To mark the hundredth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, Australian Left Review invited several individuals to write about Marx and the impact of his work on them as people and as political activists. ALR aimed for a wide cross section of viewpoints from the relatively inexperienced to seasoned campaigners, from confirmed enthusiasts to informed critics. In this edition ALR publishes articles by Bernie Taft, Toni Stephens, Jim Cairns, Simon Marginson, and Julius Roe. ALR hopes to continue the series in future issues with a view to developing further discussion around Marx and the relevance of his ideas to Australian society in 1983.

The impact of the Great Depression of 1929-33 on the heart and mind of a young lad growing up in Germany was bewildering. Poverty and fear were all around me. The growth of nazism, which I experienced directly in the classroom, was frightening and puzzling. There were hundreds of unanswered questions.

When, at the age of 14, I first read The Communist Manifesto, it was an eye-opener. There, it seemed to me, were the answers to what was troubling my young mind: the causes of the depression, poverty in the midst of plenty, the rise of fascism — it was all explained by the materialist conception of history.

Simplistic as my understanding of it was, it nevertheless provided an orientation, a way of explaining the world — and a pointer to changing it.

Indeed, the materialist conception of history that Marx elaborated and which is his lasting contribution to human history, is now largely part of our understanding of the course of social life and of the motor of historical development.

It is accepted — at least partially — by many people as a matter of course, even if they are often not aware of it. History is no longer explained solely or mainly by the actions of kings or queens, generals or great personalities. The underlying social conditions, the level of economic development, is generally acknowledged as a basis or at least a part of the cause of historical development.

It is this explanation of the motive forces of history and the analysis of the existing social system which is the core of "marxism".

Naturally (and this is very much in accord with Marx’s own conception), he was a product of his own period and was conditioned and limited by his time and circumstances. Those who elevate him as standing above and therefore outside of history, who deny his human dimension, do violence both to him and to his teachings.

It does not diminish his stature to note, 100 years later, that there are areas of social life that Marx did not encompass or, at that stage of history, could not adequately foresee or give due weight to.
To briefly sketch some of them:

* Marx clearly underestimated the force of nationalism. Its power, even after the displacement of the capitalist mode of production, has surprised all those who, in the marxist tradition, believed that its force would diminish. In fact, the opposite has occurred.

* The corrupting influence of power and the problems that arise from it were not foreseen by Marx. But this phenomenon adds a whole new dimension to the problem of the structures and organisation of a socialist society.

* The role of women in human history and in society was not adequately understood by him or his contemporaries. This is so, despite Engels' relatively progressive attitude for his time.

* At their stage of history, Marx and Engels did not face the problems of the finite nature of our resources and the destruction of our environment in the way that we do today, with all its implications.

* Naturally, Marx and Engels did not see the development of the Third World in both its specific problems and in its impact on the whole world and the revolutionary process.

Not only were Marx and Engels inevitably products of their own period, but they saw themselves and their views in this light. They regarded "Marxism" as open-ended, developing and evolving over time. Marx objected to the rigid, fixed interpretation of his views, to the point of once declaring that he was "not a Marxist".

He and Engels developed and changed their opinions as life unfolded and new circumstances arose. Note, for instance, Engels' introduction to The Class Struggles in france 1848-50, written in March 1895, a few months before his death:

The mode of struggle of 1848 is today obsolete from every point of view.

BERNIE TAFT is a member of the National Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Australia

And further:

History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong. It has made it clear that the state of economic development on the continent at that time was not, by a long way, ripe for the removal of capitalist production.

Basing himself on the experience of the Social democrats in the 1870s and '80s, Engels said they supplied their comrades of all countries with a new weapon, and one of the sharpest, when they showed them how to use universal suffrage.

He went on to say:

The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried on by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of the complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that. But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long persistent work is required ....

He goes on to say:

The irony of world history turns everything upside down. We, the "revolutionaries", the "rebels" — we are thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and revolt. The parties of order, as they call themselves, are perishing under the legal conditions created by themselves. They cry despairingly: .... legality is the death of us; whereas we, under this legality, get firm muscles and rosy cheeks and look like eternal life. And if we are not so crazy as to let ourselves into street fighting in order to please them, then nothing else is finally left for them but themselves to break through this legality so fatal to them.

Marx and Engels, despite the sharp and often harsh polemics, were capable of changing their views. They wrote differently at different times and in different circumstances.

The body of work that they left behind is wide enough, varied enough and even contradictory enough to be interpreted in different ways by those who set out to do this. Yet, to turn their writings into a kind of biblical text, with the future quoting what Marx and Engels said at various times against opposing interpreters, is quite contrary to the materialistic conception of history. But this is what has happened.

The "correct" interpretation of marxism was a feature of the Third International, and especially of the stalinist era. Within the Communist Party, it was a very dogmatic and mechanistic interpretation of marxism that we imbibed in those days. There was little encouragement to read marx's own historical writings; rather, the emphasis was on approved interpretations. Stalin, Dialectical and Historical Materialism, with its rigid over-simplified categories, figured prominently among them.

I clearly remember my surprise when, many years ago, I first read Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire and his Civil War in France. His vivid and many-sided interpretations seemed somewhat un-Marxist to me — so much had I got used to the prevailing rigidity that his flexible approach appeared at variance with the prevailing version of "marxism".

But curiously, the "return to Marx" which, in the West, followed the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and Khrushchev's denunciation of the "cult of Stalin" in 1956, produced a new crop of theorists, many of whom, though different, were equally rigid and one-sided in their interpretation of marxism. The marxist tradition remains important for the development of an adequate socialist theory. If the ongoing historical process of reshaping the world is turning out more complex, more difficult, more painful, and often different from what we'd imagined — this is what we should expect if we base ourselves on the marxist tradition.