Marx After Marxism

The Philosophy of Karl Marx

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There are assertions in Marx's theory which have struck me as strange . . . I am far from sure that I understand these assertions aright, nor do they sound to me "materialistic" but, rather, like a precipitate of the obscure Hegelian philosophy in whose school Marx graduated.

Sigmund Freud, "The Question of a Weltanschauung"

Karl Marx is usually thought of as the man who claimed to have made Socialism scientific, and who did more than anyone else to create the powerful movement which, by attraction and repulsion has dominated the recent history of Europe. It is only as a philosopher . . . that I propose to deal with him. In this respect, he is difficult to classify. In one respect, he is an outcome, like Hodgskin, of the Philosophical Radicals, continuing their rationalism and their opposition to the romantics. In another, he is a revivifier of materialism, giving it a new interpretation and a new connection with human history. In yet another aspect he is the last of the great system-builders, the successor of Hegel, a believer, like him, in a rational formula summing up the evolution of mankind.

Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*

The greatest, perhaps the only real philosopher living today . . . Dr Marx . . . is still a very young man and is going to give the death blow to medieval religion and politics. He combines the sharpest wit with the most profound philosophical gravity; imagine Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel united in one person – and I mean united, not thrown together – there you have Dr Marx.

Letter of September 2, 1841 from Moses Hess
to the novelist Berthold Auerbach

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Abbreviations

B	Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, translated and edited by T. B. Bottomore, and with a new foreword by Erich Fromm, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
CW	*Marx–Engels Collected Writings*, New York: International Publishers, 1975; cited by volume.
G	*Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, translated with a foreword by Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973.
GI	T*he German Ideology* part 1 with selections from parts 2 and 3, and supplementary texts, edited, and with an introduction, by C. J. Arthur, New York: International Publishers, 1970.
M	Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, ed. and trans. David McLellan, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
MEW	*Marx–Engels Werke*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956; cited by volume.
N	Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. with a foreword by Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with the New Left Review, 1970.

Introduction

This introduction to Karl Marx's (1818–83) philosophical theories is intended for a non-specialist reading public, concerned with recovering them after the end of political Marxism.[1] A new introduction is justified by new circumstances that provide the conditions necessary to understand Marx's theories in a very different way than they have usually been grasped. Some thirty years ago, David McLellan, a prolific student of Marx and Marxism, published a very good introduction to Marx's life and thought.[2] He justified his book in noting it was the first since Mehring's biography in 1918 and in the meantime the Marx–Engels correspondence as well as several of Marx's unpublished writings had become available. Now, after the end of political Marxism, for perhaps the first time it is possible to present an introduction that depicts Marx not only as beginning to think within, but also as later remaining within, the German philosophical tradition.

Merely because this work is meant for an unspecialized audience does not mean it will be uncontroversial or simplistic. If the discussion is presented simply and in a self-contained manner, even a non-specialist is generally capable of following enough of it to make the experience worthwhile. There is no need to think that an introduction must be a kind of philosophical potboiler in which the author talks down to readers.

Nothing about Marx is uncontroversial, except perhaps that he is singularly well known, one of the most important authors of modern times, whose ideas continue to influence the contemporary world and whose theories arguably remain unusually relevant for understanding it. Certainly life has greatly changed since Marx lived and wrote in nineteenth-century Europe. Yet since many present problems are similar to what they were in Marx's day, much of what he believed still applies to the world in which we live. The claim that not only Marx but also his theories are "dead"[3] seems about as accurate as the idea that ideology is at an end.[4] It is probable that his books

will be worth reading as long as capitalism lasts.[5] It further seems likely that increasing numbers of people who were never associated with Marx or Marxism will, like the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–), become aware of the importance of Marx's contribution for comprehending the modern world.[6]

