ideas prevented him from ever securing an academic post, and so he became a political activist, a journalist, and always a scholar. He led a scholar's life, and so rely neglected his wife and three children at times. A report by one of his contemporaries reads thus: "Marx leads the existence of a Bohemian intellectual. Washing, grooming and changing his linen are things he rarely does, and he is often drunk. Though he is frequently idle for days on

end, he will work day and night with tireless endurance when he has much work to do.... There is not one clean and solid piece of flirniture. Bverything is broken, tattered and torn. . . ."~ Marx was unable to support himself and his family financially. He was a newspaper correspondent for the New York *Daily Tribune*, but it was his friend Engles who saw that the family was provided for. Marx tragically lost 3 of his 6 children. The latter years of Marx's life were marked by slow and unsustainable work on *Das Kapital* and the revising of previously written manuscripts. His wife Jenny died in 1881, and Marx never got over the loss. He followed her in death two years later.

Are Marx's ideas still relevant today, over 100 years later? In an interesting article in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*,² John Cassidy claims that Marx's ideas have so permeated our thinking that we hardly realize their source. He says that Marx's chief contribution was in his keen analysis of capitalism, and this is how he should be remembered. What did Marx have to say about capitalism?

Let's begin with his materialist conception of history. "It's the economy, stupid!" Remember that admonition during Clinton's first campaign? Perhaps Clinton merely meant that his campaigners should focus on the issue of most concern to Americans. Marx meant something much more fundamental. He believed that the way a society organizes its economic life determines that society's attitudes and beliefs, and not vice versa. In other words, the pattern of our work lives and our means of production is what largely determines our character and our behavior. Capitalism, he believed, tended to make people selfish and competitive. He said, "Money is the universal, self-constituted value of all things. It has therefore robbed the whole world, human as well as natural, of its own values." Yes, he could actually turn a nice phrase when he wanted to.

Marx argued in *Grundrisse* that the quality of art in a culture is a reflection of the material world and how it operates. I think about what happens to art in totalitarian regimes, how degraded and conforming it becomes. And what has capitalism given us? For theater, we've got Broadway, where scarcely a fresh idea ever breathes; for fiction, we've got Jackie Collins, whose heroines sigh in the same way from volume to volume; and for TV, we've got situation comedies and canned laughter. If it sells, it has value. A narrow definition of value.

The fundamental division in any society, said Marx, is between the people who own the means of production (that would be the shareholders of corporations) and the people whose only marketable asset is their labor. He predicted that profits would increase faster than wages, so that workers would become poorer, relatively speaking, than the owners. Certainly financial inequity in this country has been growing at a frightening rate, though it seems to be settling down recently. In 1978, the average CEO at a big company earned 60 times what the typical worker earned; in 1995, such a CEO made 170 times as much. Half of all financial assets in this country are owned by the richest 1 per cent.

Marx predicted globalization a hundred and fifty years ago. He pointed out that the ever-present need for new markets "chases the bourgeoisie over the whole sur~ce of the globe," and everywhere these owners go, they undermine traditional ways of doing things. "All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed." Why are rathskellers in Germany playing American pop music? Why are Africans drinking Coca Cola?

Marx knew that companies would move to gain fresh supplies of cheap labor. "The worshipful capitalists," he wrote will never want for fresh exploitable flesh and blood, and will let the dead bury their dead." Hello, Reebok and Nike.

Marx understood that the scions of industry would need to control the political life of a country. He said, again in pointed language, "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie" (or, read, the common affairs of the corporate owners). Marx would not have been surprised at Clinton's renting out of the Lincoln bedroom for campaign contributions.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Marx's thinking is his remarks on alienation. When a worker is of value only because of the labor he sells to another, he becomes dehumanized. He is removed from the products of his

labor, which he does not own, and because of this unnatural split between him and the work of his hands, he becomes alienated from others and even from himself, from his own creative possibilities. Why do so many workers breathe a sigh of relief on Friday? TGIF, we say. Do we see ourselves as unshackled for the weekend? How terrible to spend so much of one's time making a living instead of genuinely living. Work so separate from being.

