

New York World interview with Karl Marx

Marx, Karl
1871

Marx is interviewed by R. Landor, a correspondent of the bourgeois New York World, just months after the slaughter of the Paris Commune. Taken from https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/bio/media/marx/71_07_18.htm. This is apparently an abridged version of the interview; a full version can be found in Marx, K., Foner, P. S., and Landor, R. (1972). Two Neglected Interviews with Karl Marx. *Science and Society*, 3–28.

London, July 3 – You have asked me to find out something about the International Association, and I have tried to do so. The enterprise is a difficult one just now. London is indisputably the headquarters of the Association, but the English people have got a scare, and smell International in everything as King James smelled gunpowder after the famous plot. The consciousness of the Society has naturally increased with the suspiciousness of the public; and if those who guide it have a secret to keep, they are of the stamp of men who keep a secret well. I have called on two of their leading members, have talked with one freely, and I here give you the substance of my conversation. I have satisfied myself of one thing, that it is a society of genuine workingmen, but that these workmen are directed by social and political theories of another class. One man whom I saw, a leading member of the Council, was sitting at his workman's bench during our interview, and left off talking to me from time to time to receive a complaint, delivered in no courteous tone, from one of the many little masters in the neighborhood who employed him. I have heard this same man make eloquent speeches in public inspired in every passage with the energy of hate toward the classes that call themselves his rulers. I understood the speeches after this glimpse at the domestic life of the orator. He must have felt that he had brains enough to have organized a working government, and yet here he was obliged to devote his life to the most revolting taskwork of a mechanical profession. He was proud and sensitive, and yet at every turn he had to return a bow for a grunt and a smile for a command that stood on about the same level in the scale of civility with a huntsman's call to his dog. This man helped me to a glimpse of one side of the nature of the International, the result of **Labor Against Capital**, of the workman who produces against the middleman who enjoys. Here was the hand that would smite hard when the time came, and as to the head that plans, I think I saw that too, in my interview with Dr. Karl Marx.

Dr. Karl Marx is a German doctor of philosophy, with a German breadth of knowledge derived both from observation of the living world and from books. I should conclude that he has never been a worker in the ordinary sense of the term. His surroundings and appearance are those of a well-to-do man of the middle class. The drawing room into which I was ushered on the night of the interview would have formed very comfortable quarters for a thriving stockbroker who had made his competence and was now beginning to make his fortune. It was comfort personified, the apartment of a man of taste of easy means, but with nothing in it peculiarly characteristic of its owner. A fine album of

Rhine views on the table, however, gave a clue to his nationality. I peered cautiously into the vase on the sidetable for a bomb. I sniffed for petroleum, but the smell was the smell of roses. I crept back stealthily to my seat, and moodily awaited the worst.

He has entered and greeted me cordially, and we are sitting face to face. Yes, I am tete-a-tete with the revolution incarnate, with the real founder and guiding spirit of the International Society, with the author of the address in which capital was told that is it warred on labor, it must expect to have its house burned down about its ears – in a word, with the **Apologist for the Commune** of Paris. Do you remember the bust of Socrates? The man who died rather than profess his belief in the Gods of the time – the man with the fine sweep of profile for the forehead running meanly at the end into a little snub, curled-up feature, like a bisected pothook, that formed the nose. Take this bust in your mind's eye, color the beard black, dashing it here and there with puffs of gray; clap the head thus made on a portly body of the middle height, and the Doctor is before you. Throw a veil over the upper part of the face, and you might be in the company of a born vestryman. Reveal the essential feature, the immense brown, and you know at once that you have to deal with that most formidable of all composite individual forces – a dreamer who thinks, a thinker who dreams.

I went straight to my business. The world, I said, seemed to be in the dark about the International, hating it very much, but not able to say clearly what thing it hated. Some, who professed to have peered further into the gloom than their neighbors, declared that they had made out a sort of Janus figure with a fair, honest workman's smile on one of its faces, and on the other, a murderous conspirator's scowl. Would he light up the case of mystery in which theory dwelt?

