

"... people are at last compelled to face

# With Sober Senses

their real conditions of life, and their relations with their kind." —Karl Marx

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## Marx's Struggle against Defamation: 150th Anniv. tribute to "Herr Vogt"

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[Editors' note, Oct. 8, 2011: Readers may also be interested in the related *WSS* article, concerning libel against the author: "Condemn Libelous Attack on Marx Scholar."]

## Marx's Struggle against Defamation: A 150th Anniversary Tribute to *Herr Vogt*

by Andrew Kliman, author of *Reclaiming Marx's "Capital": A refutation of the myth of inconsistency*

In 1857, Karl Marx resumed work on his critique of political economy, a process that culminated in the publication of *Capital* a decade later. He wrote a rough draft (the *Grundrisse*) in 1857 and 1858, parts of which he then reworked into the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which was published in June 1859. Then, in 1861 through 1863, he wrote a revised draft of the whole of *Capital*, which was followed by a more polished draft written during 1864 and 1865. Finally, he revised the first volume yet again, during 1866 and 1867. It appeared in September, 1867.

The careful reader will have noticed a rather lengthy gap in this chronology. From the second half of 1859 through 1860, Marx was not working on his critique of political economy. What was he doing instead? *What was so important, so much more of an urgent priority than his theoretical work?*

The answer is that Marx was fighting back against Carl Vogt's defamatory attack. He fought back in order to defend his reputation and that of his "party." This month marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Herr Vogt*, the book Marx wrote in order to set the record straight.

Vogt was a prominent *radical* German politician and materialist philosopher who had emigrated to Switzerland, where he served in parliament and was also a professor of geology. His position on the 1859 war over Italian unification had a pro-French tilt, which resulted in the publication of a newspaper article and an anonymous pamphlet that alleged—correctly—that Vogt was being paid by the French government. Vogt believed that Marx was the source of the allegation and that he had written the pamphlet. (The first belief was partly correct; the second was incorrect.)

Vogt fought back by attacking Marx. He published a short book that described Marx as the leader of a band of blackmailers who demanded payment in return for keeping quiet about their victims' revolutionary histories. The book also contained other false and harmful allegations against Marx. "M[arx]'s future [was] at stake, since Vogt [went] all-out to destroy his reputation" (Draper 1985, p. 93).

Yet these personal attacks were not *merely* personal. When it comes to someone like Marx, the personal is political. And Vogt, who had come to repudiate the cause of social revolution,

resorted to falsification of the facts and to barefaced lies to libel the Communist League, portraying its members as conspirators in secret contact with the police and accusing Marx of personal motives. The libel was taken up by the European bourgeois press and also by a number of German papers published in the USA." [editors' Preface 1985, p. xxxiii]

Ferdinand Lassalle warned Marx that Vogt's book "will do great harm to yourself and to the whole party, for it relies in a deceptive way upon half-truths," and said that "something must be done" in response (quoted in Rubel 1980, p. 53). Frederick Engels also urged Marx to respond quickly, and he provided a good deal of assistance when Marx wrote *Herr Vogt*.

But the writing of *Herr Vogt* was only the last resort. At first, Marx tried to restore his reputation and that of his "party" by going to court. Two publications—the *National-Zeitung* of Berlin and the *Daily Telegraph* of London—had reprinted Vogt's libelous accusations, so Marx sued them for defamation of character. In a February 23, 1860 letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, he argued that these lawsuits were "crucial to the *historical vindication* of the party and its subsequent position in Germany" (emphasis in original).

When Marx referred to "the party," he did not mean the Communist League, which was then defunct. In a follow-up letter of February 29 to Freiligrath, who refused to assist in the struggle against defamation on the grounds that he no longer belonged to the party, Marx explained that "by 'party' I [did not

mean] a 'League' that expired eight years ago, or an editorial board that was disbanded twelve years ago. By party, I meant the party in the broad historical sense."

Thus, Marx took legal action, and eventually wrote *Herr Vogt*, in order to vindicate the philosophical and theoretical perspectives for which the party stood. As Raya Dunayevskaya pointed out, these perspectives continued to guide Marx's thought and activity, and thus "the party" lived on, even though a specific organizational expression of those perspectives was defunct:

Because ... an independent proletarian organization, and one that would be both international and have the goal of revolution and a new society—was so central to his views, Marx kept referring to "the Party" when all that was involved was himself and Engels.

What Marx called "party in the eminent historical sense" (Letter to Freiligrath, 29 February 1860) was alive to Marx throughout the entire decade when no organization existed in the 1850s with which he could associate. [Dunayevskaya 1991, p. 155]

Unfortunately, Marx's legal actions did not succeed. The Berlin court threw out the case against the *National-Zeitung* and its editor, citing "insufficient evidence" and stating that "no discernible public interest was involved" in the case. Marx appealed this decision multiple times, but the higher courts refused to reverse it.

A court's declaration that Vogt's accusations against Marx were false would have been more effective than his own protestations. It is simply to be expected that the victim of reputation-destroying charges will claim that they are false. It is a "dog bites man" story; who pays attention? But when a disinterested body studies the evidence, deliberates, and then concludes that the charges are false, that is true vindication. It is a "man bites dog" story; people sit up and take notice.

But the bourgeoisie did not want to help Marx restore his reputation. On the contrary, as he noted in an April 24, 1860 letter to Engels, after the Berlin court stated that "no discernible public interest was

involved” in the case, “It is, of course, ‘an issue of public importance’ to the Prussian government that we should be traduced [i.e., humiliated by means of malicious and false statements] to the utmost.” So, in order to try to set the record straight, Marx had only one option left—to write *Herr Vogt*. It came out on December 1, 1860.

