

FROM POLITICS TO THEORY: THE EARLY PUBLIC RECEPTION OF MARX IN BRITAIN, 1885–1887

Filippo Pietrini

Dipartimento di Scienze per l'Economia e l'Impresa (Unifi)

April 2024

Abstract

The visibility of Karl Marx in England had a 'major breakthrough' according to Willis (1977): the publication of the first volume of 'Das Kapital' in English in 1887. Although Willis provides a quantitative description of Marx mentions based on library records, book circulation statistics and newspaper mentions, the attribution of the effect to a single event remains a simplification of a complex process. The specificities of late Victorian society and the fact that Marx wrote his theoretical works in German contributed to his near anonymity in England up to the second half of the 1880s. The liberal radical roots of the left-wing intellectuals and of the working class movements, together with the strong parliamentary tradition, constituted a challenging environment for the spread of Marx's name. With data from Google Ngram, the study adopts the synthetic control method and finds that 1886 is a breakthrough year for the mentions of Marx in England. This is combined with a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources and of the contextual nature of the interest in Marx in several literary genres. The paper complements Willis's study by shedding light on the developments preceding the 1887. In this period the surge of interest in Marx was driven by a growing fear of socialism and his mentions shift from partly generic to distinctly political. This shift was triggered by a combination of factors, including the economic crisis and rising unemployment of the mid 1880s, episodes of social unrest, key editorial developments, and the efforts of Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx, and many others in promoting the socialist cause. These conditions broadened public perceptions of socialist imminence and contributed to the symbolic diffusion of Marx's name even before 1887.

I INTRODUCTION

The spread of mentions of Marx in England is intricately connected to the raise of ‘modern socialism’, a label attributable to movements such as those led by Hyndman, William Morris and the Fabians. Intellectual figures such as Ernest Belfort Bax¹ and James Leigh Joynes played a decisive role in making Marx’s name resonate in England.

Marx’s work was shaped by and engaged with the British social and political context. He was not merely a passing continental philosopher in a setting wholly alien to his thought, as certain literature suggested (Wilson (1964), Leopold (2014)). Although instances of critical engagement with Marx existed prior to the 1880s² (Leopold (2014)), it was only in the second half of that decade that such discussions entered the public domain alongside Marx’s name, first in political contexts, and later also in theoretical/philosophical ones. From 1886 onward, mentions of Marx appeared far less frequently in generalist contexts and became increasingly common in politically charged settings, initially among activists, but starting from 1886 also among political opponents and middle/high classes.

The meaning of the word ‘socialist’ changed rapidly during the 1880s. In his autobiography (1873) John Stuart Mill called himself a ‘socialist’, but by the mid-1880s his acceptance of the word, still tied to utopian socialism, was already anachronistic. Laurence Gronlund claimed in his ‘Cooperative Commonwealth’ of 1884: ‘*modern Socialism*’ is ‘*German Socialism*’ and ‘is fast becoming *the Socialism the world over*’ (Gronlund 1965, p. 6; emphasis in original). Modern socialism called for revolution and state control of the economy; was profoundly different from the ‘wild rapsodies’ (Pigou (1966) p. 156) of utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, Henri de St Simon and Charles Fourier who fascinated Mill. The latter indeed did not pretend to be as scientific as modern socialism did. This scientific socialism raised the concern of many, including Alfred Marshall (Groenewegen (1995)). As explained by the journalist John Rae in his ‘Contemporary Socialism’ these ‘philanthropic and experimental forms of socialism’ had disappeared by mid-century and the ‘only form of socialism which has come to life again since 1848’ was the product of the Young Hegelians of the Extreme Left’ (Rae (2019)). By 1885, a modern socialist movement had begun to take shape in Britain, and by 1886, its goals and strategies were triggering worries among many middle class people. As noted by

¹Flaherty (2018) shows that Bax was a far more philosophically sophisticated figure than he is often given credit for. Far from being dogmatic, he was one of the few British thinkers to attempt a genuine critical dialogue with Marx and Engels. His intellectual engagement with the latter was open and at times confrontational, questioning several fundamental tenets of historical materialism. He was also one of the most featured authors in ‘To-Day’, as well as one of the editors.

²For example the Christian Socialist J. M. Ludlow had discussed Marx’s economic ideas in the Fortnightly Review as early as 1869 and Bax wrote an article about Marx’s life and ideas as part of the ‘Leaders of Modern Thought’ series in Modern Thought (1881).

E.P. Thompson, during 'the years between 1870 and 1880 (and even a decade prior to 1870), there had been no consistent Socialist propaganda in Britain, not even with a small group of a dozen or twenty members' (Thompson 1977, p. 276). However, in the early 1880s, initial agitation around land reform, coupled with enthusiasm for Henry George's Progress and Poverty, evolved into the early phases of an active socialist movement.

The first modern socialist organization to emerge in England was H. Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, officially born in June 1881 with the name of Democratic Federation. After a split in 1884, William Morris and his followers established the Socialist League. Both groups engaged in street corner activism and published written propaganda. A new socialist press, featuring publications like *Justice*, *Commonweal*, and *To-day*, explored Karl Marx's economic theories (even printing excerpts from 'Das Kapital'³) and condemned the failings of the parliamentary system. The 1885 Industrial Remuneration Conference offered these new socialist organizations a valuable opportunity to present their analysis of Britain's political issues. In this context, riots and social agitations occurred, further intensifying hostility toward the emerging new socialism and contributing to its perception as a serious political threat to liberal values by Britain's respectable middle class.

The Trafalgar riot of February 1886 was just a precursor to Bloody Sunday on November 13, 1887, which was organized by the S.D.F. and by the Irish National League. The latter was even more violent than previous one, with 10,000 protesters marching in from several different directions and clashing harshly with approximately 2,400 policemen and troops, using sticks and knives. Notably, intellectuals like George Bernard Shaw, who had joined the socialist cause in 1884 after reading Marx's Capital and becoming a member of the Fabian Society, condemned the police violence during the Bloody Sunday and actively supported socialism. This is a period that set in motion a series of political demonstrations and violent riots⁴, reflecting and fueling the growing fear of 'scientific socialism' in the country. This growing fear was compounded by economic pressures associated with the Long Depression (1873–1895), including rising unemployment and financial hardship, especially in London's East End. Together, these factors formed a tangled knot of events that shaped the spread of Marx's echo.

³The first British translation of any part of "Das Kapital" dates back to September 1883: Marx, Karl. "Capital. I - The Serfdom of Work. II - The Lordship of Wealth." In *To-Day: A Monthly Gathering of Bold Thoughts*, Vol. I, May-September 1883.

⁴The following Sunday, November 20, 1887 witnessed another protest, resulting in further casualties. According to a report in the partisan 'Socialist Review', one of the victims was a young clerk named Alfred Linnell, who was trampled by a police horse and succumbed to complications from a shattered thigh in the hospital two weeks later. Linnell's funeral on December 18 became a rallying point for both the unemployed movement and Irish activists. William Morris delivered the main speech, calling for a 'holy war to prevent London from being turned into a huge prison'. A smaller but similar gathering took place in next January for the burial of another victim, W. B. Curner. The release of those imprisoned in this latter riot was commemorated on February 20, 1888, with a large public meeting, where Henry Hyndman fiercely condemned the Liberal Party and the Radical MPs in attendance.

Groenewegen (1995) points out how the 1880s were different from the previous decade, when some liberal and radical circles were still ready to applaud socialist schemes. The influences of the old liberal wing of the radical party began to wane and reforms also began to originate from increasingly independent socialist labour movements. The hostility towards the new socialism was already growing in 1884 (Groenewegen (1995)), right after the death of Marx. Signs of parliamentary conflict occurred in 1880 in debating the Grand Game Act and Employers Liability Act, which divided the Liberals. In fact, as T.H. Green writes, these acts were 'opposed in the name of freedom....[because they] interfered with freedom of contract' (Green (1881), p. 369). An example of these reforms was the Bill reform act of 1884 that extended the franchise to the counties. The socialism related to such initiatives was labeled 'municipal socialism' because it expanded the territory and types of property in the hands of municipal control⁵.

Although Marx had been living in London since 1849 and his own earlier engagement with British culture was 'serious, sustained, and significant' (Leopold (2014), p. 20), and although some of his works had already been published and translated into English, it was only within the context sketched above that his popularity in England began to grow fast.

Despite this slow reception, by the end of the 1880s Marx together with scientific socialism gained public space. The theologian Douglas Mackenzie wrote in the Westminster Review of May 1890 that "it is felt by every student and every statesman, even by every one who reads the newspapers, that Socialism is in the air" (Mackenzie (1890)). Criticism and commentary on Marxist ideas were widespread, some were well-founded and carefully considered, while others were reactionary and lacked political or historical depth (Willis (1977)). Some critiques were measured and composed, whereas some were expressed with highly emotional language (Hobsbawm (1964)).

Willis (1977) noted that Marx's name remained obscure in England until the mid-1880s: he only gained public traction through short pamphlets, polemics, and the socialist press, rather than through a direct engagement with his theory. From the perspective of the history of economic thought, we know that the editorial event emphasized by Willis contributed to the resonance of Marx's name in England. While Willis identifies 1887 as a likely turning point, this paper argues both qualitatively and quantitatively that the surge actually began in 1886, thus anticipating the editorial event and highlighting the political rather than theoretical nature of Marx's early visibility in England. It also argues that earlier political, social, and editorial developments, sometimes even beyond the borders of England, played a significant role in this process.

The answer of the quantitative model may help not so much to determine the exact

⁵By the late 1880s Birmingham expanded its municipal holdings to include parks, libraries, railway network, cattle markets, harbour dispensaries, schools, hospitals and working housing.

event that triggered the salience of Marx. The method can only identify the year when his mentions began to rise significantly; determining which specific events from that year caused this increase remains beyond the power of the quantitative analysis and instead relies on historical interpretation. In this sense the synthetic control does not function as a causal explanation in this application, but rather it serves as an indicator that the publication Willis refers to was not the only reason for Marx’s spread. Although the quantitative evidence challenges Willis’ claim, it can also be read in line with Hobsbawm’s observations (Hobsbawm (1964); Hobsbawm (1974)): 1) Marx spread more broadly in England throughout the second half of the 1880s, and his early reception was often partial and reductive: It was shaped both by classical liberal/parliamentary democratic values, and by typically Victorian ideological hysteria. 2) Marx’s rising salience in British print culture was shaped more by commentary than by direct engagement with his works; and it reflected both the growing international resonance of Marx and a distinctively British reception.

The next section presents the specific factors that made the diffusion of Marx’s echo slower in England compared to other countries and the culturally hostile milieu toward Marx. Section 3 presents the dataset, the method and the problems related to its application to the particular case. Section 4 contains the results of the model (4.1) and the qualitative analysis (4.2). Subsection 4.3 is a counterexample showing how the 1890 German edition (a pure editorial event) can be considered, not without simplifications, the point of mass diffusion of Marx’s name in Germany. The conclusion examines the findings and analyze the interplay of factors involved in the process under consideration. The empirical result has two further consequences that the paper addresses: 1) both non-editorial factors such as political events or institutional concerns and editorial developments (sometimes related to the events themselves) were interwoven in rekindling interest in Marx; 2) a question arises: was Marx received in England more for his political significance or for the theoretical/philosophical ideas he put forward? Have the literary genres mentioning his name changed in the mid 1880s? The results also support the hypothesis that the economic and social hardships endured by the poorest classes and sparked unrest intensified institutional (parliamentary and academic) and middle/high class concerns about ‘scientific’ socialism and, with it, the prominence of Marx’s name. In this way, the study ultimately tries to enrich the history of economic thought by shedding light on a range of factors that shaped Marx’s reception in the years leading up to the emblematic 1887 edition of *Capital*.

II HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT: AN UNEASY MARRIAGE

The spread of Marx in England followed a different path compared to that in other European countries (Hobsbawm (1974), Hobsbawm (1964)). It was gradual, ‘slow and difficult’ (Willis (1977)). Unlike Germany, England lacked an idealist philosophical tradition that could resonate with Marx’s dialectical approach. Key Marxist texts were translated into English only belatedly, limiting timely access to his thought. Moreover, the early British Marxist movement lacked charismatic leaders capable of galvanizing mass support, in stark contrast to figures like Bebel or Guesde on the Continent. Most crucially, England’s political culture (grounded in compromise, reformism, and parliamentary gradualism) stood at odds with the revolutionary and deterministic spirit of Marxist doctrine, making full theoretical adoption both unlikely and unwelcome.

Marx lived in England for thirty-four years, primarily connected to English labor politics through his leadership of the International for slightly over fifteen years. He wrote as a journalist for the New York Tribune and as pamphleteer; and he published his work ‘Das Kapital’ in 1867 (it was only available in German up to 1872, when, to Marx’s own surprise, ‘Capital’ came out in Russian⁶). Despite this activity, as confirmed by Rae (1881), only a few thousand Englishmen were familiar with either Marx’s name or his writings. Before Marx’s ideas entered the English economic debate, it took fifty years, from the unauthorized translation of the Manifesto of the Communist Party in 1850 to the end of the century, when most Englishmen to have a broad understanding of Marx’s theory, in its most mechanistic version, even if they partially or wholly rejected it.

Some of Marx’s articles written for the New York Daily Tribune circulated among small radical groups between 1850 and 1860. As early as the 40s there existed Englishmen who knew Marx, but more as a political pamphleteer and revolutionary journalist than as a philosopher and economist.

The first Marx’s work translated in English was the Communist Manifesto (1850), published in the Red Republican, a weekly newspaper edited by George Julian Harney. He previously edited the principal Chartist newspaper, the Northern Star, where Engels wrote. The Red Republican did not last long, the copies were lost or destroyed and the Communist Manifesto did not spread in England⁷. We will have to wait until 1883, almost thirty-five years after the appearance of the Manifesto, to see any of his major

⁶My writing against Proudhon (1847), *idem* that against Duncker (1859) [both collected in ‘For the Critique of Political Economy’] found nowhere a greater outlet than in Russia. And the first foreign nation to translate ‘Capital’ is Russia’ (Marx et al. (1966), p. 177).

⁷H. M. Hyndman recalled in his autobiography that, in early 1880s England, “at most, a few ill-printed copies of the famous Communist Manifesto, translated into English... could be found only by searching within the most advanced revolutionary circles.” (Hyndman (1911), p. 2, but see also Leopold (2014), p.5).

work translated; and even then incompletely. In April 1883 the radical magazine 'Today: a Monthly Gathering of Bold Thoughts' (before it was bought by Hyndman) presented a translation of portions of a chapter of the 1872 French edition of *Capital*.

While access to Marx's writings in Britain during his lifetime was undoubtedly limited, it was nonetheless more substantial than is often assumed (Leopold (2014)). However, certain areas of his thought remain underrepresented in the available publications, many of which appeared in radical periodicals and pamphlets that soon became difficult to obtain (see Marx (1975), p. 422).

M. C. Howard and J. E. King in vol. I of their 'A History of Marxian Economics' (1989) noticed that little material was available on Marx when he died: 'Almost none of the available material was in English. Even the Manifesto, translated in 1850 for Julian Harney's Red Republican, was long out of print, and Marx was best known in Britain for his broadsides against Palmerston's foreign policy and his involvement with the International Working-men's Association and the Paris Commune. Knowledge of his political economy was acquired at one remove, via the German socialist movement or the critical writings of Continental and US academics.' (King and Howard (2014), p. 4). One of the authors' theses, relevant for the purposes of this paper, is that Marx became famous in England not through his own writings, but through those of other authors.

The version of Marxism emerged in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was profoundly shaped by the ideological lens of the Second International. It was somehow a dogmatic, deterministic, and economicist Marxism, reduced to a predictive 'science' of capitalist accumulation. As Kolakowski (1978) observed this form of Marxism strongly influenced both the reception and the critique of Marx's work in the Anglophone world.

Influential summaries and interpretations by writers such as Gabriel Deville in France and later Edward Aveling in England provided more accessible versions of *Capital*. These interpretations, along with Karl Kautsky's *précis* in Germany, reached a broader audience and informed many in Britain about Marx's ideas in a condensed form.

The first ten chapter of the first volume of 'Das Kapital' began to be translated and published serially from October 1885 through May 1889 in *To-Day: Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism*, recently purchased and renamed by Mr. Henry M. Hyndman, curator of these same editions under the pseudonym of 'John Broadhouse'⁸. Translations were 'from the original German work' (Today, *IV* n.s. (Oct. 1885 through May 1889)). This publication, although it had limited circulation (Amini (2016)), gave rise to a series of translations of Marx's works into English: In 1886 the pamphlet "Wage, labor and capital" was published in English, translated by James Leigh Joynes. In 1887,

⁸Hyndman acquired the periodical in 1884 and appointed as editors two pioneering English Marxists, James Leigh and Ernest Belfort Bax.

the translation of the first volume of *Capital* Willis (1977) refers to appeared. In 1888 Engels, Moore, and Aveling edited the first authorized English edition of the Communist Manifesto. 'Revolution and Counter-revolution' and 'The Eastern Question' (both collections of Marx's and Engels's New York Tribune articles), were compiled and published in 1896 and 1897 respectively, by Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling. *Value, Price and Profit* and the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* were translated in 1898, the *Poverty of Philosophy* in 1900; and the *Critique of Political Economy* in 1904. The second and third volumes of *Capital* did not appear in English until 1907⁹.

Between 1850 and 1880, it would have been hard to find a British-born citizen who called himself a socialist in the modern sense of the word, let alone a Marxist. The task of disproving Marx was therefore neither urgent nor of great practical importance (Hobsbawm (1964)). And even after the 1890's only a tiny fraction of Englishmen embraced orthodox Marxist thought (Willis (1977)).

The socioeconomic, political, and ideological conditions played a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of Marx's echo in Europe, but particularly in England. Indeed, in countries where capitalism was stable or growing successfully such as in England, social democracy did not take a revolutionary stance, regardless of whether it identified as Marxist. Anyway social democracy remained strongly Marxist only in countries where the liberal bourgeoisie had not previously spearheaded a radical-democratic movement that united the petite bourgeoisie and politically aware workers against the aristocracy. Where such coalitions for reform and opposition to privilege were well established, Marxist influence was limited. England is the clearest example (Hobsbawm (1974)).

An important vector of Marx's thought in Britain was the academic and critical literature of the late nineteenth century, particularly from Continental and American scholars. As King and Howard (2014) note, before the 1890s, knowledge of Marx's political economy in Britain was largely acquired at one remove through the German socialist tradition or via hostile or distorted critiques by bourgeois economists such as Eugen Dühring and Werner Sombart. The latter, despite his ambivalence, recognized the importance of Marx in shaping the intellectual landscape of modern capitalism (King and Howard (2014)).

There are other international factors at play: one of the most important channels for the early reception of Marx in Britain was the indirect influence of the German Social Democratic movement. The diffusion of the Erfurt Program, and above all the works

⁹*Capital* is an unfinished work. The only book that can be considered done and finished by Marx himself is the first, which came out in 1867 in German. Marx also edited the French edition (published in 44 parts between 1872 and 1875, briefly after the Paris Commune) and incorporated the changes made in the latter in the second German edition of 1872. Engels completed the third (published in 1883, year of Marx's death) and the fourth edition (1890, the one used as treatment for the circulation of his name in Germany in subsection 4.1); he also prepared the second and third Volume for their first publication in Germany (1885 and 1894 respectively). The fourth book was only published in 1905 by Karl Kautsky (still in German) with the title "Theorien über den Mehrwert" (Theories of Surplus Value).

of Karl Kautsky, played a significant role among British socialists. Kautsky, widely regarded as the principal interpreter of Marx in the Second International, offered a version of Marxian thought that was more compatible with contemporary evolutionary socialism and economic determinism. His writings circulated across Europe, and his approach to historical materialism had a lasting impact on socialist education in Britain. The SPD's (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, the Social Democratic Party of Germany) journal (*Die Neue Zeit*) of which Kautsky was the editor, also circulated among the more educated circles of the English socialist movement¹⁰. Hyndman himself was influenced by the theoretical developments of German socialism.

Translations and partial anthologies, often prepared by Fabians and intellectual circles close to the Labour Church or the Independent Labour Party (ILP), further contributed to the diffusion of Marxian themes, though usually in forms adapted to reformist and gradualist agendas. These texts selectively appropriated Marx, sometimes stripping away the revolutionary and historical dimensions of his theory.

A significant factor in the diffusion of socialism in England, and indirectly to the growing interest in Marx, was the emergence of the culture of altruism flourishing among British intellectuals between 1850 and 1880. As documented by Flaherty (2018), this moral and philosophical tradition (influenced by Auguste Comte's positivism and the liberalism of thinkers such as T.H. Green and Henry Sidgwick) provided an ethical and conceptual foundation conducive to the reception of socialist ideas. Rather than a coherent political ideology, it represented a constellation of shared values (social responsibility, duty towards the vulnerable classes, and cooperation) which offered a credible alternative to the dominant economic utilitarianism. Figures such as Arnold Toynbee and Alfred Marshall were profoundly shaped by this ethos: the latter, although not a socialist, envisioned an economics oriented toward social welfare and distributive justice. He acknowledged the potentially dangerous appeal of scientific socialism and took its theoretical and societal implications seriously, while also recognizing certain merits of socialist proposals he meticulously criticized their theoretical foundations. The 'culture of altruism' in other words prepared the ethical vocabulary through which socialism (and thus Marx's ideas) could be discussed or adapted within the British cultural context. In this sense, it may be viewed as an endogenous factor that facilitated the emergence of Marx's name in public discourse, even before the systematic translation of his works in English.

Warnings of the Marxist threat came from the economist T. E. Cliffe Leslie. Writing in the *Fortnightly Review* for July 1875 on 'The History of German Political Economy', he was one of the first to denounce the danger: 'German] Socialists, or social-democrats, of whom Karl Marx and the late Ferdinand Lassalle may be taken as exponents, aim at polit-

¹⁰A selection of articles from *Die Neue Zeit* translated into English and published in the British press, available at [this link](#)

ical revolution and at the abolition of private property in land and capital' (Leslie (1875)). But apart from sporadic statements like the one just reported, English economists took little interest in Marx's theory. They were busy discussing the theoretical innovations of Jevons' marginalism and its consequences on the nature of value. Mill, Jevons, Cairnes and J. N. Keynes never wrote a word on Marx and even popular surveys and textbooks of political economy, such as Henry Sidgwick's *Principles of Political Economy* (1888), John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), John Kells Ingram's *A History of Political Economy* (1888), and Henry Fawcett's *Manual of Political Economy* (1863, 2nd eds 1887), did not mention Marx. A Westminster Review critic, writing in April 1887, complained that 'It is a strange thing that the ordinary manuals of political economy, when discussing the nature of value, seem in general to ignore this famous theory on which scientific Socialism rests'¹¹.

