

# Making your Marx in research: Reflections on impact and the efficacy of case studies using the work of Karl Marx.

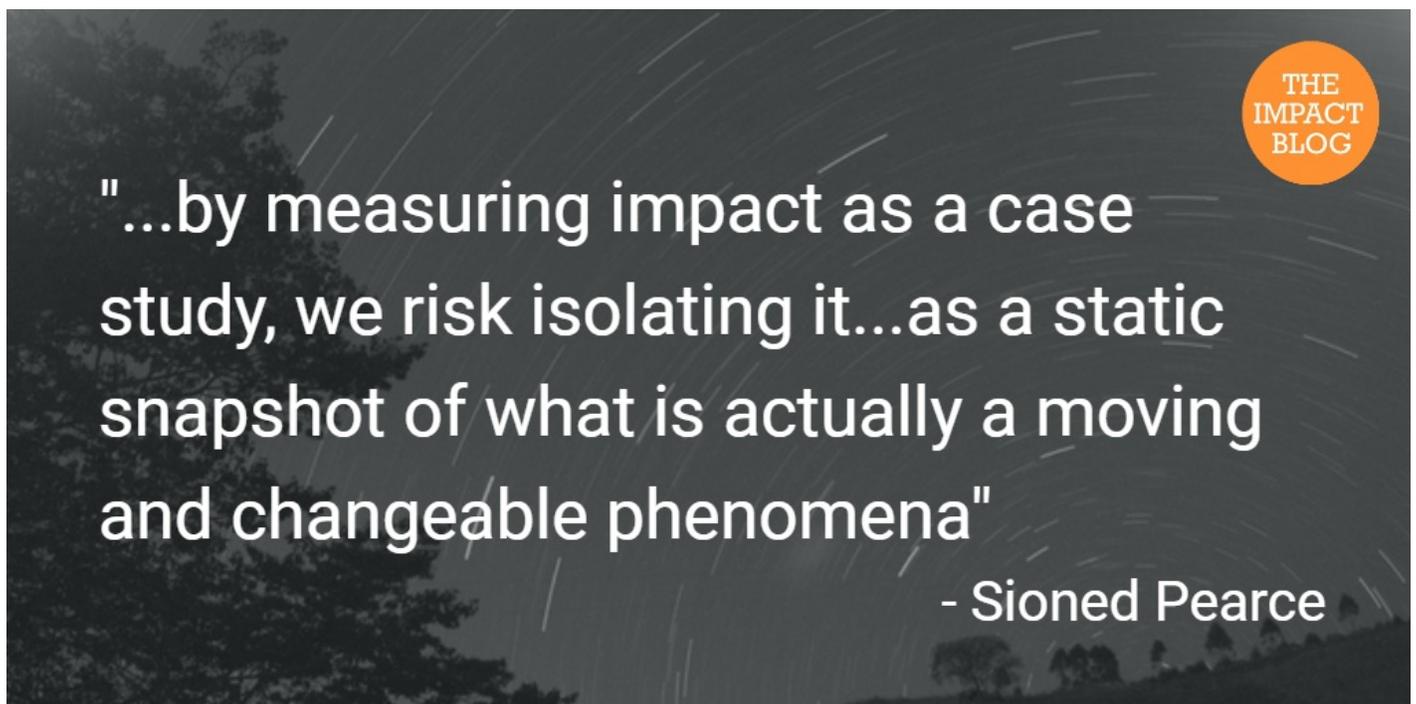
 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/06/01/making-your-marx-in-research/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/06/01/making-your-marx-in-research/)

*Drawing from a recent study on how impact occurs in the social sciences, [Sioned Pearce](#) looks at some specific issues with the case study approach to understanding impact. Viewed alongside the life and works of Karl Marx, the REF's approach to impact measurement can be seen as highly problematic. Marx's work was an accumulation of a lifetime of intellectual thought, the full effect of which did not emerge until 100 years after his death and his research would not have been eligible for an impact case study.*



The REF 2014 [defined impact](#) as “an effect on, change or benefit to, the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life”. The Economic and Social Research Council's Pathways to Impact defines it as “the demonstrable contribution ... to society and the economy”. Evidence of this effect or contribution will dictate research funding flow and direction to UK Universities for the foreseeable future.

