

# Remembering Karl Marx

## Image – Icon – Idol

Baldassare Scolari

«Enough of the lion's breast  
or lion's mane of Marx,  
the demonised dark-haired.»<sup>1</sup>

There are several photographs of Karl Marx, but one in particular has served as a model for countless images, paintings, posters, sculptures and other media artefacts: the portrait-photograph shot by John Mayall in 1875 in London. The Marx bust in the east side of Highgate Cemetery in London is one among many sculptures reproducing the well-known Marx *imago* as a middle-aged man with, in the words of Bertold Brecht, the «lion's mane». The Marx *imago* could be characterised as a «super-icon» in the sense that historian Gerhard Paul, referring to the official Mao portrait on Tiananmen Square, gives to this concept: «a paradigm for the characteristics of transculturality, transmediality and transtextuality [...], as well as in general for a re-iconisation [of images] [...], which at least partially assumes religious forms.»<sup>2</sup> Just like the Mao portrait, the Marx portrait has been reused, cited and provided with different functions in diverse historical and cultural contexts. It has functioned as a symbol for political identification, as an art object, a trademark, and, as we will see, even as a cult object or quasi-religious icon.<sup>3</sup>

The present essay is structured into four thematic sections. The first section will reconstruct the emergence, development and consolidation of the «Marx icon».<sup>4</sup> Here I will first broadly reconstruct the process that led to the iconisation of Marx's image and, second, the development of the «Marx cult» in the Soviet Union and East Germany. In the second section, the main focus will lie on the ambivalent use and reception of Marx's fig-

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1 Brecht 1967, 74 (translation by the author); German: «Genug von der Löwenbrust oder Löwenmähne Marxens, des verteufelten Mohrens!»

2 Paul 2013, 319 (translation by the author).

3 See Dühr 2013.

4 See Dühr 2013.

ure and thought in modern and contemporary society, which oscillates between the two poles of political engagement and commodification.<sup>5</sup> After that, the essay will focus on the history of Marx's burial place at Highgate Cemetery, paying particular attention to the erection of the Marx monument and how, over the years, the latter has become the pivot of a sort of necropolis of leftist activists and intellectuals. In this section, I will also discuss the thesis according to which certain cultural practices related to the Marx icon and more specifically the Marx memorial in Highgate Cemetery should be considered as religious or quasi-religious practices. In the last section, I will focus on the way in which Mike Leigh's film *High Hopes* deals with the problem and topic of the Marx memorialisation.

### 1. *The Iconisation of Karl Marx*

The 1875 Marx photograph by John Mayall shows the famous philosopher and economist at the age of 57, sitting on a chair with crossed legs, his right hand tucked inside his jacket and his left hand resting on his waist (fig. 1). Marx's face and expression, surrounded by long white hair and beard but with a still dark moustache, the only clue of the dark pigmentation that he had as a young man, already became iconic when he was still alive. Although there is a younger photo of him, at the age of 42, with graying hair but with a completely dark beard, the young Marx is – at least visually – a rather unknown being.

There are about 15 known photographs of Marx, which were mostly taken in London, and a few in other places, for example in Hannover on the occasion of the print of the first German edition of *Das Kapital*. Although there are only presumptions about the number of prints that were produced, several hints in letters suggest that they were numerous.<sup>6</sup> The exchange and despatch of photographs went beyond the family context, to which Friedrich Engels also has to be counted. In fact, not only companions and friends were addressed, but also competitors like Ferdinand Lassalle and his partner Sophie von Hatzfeld. From the beginning, the dissemination of images in the context of communication and letter culture went beyond a purely private character.

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5 Regarding the concept of commodification see Ertman/Williams 2005.

6 See Bouvier 2013, 13.

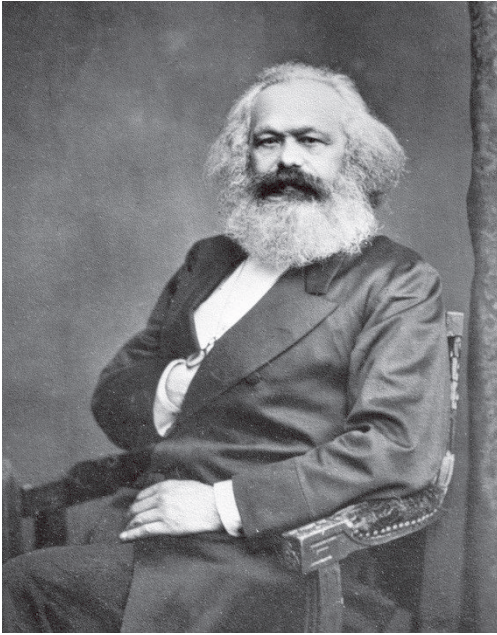


Fig. 1: *Portrait-photograph by John Mayall, London, 1875*  
(Image: Wikimedia Commons).<sup>7</sup>

As shown by the reactions of family members, the production and distribution of images was functional, beyond a mere private usage, to the disclosure of Marx's person and personality. When his daughter Laura received the photograph produced in 1867 in Hannover, she wrote to her father:

We liked Your photography immensely. Above all, I admire the eyes, the forehead and the expression: – the eyes have this real «villainous glitter» [German: *schurkischer Glitzer*] that I love so much in the original, and that is the only one of your photographs that simultaneously expresses sarcasm and goodness: a stranger, I think, would only see the good nature, but with my special «eagle eye», I also see a bit of malice

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<sup>7</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl\\_Marx\\_001.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl_Marx_001.jpg) (accessed April 4, 2018).