Marx's theories were formulated to diagnose and to alleviate the insufficiencies of modern economic liberalism. It is, or at least should be, obvious that as a political approach Marxism has failed as a historical alternative to liberal capitalism. After the rapid demise of the Soviet bloc in 1989, and the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the opposition between totalitarian Marxism and liberal capitalism, a major influence in much of the twentieth century, dissolved. As a result, the modern industrialized world entered into an involuntary Pascalian wager firmly based on liberal economic and liberal democratic principles. At the time of writing modern economic liberalism literally has no real rival in the industrialized world. Yet contemporary liberalism seems no more able after Marxism than before to come to grips with the main social problems of modern life, which were recognized even before Marx began to write. In the "Communist Manifesto" Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) called, among other things, for a graduated income tax and free education. For the most part these ends have been reached, at least in many parts of the industrialized world, even if flat tax enthusiasts and others who think the rich already contribute more than their fair share continue to arise. Yet many problems remain and new ones have emerged. Adam Smith, who founded modern political economy, was keenly aware of poverty, although he thought that even the poorest worker was better off than what he called the luckiest savage.[7] The great German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who was already critical of liberalism early in the nineteenth century,[8] complained about the inability to abolish poverty,[9] as true now as before, and warned against the growth of the resentful and impoverished rabble (*Pöbel*).[10]

The problem of poverty, which has never been solved, remains a mighty thorn in the liberal side, not only in impoverished or underdeveloped countries but even in the modern industrialized world. At the time of writing, the American economy has until recently been expanding for almost a decade at a rate unprecedented since World War II, yet the percentage of families falling below the officially defined minimum level of income is rising, the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing, and a large part of the American population still has no medical coverage. Although there is much discussion about human rights, there is surprisingly no consensus that universal medical coverage is desirable, much less a right. Despite development, poverty

still persists. Although development has proven useful in many ways, it clearly has not brought freedom.[11] It is arguable that now, after the decline of political Marxism, in a period in which for the foreseeable future in most of the industrialized world there will be no alternative to economic liberalism, Marx's theories have never been more relevant.

Like few others before or since, Marx's contributions defy any easy categorization, ranging from philosophy, to history, through political economy, to sociology, literature, and other fields. His theories have been the subject of immense debate in an enormous number of different languages from even more angles of vision. This debate, which runs from weighty tomes to comic books,[12] long ago surpassed the possibility and certainly the desire of any single person to master it. At this late date, when so much has been written about Marx, it is illusory to think that his entire position, and even less the discussion about it, can be captured in a brief book. It is equally illusory to aim at a neutral account of such a controversial figure.

The approach in this study will be resolutely philosophical for two main reasons. First, I am by training and inclination a philosopher, hence best equipped to develop a broadly philosophical approach to Marx's writings. Second, I am convinced that it is paradoxically the philosophical dimension of Marx's position that is now perhaps most significant but least recognized, above all by his Marxist followers as well as by even his most acute non-Marxist and anti-Marxist critics.

Let me explain. Any approach to Marx needs to begin with his relation to Marxism. The latter, which means different things to different observers, is a collection of theories squarely based, not on the views of Marx, but on those of Engels, his close friend and colleague.[13] Since its inception, Marxism has routinely asserted an adamantine link between Marx and Marxism. For historical reasons, political Marxism, which spread throughout the world after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, seemed for so many the best hope for a better life, for some the promise of a radiant future.[14] But political Marxism came to an abrupt, unforeseen, frequently bitter end in much of the world following the break up of the Soviet bloc toward the end of the 1980s. At present, communism, which once ruled more than half the world, remains in power in only a few places, such as North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and above all in that enormous country, so different from anything Marx was directly acquainted with or even wrote about, the People's Republic of China. There is no reason to believe communism will make a successful comeback in either the near or even distant future, and certainly none to believe that, with the exception of China, where it remains in power, it will ever again become a significant political contender on the world stage. Other than as the study

of Marx's theories and their application to an almost bewildering series of phenomena from literature, through aesthetics, to social theory, history, and so on, the period of Marxism has ended. We have now entered a period after Marxism when, in a way we could not do earlier, we can begin to understand Marx in new ways, unencumbered by Marxist interpretations that have long dominated the discussions of both Marxists and non-Marxists.

On Recovering Marx

The idea of recovering a past author, theory, position, or point of view is certainly familiar enough. Written history provides a series of variations on the theme of the recovery of the past. It has been suggested that history seeks to establish true statements about the past.[15] It is even sometimes thought that history is like natural science.[16] Yet this is implausible since historical events do not recur and do not discernibly follow natural laws. A weaker, more plausible view is that, whether or not we can know the truth about history, there are better or worse ways of writing it.