Universities are now creating structures and posts to lead on impact generation and measurement in preparation for REF 2021 and in anticipation of the [Stern Review](#) findings. Despite the quantity and breadth of research impact case studies submitted to REF 2014, most clearly shown in Jonathan Grant's report on [the nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact](#) (2015), I argue that in the context of the social sciences case studies cannot capture the ‘full’ effect or contribution of academic research to society over the past 25 years.



Case study evidence for REF 2014 was wide ranging and included statements from policy makers; citation in a public discussion; growth of small businesses; media reviews; satisfaction measures; inclusion in third, charity or voluntary sector strategies; user feedback or testimony and documented change to professional standards or behaviour, among others. However, the evidence was also inherently one small part of a wider projects rooted in a theory or movement, which relies on ongoing debate, communication and interaction between people in the field to develop.

Indeed, while case studies were judged on their reach and significance as well as writing style and structure, the approach has been critiqued for its instrumentalisation of impact. Specifically [Watermeyer and Hedegco \(2016\)](#) ([blogpost](#)) have critiqued the neoliberalising and professionalised HE institutional system facilitating this approach for rewarding academic ability to 'sell' the case study over more substantive claims. In short by measuring impact as a case study, we risk isolating it within the parameters of its presentation as a static snapshot of what is actually a moving and changeable phenomena, and dissociating it from its origins.

In the social sciences, measuring impact through number of citations, size of audience or political scale, for example, brings an additional problem as raised in James Wilsdon's et. al. (2015) [Metric Tide](#). Metrics to measure research impact in the humanities for REF 2014 stems from New Labour's heavy investment in scientific research from 1997 to 2007 and the then PM Gordon Brown's wish to see a return on this investment. While scientific research adheres to metric measurements of impact, social science research is often investigative, theoretically orientated and critical; the findings do not necessarily translate easily to direct tangible outcomes. Tailoring impact measurement to the social sciences has only recently been given more consideration and when taking the milieu of social science ontologies and epistemologies into account, the full 'effect on' or 'contribution to' society is arguably impossible to measure. To paraphrase one interviewee's astute analogy of this: "...it's like breaking a snooker table, you can control the first shot but you don't know where the balls will go."

This quote comes from a research project currently being carried out at the [Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Data and Methods](#) (WISERD), Cardiff University, to examine the concept of impact as a phenomenon in the social sciences. The project involves interviews with academics, policy makers and civil society actors on their definitions, methods and motivations for research impact. From preliminary analysis, adding to the difficulties of measurement outlined above, time and resource constraints are a big issue. While the Higher Education Funding Council for England stipulated a time frame of twenty five years (from 1988 to 2013) for research underpinning impact in REF 2014, in some cases the impact arising over this length of time goes beyond the parameters of the research project and is therefore not 'captured' by the researcher(s) who have moved on out of necessity. And in some cases, 25 years is simply not enough time. Funding such as the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account has gone some way to mitigating this but the funding limits do not always cover salary costs leaving the researcher to pursue impact measurement on the side of a different research project. In this sense even when quantification is possible it cannot be carried out.

Finally, and most importantly, impact goes to the heart of why we research society: to understand but also to influence and change. Motivations for wanting to have an impact can be divided crudely:

1. professional requirements (most closely linked to REF 2014),
2. altruistic or to benefit society and
3. curiosity and/or a desire to question the world we live in.

However, when looking at motivations there is a difference between 'wanting to have an impact' and 'wanting your research to be included in a policy document'. The latter approach was widely seen as curtailing the many possible different directions of the research findings and going against the premise of investigative research.