The lack of threat posed by socialism to English capitalism explains the calmness evident in early critical texts by Victorian bourgeoisie against Marxism (Hobsbawm (1964)). Kaufmann (1879), for instance, claimed that Marx was a pure theorist who had not attempted to put his discipline into practice (see Kaufmann (1879), p. 241). In terms of revolutionary programs, Marxism was perceived as less dangerous than anarchist thought. There is even evidence that in 1880s England, it was encouraged as an antidote to more bloodthirsty schools of thought (Hobsbawm (2015), p. 281).

The shift in the view of scientific socialism from a minor economic theory to primary cause of revolution in France and to ideological foundation of the mass labor movement in Germany was the trigger of the debate on Marxist theory in England according to both Hobsbawm (1974) and Willis (1977). From the beginning of the 1880s critics, from the most disparate fields of study, began to see scientific socialism as a concrete danger and therefore felt the need to discredit it (with particular doggedness against the labour theory of value), now perceived as a big thread to the English democratic values. Critical writings began to be more detailed and analytical; their tone changed from calm to concerned and often 'hysterical' (Hobsbawm (1964), p. 290). Actually the process of realising the socialist and revolutionary danger had already begun in the mid 1870s, but the debate was still very narrow. Thanks to efforts like Macdonnell's one (Macdonnell (1875)), Englishmen became increasingly aware of Marx's influence on German socialism and, secondarily and only imperfectly, of his doctrine. Willis (1977) suggests that one of the reasons why from a certain point in time the criticism of Marx in England came no more either from experts (philosophers, social scientists) or generalist mentions (natural scientists, biographers), but from a much wider pool (journalists, activists, ideological opponents), was that the implications of his theory started to be perceived as challenging

¹¹Anon., 'Contemporary literature', Westminster Review, cxxxviii (Apr. 1887), 121-2. From a review of the first English edition of Capital.

the social order *tout court* and not merely specific economic doctrines or as serving the ideology of a small, organized but politically irrelevant group.

A further cause for concern and for starting the criticism of scientific socialism besides those already mentioned was the expansion of the electoral base in 1884 (*representation of the people act*¹²) in order to include those living in the counties. A typical expression of the concern with the expansion of the electorate and its potential conversion to socialism appeared in this passage from an anonymous article in the *Westminster Review* of January 1886:

'On the eve of this great change in the political life of this country, at a moment when the power which has hitherto been in the hands of the owners of property is about to be placed unreservedly in those hands which are empty, it is not unimportant that we should consider what will be the probable course of legislation, and to inquire what use the people will make of their power... We have given the working classes the instrument of exaction: will they be moderate and let our capitalists keep the half of what they may possess? A demand has already been made on them for the whole. Socialists see distinctly that the political power is with the people, and they intend to use that power to carry out a few extensions of the principle of the Poor Law... That we think is a significant sign of the times. That the far more cogent and thorough views of Marx, Rodbecker [sic], and Engels, now that they are being popularized by such writers as Hyndman and Gronlund, will meet with as complete a welcome from the new voters, in whose hands are the issues of life and death for this nation, cannot, we think, be doubted.' (Anon., 'Socialism and legislation', *Westminster Review*, cxxv (Jan. 1886), 3-11).

The years between 1885 and 1890 saw a proliferation in England of articles and books on the success of German and French socialism. Discussions on Marxism and in particular on the labour theory of value abounded. The four main points of contention were: 1) the assertion that labor is the only source of value, 2) the presumed antagonism between capital and labor ('allies' according to critics), 3) the theory of human nature and motivations (Hobbes), and 4) the feasibility of teaching scientific socialism.

Hobsbawm (1964) emphasizes that the first point (the labor theory of value) received the most critical attention. As for the rest, critics were also willing to learn from Marx, recognizing his importance and abilities. Evidence of such recognition abounds. In 1885,

¹²All men paying an annual rental of £10 and all those holding land valued at £10 now had the vote. This significantly increased the electoral basis; in the 1880 general election, before the passing of the Act, 3,040,050 voters were registered, while in the 1885 general election, after the passing of the Act, there were 5,708,030 registered voters. (Craig, F. W. S. 1989. *British Electoral Facts, 1832-1987*. Dartmouth (Aldershot): Parliamentary Research Services.)

Balfour wrote he considered absurd to compare Henry George's ideas with Marx's, stating that Marx's intellectual force, consistency, reasoning abilities, and economic insights were unmatched (Dilke (1885) p. 344). Richard Ely, an American professor with progressive leanings, asserted that there was unanimity of opinion about Marx's ability (Ely (1883), p. 174). Similarly, W. H. Dawson remarked, 'However its teaching may be viewed, no one will venture to dispute the masterly ingenuity, the rare acumen, the close argumentation, and, let it be added, the incisive polemic which are displayed in the pages of Capital' (Dawson (1888) pp. 96-97). Marx's theory of unemployment was appreciated or at least presented without criticism (Rae (1887)). His views on the division of labor and machinery were recognized as significant contributions. Finally, Marx observations on wages and economic concentration, but above all his role as a historian, were well received by those who made the effort to read the entire work. Indeed, some commentators were so eager to avoid outright rejection of Marx that William Smart wrote his 1887 review of Capital specifically to encourage readers who might have been put off by the critique of value theory to study the book; since it would contain much 'of very great value both to the historian and the economist'. That said, classic works are often cited more than they are actually read, analyzed, or fully understood: many own a copy of Capital, but only a few have truly engaged with its dense arguments¹³.

The relentless criticism of the labor theory of value, compared to the rest of Marx's theory, was driven more by the perceived moral indictment it carried than by a rational counter-analysis. The reason why it was the chosen target can be traced back to moral shame: 'Perhaps the critical fire was concentrated against this because the moral accusation implied in the phrase 'labor is the source of all value' affected confident believers in capitalism more than the prediction of the decline and fall of capitalism' (Hobsbawm (1964), p. 286-287). The latter was rather something perceived as highly implausible in England.

The two principal logical objections to the labour theory of value were, first, that it failed to account for the role of capital and the time required for its accumulation in the creation of value; and second, that commodities embody not only labour but also other attributes, most notably utility. The reverend Wicksteed, a 'purist of marginal theory' according to Sraffa (1961) (Preface, p. vi), asserted: 'which all exchangeable things contain, is neither more nor less than abstract utility, i.e., the power of satisfying human desires...Exchange value itself is always immediately dependent, not upon amount

¹³Cfr. J. M. Keynes, "A Short View of Russia", in *Essays in Persuasion, The Collected Writings of J. M. Keynes*, vol. IX, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 258: "... an obsolete economic textbook ... not only scientifically erroneous but without interest or application for the modern world". See also the correspondence to G. B. Shaw, 1934, in *The Collected Writings of J. M. Keynes*, vol. XXVIII, p. 38: "My feelings about *Das Kapital* are the same as my feelings about the Koran.... Its dreary, out of date, academic controversialising.... [its] contemporary economic value.... is nil".

of labor, but upon abstract utility'. (Wicksteed (1885)).

Bertrand Russell, a young Fellow in mathematics at Trinity College, critiqued Marx's theory of value in his first book, *German Social Democracy*. He argued that abstraction alone cannot guarantee identifying the most relevant common quality among things: 'Marx was incorrect, for commodities have another common quality: *utility*, or the power of satisfying some need' (Russell and Russell (1896)). With few exceptions, it was simply argued that the labor theory of value was wrong, indeed 'the writings of the Victorian Marx critics are mostly and justly forgotten' (Hobsbawm (1964)). This view is echoed in Willis (1977), who observes that English critics of Marx's labour theory of value, and of the broader antagonism between capital and labour, rarely engaged with his arguments in depth. Instead, they tended to reaffirm the doctrines of their own economic tradition, dismissing Marx largely on the basis of presumed theoretical superiority rather than through detailed analytical refutation.

Having dismantled the labor theory of value and the antagonism between capital and labor, critics felt they had undermined the foundations of Marxist theory. This is why other aspects of the latter were superficially reviewed: his theory of money and of the concentration of capital for instance. As both common historical knowledge and specific evidence suggest (see Willis (1977), p. 449), one of the most deeply rooted beliefs among late Victorian Englishmen was that the greatness of their country derived from individual freedom, particularly as expressed through private initiative and the pursuit of self-interest. John Rae unequivocally writes: '[England] owes her whole industrial greatness, her manufactures, her banks, her shipping, her railways, to some extent her very colonial possessions, to the unassisted energy of her private citizens. England has been reared on the principle of freedom.' (Rae (1890) pp. 224-5).

III DATA AND METHOD

I frame SCM as a validation device, not as a causal identification strategy. The hypothesized turning point is 1886, chosen *ex ante* from contemporary evidence: (i) serializations and popularizations of Marx (e.g., *To-Day*, *The Commonweal*); (ii) the growth of the socialist press and organizational uses of the label "Marx"; (iii) political unrest and intensified public controversy. The pre-treatment window 1837–1886 provides a long, stable baseline with adequate coverage and low volatility for fitting; the post-treatment window 1887–1900 captures late Victorian reception while avoiding early-twentieth-century structural breaks. Under this framing, SCM tests whether a counterfactual extrapolated from the pre-1886 trajectory would fail to reproduce the post-1886 surge.

The synthetic control has an increasing use in economics (firstly used by Abadie et al. (2010)) and, albeit lagged in time, also in history of economic thought (Magnez and

Makovi (2023)¹⁴) and in economic history (Gilchrist et al. (2023), Geloso and Pavlik (2021)). It goes back to Abadie et al. (2010) and consists of a causal model that allows for the construction of a synthetic counterfactual of the treated unit (typically one). The corpus of texts is the eng-gb-2019 from Google Ngram¹⁵. The Google Ngram corpora, are continuously integrated with new collections as Google scans additional books and enhances OCR accuracy. The Ngram Viewer quantifies Ngrams as a percentage, calculated by dividing the instances of a specific Ngram in a given year by the total number of Ngrams for that year, thus standardizing results relative to the annual volume of published books. Moreover, an Ngram is considered only if it appears in at least 40 books, ensuring manageable data size. The work has several limitations: first and foremost, one must believe that the number of mentions of the word “Marx” is a good proxy for his uptake (specifically in the case of late Victorian England). Moreover, Google’s Ngram collection is only a subset of Google Books collection. Material is selected on the basis of the quality of the metadata and of the OCR. Most of the periodicals are excluded (Michel et al. (2011)). In early 2011, Google Ngram included 4% of all books ever published (Michel et al. (2011)). By 2012, this has been successively expanded to 6% (Lin et al. (2012)). The corpus was updated in February 2020. On this occasion, several improvements were introduced, including the incorporation of updated data up to 2019 and the addition of new features, such as support for searches containing up to seven words. For more information, visit this page. Therefore, it is only a subset of published books and excludes many (but not all) periodicals, daily and weekly newspapers. It is also not a measure of citations properly speaking, since it measures the number of occurrences of a specific word (or Ngram) in general and not as references in the bibliography.