[German: *Bosheit*] in the portrait, a malice that will undoubtedly scare your enemies.<sup>8</sup>

Marx answered with pleasure: «I am very glad that you liked my photograph so much. After all, my portrait is less disturbing than the original.»<sup>9</sup>

After the appearance of *Das Kapital* the demand for Marx's images grew significantly. Within the inner circle of Marx's confidants, there were different opinions on the subject of the dissemination and publication of the images. Engels, despite Marx's strong concerns, was absolutely convinced of the benefit of the publication of the images: «this type of advertisement penetrates the Philistine in his deepest bosom. So give him everything he needs», he wrote to Marx in 1868.<sup>10</sup> Marx was clearly less enthusiastic. When the publication of a biographical note accompanied by a photo in the magazine *Gartenlaube* did not materialise, Engels processed the text and published it in the daily newspaper *Die Zukunft* edited by Johann Jacoby. Marx let it happen but criticised the action in a letter to Ludwig Kugelmann: «because of your and Engels' opinion that the thing was useful, I gave in for the advertisement in the *Gartenlaube*. My conviction was *strongly against it*. Now I *urge* you to *give up* this fun *once and for all!*»<sup>11</sup>

The spread of Marx's images reached its peak in 1871 in the wake of the proclamation of the Paris Commune and, above all, because of the role assigned to Marx in it.<sup>12</sup> In connection with his activity within the General Council of the International Workingman's Association (IWA), which was founded in 1864, and because of Marx's apologia – known as *The Civil War in France* – of the Paris Commune after its bloody suppression in 1871, the conservative governments of Europe and the press represented him as a major culprit and «leader». When in the same year a hoax over his death caused excitement, the demand for pictures for press releases increased even more. Marx was now better known than ever and wanted – together with the family and Engels – to influence the *mise-en-scène* of his person: «the selection of the images provided [by Marx, his family members and

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8 Letter of Laura Marx to Karl Marx, 8.5.1867, in: Meier 1983, 51 (translation by the author).

9 Letter of Karl Marx to his daughter Laura Marx, 13.5.1867, in: Marx/Engels 1965, 548 (translation by the author).

10 Letter of Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 2.2.1868, in: Marx/Engels 1974, 27 (translation by the author).

11 Letter of Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 26.10.1868, in: Marx/Engels 1974, 573 (translation by the author, italics in original).

12 See Bouvier 2013, 16.



Engels] was as important as it was controlled, so that this process resulted in a kind of canonisation of the images.»<sup>13</sup>

This canonisation process was accompanied by written «life pictures» and «appreciations» in reference works and encyclopedias, which appeared already during Marx's lifetime. Perhaps the most important eulogy – at least in the light of its impact – is the one Engels wrote in 1877 for the *Braunschweiger Volks-Kalender* of the German Social Democracy.<sup>14</sup> Engels later referred again and again to this text, iterating its main assertions and statements after Marx's death, which did not focus much on biographical details, but rather on the weighting and appreciation of Marx's political action and intellectual work. Engels decisively shaped the reception of Marx and the construction of the icon.

The canonisation of Marx's «image» that Engels drew with words, was accompanied by a progressive iconisation of his visual image starting from 1883. In this year, the already mentioned photograph of John Mayall from 1875 became the definitive template for the Marx-icon. After Marx's death, Engels received requests from around the world and ordered 12,000 copies of the photo to be made available to newspapers and organisations. He justified the selection as follows: «It is the last, best shot, where the Moor appears in his cheerful, victorious olympic calm.»<sup>15</sup> As Beatrix Bouvier observes: «This image selection by Friedrich Engels had effects well into the 20th century, until today actually. It is always this photo template that makes the portrait of Karl Marx – in very different aesthetical forms – to the icon that is at the same time an «icon in the head.»<sup>16</sup>

A few decades after his death, Marx became the object of «Byzantine image worship» in the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> His image was carried around in processions and was almost worshipped by thousands and his portrait shown at countless mass rallies. The Marx icon is unthinkable without Lenin's and above all Stalin's. As highlighted by Barabara Mikuda-Hüttel, the latter «is decisive for the cult around Marx, because with Stalin a quasi-religious image worship developed.»<sup>18</sup> This image worship was also taken up in East Germany, where the cult of Marx was particularly reflected in memorial art. Paradigmatic for it is Lew Kerbel's monument in Karl Marx

13 Bouvier 2013, 17 (translation by the author).

14 See Marx/Engels 1987, 96–106.

15 Letter of Friedrich Engels to Eduard Bernstein, 28.4.1883, in: Marx/Engels 1979, 18 (translation by the author).

16 Bouvier 2013, 18 (translation by the author).

17 See Mikuda-Hüttel 2013a, 21.

18 Mikuda-Hüttel 2013a, 21 (translation by the author).

City alias Chemnitz, which conveys «a political-physiognomic message [...] that, beyond epoch-making allocation and beyond political conviction, emphasises the charisma and the unflinching will as decisive characteristics of a power-conscious political protagonist»<sup>19</sup> (fig. 2). Lev Kerbel's monument then also served as a model for souvenirs, which were made in countless variations in metal, porcelain and plastic.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 2: Lew Kerbel's Karl Marx memorial in Chemnitz, formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt (Image: Wikimedia Commons).<sup>21</sup>

In East Germany and in the Soviet Union Marx's image became a fundamental element within practices and representations, which were functional to the legitimisation and the sustaining of what we might call «state mythologies.»<sup>22</sup> It is an irony of history that we find, in the writings of Marx and Engels, not only a clear and explicit denial of the possibility of realising communism within singular nation-states, but also an implicit prediction of their failure.<sup>23</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the de-

19 Sperling 2008, 14 (translation by the author).

20 See Mikuda-Hüttel 2013a, 26.

21 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl-Marx-Monument\\_in\\_Chemnitz.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl-Marx-Monument_in_Chemnitz.jpg) (accessed August 19, 2020).