Much more could be said about Marx's prophetic thinking, but time constrains us. Marx was of course not always right-what were the flaws in his analysis? He believed that his analysis was basically value-free, that it was a scientific approach. As he looked at history, each economic epoch was necessary and each would then fall away when it no longer met the evolving needs of the society. So slavery gave way to feudalism which gave way to mercantilism which gave way to capitalism. Marx believed that there will be a series of recurring crises in capitalism, until the system is changed. Whereas these other shifts are historically inevitable, the shift from capitalism to socialism must be made intentionally by workers, from the bottom. History of course is not on his side at the present moment: capitalism seems to be flourishing.

Socialism for Marx was a utopian approach in which each gave according to his gifts and each took according to his needs. Here we have another problem. The fact is that human beings, which having a high and noble nature, also have a strong bent towards self-interest. Marx's scheme did not take into account the theological reality that, for want of a better word, we call sin. We can be greedy critters, and that's putting it mildly. Until we are spiritually much more evolved, we'd better have rules and regulations. Laws-which some9ne has defined as "the failure of love."

So I personally don't see capitalism fading from view anytime soon. But I would also suggest that this system can and does encourage ways of being, ways of relating, that are dehumanizing and harmful to our spiritual lives. Since this is the dominant system right now, how can we mitigate the negative effects, while claiming the positive effects-which Marx incidentally pointed out: capitalism is the most efficient means of production. I think we have to question how this system works at the level of people's everyday living. In the stories of their lives. I'm not talking about books and theories now. I'm talking about the ability of real honest-to-goodness people to live with dignity, to work at jobs that pay them a living wage, people who do not have to be ashamed in front of their children because there is no food in the pantry. I remember when I was working as a social worker at a women's agency. It was just before Christmas, and I got a call that day from a mother who asked me for help. "Could I just get one present for my little girl?" she asked. I could hear the pain in her voice. I had just read the paper that morning-a big story with lots of pictures-about a woman who had 15 Christmas trees in her house, one in every room except the five bathrooms. I had to tell this caller that we didn't give out Christmas presents. And when I hung up, I put my head down on my desk and cried.

We've got to understand that whatever hurts another eventually hurts us all. We are one organism. There is so much rage in this society. Road rage. Abuse of children. Shooting deaths. And it comes out in smaller ways. Once again our phone booth on the corner of Main and 12th has been destroyed. Just a week or so ago, I put some Thanksgiving cards out in my mailbox for the maliwoman to pick up-cards to my two boys, cards with my carefully thought out words of love. Somebody actually stole those cards out of my mailbox. For what? For the value of the stamps? We have to ask, "Where is all of this rage coming from? Is it in fact at least partly determined by an economic system that leaves so many people without hope-and guilty and ashamed and furious, as people without hope can become?"

In an interesting new book called *Jilusions of Opportunity*, John Schwarz reminds us of the deep-seated belief we have in this country that if we work hard and persevere, then we will "find a place at the table. No one need be left out," except by choice. The virtues of discipline and effort and responsibility we are quite sure will be rewarded. When they are not, we become cynical and world-weary. What does powerlessness do to character? What about people like Jim and Nancy Cash, for example, who live with their two children near St. Louis. Jim and Nancy both have two years of community college, and both are employed, he full-time as a sign painter and she nearly full time as a clerk at a discount store. Describing their prospects, Jim said, "It feels like you're pinned to the ground. I've worked forty or fifty hours a week and more, do good work, and can't get past getting nothin'. We have to beg from friends and relatives to make it, scrounge from the food bank. I hunt through dumpsters and behind stores. It's degrading. I feel humiliated." We hear the current administration brag about our economic health, about low rates of unemployment. But do they tell you that since

1973, real wages have declined by 13 per cent? And how many of those new jobs are what we call adequate jobs? Jobs that actually pay a living wage? Our unemployment rate may be around 5 per cent but our gap of adequate jobs is more like 23 per cent. That's why people like Jim and Nancy are going to the food bank.