This is not a bibliometric study because the increasing the public visibility of Marx is a semiotic process: various authors write about him, his influence, and their interpretations of his ideas, drawing not only from his own writings but also from secondary sources. Additionally, others write about these interpretations, creating a layered discourse around

¹⁴Magness and Makovi (2023) argue that the Russian Revolution played a key role in the ‘mainstreaming’ of Marx. The critical stance of Magness and Makovi (2023) is not novel. Since the post-war period, it has often been claimed that Marx’s intellectual status was overstated or ‘disproved by all intellectual tests[sic], the Marxist interpretation of history is sustained and irrationally justified by Soviet power alone’ (Trevor-Roper (1956)). This ongoing effort to discredit Marx has largely retained the same structure over time, often relying on a juxtaposition between his theory of value, grounded in an idealist philosophical tradition, and empirical observations of analytical nature, thereby setting up a comparison between different levels of abstraction. While this paper draws from their methodological approach, it departs from their tendency to seek to measure objectively the truth-value of an idea relative to its reception. Their view assumes the Russian Revolution exaggerated Marx’s relevance, suggesting a sort of standard of intellectual worth or objective value of an idea (exaggerated with respect to what?). It is arguable, however, that the significance of an idea may be assessed by its consequences instead by its *a priori* value; and Marx’s thought, central to later socialist currents, shaped the terms of debate, particularly for movements like the Fabians.

¹⁵The eng-gb-2019 corpus in Google Ngram Viewer refers to the English language dataset compiled by Google. It includes a vast collection of digitized books published in Great Britain

Marx’s name. The classics are referenced far more often than they are actually read, analyzed, or fully understood. This continuous semiotic process persisted in the following years as well (1889–1914): ‘In this period, Marx and Engels were known much less through their own writings than through the handful of commentaries that were written about their works’ (Amini (2016), p. 338). Another significant factor in the rise of the echo of Marx’s name in England was an indirect one: his growing fame in France and Germany (Hobsbawm (1974)). This provides a further reason to speak of mentions of ‘Marx’ rather than citations.

In Google Books corpus a proper name can be spelled in many ways and there may be cases of homonymy that affect the accuracy of the proxy. In constructing the dataset, the choice of whether to include the author’s first name and surname or just the surname has taken these limitations into account. Some authors will be excluded because Ngram does not provide reliable ways to distinguish them from others (such as Claude-Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon also known as the Count of Saint-Simon).

The six conditions necessary for applying the synthetic control method are satisfied (Abadie (2021))¹⁶. Engels and Hyndman and many other socialists already mentioned must be excluded because it is plausible that their mentions were influenced by the same treatment that influenced Marx’s ones, and more generally that they are correlated. We chose to use standard synthetic control instead of differential synthetic one because the treated unit does not assume extreme values of the dependent variable with respect to the donor pool¹⁷. The donor pool is composed by the authors listed in Table 1. The model then selects a subset of these authors, assigning positive, non-zero weights to those that best approximate the pre-treatment characteristics of the treated unit. The frequency of the data is annual, so in principle it could be any other event occurred in that year that boosted Marx’s mentions.

Despite several possible sources of biases we assume that Google Ngram is a good indicator of the change in mentions over time. Pechenick et al. (2015) question the validity of Google Ngram because academic texts have constituted an increasing fraction over time of the Ngram corpus and because it only counts how many times a certain word, phrase or expression appears in a dataset and not how many times a certain text

¹⁶The synthetic control method rests upon a set of key assumptions: (1) no interference across units (no spillovers, the reason why some other socialists are excluded from the donor pool, which is the entire dataset of authors from which the model selects the control units: the latter instead are those authors picked by the model from the donor pool to reproduce the characteristics of the treated unit (Marx)), (2) no anticipation of the same treatment by units in the pre-intervention period (not relevant for the present analysis), (3) availability of a suitable pool of control units unaffected by the intervention, (4) stability and low volatility of the outcome variable, (5) availability of rich pre-intervention data for an accurate fitting between treated and synthetic units, and (6) the convex hull condition, i.e., the treated unit’s covariate characteristics can be closely represented as a convex combination of those in the donor pool.

¹⁷The dependent variable in this case is the normalized share of “Karl Marx” mentions in the Google Books

has been discussed, reprinted or read. But the strength of Google Ngram is that it is internally coherent and valid: each author is equally likely to have the mentions biased (except for above mentioned cases of homonymy), so the errors are likely to be random and uncorrelated with authors.

The dataset includes forty-eight authors mainly economists, but also some philosophers, social scientists, journalists and activists. The dependent variable is the share of occurrences of the word “Marx” (case sensitive) from the eng-gb-2019 corpus, with annual frequencies. Data spans from 1837 (year when Marx begins to be cited in English¹⁸) to 1900. The pre-treatment period is 1837-1886, while the post-treatment is 1887-1900. The ratio of $\approx 1/4$ - $1/5$ between post and pre-treatment suggested by Abadie (2021) is met. In each period and for each unit, besides observing the outcome variable (the number of mentions in English), a series of predictors of the latter are observed: a set of dummies indicating whether the author was socialist or not, political or not, wrote in English or not; and the same goes for the other languages among the covariates. The time-varying covariates are the number of mentions in French (fr-2019 corpus in Google Ngram) in German (de-2019 corpus), in Spanish (es-2019), in Italian (it-2019) and in Russian (ru-2019) of each author. The characteristics of each author include the year in which his/her most popular work was translated into English.

The complete list of authors in the dataset is in Tab. 1.

Adam Ferguson	Bebel	Edmund Burke	Henry George	John Stuart Mill	Malthus
Adam Smith	Bentham	Fichte	Hobbes	Joynes	Mandeville
Anne Robert Jacques Turgot	Blanqui	François Quesnay	Hume	Kant	Marx
Auguste Comte	Charles Fourier	Friedrich Schiller	Colbert	Lafargue	Mary Wollstonecraft
Baptiste Say	David Ricardo	Guesde	James Steuart	Lassalle	Montesquieu
Bastiat	Durkheim	Hegel	John Locke	Liebknecht	Nassau Senior
Proudhon	Robert Owen	Rodbertus	Sismondi	Sir William Temple	Spencer
Voltaire	Walras	William Godwin	William Morris	William Petty	Marshall

Table 1: Lists of the forty-eight authors in the dataset

Following Abadie (2021) we avoided including authors who have little or nothing to do with Marx, socialism, philosophy and/or economics.

Although the Synthetic Control Method offers a robust quantitative tool for detecting discontinuities in the mentions of Marx, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged, particularly when applied to the history of economic thought. First, ideas do not diffuse discretely at specific points in time, but rather through a continuous, layered, and multifaceted process, involving numerous channels, sources and genres. Therefore,

¹⁸Marx was 19 years old in 1837 and had not yet written any significant works, so these mentions could be indirect references, mentions of Marx in the context of his involvement in intellectual and radical circles in Germany or in connection with young Hegelian and other thinkers, not so much mentions of his direct writings. The other two possibilities are discrepancies or attribution errors in the dataset or errors in the optical character recognition (OCR) process.

identifying a precise causal moment is inherently problematic in the history of ideas. Second, the annual frequency of data further complicates establishing clear causal relationships, especially in a historically turbulent period like late Victorian England, characterized by multiple, overlapping and causally related events. Consequently, SCM is better suited as an exploratory and interpretative complement to rigorous qualitative historical analysis, rather than a definitive causal model. In this case, indeed, the latter identifies just a discontinuity, not the precise cause. Note that not all texts were published in the year they were written, and publication delays or reprints can introduce additional confounding factors. As the corpus expands and metadata improves, some of the observed patterns may shift or lose statistical strength. Nonetheless, this limitation is inherent to any bibliometric approach and does not affect the broader qualitative and quantitative insights derived from the present analysis. This framework enables us to challenge the standard narrative centered on 1887, and to investigate whether the surge in mentions of Marx actually began earlier, in 1886. The next section provides the empirical basis for this claim.

IV QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE

Unfortunately, the Ngram corpus cannot be qualitatively queried, only the frequencies of n-grams are available. The closest (though incomplete) alternative is to manually consult Google Books. Since this corpus is itself incomplete, I also relied on the HathiTrust Digital Library¹⁹ and on the British Newspaper Archive, specifically focused on the printed press.

A comparison of the years 1885 and 1886 reveals a significant transformation in the nature and breadth of mentions of Karl Marx within British publications. In 1885, his name was present but appeared largely in generalist or historical contexts. Mentions were scattered across literary, cultural, and economic publications such as *The Athenaeum*, *Vanity Fair*, *Temple Bar*, and the historical work *England under Gladstone*. His presence was typically grouped with other socialist figures like Robert Owen, Lassalle, or Proudhon, and lacked analytical depth. References often lacked theoretical engagement, as in James Bonar’s *Malthus and His Work* and Alfred Marshall’s *Economics of Industry*, which reflect moderate or liberal orientations. Some publications, however, offered more substantial engagement. *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (vol. 259) recalled his foundational role in the International Workingmen’s Association; the *Manifesto of the Socialist League* explicitly cited Marx in relation to the working day; and the *Report of the Industrial Remuneration Conference*, featuring Sidney Webb and others, critically addressed his theory of surplus

¹⁹HathiTrust is a large-scale digital library containing millions of volumes digitized from academic and research institutions. Its extensive and well curated corpus allows for a robust and representative examination of publication trends across books, periodicals, dictionaries, conferences and many other sources.

value. *The Quarterly Review* (vol. 160) attacked his economic theories within an anti-radical polemic, while *The Cambridge Review* (vol. 6) analysed the aphorism “the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer,” evidencing some familiarity with his conceptual lexicon. A review in the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* of a pamphlet summarising *Capital* further indicated relevance to economic and historical debates. Yet overall, Marx’s presence remained marginal, lacking sustained theoretical treatment or ideological integration.

In contrast, 1886 emerges as a pivotal year for the diversification and public circulation of Marx’s name within the British context. This transformation occurred across multiple domains: academic, media, popular, and militant; pointing to a qualitative shift in how his thought was received and repurposed. Several new publications contributed to expanding Marx’s discursive presence. In the academic sphere, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, founded at Harvard in 1886, devoted four pages to Marx, reflecting a transatlantic resonance. J. E. Symes’s *Manual of Political Economy for Schools and Colleges* mentioned Marx alongside Mill and Cairnes, while Henry Dunning Macleod’s *Dictionary of Political Economy* listed him among its entries, albeit critically. In Britain, E. Belfort Bax’s *Handbook of the History of Philosophy* introduced Marx into the philosophical canon, and M. Kaufmann’s *Socialism and Modern Thought* explicitly identified him as the scientific founder of modern socialism, dedicating an entire section to historical materialism. Though polemical, this marked an act of reluctant canonisation.

In parallel, Marx’s presence grew in more popular formats. Annie Besant’s *Lectures on Social Questions* and the workers’ outlet *The Workmen’s Times* presented Marxist concepts such as class struggle, collective ownership, and the contradictions of capitalist production in direct and pedagogical forms. Paraphrases and translations from *Das Kapital*, particularly concerning the theory of value, circulated more widely. W. H. Mallock’s *Socialism: Its Nature and Aims*, while critical, acknowledged Marx as “the greatest thinker of socialism,” confirming a dual process of polemical recognition by adversaries and strategic appropriation by militants. Marx’s ideas also reached unexpected venues: the *Annual of the Cooperative Wholesale Society* linked his name to themes of labour and cooperation; *Living Papers on Christian Evidences, Doctrine and Morals* and Adolphus Behrends’s *Socialism and Christianity* associated him with broader ideological and religious debates; and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Penalty of Fate* included a fleeting citation, indicating an initial literary penetration.