22 Regarding the concept of «state mythology» see Cassirer 1946.

23 «Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples «all at once» and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of

feat of the Soviet Union and the unification of Germany, the Marx cult that served to legitimise communist state mythologies ended in a very short time. But the process of iconisation of Marx did not end with it, on the contrary; now that the «adversary» was defeated, now that «the ghost of communism» appeared no longer to haunt Europe, nothing more impeded the capitalist appropriation of Marx's image.

## 2. *The «Blind» Idolatrisation of Marx*

In the Eighties, a century after the death of Karl Marx, Marxism was clearly in political and intellectual decline. As historian Eric Hobsbawm – who is now buried a few metres away from Marx's grave – wrote in 2011, «there can be no doubt that for a quarter of a century Marx ceased to be regarded as a thinker relevant to the times, and in the greater part of the world Marxism was reduced to little more than the set of ideas of a slowly eroding corps of middle-aged and elderly survivors.»<sup>24</sup> The collapse of the USSR, the decomposition or the change in character of the non-state communist parties in Europe, the gradual demise of the age-group shaped by the experience of anti-fascism and World War II, the regression of Marxism among intellectuals caused in large part by a general mutation in the social and human sciences in the 1970 – all this and much more determined the decline of Marxism.<sup>25</sup>

Now that the thought and the figure of Marx seemed to have stopped affecting the emotions, actions and thoughts of many people around the globe, especially in Europe, they were no longer considered a great danger to the capitalist organisation of society and to the hegemonic economic and political discourse. Of course, even after the collapse of most communist regimes and the simultaneous crises of labour-based social democracy, the rhetoric of Cold War anti-communism continued, demonising the radical left and glorifying Western liberal democratic capitalism as the best of all possible economic and political systems.<sup>26</sup> However, now that the use of the figure with the lion's mane was no longer «monopolised» by states, parties, trade unions and more generally by people for whom, in one way or another, Marx was a reference figure that symbolised resistance to all

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productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them» (Marx/Engels 1998, 57).

24 Hobsbawm 2011, 385.

25 See Hobsbawm 2011, 385, 394.

26 See Hobsbawm 2011, 397–398.

forms of capitalist exploitations, the path for the figure's commodification was opened.

Marx's image and name have been widely used even by the advertising industry, and this already before the so-called New Media Age.<sup>27</sup> In a computer advert of 1984 the Apple brand promoted the Macintosh in West Germany. The advertising image displayed five objects: four books in rows with the names of Mao Zedong, Friedrich Engels, Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin and Karl Marx written on the cover, followed by a Macintosh. A text informs the reader how to interpret the advertising image: «It was about time that a capitalist also changes the world» (German: *Es wurde mal Zeit, dass mal ein Kapitalist die Welt verändert*).<sup>28</sup> Even more striking and, in some ways, ironic: in 2012, a photograph of Lew Kerbel's Karl Marx monument, which was inaugurated in 1971 in Chemnitz, a city renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953 to 1990, was chosen from a list of ten contenders to appear on a new issue of MasterCard by customers of the German bank Sparkasse of Chemnitz.<sup>29</sup> One need not be particularly imaginative to suppose that Marx would probably not have approved – despite his well-known sense of irony. There are several other examples of commercial and advertising uses of images of Marx – in most cases of John Mayall's famous photograph. If someone searches products on amazon or other similar on-line shops by typing the words «Karl Marx», he or she will find products of all sorts: Marx toys and dolls, posters, plastic sculptures, clocks, T-shirts, coffee mugs, posters and many other objects depicting or representing Marx in the well-known way: as a grey-bearded middle-age man with the «lion's mane».

The commodification of the Marx icon seems to exemplify what could be defined as an «idolatrous use» of the image of Karl Marx. Referring to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, Hans Belting defines *eidola* those images that have lost any reference to the reality and truth that they simulate to represent, that is, those images that simulate a significance, while in reality they *signify only themselves*.<sup>30</sup> In other words, they have lost any reference to the reality that they should refer to. However, Hans Belting specifies,

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27 See Meier 2013, 31–37.

28 See Meier 2013, 34.

29 <https://boingboing.net/2012/07/03/karl-marx-on-a-mastercard.html> (accessed April 4, 2018).

30 See Belting 2005, 15–16.

[it is] not the individual products that are threatening us, but their continued production that seduces us to 'blind' idolatry. [...] In the supposedly self-contained and inscrutable stream of images, there is one [...] instance that so much wants to hide its presence behind the images. It consists in the economic power that pushes the former role of political power into the background. The leading images [German: *Leitbilder*] that this power produces are therefore icons of consumption and no longer icons of political ideas or ideologies.<sup>31</sup>

Belting goes on to explain the difference between idolatry in past ages and idolatry today, in the contemporary world:

Idols were empty images under old premises, namely images without reference and without symbolic practice. Idolatry was synonymous with a worship of surfaces and visual illusions with which the idols faked the essence of the image. Can such a discourse be maintained? Images today demand our faith, but they are not made to convince us and destined to impress us. They arouse our attention with the intention to numb it.<sup>32</sup>

In the stream of images, controlled by the economic power, even Marx's image seems to become meaningless, without any reference to his thoughts and concepts, mutating into a pure means of entertainment or, more precisely, of mass distraction.<sup>33</sup>

Marx's image and thought, despite this process of meaning-emptying and capitalist appropriation, has never completely lost its ability to appeal and affect people politically. In fact, after a long story of leftists' disillusionment and demonisation of Marxism, in the last decade there have been

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31 Belting 2005, 18, 23 (translation by the author).

