Stuart McIntyre looks at the history of capitalism and revolutionary movements since Marx. He argues that although many of the social movements that have developed recently cannot be simply reduced to questions of class, class refuses to go away. For McIntyre, Marx's science of history remains relevant to the Australian labour movement today.

On the 14th March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think. He had been left alone for scarcely two minutes, and when we came back we found him in his armchair, peacefully gone to sleep — but for ever.

The words are those of Frederick Engels spoken at the graveside of Marx four days after his friend's death. Engels went on to say that an immeasurable loss has been sustained both by the militant proletariat of Europe and America, and by historical science, in the death of this man.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.

That comparison with Darwin, and that statement — "Marx discovered the law of development of human history" — immediately gives us a cultural context. Marx belongs to that group of thinkers who in the Victorian age laid the foundation of our modern areas of knowledge: in addition to Marx and Darwin we can think of Charles Lyell (geology) or James Murray (philology and etymology), James Frazer (anthropology) and many others. These men have more in common than the fact that they were bearded patriarchs. Mostly operating from the universities, they were essentially solitary gentlemen scholars of independent means (and despite his poverty, Dr Marx fits into this category) who devoted their lives to their particular science. They were universalists, heirs both of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the mechanical age in which they lived, seeking a system of thought, categories and laws that would enable them to comprehend the broad sweep of their subject and its place in the order of things. Engels' reverence is not just the reverence for an intimate friend and comrade, it is reverence for someone he deemed to be "the greatest living thinker".

Why does Marx stand out from this gallery of pioneers? Why are Marx's writings read and discussed as having a continuing meaning when we regard his contemporaries either with curiosity or awe? Partly because his area of knowledge — the law of development of human history and also what Engels called 'the special law of motion' governing the capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois society that the capitalist mode created — retains its relevance. And partly, of course, because Marx produced something more than a philosophy or a science, namely a social movement. He was both a thinker and a revolutionary activist. To quote Engels again:

Science was for Marx a historically dynamic, revolutionary force.

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.

We commemorate Marx a century after his death because of his association with the momentous changes that have taken place since then. He died, as it happened, at a lowpoint in the fortunes of the revolutionary working class. He had seen and experienced personally the defeats of the 1848 uprising in Germany, France and elsewhere; he
had seen the massacre of the French Communards in 1871; and then the capture of the First Socialist International and its collapse in the 1870s. He died, in fact, during the heyday of European capitalism, when the leading capitalist powers had weathered the social and economic crises of initial industrialisation and seemed secure, when they were subordinating all other parts of the world to their rule and creating the international capitalist economy.

Engels was more fortunate: he lived long enough to see the creation of the Second International and to take an active part in its growth.

I want to consider his legacy from the perspective of the progress of the Marxist movement — and its setbacks — in the past hundred years, and in doing so I want to consider some of the changes that capitalism has thrown up. In the light of this historical review we can come back to Marx himself and assess his modern relevance.

Let us jump forward a third of a century from the Highgate Cemetery to Russia in 1917. For better or for worse, the Russian Revolution remains the most important example of a revolution by Marxists. I don’t think it is necessary to rehearse in detail Lenin’s explanation of why revolution should have occurred there rather than in the advanced capitalist societies — Germany, France or Britain. But we can point to three essential elements.

First, there was his analysis of capitalism as a world system, a system of imperialism whereby the spoils of colonialism and superprofits reaped from pre-capitalist sectors enriched the metropolitan powers and gave them a stability. Coupled with this was his criticism of workers’ parties in Western Europe who, he said, had turned Marxism into a doctrine of evolutionary socialism so that the transformation to socialism had to await the maturation of capitalism.

Second, there was the appreciation that Russia’s uneven development — a fragile and immature capitalism imposed suddenly on a despotic social and political order — allowed special opportunities. But third, there was Lenin’s expectation that while Russia might anticipate the major capitalist countries because of its special circumstances, made more opportune by the crisis engendered by defeat in the First World War, that same war crisis would precipitate revolution in Western Europe. If the Bolsheviks could seize power, take in hand the first steps towards emancipation, and hold out for two or three years, he thought they would be joined by the rest of the working class.

As we know, he was mistaken in this expectation. The major capitalist powers weathered the political crisis of 1917–1920; by resorting to fascism in more vulnerable countries, they weathered the great economic crisis of the 1930s. The Marxists in the Soviet Union were thus left to construct a socialist order in circumstances they had not anticipated and in the face of unremitting capitalist hostility. They survived and they survive at great cost.

If the Soviet Union has avoided the worst excesses of capitalism, it has done so by political repression and forms of economic control that Marx would have found difficult to anticipate.

These are real problems. In the second period of working-class advance associated with the Second World War and the post-war decolonisation, Marxists in Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, Viet Nam and elsewhere have encountered the intractability of these problems first encountered in the Soviet Union.

Where revolutionaries have come to power in exploited and economically backward countries, countries with large non-capitalist sectors and social elements, after protracted conflict and against unremitting hostility from the capitalist world powers, there is no easy way to construct socialism.

