

# Crises and contradictions

## ‘Marx and Capitalism’, the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, February – August 2022

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In an August 1890 letter to Conrad Schmidt, Engels remarked: ‘Just as Marx used to say, commenting on the French “Marxist” of the late [18]70s: “All I know is that I am not a Marxist”.’ Even during his lifetime there was a tension between what Marx himself wrote and thought and what his followers made of it. There is a similar tension, too, between Marx’s ideas at various points in his life, which can sometimes seem diametrically opposed. The recent ‘Marx and Capitalism’ exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin is a response to these tensions, more particularly between, on the one hand, Marx the man and, on the other, Marxism as a reaction to crises and capitalism in the nineteenth century, and as a political ideology in the twentieth century.

The exhibition responds to renewed mainstream discussions of Marx following the 2008 economic crisis, with a focus on the need to separate the contemporary relevance of Marx’s thought from its abuses in twentieth-century Communist movements. But it equally questions Marx’s applicability in the present, ending with a photo gallery of violent dictatorships and post-2008 anti-capitalist protest movements without explanatory text. The exhibition is keen to present the contradictions of Marx’s thoughts and interactions whenever it can. However, it completely forfeits the dialectical leap to any overcoming of them, preferring instead to revel in them and signs of failure and obsolescence. As a consequence, it paints a portrait of Marx for a general audience that functions to dismiss him as an ultimately irrelevant figure, whose thought begins and ends in the nineteenth century. This picture and its shortcomings are particularly evident in the exhibition’s shallow treatment of

Judaism and antisemitism, colonialism, women’s voices and Marxist thought.

Marx had many sides. Born to a formerly Jewish, converted Lutheran family in Trier in 1818, he was a philosopher, economist, historian, journalist, political theorist and Communist revolutionary. The exhibition tries to organise all this into a chronological timeline divided by main thematic clusters, ranging from Marx’s thoughts on religion and ecology to journalistic and political responses to revolutions and violence in industrialised Europe and America. It describes how, after moving to Berlin in 1836, Marx married theatre critic and political activist Jenny von Westphalen, who was to become a key collaborator and editor of his writing. Berlin was the site of Marx’s involvement with the Young Hegelians, where he was especially close to Bruno Bauer, with whom he co-edited Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion*. After completing his PhD at the University of Jena, Marx turned his attention to journalism, first in Cologne in 1842 and then in Paris in 1843. Marx’s life is mainly explored through the articles and correspondence that he began to write around this time and which he continued to produce throughout his life.

In Paris, Marx was active in left-wing French-German journalism, met lifelong friend and collaborator Engels, and began his intensive studies of political economy. These activities forced him to move to Brussels in 1845, where he met other exiled socialists from across Europe. It was during this period that Marx and Engels refined their concept of historical materialism, were active with the Communist League, and wrote their 1848 *Communist Manifesto* in the shadow of the Revolutions of 1848 that

roiled Europe. Marx established the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1848 as a means to interpret and comment upon this turmoil, but was soon forced into his final exile in London in 1849. Here Marx split with the Communist League over the issue of how to enact Europe-wide revolution, contributed to international newspapers and became interested in the United States. In 1864 he joined the First International and in 1867 he published the first volume of *Das Kapital*, the later volumes of which were published after his death in 1883.

This timeline is framed by an overarching concern for how Marx and his thought were affected by the crisis and instability caused by modern Europe's rapid industrialisation and its various discontents. It underlines that while Marx adapted and changed in response to each crisis, his thought, as the final panel on Marx's historical impact rather banally puts it, remained 'contradictory and fragmentary'. Such examples include Marx's simultaneous call for violent revolution and for cooperation with the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the struggle against monarchic rule. The exhibition also details how Marx coined the term 'capitalist mode of production' as a response to the first worldwide economic crisis in 1857, which Marx hoped would trigger a wider collapse, yet later distanced himself from this idea and instead admitted that crisis is built into capitalism itself. Beyond the obvious insight that Marx grew as a thinker and changed his mind throughout his life, these moments are presented as simply contradictory in character rather than as dialectical in their approach to strategy.

The exhibition is studded with a range of objects from the nineteenth century, including paintings, drawings, factory equipment, Marx's personal objects, several taxidermised animals and a chess game, as well as installations. Several large pieces of factory equipment dominate a large room in which raucous factory sounds echo across tattered red banners, and one can retire to a corner to experience 'the smell of capitalism', a heady mix of sweat, metal and money. While objects are intended to be didactic, they sometimes simplify concepts to the point of distortion, such as an interactive installation on surplus value in which viewers must pump water and receive only a trickle.