32 Belting 2005, 25 (translation by the author).

33 As David Harvey observes, this loss of interest in Marx's thought can also be observed in recent publications on his life and the historical context in which he lived: «In recent times there has been a flurry of comprehensive studies of Marx in relation to the personal, political, intellectual and economic milieu in which he was writing. The major works of Jonathan Sperber and Gareth Stedman Jones are invaluable, at least in certain respects. Unfortunately, they also seem aimed at burying Marx's thinking and massive oeuvre along with Marx himself in Highgate Cemetery as a dated and defective product of nineteenth-century thought» (See Harvey 2018, xii–xiii; Harvey refers here to Sperber 2013 and Stedman Jones 2016). Harvey draws attention here to the fact that at least a part of the literature on Marx is not so much interested in his philosophical, economic, and political thought, but rather in Marx as a historical figure.

some hints of a return and revival of Marx and Marxism.<sup>34</sup> As historian Eric Hobsbawm observes, the economic crisis of 2008, the catastrophic consequences of the unlimited abuse of resources and commodity production for the environment, as well as the exponential and increasing disparity between rich and poor, have brought to light that the world's future «is put into question not by the threat of social revolution but by the very nature of [capitalism's] untrammelled global operations, to which Karl Marx has proved so much more perceptive a guide than the believers of rational choices and self-correcting mechanisms of the free market.»<sup>35</sup>

The revival of Marx and Marxism can be observed in the most disparate contexts. Sales of Marx's *Das Kapital* have soared ever since 2008, as have those of *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Critique of Political Economy*.<sup>36</sup> Several well-known philosophers, human and social scientists – Chantal Mouffe, Naomi Klein, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Ranciere, Terry Eagleton, David Harvey, to name just a few – in recent years have drawn attention to the relevance and actuality of Marx's thought in highly successful books. In the documentary *MARX RELOADED* (Jason Barker, D/F 2011), which aims to examine the relevance of Marx's ideas in relation to the general economic decline observed in world markets during the late 2000s and early 2010s, many of these thinkers were interviewed. In 2017 the film *LE JEUNE KARL MARX* (Raul Peck, F/D/B), a biopic about Marx's life between 1843 and 1848, was screened at the Berlin Film festival (fig. 3). The writings, ideas and life of Karl Marx are not only the subjects of academic publications and professional film productions, but also of numerous more or less amateurish Internet contributions. See, for example, platforms like *Wikipedia* or *YouTube* – if someone types «Karl Marx» in *YouTube*, a total of 640,000 entries will appear – but also social networks like *Facebook*, influence public opinion about Karl Marx.<sup>37</sup>

The role of Marx in the contemporary «cultural imaginary» seems thus to be ambivalent.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, we observe a revival of Marxism, understood here as an interest in its philosophical, economic and political thought; on the other, we observe a commercial and «idolatrous» use of the Marx figure, by which his image has been largely detached from his thought, becoming almost a mere product of entertainment and consump-

34 See Jeffries 2012.

35 Hobsbawm 2011, 398.

36 See Connolly 2008.

37 See Henschel 2013, 39–45.

38 Regarding the concept of «imaginary» see Castoradis 1975 and Pezzoli-Olgianti 2015.

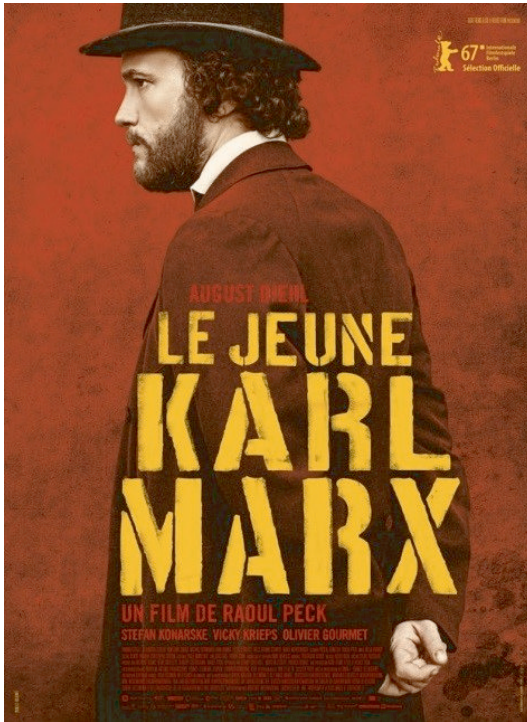


Fig. 3: Film poster of *Le jeune Karl Marx* (Raul Peck, F/D/B 2017, Image: Baldassare Scolari 2017).

tion. Like other super-icons, Marx's *imago* seems to be characterised by a sort of *hermeneutic and performative openness*, which allows a very disparate variety of usages and attributions of meaning. The Marx image can be used as an idol without any reference to Marx's philosophical, political and economic thought, thus in a decontextualised manner, or it can be used and received as an image that *connotes* Marx's worldview and *appeals to* the recipient to engage with his thought and writings. To understand if Marx's image is used and received in one way rather than another, nothing can be done but to study the concrete cases. And what is more appropriate and intriguing to take as a case study than an artefact that not only depicts Marx, but that is also located a few metres from his mortal remains?



### 3. *The Marx Memorial in Highgate Cemetery*

Following the death of his wife, in December 1881, Marx died in London on 14 March 1883 at the age of 64. Family and friends buried his body three days later in the non-consecrated section of Highgate Cemetery, near Kentish Town, where he lived his last years, and where his grandson and his wife were already resting. Several of his closest friends spoke at his funeral, including Friedrich Engels, who gave the funeral speech in English:

On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think. [...] Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history. [...] Such was the man of science. But this was not even half the man. [...] For Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation [...]. He died beloved, revered and mourned by millions of revolutionary fellow workers – from the mines of Siberia to California, in all parts of Europe and America – and I make bold to say that, though he may have had many opponents, he had hardly one personal enemy. His name will endure through the ages, and so also will his work.<sup>39</sup>

With this funeral eulogy, Engels, together with Eleanor Marx, laid down the image of Marx, which he wanted to be remembered by friends, enemies, and more generally by people around the world. In other words, and with the same intention, he repeated what he had already written in the *Braunschweiger Volks-Kalender*, praising the two main «discoveries» of his friend and portraying him as both a «man of science» and a «revolutionist». «In this exaggeration» – writes Beatrix Bouvier – «Marx became the man who had basically set everything in motion. [...] It was not his disputed economic writings, nor the serious economic and social questions that followed from them, that were to be expressed, but rather the role that Marx played in confrontation between capital and labor.»<sup>40</sup> Marx advanced

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39 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm> (accessed April 4, 2018)

40 Bouvier 2013, 18 (translation by the author).

to a mythological figure of class struggle, a narratively constructed paladin of all the workers and exploited.