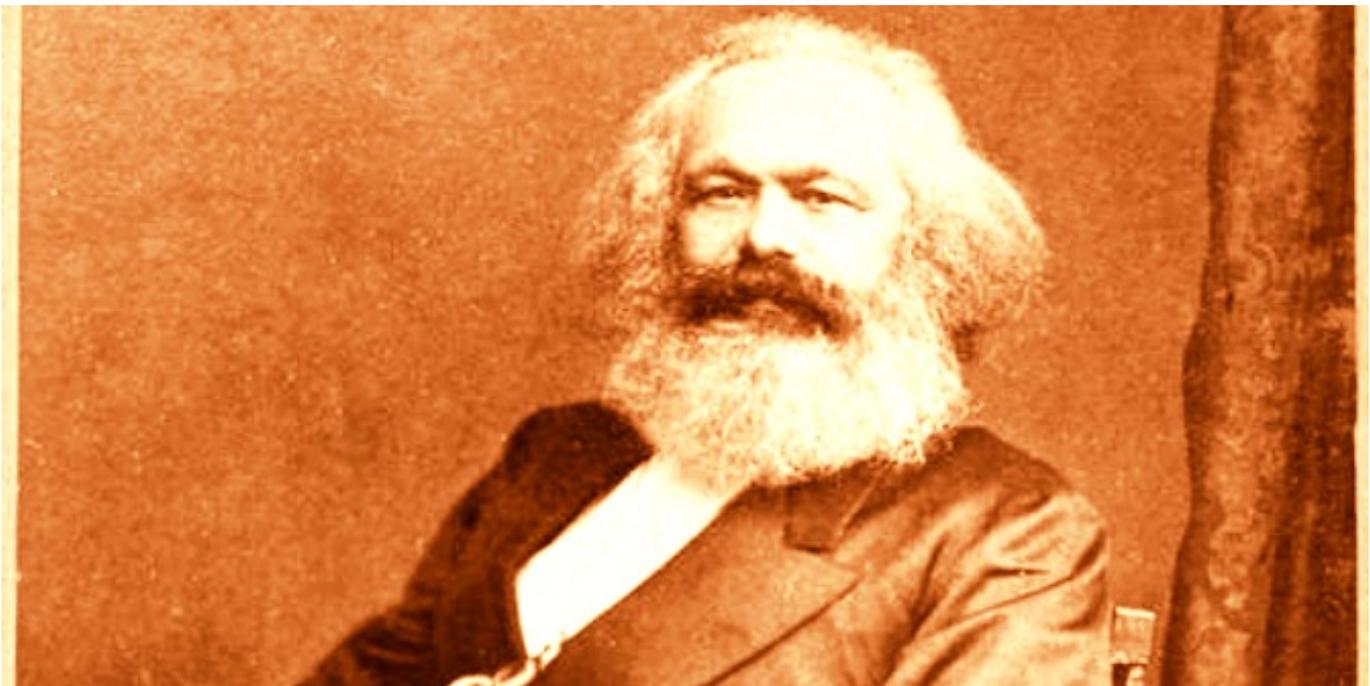
In order to explore these issues further I now turn to the life and career of revolutionary philosopher, Karl Marx. His theories of class struggle, alienation, historical materialism and capitalism now influence our understanding of the socio-economic structures in which we live. His work has also influenced and led to socialist and counter-socialist movements across the globe, most notably the Soviet revolutions in Russia and China. He has arguably had the largest effect on our understanding of the economic and social world as we know it; in short he has had an impact.

## **What was Marx's pathway to impact and what can we learn from it?**

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world...The point, however, is to change it (Karl Marx 1888)*

Marx was born to a middle class family on the 5th May 1818 in Trier, North West Germany. Having failed his first year of Law at Cologne University Marx was sent to Berlin. There he met lecturer and leader of Junghegelianer ([the Young Hegelians](#)) Bruno Bauer. The group was driven by Hegel's philosophy of idealism and the premise that society is constructed by subjectivities. Marx became an active member throughout his degree and, upon finishing, his aim was to pursue an academic career in philosophy. In 1841 he won a doctoral scholarship to the University of Jena through an essay on the work of Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus.