Since the past has already taken place, the difficulty lies in determining what has occurred and how it is to be understood. Two different approaches to retrieving the past can be mentioned: the idea that the past can be recovered in a way beyond perspective, for instance in a description that merely reports but does not interpret it; and the further idea that the past can only be recovered in a way that depends on perspective, hence that necessarily interprets what it reports. At stake is whether perspective can and should be avoided in writing history, for instance in a description that supposedly avoids interpretation.

According to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), every claim to know is based on a prevailing perspective, or world view.[17] This idea, which relativizes claims to know to the historical moment, to where we are at the present time, is widely denied. On the contrary, the well-known nineteenth century German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) suggests the need to recover the past exactly as it occurred.[18] Following Ranke, the even more widely known German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) stresses the necessity to address significant philosophical problems, in his case the question of the meaning of being, as they were supposedly originally raised.[19] The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) attempts in an unfinished study to recover whole the life and work of the French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821–80).[20] These and other writers implicitly assume it is possible to describe past events without interpreting them.

I believe, on the contrary, that there is no way to separate description and interpretation, since every description is an interpretation. There is no way to describe Marx's theories without picking out what is significant in the texts, hence without interpreting them. The only relevant issue is how to approach Marx's position, while acknowledging that any description will also be an interpretation. How should it be described? How should it be interpreted? Is there a difference?

Five Conditions for Comprehending Marx's Philosophical Views

In the window of opportunity opened by the precipitous decline of official Marxism, I see five conditions that must be met for recovering Marx's philosophical ideas. These conditions concern (1) Marxism, (2) Hegel, (3) political economy, (4) Marx's model of modern industrial society, and (5) his own distinctive philosophical contribution. Let me put my cards on the philosophical table, so to speak, right at the beginning of this study. For contingent reasons, Marx's ideas are closely linked to Marxism, a political movement that arose under his influence, and that has always claimed and still claims a privileged relation to his theories. Marxism typically presents a view of his position that is widely accepted without careful scrutiny by Marxists, non-Marxists, and even anti-Marxists alike, but that I believe obscures, transforms, distorts, and renders inaccessible his basic philosophical insights.

It is a matter of concern that even the most informed, most capable interpreters of Marx and Marxism routinely fail to draw a distinction, or at least a sufficient distinction, between Marx and the Marxists,[21] hence continue to interpret Marx through his followers. This is surely unprecedented and undesirable. One would not dream of reading Plato through the Platonists, or Kant through the Kantians. It seems obviously preferable to read an author's own writings, assuming we possess them, rather than to rely on what someone else, however well informed or well intentioned, might say about them.

Obviously the best way to determine Marx's views is to read Marx. Yet since the abundant literature about Marx reflects a deeply entrenched Marxist reading of his position, and since it is still rare to draw a strict distinction between Marx and Marxism,[22] it will be useful to turn first to Marxism – to clear the ground as it were – before only then turning to Marx. Hence, an initial task must be to draw a clear distinction in kind, as difficult as this now is well over a hundred years after Marx's death, between him and those who claim to speak in his name in order to enable his texts to speak for him.

The second condition concerns a thorough reassessment, long overdue, of the relation of Marx to Hegel. Almost everyone who writes on Marx feels constrained to say something about Hegel. But what is said is often minimal, sometimes very minimal, in most instances not very informative, by writers who are themselves insufficiently informed, or again who fail to reflect on, or on occasion are not well placed to grasp, the singular importance of Hegel. The latter is not merely someone against whom Marx reacted, whose mistakes he corrected; he is rather someone whose ideas remain tightly woven into the warp and woof of Marx's mature theories.[23] It is a truism that Hegel was one of the few real philosophical giants, the author of a philosophical position of enormous and continuing influence. As Marx was forging his conceptual arms, Hegel dominated the philosophical debate in a way that is now difficult to comprehend. Marx's theories took shape within the wider context of Hegel's position, which he did not, could not, which perhaps even we cannot, escape.[24] For various reasons, Marxists, even the most philosophically competent among them, routinely present Marx as allegedly simply shattering, or at least breaking out of, the confines of Hegel's position, at a minimum of leaving Hegel's theories (regarded as incapable of comprehending social reality) in his wake in the course of leaving philosophy behind.[25]

Marx's theories also should not be regarded on a positivistic scientific model as resolving philosophical problems on an extra-philosophic, scientific plane. This positivistic approach simply blocks a reasonable grasp of Marx's position, charitably construed. Marx's critical effort to deal with Hegel, in itself a wonderful example of the conceptual clash of two of the most powerful minds of the nineteenth century, commenced as soon as he began to write. It continues as a central theme in his writings from beginning to end. Marx's own theories should be regarded as the result of his lifelong effort to think through, to react against, to criticize, to appropriate, to further elaborate, and to carry through some of Hegel's most significant insights into modern society. It is an important mistake to understand Marx as located "outside" of and squarely opposed to Hegel's views; we should rather regard him as located "within" and working out some Hegelian views while criticizing or rejecting others, which he may or may not understand.