The socialist press played a crucial role in this evolving landscape. From 1886, the Socialist League’s journal *The Commonweal* serialised *Socialism from the Root Up* by William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax, a series tracing the development of socialism and embedding Marxist theory in a narrative accessible to the broader public. Edward Aveling published lectures on *Das Kapital* in the same periodical between 1885 and 1886, and,

significantly, 1886 saw the first English translation of *Wage Labour and Capital*, issued by the Modern Press, a publishing house linked to Henry Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation. Translated by James Leigh Joynes, this short pamphlet offered a clear exposition of core Marxist concepts such as the nature of wages, prices, and capital, and was particularly effective among the working class due to its accessible language and concise format.

Beyond editorial transformations, 1886 was also a year marked by political unrest and international mobilisation, which contributed to the resonance of Marxian themes. In Britain, riots erupted in February in cities like Birmingham and Yarmouth, as large groups of unemployed workers protested in the streets. These demonstrations, reported in the international press, heightened awareness of structural economic discontent. Abroad, events such as the general strike and wave of worker revolts in Belgium, timed with the anniversary of the Paris Commune and met with violent repression, were widely covered and interpreted within a socialist framework. The same year, the International Labour Conference held in Paris by the *Parti Ouvrier Français* gathered delegates from across Europe and the United States, including British representatives, and agreed to draft a joint socialist manifesto, reinforcing a transnational sense of solidarity and diffusion of Marxist-oriented socialism.

In spring 1886, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling travelled to the United States with Wilhelm Liebknecht, visiting major cities and participating in meetings of trade unions and socialist associations. Their public appearances, amplified by press coverage, associated the name Marx with contemporary political debates and working-class activism. This circulation extended to gendered narratives, as in the report *One Woman's Experience of Emancipation*, which featured an interview with Eleanor Marx and Aveling and embedded Marx's figure in discussions of marriage and socialism (this was not a new topic; see for instance the *Lectures to Women* (1873) delivered at Cambridge by Alfred Marshall, where the focus was on the effects of working conditions on man's character).

Taken together, these developments indicate a significant turning point (as mentioned above, the fact that some books issued in 1886 were drafted earlier, so authors' exposure to "Marx" may predate the 1886 events, a limit on both the quantitative and qualitative evidence). Whereas in 1885 Marx appeared primarily in general-interest publications with limited theoretical elaboration, in 1886 he became a central figure in politically engaged discourse. Mentions of his name became more structured, ideologically informed, and integrated into pedagogical contexts. The proliferation of works, also from critics, explicitly dealing with specific social and political problems, and to a lesser extent with Marx's theoretical apparatus, signals a phase of increased visibility and critical relevance. By the end of 1886, a solid socialist infrastructure, editorial, political, and organisational was in place in Britain.

Tab. 5 below presents the distribution of mentions of Marx across different publication types as captured by the HathiTrust Digital Library between 1885 and 1887. These data reveal not only the sheer quantity of Marx’s mentions across the most diverse media and literary genres, but also their shifting balance along these two dimensions during three years.

Original Format	1885	1886	1887
Book	100	132	115
Serial	60	67	78
Journal	56	60	69
Biography	10	2	14
Conference	5	0	1
Dictionaries	1	0	5
Newspaper	1	1	4
Encyclopedias	0	2	0
Microform	0	1	0

Table 2: Distribution of mentions across publication types (1885–1887)

The shift in the intellectual positioning of Marx after 1886 is corroborated by changes in the publishing formats through which his name circulated. In 1885, Marx appeared predominantly in serials and journals. By 1886, while mentions in journals remained significant, the sharp rise in books reflects a shift towards a more consolidated and authoritative engagement with his name. This shift is also evidenced by Marx’s entry into dictionaries and encyclopedias, underscoring that by 1887 his name had begun to circulate within more formal repositories of knowledge, gaining a status that extended beyond the sphere of the political press and of generalist literature.

Context	1885 (%)	1886 (%)	1887 (%)
Political	27.6%	47.2%	40.8%
Theoretical/Philosophical	38.2%	44.3%	48.9%
Generalist/Anecdotal	34.2%	8.5%	10.3%

Table 3: Distribution of Marx mentions across contexts and years (1885–1887)

Both political and theoretical mentions increased, as shown in tab. 3, but the latter grew more sharply; the biggest jump between them occurred from 1885 to 1886. From 1885 onward the interest in Marx was initially political, and only later theoretical. It was only after Marxist economic theory was seen as a catalyst for revolution in France, recognized as the ideological foundation of a powerful mass movement in Germany, and feared to be sparking a similar surge in Britain, that English economists and intellectuals

began to take serious notice of it and engage with it in earnest.

I present here the heat map showing the trend of the different subjects associated with works mentioning Marx, as classified by HathiTrust.

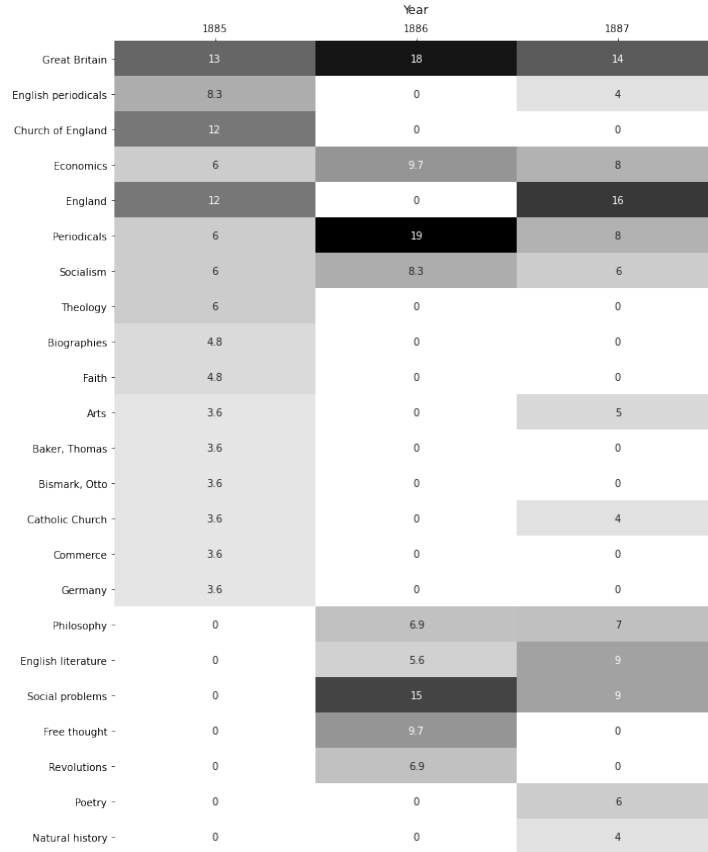


Figure 1: Distribution of mentions of Marx across HathiTrust subjects (1885–1887)

Marx mentions in periodicals surged in 1886, rising from 6% to 19% of the total. This is also the case for the subject labeled as “social problems” by HathiTrust. This suggests that in 1886 he was discussed closer to political contexts; and, after having read some of the full texts, these mentions are often in relations to practical solutions to concrete social problems. In 1886, Marx is mentioned in relation to fewer topics than in the other two years, but less generalist and more tied to current events. Mentions related to “Socialism” and “Theology” remain stable throughout the three year period, indicating a broad and ongoing interest. In contrast, many of the subjects tied to specific fields, such as “Biographies” or “Arts”, appear more intermittently and with less prominence. The trajectory of the contexts in which Marx is mentioned begins with generalist framework,

then shifts toward social and political settings, and eventually takes hold as a theoretical figure, both among his followers and his critics.

The picture emerged provides an answer to the question of whether Marx was first received in England as a political figure or as a theorist. The trajectory appears to be the following: in the early 1880s, mentions of Marx were often general in nature, scattered across a wide variety of genres, and primarily found in publications by a minoritarian and socialist press. Between late 1885 and 1886, the salience surrounding Marx's name intensified, driven by political and symbolic/semiotic reasons, as well as by social unrest linked to concrete economic grievances. This surge laid the groundwork for the broader diffusion of Marx as an economist, theorist, and philosopher. This starts to take place only at the end of the decade and always in specific (often reductive and vulgarized) forms. Others distilled Marx's ideas into simplified, slogan-ready forms (often detached from their theoretical scaffolding) to circulate his name and key motifs more broadly as a recognizable label.

The analysis is refined by qualitatively exploring the mentions on the British newspapers of that time. It is noteworthy in this perspective that the 1886 was the first year that every issue of Hyndman's 'To-Day' featured translated sections of Marx's *Capital*²⁰, and in August 1886 an additional special number was published expressly to include an extra excerpt ([link](#)).

I draw upon data from the British Newspaper Archive (BNA), one of the largest repositories of digitalized historical newspapers. Covering the years 1885–1887, the BNA provides access to a wide range of periodical material, including articles, advertisements²¹. It allows for a more nuanced examination of how Marx was mentioned and circulated within British public discourse. By focusing on this source, it is possible to trace the prominence of Marx across different types of media. In the British Newspaper Archive (BNA), when searching for a specific term and an article appears in the results, the count refers to the number of articles in which the term is mentioned, not to the number of times it appears within the text of all the articles.

²⁰Also the entire year of 1887 is covered by this monthly series of translations started in October 1885.

²¹The category 'Advertisement' in the BNA includes paid announcements and commercial listings, legal and administrative notices, announcements of new book or journal publications, notices of conferences and political meetings, as well as job postings and professional opportunities.

Category	Name	1885	1886	1887
Article	–	116	156	107
Advertisement	–	3	8	13
Illustrated	–	1	6	5
Total mentions	–	120	170	135
Newspapers and magazines	Justice	16	19	13
	Northern Ensign and Weekly Gazette	9	–	–
	St. James’s Gazette	8	–	5
	Weekly Dispatch (London)	5	–	–
	The Echo (London)	3	–	–
	National Reformer	–	7	7
	Dundee Courier	–	6	–
	Pall Mall Gazette	–	5	16
	Academy	–	4	–
	Pall Mall Budget	–	–	4

Table 4: Summary of British Newspaper Archive results across publication types and newspapers with most mentions (1885–1887).

The data from the British Newspaper Archive (1885–1887) reveal a relatively modest overall number of references to Marx, yet clearly capture the intensification of attention in 1886: mentions rise from 120 in 1885 to a peak of 170 in 1886, followed by a slight decline to 135 in 1887. This significant increase in 1886 reflects the climate of social and political mobilization of the period and coincides with Marx’s growing visibility in the press as a name increasingly discussed in the public sphere. By 1887, mentions in advertisements also grew, highlighting a broader circulation of Marx’s name, especially in notices for political meetings and gatherings.

Both 1885 and 1886 the newspaper mentioning Marx most frequently was *Justice* (the weekly publication of the Social Democratic Federation) followed closely by the atheist ‘National Reformer’ in 1886. By 1887 the leading journal in terms of Marx’s mentions had become the ‘Pall Mall Gazette’ (ranked fourth in 1886), a conservative outlet that often mentioned Marx in critically charged contexts²². This shift again suggests that Marx was increasingly mentioned in more polemical semantic contexts, a sign of his growing prominence, and contested reception, within British public discourse. While before 1886 he was circulated within small circles and in newspapers read by a minority, after 1886 his echo broadened to include media of opposing ideologies.