However, the political climate in Germany was not supportive of Marx's philosophical outlook as the authoritarian rulers within the German confederation were cracking down on intellectuals threatening to disrupt the hierarchical status quo. Wider political forces drove his university to restrict intellectual thought perceived as a threat to political power, meaning Marx's research was kept 'underground' and while emerging from the intellectual environment was not fostered by the institutional structures; an important distinction between structure and agency. The way state suppression strengthened the cause in this case, as is often the case, is interesting to consider in terms of impact. Finally the removal of Bauer from Berlin University for his use of rationalist theory in teaching theology drove Marx to change career paths.



**Image credit: Portrait of Marx by [John Jabez Edwin Mayall](#) – [International Institute of Social History](#) in [Amsterdam, Netherlands](#) (Public Domain – modified)**

He became a journalist in 1842 and joined Die Rheinische Zeitung newspaper and his writing became steadily more left wing in its critique of the feudal laws which still existed in Germany as he moved up the ranks to editor. The newspaper was shut down by German authorities in 1843 and Marx was forced to flee to Paris. The move led him to meet the successful businessman turned socialist, Frederick Engels. Marx and Engels went on to co-author the German Ideology, a critique of German and Prussian feudal regimes drawing on the work of Hegel, for which they could find no publisher during Marx's lifetime.

Marx was then forced to flee Paris for Brussels as his reputation as a radical thinker in Germany became known to

the French authorities. Marx was in Brussels for three years during which time he visited the UK to attend the International Socialist Conference in 1847, from which stemmed the Communist Party Manifesto, published in 1848. That year Marx and his family, forced again to flee from Brussels, moved to London where he would spend the rest of his days living in poverty and ill health due to lack of steady income or permanent employment. For this reason, despite having worked on his masterpiece for over twenty five years, *Das Kapital* was unfinished by his death in 1883.

Marx's work was an accumulation of a lifetime of intellectual thought, the full effect of which did not emerge until 100 years after his death. Though his work was printed in newspapers and pamphlets, it was not published in an academic journal. His research would not have been eligible for an impact case study, made irrelevant by the fact that he did not work within any one institutional structure or country. However, his ideas influenced socialist political groups and their actions at the time, tangible evidence of impact e.g. number of newspaper articles published, use and development of his work in manifestos and political party processes. In this case, short term outcomes were an indication and indicative of the 'full' impact which emerged over a century later. This is despite neither being underpinned by academic publications nor protected or encouraged by the institutions in which he worked. Subsequently he received neither government nor grant funding to pursue his research and relied on private funds, provided largely by Engels.

While leaders and revolutionaries such as Lenin and Castro have declared his work the greatest writing on political economy in existence, its 'full' impact has gathered momentum over centuries and through the intellectual debate, thought and practice of many people beside the author. In this case the impact is a collective, ongoing and contested element in a constant state of flux. This is shown by the use and devastating misuse of Marx's theory during the 20th century compared with, what some would argue is, its increasing importance in times of economic instability and uncertainty, most notably in the UK, since the crisis of 2008 onwards.

While noting what is possible to measure is valuable, defining and measuring the impact of academic research through case studies and tangible evidence does not represent its 'full' impact within the field of research. This is problematic and an alternative way to define, measure and capture research in the humanities is yet to be formulated. [WISERD research](#) exploring the definition, methods and motivations for research impact will continue to explore these issues inside and outside of academia and the role of universities in fostering impact in an increasingly professionalised environment.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## **About the Author**

**Dr Sioned Pearce** is a Research Associate in political sociology at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Data and Methods (WISERD) at Cardiff University. She is interested in impact as a contested concept in understanding the relations between state and (civil) society, particularly in the context of devolution and constitutional change. She is also co-running a study of young people and the EU referendum, details [available here](#).

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