Hegel is a philosophical giant, but only a philosopher. In claiming that Marx is finally a Hegelian, I am not claiming that Marx is only a philosopher. It is an indication of his enormous stature as a thinker that his theories cannot simply be confined to philosophy, to economics, to politics, or indeed to any other single field. Like only a few others, he ranges widely and restlessly across artificial boundaries. Here as well as later in the book I will be using the term "economic" in a wide, now unusual sense to refer to the kind of

discipline whose most important modern impetus derives from Adam Smith and that for Marx, but not for our contemporaries, is inseparable from politics in general.

The philosophical dimension of Marx's position cannot be separated from its economic dimension. Hence, a third condition is to see that Hegel's influence on Marx is absolutely crucial for the latter's critique of political economy. Kant is an ahistorical thinker and Hegel is a profoundly historical thinker. The main difference between Kant and Hegel lies in the latter's turn to history. Post-Kantian German idealism takes an increasingly historical turn in the wake of the French Revolution. Hegel's deeply historical perspective determines Marx's own historical critique of political economy. After the early 1840s, Marx studies the writings of contemporary economists in great detail. He never later swerves from this path in the course of working out his own position. He raises many interesting objections in discussing political economy. But his central idea, which he takes over from Hegel, is that, despite what political economists may say or think, this science is intrinsically historical.

The fourth condition is to comprehend that the same historical perspective that determines Marx's critique of political economy also determines the nature of Marx's rival theory of modern industrial society. Modern economics studies industrial society since the industrial revolution. Marx proposes an account of modern industrial society based on a historically contingent form of private property, or the private ownership of the means of production, which he like others sees as the defining characteristic of capitalism. The central idea in his own rival economic theory is not his theory of value, nor his account of commodities, nor again his conception of alienation, nor even his view of the fetishism of commodities. It is rather the decisive insight, based on Adam Smith and developed in part by Hegel, that modern society is a transitory stage arising from the efforts of individuals to meet their needs within the economic framework of the capitalist world.

These four conditions must be met in order now at this late date to begin to recover Marx, more precisely in order to take the measure of the fifth condition, that is, his own distinctive contribution to the philosophical discussion. The Marxist view of Marx so widely accepted across the board makes it exceedingly difficult to evaluate his ideas as philosophical at all, which they simply could not be if he had left philosophy behind. Nor can Marx's philosophical insights be measured in isolation as if his theory were *sui generis*, finally unrelated to the preceding and succeeding debate. They can only be identified and studied when we see the way in which they emerged in the debates of his own time.

I will be concentrating on recovering Marx's philosophical ideas not in opposition to but rather within the larger Hegelian framework. There is no consensus about what constitutes philosophy. Different philosophers inevitably understand what they do differently. Different understandings of the nature of philosophy will obviously lead to different selections from Marx's enormous corpus as relevant to a philosophical treatment of his position. Any choice of texts necessarily reflects my own view of philosophy and the way it is or is not exemplified in various Marxian writings. Other selections, other treatments, and other evaluations of Marx's philosophy cannot be excluded except in arbitrary fashion. Indeed, one measure of the success of this book might be its capacity over time to elicit other strictly philosophical readings of Marx's position.