In 1885–86 Marx’s name was amplified above all through political reportage, organizational debates, and popular pedagogy (lectures, pamphlets, serialized materials), with

²²In A.3, fig. 12, an example from the Pall Mall Gazette (Friday 06 May 1887), referring to Marx’s theory of value: “its argument is only saved from flagrant absurdities by innumerable inconsistencies, masked under a cloud of words and expressed in a vague pseudo-metaphysical terminology”.

opponents acknowledging him as a political adversary. Only thereafter did handbooks, dictionaries, and reviews consolidate his theoretical status; thus political visibility preceded full theoretical uptake, with 1886 as the pivot before the 1887 editorial landmark

V QUANTITATIVE VALIDATION VIA SYNTHETIC CONTROL

The result of the primary SCM regression is displayed in Fig. 2, which shows the data and the counterfactual prediction for the whole period 1837-1900.

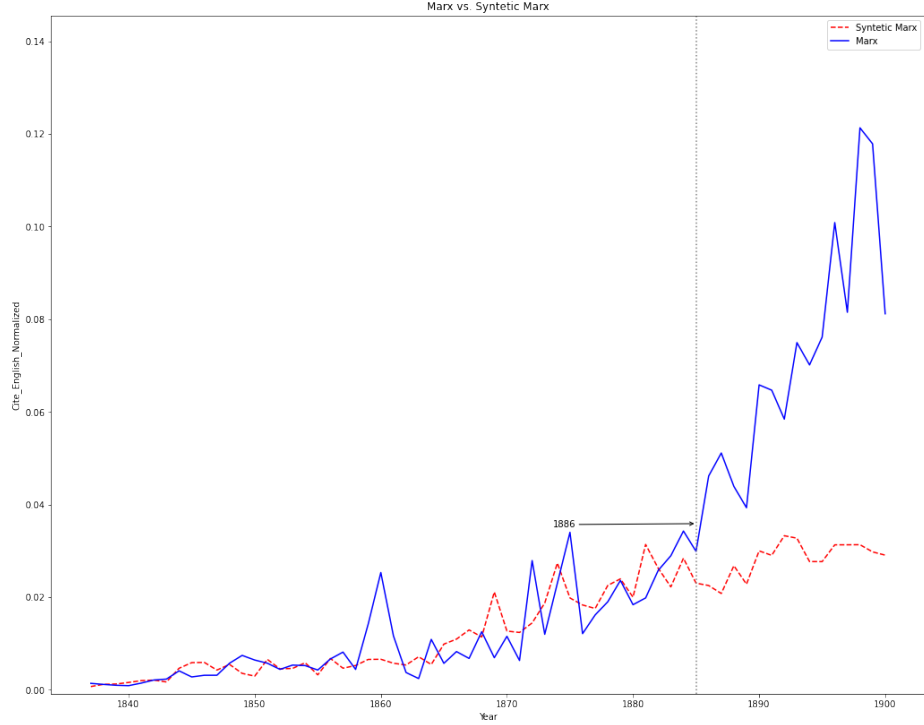


Figure 2: SCM regression, time is on x-axis while the number of mentions of 'Marx' in the eng-gb-2019 Google corpus is on the y-one.

The treated unit is 'Marx' and 1886 is considered the year of treatment. The dashed line represents the synthetic Marx and the solid one the real Marx²³. The two lines are similar in the pre-treatment period, suggesting a good fitting of the synthetic counterfac-

²³Synthetic Marx is the 'reconstructed' Marx by combining outcome variables and covariates from the donor pool before treatment, and projected into the future without fitting constraints as the combination of donor pool's authors variables.

tual with respect to the real data. The appropriateness of the fitting and the robustness of this result are analysed in the online appendix.

Marx’s mentions in both pre-treatment and post-treatment are erratic and correlated with certain historical events. The period from 1852 to 1862 was the most prolific for the journalist Marx, whose early career has often been overlooked. During this period, Marx contributed approximately 372 articles to the New York Daily Tribune. However, due to the newspaper’s editorial process, many of these articles were significantly modified before publication. Moreover, attribution is challenging, as the articles were not signed and often underwent substantial revisions after the initial version was submitted. From 1853 onwards, Marx wrote the articles directly in English, while in the first year, they were translated by Engels or Wilhelm Pieper. This peak can be explained by other events that relaunched Marx in England: the founding of the First International in 1864 and the events that preceded it, such as the great workers’ rally in London in 1863 in favour of Polish independence; or the meeting between French and English workers in 1862 during the London expo. In a first stage Marx played a minor role in the formation of the movement, but soon confirmed himself as one of its most important leaders. The second peak is observed immediately after the Paris Commune and the writing of the pamphlet ‘The Civil War in France’ (1871), which was written in English and translated into several languages. It was considered to be one of Marx’s most important directly political writings and it plausibly relaunched his name also in England.

The SCM plotted in fig. 2 is a penalized SCM²⁴ with ($pen = 'auto'$), where (pen) is a penalization coefficient that automatically adjusts the weight of ex-ante similarity in the penalized synthetic control within the *Synth* package in Python.

²⁴You can think of the ordinary synthetic control method as trying to find weights such that the synthetic control unit is maximally similar to the treated unit *after* you mix the control units (ex-post similarity: just their weighted combination is similar to the treated unit). Penalized Synthetic Controls try to find weights such that the control units are maximally similar *after* you mix them into a synthetic unit, but also *before* you mix them. I.e. you would prefer for the units inside the synthetic control to be similar to the treated unit even before you mix them (ex-ante similarity). It is called penalized synthetic control because it assigns penalties, and thus a lower probability of being selected as control units, to units whose characteristics differ markedly from those of the treated unit, even if their combination with other authors, once the model is applied, would collectively approximate the treated unit’s characteristics. If the relationship between the outcome and the covariates is non-linear, then the standard synthetic control is biased and this bias is higher the lower is ex-ante similarity.

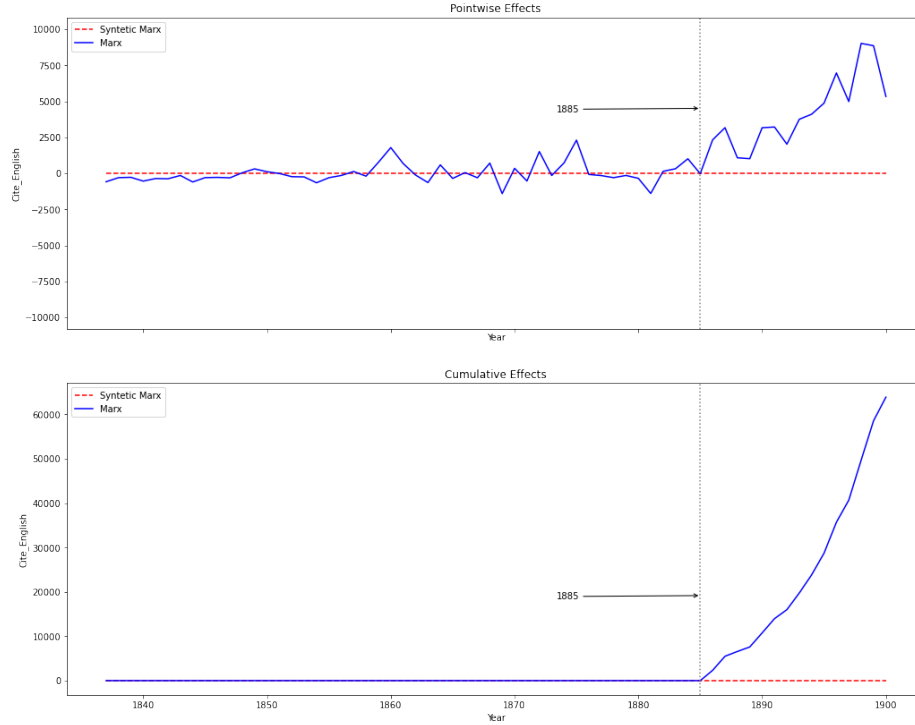


Figure 3: Pointwise estimate (top) and cumulative effect (bottom).

Fig. 3 (top panel) shows the difference between the observed data (solid line) and the synthetic counterfactual prediction (dashed line) centered around zero.

Fig. 3 (bottom panel) The bottom panel sums the pointwise gaps and is initialized at zero; given the near-zero average gap before 1886, it stays close to zero in the pre-treatment years. The larger vertical scale (relative to the top panel) makes it look flat, though small oscillations around zero are present. After 1886 the cumulative gap rises, reflecting the persistent post-treatment divergence.

Author	Weight
John Stuart Mill	0.104061
Lassalle	0.525924
Sismondi	0.050583
Hegel	0.059004
Proudhon	0.039544
William Morris	0.220643

Table 5: Synthetic Marx composition

Tab. 5 shows the authors composition of the synthetic Marx. The latter is composed of 52% of Lassalle, 22% of William Morris, 10% of Mill, almost 6% of Hegel, 5% of Sismondi and almost 4% of Proudhon. The weights assigned to units in the Synthetic Control method are sparse, ensuring a high degree of transparency in the model’s construction.

	Marx	Synthetic Marx	WMAPE	Importance
Socialist	1.00	0.90	0.10	0.10
YearofTranslationtoEnglish	1887.00	1878.36	12.80	0.01
wrote_English	0.00	0.32	0.32	0.10
wrote_German	1.00	0.62	0.38	0.10
wrote_French	0.00	0.05	0.05	0.10
Cite_French	763.63	1198.23	950.65	0.10
Cite_German	2097.33	1874.15	2643.07	0.09
Cite_English	1193.24	1193.72	1207.12	0.12
Cite_Italian	174.16	449.98	414.53	0.07
Cite_Esp	35.43	87.44	81.00	0.09
Cite_Russian	593.29	500.18	559.89	0.12

Table 6: Comparison between synthetic and real Marx

Tab. 6 gives descriptive statistics on both the control unit and the real Marx. Synthetic Marx (first column) is very similar to real Marx. The WMAPE is an increasing function of distance between the synthetic Marx and the real Marx for each specific covariate. The last column shows the importance each feature has in the construction of the synthetic control and its entries add up to one. The result of fig. 2 and fig. 3 shows how Marx’s mentions significantly raised in 1886.

A possible extension of the present analysis involves the construction of a second synthetic control model using the post-1886 period as the baseline. The units selected in the donor pool cannot be causally interpreted (Abadie (2021)), but the purpose of this exercise is to explore whether the model reconstruction of Marx’s mentions shifted after that year. The identification of the turning point (1886) and the interpretation of what caused it are logically distinct steps. While the data allow us to pinpoint the moment when Marx’s mentions began to rise, they do not, by themselves, reveal the mechanism behind it. This heuristic use of the model can shed light on whether the semantic or ideological environment surrounding Marx changed. Although the synthetic control method is primarily designed for causal inference, it can also be used heuristically: the weights it assigns, though not causally meaningful, capture similarities in the shape and dynamics of trajectories over time.