Marx received a good deal of support in his battle against defamation. For instance, Engels helped defray his legal expenses and assisted him with *Herr Vogt*. The German Workers Educational Association “immediately supported him vigorously” (Mehring 1962, p. 297) and unanimously passed a resolution condemning Vogt’s libelous allegations. Charles Anderson Dana, editor-in-chief of the *New York Daily Tribune*, assisted Marx’s legal action against defamation by providing a testimonial letter. And Ernest Jones, the former Chartist leader, wrote a letter (included in an appendix to *Herr Vogt*) which stated,

I have read a series of infamous articles against you in the *National-Zeitung* and am utterly astonished at the falsehood and malignity of the writer. I really feel it a duty that every one who is acquainted with you, should, however unnecessary such a testimony must be, pay a tribute to the worth, honour and disinterestedness of your character. ... Permit me to hope that you will severely punish your dastardly and unmanly libeler. [Jones, quoted in Marx 1981, p. 323]

In marked contrast to this, many intellectuals have evinced a shockingly hardhearted and dismissive attitude toward *Herr Vogt* and Marx’s struggle against defamation. Such intellectuals do not seem outraged by the fact that Vogt published untrue things about Marx, nor by the fact that his lies threatened the reputation of Marx and his “party.” Expressions of support for Marx’s actions in defense of himself and the “party,” or even signs of simple human sympathy, are rare.

For example, Francis Wheen (2000, p. 238), a recent biographer of Marx, refers to Marx’s struggle against defamation as “a spectacular, pointless feud against one Karl Vogt” and an “absurd interlude.” David McLellan (1977, p. 311), another biographer of Marx, calls it a “quarrel” and “a striking example

both of Marx’s ability to expend tremendous labour on essentially trivial matters and also of his talent for vituperation.” And in his chronology of Marx’s life and works, Hal Draper (1985, p. 92) dismissed the controversy as a “time-consuming foofaraw”—i.e., a great disturbance over a very insignificant matter—even though he recognized that Vogt was engaged in “a massive campaign to discredit M[arx] personally,” and that “M[arx]’s future [was] at stake, since Vogt [went] all-out to destroy his reputation” (Draper 1985, p. 93). It is unclear why Draper regarded Marx’s future and reputation as insignificant.

Many of these intellectuals seem miffed that the struggle against defamation was a more urgent priority for Marx than was his theoretical work, and that this may have caused *Capital* to appear in late 1867 instead of in early 1866. Marcello Musto (2008, p. 394, p. 395), a political scientist, charges that the Vogt affair made Marx “neglect his economic studies” and “lose sight even of his project of critique of political economy”; Musto’s evidence seems to consist of the fact that Marx interrupted his work on that project. Wheen (2000, p. 254) alleges that Marx’s work on *Capital* was “catastrophically interrupted by the feud with Vogt,” but provides no evidence that the interruption led to any catastrophe.

Robin Fox (2004, p. 36), a Rutgers University anthropologist, cites the fact that Marx’s work on *Capital* was interrupted as evidence that “the future of Socialism was less important to Marx than the countering of heresy and libel.” Given that academics are supposed to be dedicated to the search for truth, Fox’s dismissive attitude toward the countering of libel is no small matter. But what is especially bizarre about his conclusion is the fact that he counterposes “the future of Socialism” to Marx’s struggle against Vogt’s libelous charges—as if the future of socialism depends only on theoretical works while the reputation of Marx’s “party,” and Marx himself, were irrelevant.

I do not at all mean to imply that *Capital*, or theoretical work generally, is unimportant, or unimportant to the future of socialism. I have spent a great deal of time studying and writing about *Capital*, and I have fought hard to help reclaim it from the myth that its value theory and law of the

tendential fall in the rate of profit are internally inconsistent (see, e.g., Kliman 2007). But when crises arise, they take priority. And it makes no sense to me to treat *Capital* and Marx's struggle against defamation as opposites. Marx was no "armchair radical." *Capital*, and his "party," and his personal reputation were all necessary and inseparable parts of the struggle for a new human society. After all, what would have been the fate of *Capital*, or the Marxian conception of socialism, if Vogt's vile allegations had been accepted as true because Marx offered no defense against them?

The problem is not that intellectuals such as those quoted above dislike Marx. Almost all of them like Marx. But one gets the sense that some of them like Marx in the way that people in certain Asian countries like dogs: not as friends and companions, but hacked into pieces and served to them as something to consume and digest. In contrast to Marx's theoretical work, *Herr Vogt* offers them no benefits—Marx wrote it to benefit himself and "the party," not readers—so they regard it as a worthless expenditure of his time and energy.

And one gets the sense that very few of them have any personal experience with libel. The fact that I am the victim of a libelous review recently published in the *Review of Radical Political Economics*—about which I hope to write more later—perhaps explains in part why I am more sympathetic to Marx's struggle against defamation and less willing to second-guess his priorities.

Carl Vogt and the circumstances that gave rise to his defamatory attack against Marx and his "party" are dead and gone. But *Herr Vogt* and Marx's battle against defamation remain living exemplars of how one responds in a genuinely Marx-ian way—i.e., the way of Marx. Do not separate theory from practice, or philosophy from organization. Do not retreat to the ivory tower or suffer attacks in silence; set the record straight. Use the bourgeois courts if necessary. Enlist the assistance of others.

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