*Fig. 4: The original burial place of Karl Marx with candles and stones left by visitors (Image: Baldassare Scolari 2017).*

Marx's tomb has repeatedly attracted both friends and enemies of Marx and his ideas. In fact, it soon became a place of pilgrimage for socialists and communists of every stripe. Even Lenin, in 1903, led a solemn delegation of Bolsheviks who were attending a conference in London to the burial place. By the end of the 1920's, the Soviets were even applying pressure to Her Majesty's Government to allow them permission to exhume Marx and remove him to Moscow where the plan was to lie him in state next to Lenin in Red Square. The pressure was resisted and the request refused. Marx and his family were reburied on the new site nearby in November 1954. The erection of a bust of Karl Marx, whose imposing stature forced the original burial place to be moved a few metres, results from an initiative of the Communist Party of Great Britain (fig. 4). The Marx Monument

Committee, founded for this purpose in 1955, gave the assignment to develop and produce the sculpture to the artist Laurence Bradshaw, a member of the party since the thirties. The party general secretary Harry Pollitt inaugurated the bust in the presence of two hundred people, on March 14, 1956.<sup>41</sup>

Since the memorial has been erected, there have been repeated acts of vandalism. In 1970 a person or persons unknown tried to blow up the monument. As stated in *The Londondead Blogspot*, «the sophisticated plan involved sawing off Karl's nose and then emptying bolts, fireworks and a mixture of weedkiller and sugar into the hollow head. The plot was foiled when many hours of sawing revealed that the nose was solid and therefore no easy route into the empty space inside the brain cavity.»<sup>42</sup> In June 1960 The memorial was also violated with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans such as «I love Eichmann.»<sup>43</sup> Recently, at the beginning of February 2019, the memorial was vandalised again. The suspected vandal damaged the marble plaque, which was taken from Marx's original 1883 gravestone and incorporated into the 1954 monument. As the *Guardian* reported, the plate appears to have been hit repeatedly with a hammer. Ian Dungavell, the chief executive of the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, condemned the attack as «an appalling thing to do» and a «particularly inarticulate form of political comment» and added: «that's the only consolation – he hasn't been forgotten about.»<sup>44</sup>

What characterises this monument so loved and hated? The bust is clearly a variation of the Marx icon: a massive sculpted head of Marx, with the usual lion's mane and beard, stands on a twelve-foot high granite plinth

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41 It is worth quoting here the description of the bust given in an article that appeared in *The Guardian* the day after the inauguration: «Although the colour is bilious and the inflated proportions are monstrous at close quarters, it is not without grandeur. The face has formidable benignity, the face of a father who would chastise his children but always in sorrow. If Communism ever becomes past history, the archaeologists of the future will be able to learn a great deal about the psychology of it by digging in the cemetery at Highgate» (*The Guardian* 1956). One cannot help but notice a strong critical attitude towards communism in general and Marx's bust in particular. This is not surprising, since in those years public opinion was becoming more and more aware of the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime, which certainly did not constitute good publicity for the communist idea, especially for those who only knew of this idea through the Western anti-communist press.

42 Bingham 2014.

43 See Jewish Telegraphic Agency – Daily News Bulletin 1960.

44 Quoted in Weaver 2019.

with gold lettering (figs. 5 and 6). The memorial bears the carved message: «WORKERS OF ALL LANDS UNITE», the final line of *The Communist Manifesto*, and from the 11th *Thesis on Feuerbach*: «The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways – the point however is to *change* it».<sup>45</sup> As the pedestal and bust exceeded the height allowed in the cemetery, the bust was cut around the chest for the installation in 1956. It is perhaps for this reason that it looks a little stocky, giving Marx an almost comical look. From an aesthetic and artistic point of view, the bust of Marx in the Highgate Cemetery is nothing special. It has a monumental character that recalls the aesthetics of neighbouring tombs – including that of the philosopher Herbert Spencer.<sup>46</sup> Like the sculpture by Lev Kerbel, it depicts only the head of Marx – except for a hint of shoulders – and bears the most famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto* (which in Chemnitz is written in English, Russian and German on a wall at the back of the heavy 40 tonne giant head).



Figs. 5 and 6: *The Karl Marx Memorial in Highgate Cemetery*  
(Images: Daria Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2018).

However, leaving aside clear differences in style,<sup>47</sup> there are two major differences with respect to Kerbel's sculpture. In the first place, it is located in

45 Marx/Engels 1948, 44; Marx 1998, 571 (italics in original); the final line of *The Communist Manifesto* has been mostly translated as follows: «Workingman of all countries, unite!». For a critical reflection concerning the hierarchy of the names of the Marx family engraved on the white marble slab on the bottom of the Karl Marx memorial, see Dolores Zoé Bertschinger's contribution in this volume.