	Weight
Montesquieu	0.112953
Guesde	0.208122
Bebel	0.512718
Joynes	0.102203
Marshall	0.063304

Table 7: Synthetic Marx composition (post 1886 period)

The comparison between tab. 7 and tab. 5 suggests a shift in the intellectual context through which Marx was referenced. Before 1886 (tab. 2), synthetic mentions of Marx clustered around classical economists and early socialists (Mill, Sismondi); William Morris and Lassalle instead reflect more the political and journalistic activities. While after 1886 (tab. 4), Marx appears in the semantic proximity of politically engaged or ideologically radical figures like Guesde, Joynes or Bebel, as well as eminent economists like Marshall. This indicates a broader, institutionalized, but also more contested and politicized public image. The heuristic synthetic control reflects both a growing politically centered interest and a transversal visibility of Marx as a pivotal reference point across the ideological spectrum.

THE GERMAN CASE

This study does not claim that the spread of Marx’s name was everywhere driven solely by political and semiotic events. While the analysis focuses primarily on the role of facts prior to the 1887 English edition, the synthetic control method is also applied to the 1890 German edition of *Das Kapital*, allowing for comparative insights. The results suggest that, in Germany, an editorial decision rather than a political event significantly influenced the mentions of Marx in that period. This underlies that this kind of processes were not driven solely by social dynamics but could also be shaped by publishing facts. The edition in question became the ‘standard’ edition of ‘*Das Kapital*’. Marx was dissatisfied with the first German edition published in 1867, in particular with the two expositions about the forms of value: one in the text and the other in the appendix for non-dialectics philosophers. For the second German edition, published in 1872, Marx drafted a manuscript with a unified treatment of the topic, but it was the Engels’s 1890 edition that eventually gained widespread circulation.

The results of the regression for the German case are in Fig. 4.



Figure 4: The impact of the German edition of 'Das Kapital' (1890) on the German mentions of 'Marx'

Engels' edition in 1890 clearly raised the mentions of Marx in Germany in the Google books corpus (de-2019). This proves that even a publishing event can influence the spread of an author, and that the method is suitable for cases in which a potential cause for a break in a trend can be precisely identified.

VI FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together, a clearer picture begins to emerge. In 1886, several editorial initiatives and publications significantly contributed to Marx's political and public visibility. As Willis observed, the English reception of Marx operated not only through critiques of his economic theory, but more profoundly through a defense of the ethical and political values underpinning Victorian liberal capitalism. This suggests that Marx's name functioned as a semiotic threat to those values (self-help, individual liberty, parliamentary democracy, and so on) and that his early mentions in public discourse were part of a broader exercise in ideological boundary work. In this sense, the reception of Marx in England took the form of symbolic and ideological confrontation rather than of

theoretical engagement.

Although the Synthetic control does not allow us to rigorously separate interest in Marx’s theoretical aspects from his political ones, the qualitative analysis and the historical context strongly support the hypothesis that the increase in mentions between 1885 and 1886 was driven primarily by attention to the political implications of his ideas, rather than by any deep engagement with his theoretical contributions. Social unrest, the rise of ‘new socialism’, and the heightened perception of Marxism as a political threat among the English middle and ruling classes all point to a pragmatic and contested reception.

Thus, the main contribution of this study to the history of economic thought is to show that Marx entered British public discourse more as a political figure than as an economic theorist—at least initially—and only later gained recognition (after 1887) as a philosopher and theorist.

The findings indicate that interest in Marx began to spread even before the release of the full English translation of *Capital*, which was itself embedded in a broader political context. This suggests that ideological diffusion can precede formal publications, especially in a culturally and politically engaged environment. Such a perspective offers dynamic view of how media and social movements shaped the reception of Marxism in late 19th-century England.

The SCM model has proven useful in this regard, as it suggests that a combination of events created a receptive environment that amplified interest in Marx’s name. What emerges is not so much a dissemination of doctrinal content, but rather a dynamic of media visibility, whereby Marx’s name circulated even among those unfamiliar with his writings.

From a historiographical perspective, this study challenges editorial-centric narratives of Marx’s reception in Britain. It offers instead a view in which political upheaval, media discourse, puritan anxieties, and editorial activity together shaped a complex dynamic. The turning point of 1886 thus marks the public emergence of Marx as a representative figure within a contested political landscape.

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The goal is to estimate the effect of the treatment (1886) on the mentions of Marx in English. With $J + 1$ units and T periods in the dataset, let define time as $t = 1, \dots, T$. Assume that the first T_0 periods are before the intervention and that $t = T_0 + 1$, the estimated equation is:

$$\tau_{1t} = Y_{1t}^I - Y_{1t}^N, \quad (1)$$

where

τ_{1t} is the effect of the intervention of interest for the affected unit (which, without loss of generality we assume is the first one, i.e. $j = 1$, with $j \in \{1, \dots, J+1\}$) in the period after the intervention. Y_{1t}^I is the outcome variable of the treated unit with the intervention and Y_{1t}^N is its outcome variable if the intervention had not occurred. The synthetic control estimators of Y_{1t}^N and τ_{1t} are

$$\hat{Y}_{1t}^N = \sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j Y_{jt} \quad (2)$$

and

$$\hat{\tau}_{1t} = Y_{1t} - \hat{Y}_{1t}^N \quad (3)$$

respectively. $w_j \in \mathbf{W} = (w_2, \dots, w_{J+1})'$ is the weight assigned to unit j in the donor pool. It measure unit j contribution to the synthetic reconstruction of the treated unit. Notice that \mathbf{W} is a vector of J weights ($|\mathbf{W}| = J$) which represents a synthetic control estimator. These weights are restricted such that $w_j \in [0, 1] \forall j \in \{2, \dots, J+1\}$. In other words the synthetic control unit is a convex combination (and not simply a linear one) of the units in the donor pool. This constraint is designed to avoid extrapolation. SCM in this setting just allows for interpolation. There are cases where an unrestricted synthetic control (with weights that add up to 1, but that can also take on negative values, see Abadie (2021)) is more suitable, but this is not one of them. Y_{jt} is the outcome of interest for unit j in period t . What the SCM does is to choose these weights in such a way that the resulting synthetic control resembles as closely as possible the pre-intervention values for the treated unit, both of the predictors of the outcome variable and of the outcome variable itself. Once the vector of weights resulting from the minimisation has been obtained ($\mathbf{W}^* = (w_2^*, \dots, w_{J+1}^*)'$) (3) can be rewritten as

$$\hat{\tau}_{1t} = Y_{1t} - \sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j^* Y_{jt} \quad (4)$$

which is the the estimated treatment effect for the treated unit at time $t = T_0 + 1$. This can be generalized $\forall t \geq T_0 + 1$. Finally, it should be noted that the treatment can last over time and its average effect can be estimated over several years. Specifically, I used Py 'synth' package to run estimates with $t = 1887$ and the effect is positive, but the treatment begin earlier. It starts to be significant from 1886 and remains significant for the subsequent periods (up to 1900). This is also due to the fact that the dataset begins when Marx was young it is physiological that his mentions increase over time; for instance in 1888 the first authorized translation and edition of the *Communist Party manifesto* came

out in England and this plausibly further increased his mentions. However, the purpose of the study is to identify the temporal break point, so this type of considerations should not affect the scientific validity of the study.

B INFERENCE AND ROBUSTNESS TESTS

ROBUSTNESS OF THE ENGLAND CASE

The inference procedure referred to result displayed Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 relies on permutation tests. The permutation test consists in an in space placebo test (Abadie (2021)) where, one at a time, all the units in the donor pool are assigned as treated units. Indeed the inference procedure implies to reassign the treatment in the data to a comparison unit. In this way, we can obtain synthetic control estimates for authors that did not experience the event of interest. Applying this idea to each author in the donor pool allows to compare the estimated effect to the distribution of placebo effects obtained for other authors. We will deem the effect of the treatment significant if the estimated effect for Marx is unusually large relative to the distribution of placebo effects. Or conversely, if we find that many or all control units were affected by the treatment, then we can conclude that the effect on Marx is due to random chance. The results are best visualized plotting the Root Mean Square Prediction Error ratio in Fig. 6,

The Root Mean Square Prediction Error (RMSPE) is a metric used to quantify the accuracy of a synthetic control model. It is defined as the square root of the average of the squares of the differences between the observed values and those estimated by a model for a treated unit over a specific period. Formally it is:

$$\text{RMSPE} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T (Y_{jt} - \hat{Y}_{jt})^2}$$

where Y_{jt} represents the observed value for unit j at time t , \hat{Y}_{jt} is the value predicted by the synthetic control model for unit j at time t , and T is the total number of periods considered for the calculation. The RMSPE ratio used in robustness tests represents the ratio between the deviation of the true value from the synthetic counterfactual after the treatment and the deviation before the treatment. It measures the effectiveness of the treatment on the unit in question: the higher its value, the greater the impact of the treatment on that specific unit, provided that its pre-treatment fit is sufficiently accurate.

In Tab. 8 Marx is clearly an outlier in terms of post-period/pre-period RMSPE distribution, almost twice as extreme as any of the placebo treated units. This validates the synthetic control estimates (Abadie (2021)). Marx RMSPE ratio is almost the double of

that one of the second author: Anne Robert Jaques Turgot. The number of authors in the in space placebo results may be less than the original number of units in the dataset. This is because the SCM for some placebo treated units fails to converge to a solution, as the latter is constrained (Abadie (2021)). Results are in Fig. 5.

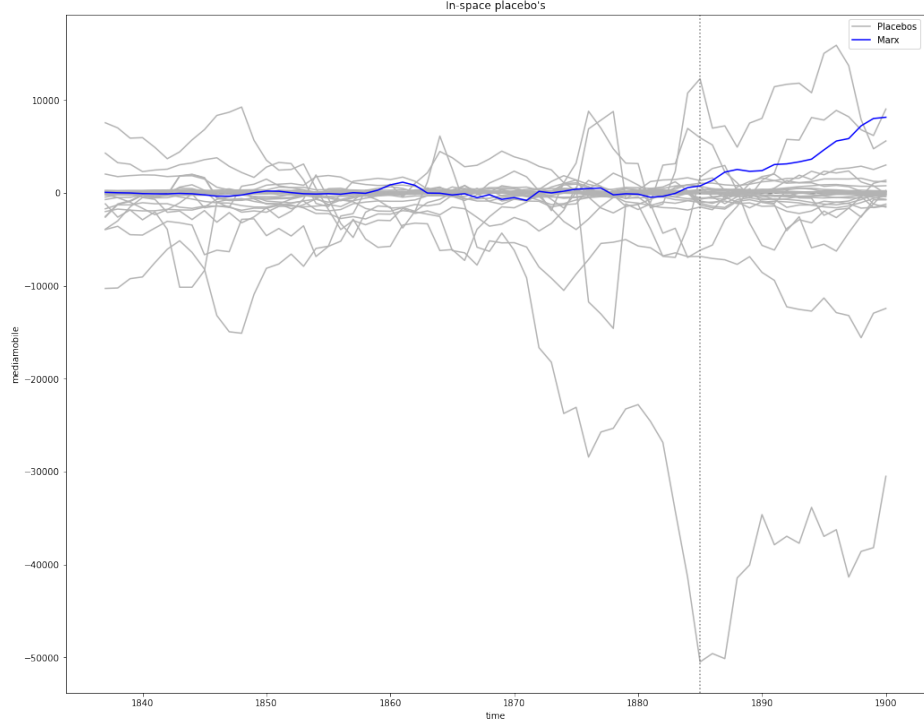


Figure 5: In space placebo test

Marx is the blue line and the grey ones are the control ones, which in turn are considered as treated units. If the deviation of the synthetic from the true value in the pre-treatment period is large, any deviation in the post-treatment period will be weighted less. Fig. 6 and Tab. 8 show RMSPE for all authors, for few of them the model is not able to find a good control (i.e. a good fitting in the pre-treatment period).