The exhibition's strategy for presenting contradictions is exemplified in the exhibition's first sections dealing with religion, antisemitism and 'The Jewish Question'.

It begins with young Marx's feelings about religion, detailing how he drew on Feuerbach's idea of religion as a human invention and saw all broader criticism as departing from the critique of religion. Marx's critique of the abuses of Christianity by European monarchs is used to underline his interest in religion as mainly a metaphor of illusion and control, useful for challenging the feelings of alienation and powerlessness elicited by capitalist modes of production. The following section places these broader thoughts on religion within the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish emancipation in Europe and rising anti-Semitism connected to restrictions on Jewish communities who were forced into banking and commerce. The close juxtaposition of the critique of religion and antisemitism sections seems to suggest that the thread of religion, so centrally important to Marx's broader societal critique, was inherently tainted by its casual use of antisemitic tropes that reinforced the precarious situation of Jewish people at this time. This section presents antisemitic cartoons, a picture of the Jewish grave of Marx's grandfather and includes Marx's letters to Engels in the 1860s in which he uses antisemitic language. Jewish socialist philosopher Moses Hess' *Rome and Jerusalem: A Study in Jewish Nationalism*, an early call for a Jewish nation state in response to European antisemitism, is there together with French socialist Alphonse Toussenel's 1845 *The Jews, Kings of the Epoch: A History of Finance Feudalism*, an antisemitic criticism of capitalism in the 1840s that describes Jews as parasites primed for world domination. It ends with a short overview of Marx's 1843 'Zur Judenfrage' (The Jewish Question) essay, in which he proposes that emancipation from Jewish concepts that have infected bourgeois society is the first step to a broader human emancipation in which all particular religions would cease to exist. In this section, as in the earlier examples, the 'contradictions' do not lead to any synthetic insight – for instance, a reflection on what assimilation meant for Marx.

In the Judenfrage corner, two white busts of Marx face off against each other. Quotes floating above each statue illustrate Marx's desire for Jewish assimilation as part of universal emancipation versus his use of antisemitic stereotypes that associate Jews with commerce. Certainly, the essay can easily be read as an example of antisemitism. 'What is the secular basis of Judaism', Marx wonders. 'Practical need, self-interest. What is

the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly god? Money.’ Attempts to interpret Marx’s relationship to Judaism typically either try to describe his thought as containing a concealed Jewish messianism or position ‘Zur Judenfrage’ as a document of Marx’s antisemitism. But the exhibition fails to answer what looking at this small part of Marx’s thought in a specifically nineteenth-century context actually reveals.

As Enzo Traverso argues in *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate*, Marx posits the Jewish Question as mainly an issue of the sublation of Judaism into a universal framework to create political equality between Jews and Christians in order to work on broader human emancipation. Marx does not mention the discrimination affecting Jewish communities. The Jew is rather a symbolic, supra-historical figure tied to banking and commerce. But Marx’s desire to sublimate Judaism has to be understood in the context of a broader generation of German-Jewish intellectuals who hoped for greater Jewish rights. This history was linked to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century formation of a wealthy class of Prussian Jewish state bankers and ‘court Jews’ dependent on political sovereigns, and, subsequently, the creation of an intellectual middle class in the wake of various early to mid-nineteenth-century Jewish emancipation laws passed throughout the German states. Hannah Arendt describes this tension as one in which the status of the court Jews was kept in place while most Prussian intellectuals chose the path of converting to Lutheran Protestantism in the attempt to fully participate in German cultural and political life. Yet as convert Ludwig Börne (né Loeb Baruch) wrote several years after his conversion, ‘Some reproach me for being a Jew, some praise me because of it, some pardon me for it, but all think of it.’

Marx, also a converted Protestant Lutheran, was part of this group of Prussian intellectuals who sought to escape their Jewish roots in the hope of equal participation. Despite these efforts, they were continually confronted with their Jewish past. It is in this setting that ‘Zur Judenfrage’ must be understood. On the one hand, it is part of a specific history of the desire for equality and assimilation on the part of nineteenth-century intellectuals who were never able to escape their associations with Judaism. On the other, it brings up the question of how ‘assimilated’ Marx could have ever become. Can Jewish radicals ever truly assimilate or do they just conveniently

swap out one state of apostasy for another?

While one could argue that an exhibition on the entirety of Marx’s life cannot devote such extensive attention to Judaism and antisemitism, the lack of detail is particularly striking given the exhaustive space that the downstairs ‘Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling’ exhibition devotes to völkisch antisemitism.