46 See Tartakowsky 2011, 78.

47 See Dühr 2013, 162 & 167.

England, which never was a Communist country, and thus was not commissioned by state apparatuses. It is therefore not an example of «authoritarian art setting in urban space»,<sup>48</sup> but the initiative of a minority party that never held power (in the UK parliamentary elections of 1955, one year before the erection of the bust, the party had won 0.1 % of the overall vote).<sup>49</sup> In the second place, Bradshaw's Marx bust is not situated in the centre of a square, namely a place of transit or in which political, commercial or recreational activities take place (manifestations, rallies, markets, concerts, etc.). Of course, both the inauguration of the bust at the Highgate Cemetery as well as Marxist's pilgrimages can be considered as political activities; moreover, recreational activities are also held at Highgate.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, as a cemetery, Highgate is a very special place because, as Carla Danani's essay in this volume highlights, as a «threshold» it both separates and connects the community of the living and of the dead.

Over the years, the eastern part of the Highgate Cemetery has become a sort of cosmopolitan necropolis for leftist activists, politicians and intellectuals – among others: South African communist and anti-apartheid activist Yusuf Dadoo (1909–1983), Communist leader and founder of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran Mansoor Hekmat (1951–2002), and historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) – and more generally of leftist political activists coming from around the world (fig. 7). Many of them lived and died as expats in the United Kingdom, as, for example, the Trinidad-born Claudia Vera Jones (1915–1964), who, after emigrating to the USA, became a journalist and political activist (fig. 8). As a result of her political activities, she was deported in 1955 and subsequently resided in the United Kingdom, where she founded Britain's major black newspaper, *The West Indian Gazette*. On her tomb one can read the following epitaph: «Valiant fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of socialism and the liberation of her own black people». Also Kurdish Iraqi leftist poet Buland al-Haidari, who died in 1996, is buried near to Marx's grave and memorial; on his grave we read: «Iraqi poet of Kurdish origins. Pioneer of Arabic free verse. Advocate of democracy and human rights. Lived in exile for 30 years» (fig. 9). This and other examples show that the area around the Marx memorial has become a highly symbolic space for people who understood themselves as being part of a transnational, cos-

48 Mikuda-Hüttel 2013b, 172.

49 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1955\\_United\\_Kingdom\\_general\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1955_United_Kingdom_general_election) (accessed April 4, 2018).

50 See Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution in this volume.



mopolitan community of activists and intellectuals committed, in different forms and variations, to the same universal fight against injustice and exploitation of workers and marginalised people.<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 7: Tomb of historian Eric Hobsbawm (Image: Daria Pezzoli-Olgati 2018).

Fig. 8: Tomb of political activist Claudia Vera Jones (Image: Baldassare Scolari 2018).

Fig. 9: Tomb of Kurdish Iraqi poet Buland al-Haidari (Image: Daria Pezzoli-Olgati 2018).

In a comparative study about the political usage of Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago, Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, and Highgate Cemetery in Lon-

51 Other Epitaphs of tombs near to the Marx Memorial are: Richard and Kay Titmuss (1973 and 1987): «Socialist and humanitarian thinker. Committed wife and welfare worker»; David Cohen (1988): «Our dear comrade»; Sello Moeti (1988): «Son of Africa. Our beloved comrade and friend»; Farzad Bazoft (1990): «Observer journalist. A journalist in Iraq. Executed by the regime»; Carmen England (1991): «She caused her people to realise their beauty»; Frank Ridley (1994): «Freethinker and campaigner»; Simon Paul Wolff (1995): «Scientist and campaigner. I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world»; Jamil Munir Abdul-Hamid (1997): «Iraqi communist dedicated to democracy and human rights in Iraq»; Dachine Rainer (2000): «Poet and anarchist»; Paul Foot (2004): «Writer and revolutionary. Rise like Lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number / Shake your chain to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you / You are many - They are few» [This epitaph reproduces the last strophe of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *The Mask of Anarchy*]; Wolfgang and Joža Bruegel (1985 and 2005): «They strove for a better world»; Dr. Sabiha Mehdi Al-Khalil (2005): «Tireless campaigner for peace, women's rights and social justice in Iraq»; Ian Dorans (2007): «Loving family man and socialist to the end.» See Tartakowsky 2011, 74, 88.

don, Danielle Tartakowsky argues that all three cemeteries are «complex necropolises in which intimate relations have been forged between death, sacrality, history and politics». The three cemeteries share an important political function in common, namely they «have imposed themselves early and lastingly as symbols of the workers' movement, in the diversity of its components and on the international scale.»<sup>52</sup> These places, she argues, «confer on death a particular sacredness», inasmuch as they are all expression of the desire «to participate in a common ascent towards a better becoming and to construct, in this way, a new form of eternity, where history [becomes] the source of a new transcendence.»<sup>53</sup>

Tartakowsky seems here to corroborate a thesis supported by many scholars, according to which Marxism should be understood as a «substitute religion» or as a «quasi-religion».<sup>54</sup> Roland Stromberg, for example, lists a number of similarities between Marxism and the Abrahamic religions:

In place of Yahweh stands historical Necessity; the Proletariat is, of course, the Chosen People; the Christian *parousia* becomes the post-revolutionary Communist society. The final fight between Christ and Anti-Christ seems as obvious an analogue to the last antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat as does the Saints' Everlasting Rest to the Marxist Kingdom of Freedom when Communism has resolved all alienations and dualisms and restored man to his nature. The specific structure of Judeo-Christian eschatology was thus found in Marxism. Additionally, the Marxist movement took on cult qualities quite predictable by the sociology of religion: making the works of Marx

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52 Tartakowsky 2011, 74–75 (translation by the author). At Père-Lachaise, several hundred anonymous communards, who were executed by the Versailles army at the end of the «bloody Week» in May 1871, were buried in mass graves Northeast of its surrounding wall. In the Waldheim Cemetery of Chicago there are the burial places of five anarchist militants, who were arrested after the deadly explosion of a bomb at a workers' meeting held on May 4, 1886 in Haymarket Square. They were condemned to hang at the end of a show trial and executed the following year and their innocence was only recognised six years later. According to Tartakowsky, in both cemeteries the mentioned fallen communards and anarchists, who were promoted as holy martyrs, encouraged the affirmation of heterodox modes of expression of transcendence and of the sacred.