Notes

1 To avoid misunderstanding, let me state as clearly as I can that, as distinguished from a political approach, which is now moribund, that as an intellectual approach Marxism is still very interesting. There is much strong recent work in the emerging field of analytic Marxism, in the wake of G. A. Cohen, including such authors as John Roemer, Jon Elster, Allen Wood, Sean Sayers, and Roy Bhaskar. G. A. Cohen has written on history (*Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); John Roemer has contributed to economic theory (*Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jon Elster has worked out a rational choice approach to Marxism (*Making Sense of Marx,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sean Sayers has contributed to the interface between dialectic and theory of knowledge (*Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge,* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1985); Roy Bhaskar has been working out a critical realist approach to philosophy of science (*Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom,* London: Verso, 1993); and Allen Wood has written a historically informed, systematic study of Marx (*Karl Marx,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
2 See David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought,* New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
3 See Jean-Marie Benoist, *Marx est mort,* Paris: Gallimard, 1970.
4 See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology,* New York: Collier Books, 1962.
5 See John Cassidy, "The Return of Karl Marx," in *The New Yorker,* October 20 and 27, 1997, p. 255.
6 See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx, l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle internationale,* Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993.

7 See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations,* ed. Edwin Cannan, New York: Modern Library, 1937, p. lviii.
8 See Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
9 See *Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* trans. with notes by T. M. Knox, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, §245, p. 150.
10 See ibid, §242, p. 149.
11 See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
12 See Rius, *Marx For Beginners,* trans. Richard Appignanesi, New York: Pantheon, 1976.
13 I agree with Rubel, who writes: "Le marxisme n'est pas venu au monde comme un produit authentique de la manière de penser de Karl Marx, mais comme un fruit légitime de l'esprit de Friedrich Engels." "Point de vue: A Propos du thème: 'Engels fondateur'," in Maximilien Rubel, *Marx, critique du marxisme,* Paris: Payot, 1974, p. 19.
14 See Alexandre Zinoviev, *L'avenir radieux,* trans. Wladimir Berelowitch, Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1978.
15 See Murray G. Murphey, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past,* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980, p. 1.
16 See Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis,* ed. Herbert Feigl and Wilfred Sellars, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949, pp. 459–71.
17 See J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,1967.
18 For discussion, see "The Theoretical Foundations of German Historicism II: Leopold von Ranke," in Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present,* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 63–89.
19 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Evanston, IL: Harper and Row, 1961.
20 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Idiot de la famille,* 3 vols., Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
21 An example is Kolakowski, the author of what is currently the best history of Marxism, but who, other than through a few rhetorical gestures, sees no basic difference between Marx and Marxism in his important book. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism,* 3 vols., trans. P. S. Falla, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.
22 A recent example is provided by Brudney, who does not distinguish between Marx and Engels in his discussion of the former's theories. See Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
23 An example among many is provided in Cohen's study of Marx's view of history, in which consideration of Hegel is almost exclusively confined to the first short chapter of a very long book. See Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History.*
24 See Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.

25 Lukács, the most philosophically competent Marxist of the century, argues in his groundbreaking book in which he literally discovered Marx's relation to Hegel, that Hegel the philosopher offers merely a mythological view of history which Marx replaces with a view of real human history. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973.

1

Hegel, Marx, and Marxism

The immediate task is to distinguish between Marxism and Marx, since it is only in that way that we can raise again the question of Marx's relation to his philosophical roots, in particular his relation to Hegel. This will require us to characterize Marxism and to draw a distinction between Marx and his Marxist followers.

Marxism, which derives from Engels, turns on its account of the relation of Marx to Hegel, which in turn determines a view of Marx as leaving Hegel behind. I believe the Marxist view of Marx is both substantially inaccurate, and that it impedes a better view of Marx's position, including his philosophical contribution. I will be arguing that to "recover" Marx, we need to free him as much as possible from Marxism, hence from Engels, the first Marxist. This will allow us to comprehend Marx's relation to Hegel in a substantially richer and very different fashion in revealing Marx's continued dependence on central Hegelian insights. For reasons to be specified below, I believe that Marx is one of the most important but least understood philosophers. Since Marx is mainly understood in Marxist terms, there is a grain of truth in the admittedly extreme claim that Marxism is the series of misunderstandings of Marx's theories.[1]

On Distinguishing Between Marx and Marxism

Marxism is anything but simple. In fact it is highly complex, controversial, and, in virtue of its protean nature, difficult to describe briefly. The views of Marxism depend on the authority cited. According to Perry Anderson, Marxism is important because of its sheer intellectual scope, as a theory of historical development, and as a political call to arms.[2] Yet all three reasons are suspect. First, there are other wide-ranging theories that one might decline

to endorse. Second, in an important sense Marxism, which features a reflection theory of knowledge, is anti-historical. And, third, there are numerous political calls to arms one might reasonably decline to answer.

