

COMMUNISM TODAY

After the financial meltdown and with labour protests in the air, some experts are saying the old comrade is more relevant than ever, and that few people even realize how much they owe to him. **Elizabeth Renzetti** investigates

Springtime for Marx

LONDON

In Highgate Cemetery, the faithful still come to drape flowers over the giant bust inscribed with some of Karl Marx's most famous words: "Workers of all lands unite" and "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it."

It is the most-visited grave in the cemetery, even if most of the pilgrims don't come from Britain, the land of Marx's exile, where he died in near-obscure in 1883. One of the volunteers at the cemetery, where fewer than a dozen mourners gathered at his funeral, says, "We get lots of Chinese visitors. They seem to think he's the greatest man who ever lived." Around the base of his monument, crocuses have pushed their way through the cold earth.

Still, with the West suffering from the after-effects of the financial crisis and revolution in the air in parts of the world, could it possibly be springtime for Marx? Could Marxism, the Union Carbide of political brands, possibly be rehabilitated – or, more likely, mined for the bits that are still relevant in a chaotic world?

The signs may be sparser and more frail than those spring flowers around his grave, but students of the historian's work point to a few potential indicators: Striking workers in Egypt provided crucial leverage in the downfall of Hosni Mubarak; thousands of people have poured onto the streets of the American Midwest to protest against draconian labour legislation in various states. In Britain, trade unions are organizing marches on Saturday that will probably be the largest seen in the country since the anti-war demonstrations of 2003. Workers may not be the gravediggers of capitalism, as Marx and Friedrich Engels prophesied, but they may no longer be its zombies, either.

IN HIS OWN WORDS



Karl Marx has been called 'a thinker for the 21st century.' THE CANADIAN PRESS

ON POLITICS

"The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them."

"Political power, properly called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another."

defending free markets, *A Future Perfect*, write that Marx's "description of globalization is as sharp today as it was 150 years ago."

When Christopher Hitchens, a famously robust leftist in his youth, wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* titled *The Revenge of Karl Marx*, he quoted financial journalist James Buchan on the ubiquity of the philosopher's analysis: "Marx is so embedded in our Western cast of thought that few people are even aware of their debt to him. Everybody I know now believes that their attitudes are to an extent a creation of their material circumstances."

Cafeteria Marxists

You'd have to hunt pretty far to find true believers who still buy the whole package: a revolution of the working classes against their capitalist oppressors, leading to the abolition of private property and a classless society. But, much in the manner of cafeteria Catholics, who choose to follow the bits of dogma they find palatable, there's a sense that, strained and filtered, there's still much that's useful in Marxist thought.

"Marxism should never have been an ideology, in the sense of a set of articles of faith you hold regardless of the evidence," says Grant Amyot, a political-studies professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. "But as a way of analyzing the inequalities and injustices of modern societies, and identifying who can act to change it, it's probably more relevant than it has been since the 1920s."

cepts for the enlightenment of workers – the development of class consciousness – is difficult to achieve if class is not measured by your relationship to the means of production, but by how much free-range chicken you eat.

A new breed of wage slave

"It's not as if everybody in the developed world has become middle-class," Prof. Amyot says. "It's just that the form of exploitation has changed. We're not sitting behind steam-powered looms any more, we're sitting behind computers, but the vast number of people are still working for a wage or salary."

Says Prof. Panitch, "It's much more complicated now. It's not easy to organize these days when you don't have masses of workers brought together in a big factory and they aren't living in the same part of the city. A lot of people now who are exploited and poorly paid are working in funky areas like producing software or advertising."

Two years ago, he wrote a piece for *Foreign Policy* magazine titled *Thoroughly Modern Marx* about how the post-crash world might possibly (though by no means inevitably) see a rebirth in radical thinking. That, of course, has not happened – in fact, the political left has suffered setbacks and since 2008, centre-right parties have gained power in Europe. Former British Labour cabinet minister David Miliband – son of the Marxist historian Ralph – recently gave a lecture at the London School of Economics titled, *Why Is the European Left Losing Elections?*

At this moment, the most famous living historian of Marxist thought is digging him from the toxic bed where Stalin and Mao left him: "Today Marx is, once again, very much a thinker for the 21st century," Eric Hobsbawm writes in his 16th book, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*. (The collection of essays, just published in Britain, will be available in September in Canada and the U.S.)

The title is much more crusading than the book's sober content – and its cover, which features a picture of Che Guevara, but not Marx, may give some indication of the taint still attached to poor old Karl.

In these essays spanning 5½ decades, Prof. Hobsbawm, who was born in the year of the Russian Revolution, discusses why the time is ripe to revisit this seminal thinker: As an analyst of upheaval in the capitalist system, Marx is unparalleled; as someone whose writings contributed (however tragically) to leading political movements of the 20th century, he is the most influential secular thinker in history; and because he was prescient: "The globalized capitalist world that emerged in the 1990s was in crucial ways uncannily like the world anticipated by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*," Prof. Hobsbawm says.

For one thing, Marx saw that the capitalist system would necessarily concentrate wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer players, and that those players would be forced to search beyond their borders for new markets and consumers to exploit.