This raises fresh the course of events in the capitalist heartlands. I don’t think that I am guilty of heresy in suggesting that capitalism has displayed greater resourcefulness, greater longevity than would have been thought possible in the second half of the nineteenth century. Certainly in the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels anticipated that the final crisis of capitalism could not long be delayed. Even in Capital and other later works, Marx looked forward to deepening crises, increasing impoverishment of the proletariat, growing polarisation of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and heightened class consciousness on the part of the working-class majority. What has happened?

We have certainly seen recurrent capitalist crises, we have seen the enormous wastefulness and destructive power of capitalism, but we have also seen it weather the major crises. Not least, there has been the extension of capitalist relations into new fields and the development of new commodities — from motor cars and microchips to leisure industries and the commercialisation of blood. These
Socialists have to be aware of the actual possibilities of an historical situation. In Russia in 1917 special circumstances and opportunities enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power. But elsewhere major capitalist powers have weathered political and economic crisis. Above: Workers of the Petrograd Arsenal during the July 1917 demonstration.

Social movements such as the environment movement, peace and nuclear disarmament movement, and the women’s liberation movement, have developed which can not be reduced, simply and only, to questions of class. Yet class refuses to go away — unemployment and obscene contrasts of wealth and poverty make this clear. Above left: Residents demonstrate against the building of the F19 freeway in Melbourne in 1977. Top right: The ‘Embrace the Base’ demonstration by 30,000 women against the siting of USA Cruise missiles at Greenham Common airbase in England. Bottom right: Wollongong Out-of-Workers Union commandeer the merry-go-round at the civic centre in Canberra, 23.8.83, during demonstrations for higher dole payments.
devices have at the very least delayed
the declining rate of profit and given
the capitalist fresh fields of
exploitation.

We have seen also that the
capitalist state has taken on a new
complexity and effectiveness. It
commands and engrosses a large
proportion of the gross national
product; it regulates the economy
through fiscal and other mechanisms
devised in this century; it employs
directly a large part of the workforce
and provides work for many more.
Furthermore, the political mechanisms
that Marx was able to observe in the
United States, Australia, New Zealand
and, to a lesser extent, in Western
Europe — mechanisms based on
democratically elected legislatures,
and the modern executive — have been
carried through. With them the process
of political legitimation rests on a quite
different basis than when the state was
overly undemocratic and repressive.

Finally, the class structure of
capitalism remains complex.

Certainly we have a class that
owns or controls the means of
production, and certainly we have a
working class that relies for the means
of subsistence on the sale of its labour-
power. But we also have a large and
growing category of middle strata —
not just the professions and self-
employed, the petty bourgeoisie, but
notably a salariat of white collar
workers and the like and those
performing the distributive,
administrative, information-
procession tasks which occupy a
strategic place in modern economic
life.

With the erosion of the classical
proletariat we have the development of
ideologies and social movements that
are not based on work (even through
they raise issues about work), and are
not centred on class and production. I
refer here to movements based on
ethnicity and nationality, those
concerned with the environment since
the creation of nuclear weapons, and
especially over the past decade, peace
movements and demands for nuclear
disarmament, and, above all, the
women's movement.

I am not saying that these are
unrelated to questions of class and
production — they are — but it is clear
that they cannot be reduced to
questions of class in the way that
Marxists sometimes try to reduce
them.

So what are we to say about Marx's
law of the development of human
history, which Engels summarised at
the graveside as follows:

the simple fact, hitherto concealed by

an overgrowth of ideology, that
mankind must first of all eat, drink,
have shelter and clothing, before it can
pursue politics, science, art, religion,
etc.; that therefore the production of
the immediate material means of
subsistence and consequently the
degree of economic development
attained by a given people or during a
given epoch form the foundation upon
which the state institutions, the legal
conceptions, art, and even the ideas on
religion, of the people concerned have
been evolved, and in the light of which
they must, therefore, be explained,
instead of vice versa, as had hitherto
been the case.

The doctrine of historical
materialism has had as much ink split
over it as any part of Marx's doctrine.

relations of production; on the other
we have that tradition associated
particularly with continental critical
theory which emphasises the
dialectical aspects of Marx’s thought.
A similar difference of emphasis can be
observed among Marxist historians.
One school of interpretation insists on
relations of determination, the
structures in which human activity is
contained and their effects on
historical practice. This was a tradition
in which most Marxist historians
worked up to the 1960s; we can think,
for example, even of Brian Fitzpatrick
who produced the most substantial
historical materialist account of
Australia's past, in which the crucial
process was Australia’s part in the
world economy, and especially British
imperialism, and the effect of the
capitalist mode on social and political
relations.

The other tradition rejects such
determinism, and in the case of its
most polemical exponent, Edward
Thompson, is fiercely critical of
structural explanation. It places the
emphasis on the class struggle, on the
mobilisation of men and women, and
on human agency. This has had the
salutary effect of restoring a balance
against the over-fatalist effects of
began its summit discussions with
representatives of labour, capital, and
all the other interest groups,
committed to the task of national
reconciliation. Every Australian, the
Prime Minister tells us, has to learn to
live with each other: the mission of his
government is to be national
reconciliation. Truly, Marx’s science of
history has a relevance for us and a
relevance to the Australian labour
movement.

"...after we have acknowledged the emergence of the new political forces and our neglect of issues such as race and gender, it remains the case that class refuses to go away."