And what about taxes? Do Jim and Nancy get tax breaks? A bit for the children, and that's it. On the other hand, according to a report from the IRS, the number of people who make \$200,000 or more grew more than 15-fold from 1977 to 1993, and the number of people in that category who paid no income taxes at all grew 28-fold.

Not to mention giveaway programs to corporations, popularly known as "wealthfare." Have you ever heard of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation? It insures and finances investors in Third World countries. We'll talk billions of dollars. Our tax dollars. We are going to give the timber companies a break by spending \$41.5 million this year to build roads so that they can cut down trees in our national forests. Corporations can, of course, deduct the cost of the obscene salaries they pay to their CEOs, all business travel expenses, and here's a big one—all of their advertising. If Nike, for example, took just 1 per cent of their advertising budget and used it to supplement their workers' pay, all their workers overseas would be above minimum wage, according to Michael Moore, who spoke in Portland a couple of months ago.

We need to question what is. So often we fall into what sociologists call "mystification"—that is, we just accept the way things are as a given. I've been beaten all my life, so I need to find a man who beats me. That's the way things are. We can't even imagine an alternative. A man gets downsized out of a job after ~ 5 years, or after 30 years, of faithful service, and he says, "Well, that's just the way things work these days." We must not allow ourselves to accept this kind of thing as OK. It's not OK. As people of faith we need to apply the values that we hold dearest to every element of our living, including our economic lives.

We really have to begin to think out of the box. There is prima facie evidence, folks, that the system is broken: when I come into church early Sunday morning and have to ask a family to move off the church steps where they slept the night before, that is prima facie evidence that something is wrong, something is broken. And no I do not accept the specious argument that all these people are just shiftless and lazy. That is a rationale people use to make themselves feel better because they don't know what to do about a problem that is eating away at their insides. Our own insides. There are other things we say. "Well, think how much better our poor are than the poor in India." "You know, we should pay our workers more, but then unemployment would go up. I guess there's not much we can do." A false dichotomy. Or we retreat into ideology and into theory because ideas are safer than flesh. Talk about the real world. That's the real world. The world of stories. The woman calling about a Christmas present for her child.

I don't have the answers today. I wish I did. But I do know this. We have to question our system. If capitalism is to be our way, and it looks like it is, we have to ask, what kind of capitalism? What kind of regulatory means can we bring to such a system so that it can be functional and at the same time not violate our deepest human values. Questions like these:

-What is freedom? Freedom to compete? What about freedom from hunger? Is that a human right? What is responsible freedom?

-Is inefficiency the greatest sin against the Holy Spirit?

-What happens to those who can't compete because of mental illness or physical disability or low intelligence? Do they have a place at the table?

-Do we need a maximum as well as a minimum wage?

-What does the constant barrage of advertising do to our spirits—and especially to the spirits of our children?

-How can our economic system contribute to "right relationship"?

-How can I bring my whole self to the office?

In his book *Home Economics*, Wendell Berry traces the etymology of the word economics. Originally, the term meant the activity involved in caring for the home, simply a part of our daily lives. Now economics has been relegated to the experts; it is a sophisticated discipline controlled by those who "know." What will Alan Greenspan say next? But we dare not leave it to the experts, for it determines so much of what we can be as a people. Our first principle is "we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people." What does that principle imply about the economic life we share? Yes, problems are thorny. No, we don't have the answers. But we must not close our hearts against even the questions. The questions will lead us to places we have not been and may fear, but desperately need to go.

PRAYER

Spirit of Life, send us the questions, if not the answers. Help us to awaken to new possibilities in the common life we share. We are tempted to accept the status quo, because Imagining and inventing are such hard work. Not to mention organizing. Not to mention speaking the truth to power. But that is what we as a religious people are called to do. Give us strength, give us wisdom, give us courage.

So be it. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go now and let the questions come. They will lead you home. Go in love and in peace.

¹Quoted in Robert Payne, *Marx*, London, 1968, p.²⁰. Originally printed in *Archiv für Geschichte des Socialismus*, Berlin, 1922.

²*The New Yorker*, October 20 and 27, pp. 248-259.