The German Historical Museum frames their Marx and Wagner exhibitions as part of their 2022 preoccupation with capitalism, stating, ‘Like Marx, Richard Wagner was also a critic of the modern economy’. It likewise describes Wagner in language that strikingly echoes many of the upstairs descriptions of Marx, as a ‘Composer and theatre reformer, court music director and festival founder, revolutionary and exile, entrepreneur and capitalism critic, debtor and anti-Semite.’ The Wagner exhibition is voluminous and sensual in comparison to that of Marx. Diaphanous curtains hide nineteenth-century German cultural figures and soft pink neon words categorise the emotional nuances of Wagner’s feelings on Germanness. The comparatively sparse nature of the Marx exhibition raises the question of why more space was not devoted to his side of the antisemitism debate. The juxtaposition of the two exhibitions runs the risk of normalising Wagner’s racist antisemitism by perpetuating the idea that, from left to right, antisemitism was everywhere in the nineteenth century.

The failure to explore the nuances of Marx’s thought extends beyond the lonely Judenfrage corner to the small colonialism and women’s rights sections. These are treated as mere appendices to the canonical events in Marx’s life, and are indicative of the exhibition’s failure to discuss how Marxist thought shifted and changed in the years after Marx’s death, especially with regard to feminism, colonialism, post-colonialism and race.

The 'Modernisation, colonisation, and global revolution' section of the exhibition juxtaposes Marx's 1851-1862 journalistic texts that supported the civilising mission of British colonial rule with his later condemnation in *Das Kapital* of the destruction and plunder enacted by European colonialism. Instead of referencing the various sites of colonisation, it includes Marx's 1853 article on British rule in India and a drawing of a British 'civilisation steam engine'. A discussion of Marx's later thoughts on colonialism would have provided an interesting point of intervention into the following 'Nature and ecology' section, which could have highlighted colonised lands as sites of the vast plunder of natural resources rather than speculating on Marx's infatuation with guano. It could have also been a chance to discuss Marx's relationship to the United States, abolitionism and the Civil War.

'The emancipation of women and social issues' section goes into more depth than the section devoted to colonialism, but likewise presents women's struggles simply as a topical issue. It states that neither Marx nor the First International could agree on the role of women in socialist movements. It presents documentation of women's strikes and interventions from Victoria Hull and Harriet Law, and underlines that, while Marx did support women's strikes, he argued that 'social issues' had to be solved before dealing with the 'women's issue'. This presentation does not include any discussion of the broader politics of the women activists who are cited here, something which is important in addressing figures such as Hull, who openly expressed support for eugenics, nor does it mention Jenny Marx, who is presented as her husband's faithful scribe and supporter throughout the exhibition but does not earn a place in the women's section.

The exhibition ends with a photo wall, including post-war German Social Democratic and Christian Democratic posters juxtaposed with a silken Stasi scarf that uses Marx's likeness. Marx then pops up internationally on

photos of a banner on a Peking street in the 1970s, a banner from the 1975 Angolan War of Independence, and a meeting of the Khmer Rouge juxtaposed with pictures from the Occupy Movement, a Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen banner, and a 2021 Migrantifa poster (referred to simply as a May Day demo poster). Interesting to note is that there is no mention of the political spaces Jews and No-Longer-Jews inhabit after the Shoah. The discussions of antisemitism brought up in relation to nineteenth-century Marx are just as important in a current context, as many leftist Jewish movements in Germany grapple with accusations of antisemitism in relation to pro-Palestine and BDS activism – although perhaps this absence is a blessing in disguise, as one could easily imagine a connection being drawn between Marx's Judenfrage and contemporary Jewish pro-Palestine activism.

The casual comparisons between such wildly divergent movements in the final section echoes the exhibition's overall tendency to present Marx as so contradictorily pro or anti that he ends up cancelling himself out. But it also speaks to a larger strategy of creating an ambivalent portrait of Marx, as a figure who may have some insights into capitalism but whose thought largely fails to hold up outside of a nineteenth-century context. Much of the story of Marxism after Marx is, of course, one of attempts to solve twentieth- and twenty-first-century problems using a theoretical framework that was created in response to the crises of the nineteenth century. Followers of all stripes have struggled to fully integrate these conflicting contexts, having to improvise, fill in blank spots, as well as violently project allegedly Marxian solutions onto suffering peoples. The exhibition fails to envision Marxism after Marx, to use Marx to productively illuminate the world after his death. It is 'Marxist' only in the sense that Marx would not have recognised himself here either.



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