

MARX-ENGELS  
DICTIONARY

James Russell

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James Russell

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**To  
Hans H. Gerth 1909–1978**  
**Teacher of generations of radicals, refugee from fascism,  
and example of intellectual integrity always.**

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# INTRODUCTION

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The social movements of the 1960s in Western Europe and the United States stimulated a renaissance of serious study of Marx and Engels. Many hoped to develop a deeper understanding of the causes of the movements which brought them to political activism. If the 1960s activism was an awakening, the study of Marx is the act of political maturing.

## THE PROBLEM

But, the Marxian classics are not easily understood, as generations of frustrated activists, scholars, and general readers have discovered. Part of the difficulty is terminological and that is the motivation for this dictionary. The causes for terminological difficulties are many. The first is simply time. Many of Marx's and Engels's terms have gone out of general use or have acquired a different meaning in the hundred or more years since they appeared. This problem is encountered in reading any text from another historical period. The second is ideological in the sense of the sociology of knowledge. The Marxian conceptual apparatus represents a point of view that was and continues to be radically different from the prevailing bourgeois mode of thought. It is a terminology designed to represent not the ideas of a ruling class but rather the antithesis of those ideas, that is the historical point of view of the working class. Marx and Engels stated that the ruling ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class. It follows that it is difficult for any member of a capitalist society to break out of the bourgeois modes of thought, to see society conceptually as did Marx. The third cause is scientific. Marx and Engels took the best currents of Western economic, political, and philosophic theory to produce a qualitatively new synthesis. The concepts of the new synthesis were just that—new. Hence Engels warned readers of *Capital*: "There is, however, one difficulty we could not spare the reader: the use of certain terms in a sense different from what they have, not only in common life, but in ordinary Political Economy. But this was unavoidable. Every new aspect of a science involves a revolution in the technical terms of that science."

In addition to the problems of terms that were common only in the

nineteenth century (for example, joint-stock company) or that have a particular Marxian meaning (for example, surplus value), the general reader is likely to have trouble with technical historical, economic, and philosophical terms (such as Zadruga, amortization, and monism). For all these types of problems ordinary dictionaries are of little use; the specialized Marxian use of the terms requires a correspondingly specialized dictionary.

### CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

If access to the Marxist classics requires a familiarity with its terminology, the furtherance of Marxism as a science requires continual attention to concept clarification. Any science that strives for cumulative development must sharpen the accepted understandings of its basic concepts. Otherwise, to the extent that the basic tenets of the science are individually interpreted, that part of the cumulative development that is the result of the advantages of being a collective endeavor suffers.

This is not to argue for a dogmatic interpretation of the basics of Marxism. On the contrary, Marxism is a method for interpreting and changing the world, not a set of dogmatic assertions handed down *ex cathedra*. But attentiveness to method includes attentiveness to concept clarification. There can be a thin line between concept clarification and the idealist fallacy of fetishistically treating the definitions as more important than that which they define. Marxism constructs definitions in order to reflect the essence of a changing reality; as such, the definitions are secondary to that reality.<sup>1</sup> Though secondary, definitions are essential: revolutionary class consciousness is precisely the ability to define human and class reality accurately.

To expect everyone to agree with all the definitions would be totally unrealistic. No one could produce such a dictionary. Marxism is not positivism. There is plenty of room for disagreement on the fundamentals as the proliferation of tendencies within Marxism testifies. Thus one tendency or another will undoubtedly raise a howl of protests at the definition of particular concepts and will see the dark machinations of another tendency at work. There is nothing so calculated in this project. Although I have my own political perspective, my objective has been to come as close as possible to an orthodox Marxian rendition: to uncover what Marx and Engels meant by the terms in their writings. On some terms it is fairly obvious what they meant, but on others, interpretation must enter the definition. In those latter cases the reader will have to decide how reasonable the interpretation is.

With the exception of some post-Marx terms (such as historical materialism) that are widely used, only the terms that are in the writings of



Marx and Engels are included. Where available I have supplied definitions given by Marx and Engels. Where they used a term but did not define it directly, a derived definition appears. All the terms are in alphabetical order. Where advisable for the sake of clarity, I have grouped several terms under one heading (for example, *differential and absolute ground rent* under the heading *ground rent*). However, all terms are listed alphabetically in the table of contents though some may direct the reader to another heading.

NOTE 1. Cf. Proudon "has not perceived that economic categories are only abstract expressions of . . . actual relations and only remain true while these relations exist . . . the political-economic categories (are) abstract expressions of the real, transitory, historic social relations." Marx, letter to P. V. Annenkov, December 28, 1946.

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