53 Tartakowsky 2011, 90 (translation by the author).

54 Stromberg 1979; Smith 1994; See also Boli 1981; Joshi 1991; Ling 1980; Turner 1983.



and Engels into holy writ, establishment of an official priesthood, a «secular scholasticism», even holy relics and pilgrimages.<sup>55</sup>

Should we agree with this description of Marxism and understand the Memorial in Highgate Cemetery as a memorial sign that *signifies* Marx's burial place as a holy place and its visitation as a sort of religious or quasi-religious pilgrimage and celebration?

Answering this question is anything but simple, since it depends, in the first place, on how the term «religion» is defined. Martin Riesebrodt, for example, lists eight different definitions that compete with each other;<sup>56</sup> depending on which of these (or other) definitions one decides to use, arguments may be found for or against the argument that Marxism is a religion or not. The problem of the definition of religion is made even more complicated by the fact that the term «religion» itself is an important element within practices and strategies of power legitimisation. As William T. Cavanaugh rightly observes, «the term religion has been used in different times and places by different people according to different interests. [...] [T]he construction of the category of religion has become an important piece in the ideology of the West since the rise of modernity, both within Western cultures and in the colonization of non-Western cultures. Religion is [...] a term that constructs and is constructed by different kinds of political configurations.»<sup>57</sup> What Cavanaugh notes is also valid for the thesis that Marxism is a religion, a substitute religion or a quasi-religion, a thesis that has often been used to generally criticise Marxism as an irrational, absolutist and divisive ideology.

In my view, however, the most interesting question is not so much whether the figure of Marx or, more precisely, the practices by which this figure is memorialised, should be considered religious or quasi-religious. The challenging question is rather what this figure performs, in what way it affects the recipients. In the previous pages I shed light on very different uses and practices of memorialisation of the Marx *imago*, each of which has

55 Stromberg 1979, 210.

56 Religion as divine gift of reason (Immanuel Kant); as revelation experience (Rudolf Otto, Gerard van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade); as a projection (Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud); as proto-science (Auguste Comte, Edward B. Taylor, James Frazer); as affect and affect control (David Hume, William McDougall, Robert R. Marett, Bronislaw Malinowski); as brain function (Andrew Newberg and other neurologists); as sacralised society (Émile Durkheim); as salvation interest (Max Weber); as commodity (rational choice theory). See Riesebrodt 2007.

57 Cavanaugh 2009, 58.

a different performative force, affecting the recipients in different ways. In East Germany and in the Soviet Union it played an important role in practices aiming at legitimising political authority; it was used as a symbol for the national political body with which a citizen could (and should) identify him- or herself. If in the countries of the Western Bloc the figure of Marx was initially demonised, when it became clear that Marxism was in decline, the advertising industry took the first steps towards a use of it that I called idolatrous, inasmuch as the figure has been stripped of its historicity and from any reference to Marx's political thought. Nevertheless, as we have seen, in the last few decades Marx has returned to being a reference figure for many people and within different media, in which there is an explicit reference to and reflection on his thought, his critique of capitalism and his vision of a more just, fair and supportive society. We have therefore identified at least three very different uses of the Marx figure: first, it has been used within practices of political legitimisation aimed at constructing a collective national identity; secondly, it has been implemented by the advertising industry for marketing purposes; finally, it has been referred to in practices of memorialisation aiming at keeping alive his political thought and commitment for a better world and society.

#### 4. Mike Leigh's *Film High Hopes*

Released shortly before the end of the cold war, Mike Leigh's film *High Hopes* (UK, 1988) portrays the working class' disillusionment, the degradation of the social state and the annihilation of the dream of class-free and socialist society. The two main characters are Cyril, a postal courier, and Shirley, a municipal gardener who wants to have a baby, despite her partner's strong views that the world is already «over-populated». Cyril is an old-style Marxist who seems to have definitively lost all hope in the possibility of a radical change in society and in the realisation of the socialist project and looks to present and future times with bitterness and disillusionment. This attitude does not only affect his opposition to Shirley's desire to have children, but also his skepticism concerning political activism. In a scene in which a young «active» Marxist tells Shirley and Cyril about the regular meetings with other comrades in which she participates, the latter asks sardonically: «But apart from the yabber, what do you actually do?». When the young woman, angrily, asks «well, what do you do?», Cyril replies: «Sit on my arse.»

Cyril's relationship with Marxism and in particular with the figure of Marx is shown in an exemplary way in a scene, in which Cyril and Shirley

visit the Marx memorial in Highgate Cemetery. While Shirley carefully observes the surrounding vegetation and seems to enjoy the fresh air, Cyril, with a serious, almost gloomy face walks straight ahead of her, almost in a hurry to reach the goal of their trip. After framing the monument erected above the tomb, the camera shows the couple from behind, while their gaze is turned to the memorial:

S: He's a bit big, isn't he?

C: He was a giant.

S: No, I mean his head.

C: He's all right. What he done was he wrote down the truth. People was being exploited. Industrial revolution – they were forced off the land into the factories. There weren't no working class before then. He set down a programme for change.

S: He's got his whole family in there with him.

C: Without Marx, there'd have been nothing.

S: Oh look. His grandson was only four when he died.

C: Kids died young in these days.

S: I know.

C: Wouldn't have been no unions, no welfare state, no nationalised industries.

S: I wish I'd brought some flowers now.

C: Don't matter, does it, flowers?

S: What you mean, it doesn't matter?

C: He's dead.

S: You're going on about him.

C: I'm talking about his ideas.

S: I know. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it. There you are.