Prof. Hobsbawm said in an e-mail interview that the aim of his book "is to explain and to renew the claim for a modified version of Marx's analysis. He was virtually written out of the public scene by an ideology of free-market fundamentalism whose bankruptcy is now evident, even though the U.S. and British governments apparently refused to recognize this."

And not it's not only veteran lefties who appreciate the Marxist analysis, apparently.

Prof. Hobsbawm writes about having lunch with George Soros and tiptoeing around any possibly appetite-disrupting radical talk, only to have the financier say: "That man discovered something about capitalism 150 years ago that we must take notice of." Even John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their book

ON GLOBALIZATION

"The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. ... It has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old, established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe."

ON CAPITALISM

"The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."

"Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."

"The production of too many useful things results in too many useless people."

ON THE ENVIRONMENT

"The development of civilization and industry in general has always shown itself so active in the destruction of forests that everything that has been done for their conservation and production is completely insignificant in comparison."

ON MARXISM

"I am not a Marxist."

Staff

It's not just the concepts but the language of Marx that have seeped into the groundwater: "This is class war that's being levelled against the working people of this country," filmmaker Michael Moore said after addressing a pro-union rally in Wisconsin this month. At a similar protest, a young farmer named Tony Schultz made an impassioned speech denouncing state legislation that severely restricted the collective-bargaining rights of public-sector unions: Ordinary Americans shared a similar desire, he said: "To be empowered by your work, and not alienated by it."

Marxist language is alive even in the American heartland, although the word itself is still a general-purpose insult. Talking about protests by U.S. Uncut, a group that wants to reverse cuts to public services, Fox News's Andrew Napolitano said, "These people do hate capitalism. It's a form of socialism or even Marxism."

Fox commentators may be alarmed by the nascent activism of U.S. Uncut and the thousands of demonstrators who have taken to the streets to protest against anti-labour bills in several U.S. states, but for those on the left, it's too early to be shouting from the ramparts.

"I'm optimistic about the explosion that's happened in Wisconsin," says Leo Panitch, a political-studies professor at York University in Toronto. "For the first time in a long time, the Canadian left is looking south, rather than the other way."

But he's loath to make too many claims for a new dawn rising: "The craziness and mindlessness of so much of what is going on in the American right may – and I'm very cautious about this – it may lead to the same kind of sensibilities that produced a radical new left in the sixties."

Unrest isn't confined to the United States, where an estimated 100,000 protesters gathered on March 12 in Madison, along with thousands more in states such as Ohio, Indiana and Iowa. In Egypt, a general strike that began on Feb. 9 is thought to have hastened the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Last summer, a wave of strikes spread through Chinese factories, rattling the government. The largest union in Britain, the Trades Union Congress, is organizing a "March for the Alternative" in London on Saturday, which it hopes will unite union members, professionals and students in a large-scale protest against the austerity cuts imposed by Britain's coalition government.

But union membership in the West is at historically low levels, and one of Marx's central con-

"Not since the First World War has there been this kind of domination from the right," Mr. Miliband said. Why? Because right-wing parties have been more flexible in adapting their policies, and by softening their positions on social issues have furtively camped on the left's traditional hunting grounds.

It's not in political parties themselves that radical leftist thought will be resuscitated, Prof. Hobsbawm said in the e-mail interview: "The revival of Marxism as a political project is unlikely, because the social forces that Marx expected to realize his ideas have been decisively weakened since the 1970s, namely the labour movements and mass labour and socialist parties. What should revive in today's global atmosphere is Marxism as the major ideology criticizing capitalism and analyzing its internal contradictions and its incapacity to find effective solutions for the global problems of our century, notably the environmental crisis."

But there are still true believers who plan to seize what they think is a decisive political moment. "I think 2011 is going to be remembered like 1968," says Dan Mayer, organizer of Marxism 2011, a five-day festival in London beginning on June 30. Last year's Marxathon drew 5,000 people; it is the biggest gathering of its kind in Europe (and charmingly old-school: Accommodations can be arranged "if you're an older comrade").

Mr. Mayer expects this year's festival, featuring speakers such as Labour Party veteran Tony Benn, literary critic Terry Eagleton and Richard Wilkinson, author of *The Spirit Level*, to be even bigger. Revolution is not necessarily on the agenda, but more modest goals are: "We'd like to see the [British] coalition government brought down," and an end to its austerity program, Mr. Mayer says. "A country where the sick, the poor, the elderly and the unemployed are treated in quite brutal ways is not a society you want to live in."

The faithful will look for signs of hope, no matter how faint. At the London Review Bookshop, Prof. Hobsbawm's *How to Change the World* is on the bestseller list, along with a new volume of letters by martyred revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, though this says more about the shop's clientele than about the likelihood of a proletariat uprising. Just as easily, you could visit Liverpool Street in London's east end, where *The Communist Manifesto* was first printed in 1848, and see that it's now surrounded by a sea of banks.

Elizabeth Renzetti is a member of *The Globe and Mail's* European bureau.