The professor laughed, chuckled a little I fancied, at the thought that we were so frightened of him. "There is no mystery to clear up, dear sir," he began, in a very polished form of the Hans Breitmann dialect, "except perhaps the mystery of human stupidity in those who perpetually ignore the fact that our Association is a public one, and that the fullest reports of its proceedings are published for all who care to read them. You may buy our rules for a penny, and a shilling laid out in pamphlets will teach you almost as much about us as we know ourselves."

R. [Landor]: Almost – yes, perhaps so; but will not the something I shall not know constitute the all-important reservation? To be quite frank with you, and to put the case as it strikes an outside observer, this general claim of depreciation of you must mean something more than the ignorant ill will of the multitude. And it is still pertinent to ask, even after what you have told me, what is the International Society?

Dr. M.: You have only to look at the individuals of which it is composed – workmen.

R.: Yes, but the soldier need be no exponent of the statecraft that sets him in motion. I know some of your members, and I can believe that they are not of the stuff of which conspirators are made. Besides, a secret shared by a million men would be no secret at all. But what if these were only the instruments in the hands of a bold, and, I hope you will forgive me for adding, not overscrupulous conclave?

Dr. M.: There is nothing to prove.

R.: The last Paris insurrection?

Dr. M.: I demand firstly the proof that there was any plot at all – that anything happened that was not the legitimate effect of the circumstances of the moment; or the plot granted, I demand the proofs of the participation in it of the International Association.

R.: The presence of the communal body of so many members of the Association.

Dr. M.: Then it was a plot of the Freemasons, too, for their share in the work as individuals was by no means a slight one. I should not be surprised, indeed, to find the Pope setting down the whole insurrection to their account. But try another explanation. The insurrection in Paris was made by the workmen of Paris. The ablest of the workmen must necessarily have been its leaders and administration, but the ablest of the workmen happen also to be members of the International Association. Yet, the Association, as such, may be in no way responsible for their action.

R.: It will seem otherwise to the world. People talk of secret instruction from London, and even grants of money. Can it be affirmed that the alleged openness of the Association's proceedings precludes all secrecy of communication?

Dr. M.: What association ever formed carried on its work without private as well as public agencies? But to talk of secret instruction from London, as of decrees in the matter of faith and morals from some centre of papal domination and intrigue, is wholly to misconceive the nature of the International. This would imply a centralized form of government for the International, whereas the real form is designedly that which gives the greatest play to local energy and independence. In fact, the International is not properly a government for the working class at all. It is a bond of union rather than a controlling force.

R.: And of union to what end?

Dr. M.: The economical emancipation of the working class by the conquest of political power. The use of that political power to the attainment of social ends. It is necessary that our aims should be thus comprehensive to include every form of working-class activity. To have made them of a special character would have been to adapt them to the needs of one section – one nation of workmen alone. But how could all men be asked to unite to further the objects of a few? To have done that, the Association must have forfeited its title to International. The Association does not dictate the form of political movements; it only requires a pledge as to their end. It is a network of affiliated societies spreading all over the world of labor. In each part of the world, some special aspect of the problem presents itself, and the workmen there address themselves to its consideration in their own way. Combinations among workmen cannot be absolutely identical in detail in Newcastle and in Barcelona, in London and in Berlin. In England, for instance, the way to show political power lies open to the working class. Insurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more swiftly and surely do the work. In France, a hundred laws of repression and a mortal antagonism between classes seem to necessitate the violent solution of social war. The choices of that solution is the affair of the working classes of that country. The International does not presume to dictate in the matter and hardly to advise. But to every movement it accords its sympathy and its aid within the limits assigned by its own laws.

R.: And what is the nature of that aid?