It would be an obvious mistake simply to condemn Marxism, which has been politically powerful, sometimes enlightened, but also politically harmful in many ways,[3] sometimes intellectually creative but very often intellectually stultifying or worse. But if the concern is Marx's philosophy, the situation is somewhat different. I believe Marxism tends to obscure, even to hide, Marx's philosophical contribution for a number of reasons. These include the Marxist insistence on the continuity between Marx and Marxism; the Marxist view that taken together they constitute a single unified world view; the Marxist emphasis on Marxism and even on Marx's position as science; the Marxist idea of the division of labor between Marx and Engels, who is often described as the philosopher of Marxism, and so on.

The term "Marxism," which was not used in Marx's lifetime, has been routinely employed since then to refer to a view, or set of views, allegedly common to Marx and his followers. This term seems to have been first used by Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856–1918), the Russian Marxist philosopher, shortly after Marx's death to describe a position allegedly common to Marx and his epigones. Plekhanov's student, Vladimir Ilich Lenin (1870–1924), the central figure of the Russian Revolution, politically and perhaps even theoretically the most influential Marxist of the twentieth century, defines "Marxism . . . [as] the system of the views and teachings of Karl Marx."[4] This canonical definition suggests a complex relation between Marx and Marxism, in which the latter is continuous with, hence authorized as, the "official" source of, Marx's views. It is a little like saying: if you want to know what Marx's theory is about you will need to study the Marxists instead of Marx; they will tell you what you need to know. This implication was not lost on later Marxists. Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), Lenin's political successor, noting the difference in the periods in which Marx and Lenin were active, contends that "Leninism" is "the further development of Marxism" under the specific conditions obtaining in "the era of imperialism and of the proletarian revolution in general, the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular."[5]

There are many difficulties in untangling Marx from Marxism. One is the multiform, varied, persistent, omnipresent extension of the influence of the former through the latter in a bewildering series of intellectual domains. Understood as an intellectual movement, Marxism includes the extension of Marx's ideas to an increasingly wider range of social phenomena virtually across the board. An incomplete list would include in no particular order:

literature,[6] literary theory,[7]political economy,[8] sociology,[9] history,[10] historiography,[11] political theory,[12] religion,[13] ethics,[14] philosophy of science,[15] psychology,[16] ethnology,[17] and so on, a simply staggering list of fields. Understood, on the contrary, not as an intellectual approach to one or more fields but as a political tendency, "Marxism" refers to the complex political movement following from the concern to work out an acceptable view of political goals and political action.

Marxism divides roughly into official Marxism that, during the Soviet period, ended with the demise of the Soviet Union, was constantly concerned with political orthodoxy, hence little inclined toward conceptual innovation, and unofficial Marxism that, since it was never concerned with political orthodoxy, has always been far more lively.[18] "Official" Marxism, especially "official" presentations of Marxist philosophy, have often been rather dull statements of a politically sanctioned point of view, lacking any real philosophical bite,[19] devoid of more than the most distant philosophical interest. Unofficial Marxist theory has often proven much more lively in applying and developing insights from Marx in interesting, often insightful and occasionally fascinating ways. To take a single example, Georg Lukács's pioneer Marxist reading of Marx as a Hegelian philosopher is one of the most important philosophical works of the twentieth century.[20]

Marxism has always insisted on the seamless continuity between Marx and Marxism. This idea, which is omnipresent in Marxist texts, is reproduced in the few available histories of Marxism.[21] Writing in 1908, Plekhanov contends that "Marxism is an integral world outlook."[22] By the time of the Russian Revolution Marxism in practice had become an encompassing, distinctive world view,[23] very different from anything in Marx's philosophical writings. A similar Marxist world view later functioned as the basis of so-called state socialism in the Soviet Union and allied countries.

The political history of Marxism is linked to a series of Internationals, which can be described very briefly.[24] The term "international" derives from the international character of Marxism. The International Working Men's Association (1864–76) was a federation of working-class organizations located in Western and Central Europe, founded by workers from London and Paris. Although not begun by Marx and Engels, they exerted important leadership roles. The First International was marked by a struggle against the anarchists, led by Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76), which led finally to its dissolution.

Marx died in 1883, shortly after the demise of the First International and before the beginning of its successor. The Second International (1889–1914) was organized at the International Workers' Congress in Paris in July 1889