Karl Marx was born a little over 200 years ago in Trier, Germany. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall on the other side of Germany, Marx’ teachings seemed to have become obsolete. But in the beginning of the 21st century, it appears that Marx’ philosophy and some of his economic ideas have remained relevant, and might even be revived.

Our observations

• Marx was voted the most influential philosopher of all time in a 2005 BBC Radio poll, as nearly four in ten people on earth lived under governments that claimed to be Marxist when the Berlin Wall fell.

• Marx turned Hegel’s understanding of history on its head: instead of a spiritual foundation - such as religion, art, the Absolute - regulating the course of history, history is determined by material conditions, in which material oppositions stimulate historical developments (from feudal lord versus farmer, to capitalist versus proletarian, to platform owner versus errand boy). Following this “historical materialism”, Marx concluded that instead of Hegel’s Geist, money has become our God and makes the world go round.

• Capitalism has a tendency to magnify inequality, according to Marx’ analysis in Das Kapital, as capital increasingly concentrates in the hands of the few at the cost of the many. Those who own the means of production – capitalists – are even forced to exploit those who don’t own the means of production – proletarians – or else they will be put out of business by others who will do so.

• Marx distinguished between societies’ base- and superstructures. The base-structure consists of the material conditions and the methods and relations of production means (who owns how much of them). The superstructure is comprised of our beliefs, morals and habits, and is the ideological reflection of this base-structure. As such, a society’s consciousness always reflects a certain material division and use of tools production within the base-structure, and even legitimizes this.
Nearly 135 years after Marx’ death, history seems to have rendered his ideas and his theories on capitalism, history and philosophy obsolete. One of Marx’ biggest accomplishments in his 1867 magnus opus *Das Kapital* is that he derives the definition of capitalism from its own presuppositions, by showing that capitalism is the rational and logical realization of a long historical process. Furthermore, he derives the logic of capital from the systematics of this capitalist mode of production and society, thus providing a “philosophical” understanding of economics and the history of economics. Taking Marx’ economic ideas and theories as philosophical ideas on the nature of our economy and modern society still provides valuable insights and teachings. The title of the 2013 book that made Thomas Piketty a famous economist contains an explicit reference to *Das Kapital*: “Capital in the 21st century”. In this work, Piketty’s central claim is that the rate of return of capital has been higher than the growth rate of the real economy in the long term, and that inequality has therefore been rising structurally. And by showing that inequality is not accidental but an inherent aspect of capitalist societies, Piketty addresses a typically Marxist point. Furthermore, Marx’ analysis of the opposition between the “haves” and the “have-nots” remains as relevant as ever, especially with the return of masters and servants in our gig economy. Although some of Marx’ economic theories – i.e. the idea that labor and capital are perfect substitutes or that the capitalist organization is only a form of rent-seeking with no real value creation – have been proven wrong, Marxism remains alive and kicking for most of the world. China’s Communist Party has adopted “scientific socialism” as its official ideology by adapting it to the Chinese context (“Marxism with Chinese characteristics”). Doing so, the Party legitimates its rule with reference to Marx’ core idea that alienation and inequality are inherent aspects of capitalist societies, and that only the communist state can lift 800 million out of extreme poverty in a few decades. Extending this idea by stating that the social stratification between those who own and those who do not own the means of production has become global and is ever-increasing for the world’s poorest, an adaptive Marxist ideology or economic model might become attractive for other developing countries. And indeed, Marxism seems to be on the rise again. Furthermore, we are all Marxist in a philosophical sense, as few believe that history is determined by ideals or other “transcendent” motives. Instead, many do hold the “Marxist” view that the way we see and understand the world is primarily a function of our historical, socio-economic conditions. For example, that consumers in “backward” countries will become less religious when they get smartphones and middle-income economies “end their grand narratives” when they become advanced ones.

**Implications**

- Following Marx’ thought that our socio-economic, material conditions shape our thinking, digital technology might also generate new philosophies and ideas how to regulate our societies and economies. And as Marx showed that our tools shape our thinking, the increased negative connotations of social media and smartphones, or the increased power and wealth of Big Tech, might revive interest in Marxist anthropology, sociology and philosophy.

- A general misconception about Marx is that he claimed the communist state was the finalization of history. In fact, Marx claimed that states are only a temporary moment in the development of history, necessary for the privatization and equal distribution of wealth and property. As our needs and preferences are determined by our historical, material conditions, the state should abolish itself as soon as there is perfect equality, as no human being in the communist utopia would feel the necessity to own private property or exploit others. As Marx’ conception of capital as the most abstract form of material conditions has the radical tokenization of our worlds as its anti-thesis, Marxist philosophy would embrace a decentral network economy as a solution to the problem of alienation. As such, it might fit into the state ideologies of China, Singapore or Russia.