That said, Shirley moves away from the memorial and approaches the grave of the chairman of the South African Communist Party, where she enjoys the sight of flowers. Cyril remains silent for a while, as if Shirley's observation had shot him down (fig. 10). After a while he seems to regain his strength and observes:

C: The thing is, change what? It's a different world now, Innit?

S: That ivy could do with a bit of a prune.

C: By the year 2000, there'll be 36 TV stations, 24 hours a day, telling you what to think.

*Asian tourists are entering in the frame.*

S: They've planted them trees right on the top of the graves.

C: Pissing in the wind, Innit.

*Asian tourists are looking at the memorial from behind C. and S. (fig. 11).*

C: You ain't interested, are you?

S: Yes, I am. I care a lot.



*Fig. 10: Cyril looking at the Karl Marx Memorial  
(Film still: High Hopes, 01:01:46).*



*Fig. 11: Tourists looking at the Karl Marx Memorial  
(Film still: High Hopes, 01:02:30).*

This scene, like the whole film, highlights in an almost caricatured way two completely different ways of approaching the world and life. On the one hand there is Cyril, who looks bitterly into the world and, despite holding to his moral and political convictions, has given up all hope. He

speaks of Marx in mythological terms: a giant, without which there would be nothing. Nevertheless, he has almost lost confidence in the ability to realise Marx's ideas, the same ideas that fascinate him. Cyril seems to no longer believe that it is possible to change the world; he imagines and describes the society of the immediate future in terms, for us who live in the so-called New Media age, that appear fairly correct and realistic, describing it as the society of spectacle, in which the media dominate the minds, desires and thoughts of humanity. It is a society in which everything is considered and used as a mere object of consumption and in which, as the film seems to suggest in the last shots of the scene, even the tomb and the bust of Karl Marx are reduced to tourist destinations. For Cyril, in this society, there is no more room for the class struggle.

On the other hand, there is Shirley, who observes and enjoys the beauty of the natural world in a kind of naïve, childlike but yet authentically jubilant way. It seems clear, looking at the whole movie, that it is Shirley who has the healthiest relationship with the world; she is still able to look forward, to imagine a future in which there is still happiness and it makes sense to have children, while Cyril is only able to «sit on his arse». Also their ways of looking at and approaching the monument of Karl Marx could not be more different: Cyril focuses only on the «giant» Marx, the mythic and iconic figure of the class struggle, while Shirley sees Marx as father of a family and notices the flowers someone has placed at his grave (figs. 12 and 13). Shirley has a more pristine look than her partner, because she can see Marx as a person and as a family man and not as the mythological figure that he has become in a certain type of collective imaginary. However, if it is true, on the one hand, that the film makes fun of the character of Cyril (and with him of all those for whom he is the symbolic representative), it is equally true, that it critically displays the social unease and the ugliness and selfishness produced by late capitalism in the era of Thatcherian neo-liberalism. The film reaffirms thus the rightness of Marxist analysis and critique of capitalist society, but at the same time expresses the total failure of the Marxist revolutionary project, implicitly addressing the situation of impasse which, since the eighties, those movements and political parties that still refer to Marx's thought and ideas have reached.



Fig. 12: The «massive head» of Karl Marx (Film still: *High Hopes*, 01:01:47).

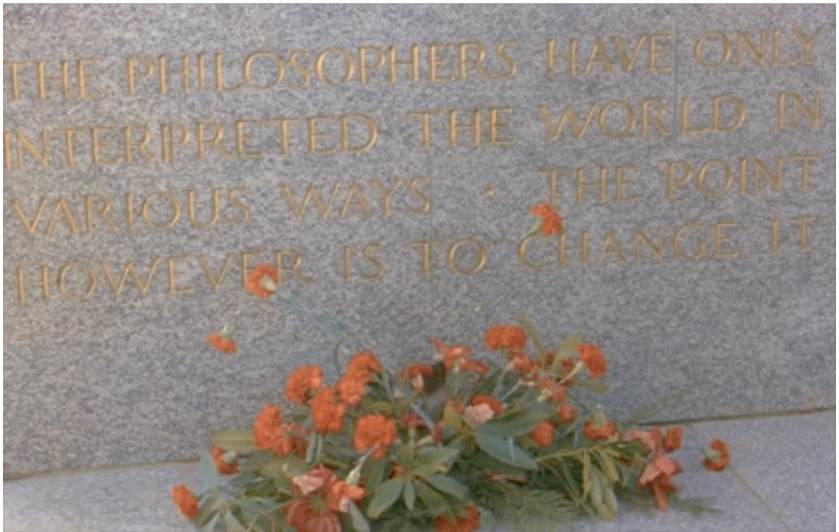


Fig. 13: Flowers at the bottom of the Karl Marx Memorial (Film still: *High Hopes*, 01:01:33).

In a sense, also Mike Leigh's film highlights a sort of quasi-religious veneration of the Marx icon by the protagonist Cyril. However, *High Hopes*



somehow addresses also the risk that the Marx icon could become a mere idol: an image that demands faith, but which is no longer able to convince and which, as a result, is self-referential and can only be consumed as a sort of «visual commodity». Cyril's attitude exemplifies one of the conditions of Marxism in so called postmodern times: Marxism has become a narrative in which it is still possible to believe but is no longer able to convince or, more precisely, to motivate people to political action. Marxism nowadays seems to be, so to speak, a weakened, inoperative myth. Nevertheless, it is not dead. As demonstrated by the tombs in the area of Marx's burial place, Marx's image is still able to appeal to people who identify themselves not with a certain nationality, or ethnicity, but with a universal idea of justice. Perhaps the myth is, at the moment, almost inoperative, but the necropolis that has formed around the tomb of Karl Marx is there to remind us that there were and still are persons for whom Marx is not only a reference figure, an icon for political identification, but who are also inspired by Marx's thought to fight for a better world.

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