Dr. M.: To give an example, one of the commonest forms of the movement for emancipation is that of strikes. Formerly, when a strike took place in one country, it was defeated by the importation of workmen from another. The International has nearly stopped all that. It receives information of the intended strike, it spreads that information among its members, who at once see that for them the seat of the struggle must be forbidden ground. The masters are thus left alone to reckon with their men. In most cases, the men require no other aid than that. Their own subscriptions, or those of the societies to which they are more immediately affiliated, supply them with funds, but should the pressure upon them become too heavy, and the strike be one of which the Association approves, their necessities are supplied out of the common purse. By these means, a strike of the cigar makers of Barcelona was brought to a victorious issue the other day.

But the Society has not interest in strikes, though it supports them under certain conditions. It cannot possibly gain by them in a pecuniary point of view, but it may easily lose. Let us sum it all up in a word. The working classes remain poor amid the increase of wealth, wretched amid the increase of luxury. Their material privation dwarfs their moral as well as their physical stature. They cannot rely on others for a remedy. It has become then with them an imperative necessity to take their own case in hand. They must revive the relations between themselves and the capitalists and landlords, and that means they must transform society. This is the general end of every known workmen's organization; land and labor leagues, trade and friendly societies, co-operative production are but means toward it. To establish a perfect solidarity between these organizations is the business of the International Association. Its influence is beginning to be felt everywhere. Two papers spread its views in Spain, three in Germany, the same number in Austria and in Holland, six in Belgium, and six in Switzerland. And now that I have told you what the International is, you may, perhaps, be in a position to form your own opinion as to its pretended plots.

R.: And Mazzini, is he a member of your body?

Dr. M.: (laughing) Ah, no. We should have made but little progress if we had not got beyond the range of his ideas.

R.: You surprise me. I should certainly have thought that he represented most advanced views.

Dr. M.: He represents nothing better than the old idea of a middle-class republic. We want no part of the middle class. He has fallen as far to the rear of the modern movement as the German professors, who, nevertheless, are still considered in Europe as the apostles of the cultured democratism of the future. They were so, at one time – before '48, perhaps, when the German middle class, in the English sense, had scarcely attained its proper development. But now they have gone over bodily to the reaction, and the proletariat knows them no more.

R.: Some people have thought they saw signs of a positivist element in your organization.

Dr. M.: No such thing. We have positivists among us, and others not of our body who work as well. But this is not by virtue of their philosophy, which will have nothing to do with popular government, as we understand it, and which seeks only to put a new hierarchy in place of the old one.

R.: It seems to me, then, that the leaders of the new international movement have had to form a philosophy as well as an association themselves.

Dr. M.: Precisely. It is hardly likely, for instance, that we could hope to prosper in our war against capital if we derive our tactics, say, from the political economy of Mill. He has traced one kind of relationship between labor and capital. We hope to show that it is possible to establish another.

R.: And the United States?

Dr. M.: The chief concerns of our activity are for the present among the old societies of Europe. Many circumstances have hitherto tended to prevent the labor problem from assuming an all-absorbing importance in the United States. But they are rapidly disappearing, and it is rapidly coming to the front there with the growth, as in Europe, of a laboring class distinct from the rest of the community and divorced from capital.

R.: It would seem that in this country the hoped-for solution, whatever it may be, will be attained without the violent means of revolution. The English system of agitating by platform and press, until minorities become converted into majorities, is a hopeful sign.

Dr. M.: I am not so sanguine on that point as you. The English middle class has always shown itself willing enough to accept the verdict of the majority, so long as it enjoyed the monopoly of the voting power. But, mark me, as soon as it finds itself out-voted on what it considers vital questions, we shall see here a new slaveowners's war.

I have given you, as well as I can remember them, the heads of my conversation with this remarkable man. I shall leave you to form your own conclusions. Whatever may be said for or against the probability of its complicity with the movement of the Commune, we may be assured that in the International Association, the civilized world has a new power in its midst, with which it must soon come to a reckoning for good or ill.

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