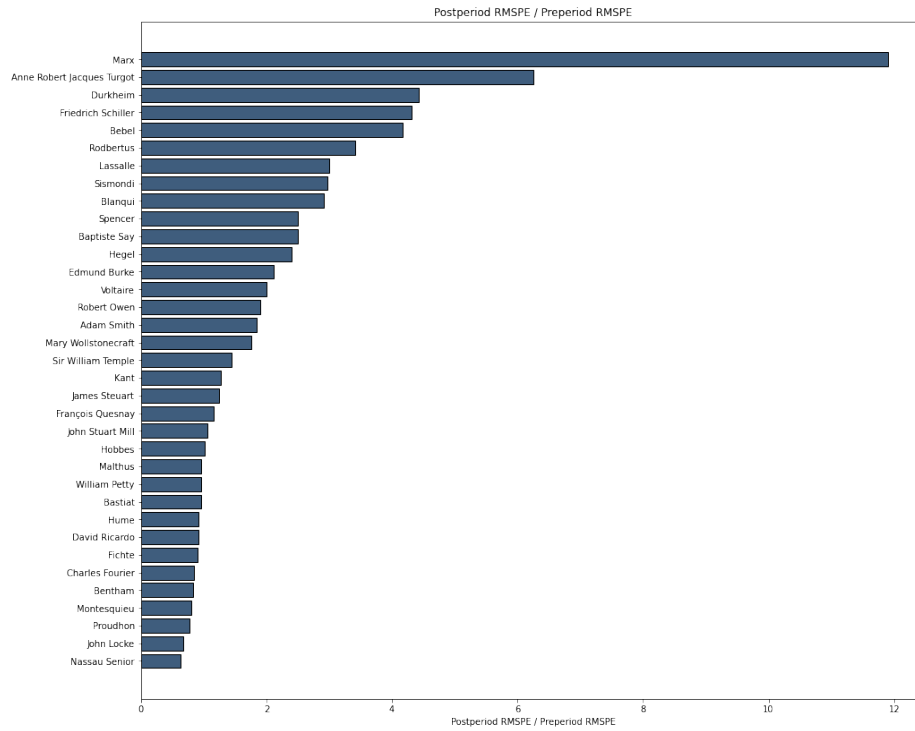


Figure 6: RMSPE ratio magnitude for each author

Author	pre_RMSPE	post_RMSPE	post/pre
Marx	382.973240	4414.029074	12.525685
Adam Smith	1422.280522	2295.273624	1.613798
Bastiat	311.950310	347.394388	0.973621
Bentham	2463.797414	3612.330593	0.926164
Blanqui	492.974114	1432.857789	2.966558
Charles Fourier	94.452958	98.694821	0.934910
David Ricardo	86.785802	79.296473	0.962703
Durkheim	74.483914	161.996188	4.074915
Hobbes	1039.977749	1254.465010	1.026242
Hume	6535.530978	6526.974845	0.968691
John Stuart Mill	1255.511543	1315.949202	1.088138
Lassalle	321.575906	1222.432465	3.201381
Malthus	621.786588	1093.797152	1.009120
Nassau Senior	107.308604	65.303830	0.608561
Proudhon	500.792476	402.189287	0.863106
Robert Owen	191.909474	311.759358	1.624513
Rodbertus	104.711345	346.098242	3.305260
Sismondi	1144.564160	1106.598268	3.166829
Spencer	14082.324382	40072.196356	2.845567
Baptiste Say	7617.118291	18910.691439	2.482657
François Quesnay	272.788458	217.620417	0.997763
Thomas Robert Malthus	626.117174	1093.276177	1.746121
Anne Robert Jacques Turgot	86.697257	504.927418	5.977469
James Steuart	181.005749	614.247128	1.093523
John Locke	5351.771865	3953.377998	0.728705
William Petty	311.950310	347.394388	0.983621
Sir William Temple	615.974647	1102.137887	1.389259
Hegel	4590.831181	10964.320555	2.388308
Edmund Burke	507.002062	1063.056573	2.096750
Mary Wollstonecraft	181.005749	614.247128	1.493523
Montesquieu	2444.983820	2181.624831	0.892286
Voltaire	4597.588281	11425.261363	1.985055
Kant	2551.665686	3044.642112	1.193198
Friedrich Schiller	79.764519	161.021349	3.818709
Fichte	1139.094672	1065.961675	0.935797
Bebel	43.734375	207.695701	3.663639

Table 8: The in space placebo test produces ratios between pre-intervention Root mean square prediction errors and the post-intervention ones. It quantifies the magnitude of the effect of the treatment for all units in the donor pool and for the treated unit

Tab. 8 is useful because it allows one to see who are the authors whose fitting in the pre period is not good and are represented by the gray lines that do not converge to the blue one in Fig. 5. The RMSPE is an inference procedure with some advantages compared to that based on the p-values run below (Abadie (2021)).

Some robustness tests are necessary to assess the validity of the result:

1) An in time placebo test, with treatment set at 1887. The in time placebo reinforces the result of the original SCM regression and confutes the thesis that the 1887 edition was the major breakthrough.

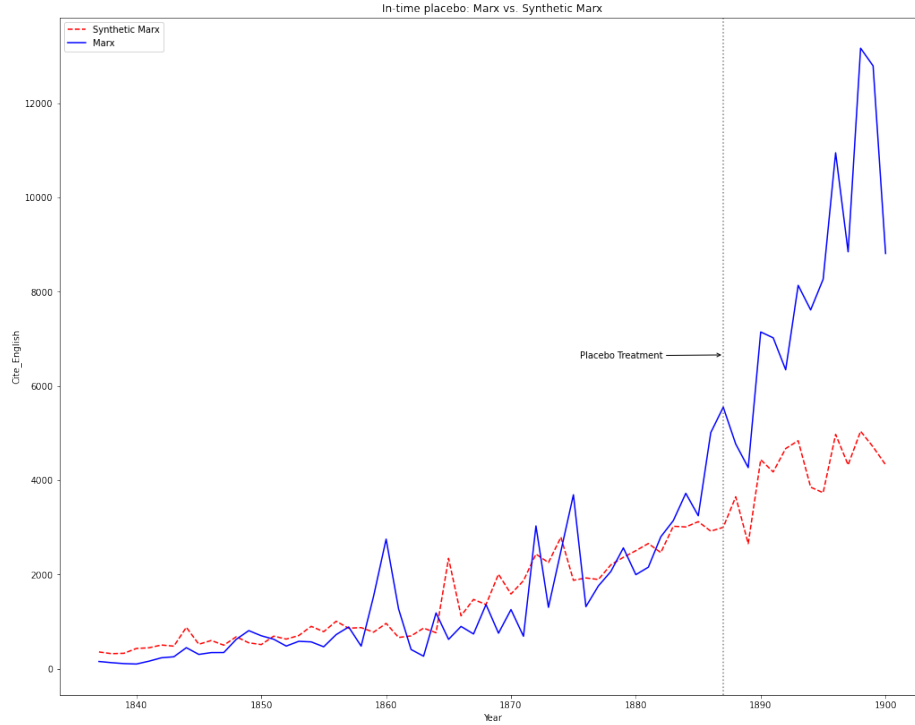


Figure 7: This figure shows the results of the in time placebo test, where the treatment is considered to be the 1887, as Willis suggested

This result in Fig. 7 challenges Willis’s thesis.

2) An attempt using the differenced synthetic control, since there are some constraints inherent in the Ngram data. The Ngram Viewer is limited to identify phrases exclusively, and due to the peculiarities of personal names and their orthographies, the methodology necessitated an amalgamation of ‘surname’ with ‘name surname’ within the dataset. This amalgamation could potentially confer an advantage to certain authors over others, predicated on the assumption that, *ceteris paribus*, the frequency of occurrence for ‘surname’ surpasses that of a given ‘name surname’. For the same reason an author referred to simply as ‘Proudhon’ or ‘Rodbertus’ might enjoy a preferential citation series compared to one cited as ‘John Stuart Mill’.

To control for this possible source of bias, the effect of the treatment is estimated with the differenced synthetic control (Engelbrektson (2021)). This method is new, not well known in the literature and was introduced by Engelbrektson (2021) in his Phd thesis under the supervision of Abadie. The basic idea is that if the outcome of the treated unit is more extreme than those of any or most of the control units, then ordinary synthetic control is bound to fail, as the convexity constraint on the weights (they can never sum

to more than 1), implies the best synthetic control will assign all weight to the most extreme control units in order to reproduce the levels of the outcome variable (and also of the characteristics) of the treated one. In this case, Differenced Synth will bypass the problem as it tries only to construct a synthetic control that changes the same way as the treated unit, not one that changes the same way and has the same level as the treated unit. In my donor pool there are authors who have many more mentions in English than Marx (e.g. Hegel, Hobbes, Marshall and Adam Smith), thus the problem just discussed the treated unit should not be a source of bias; but we use this method as a robustness check, since Marx has a considerable number of mentions in English compared to several authors in the dataset. The DSCM results (Fig. 8) confirm the SCM ones.

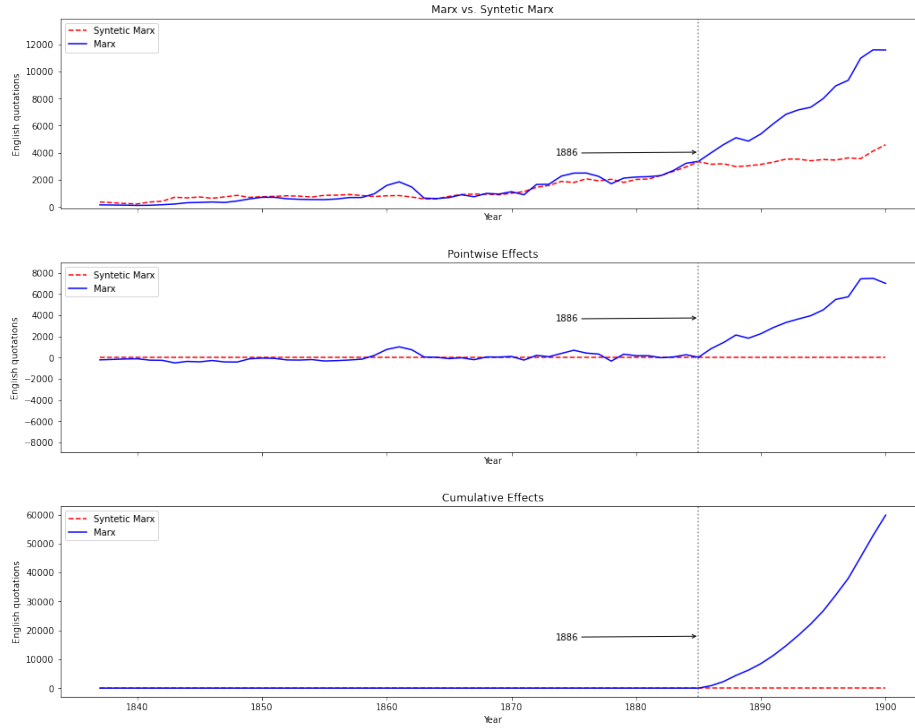


Figure 8: Differenced synthetic control

The three graphs are compressed into a single figure. The results mirror those of the SCM in Fig. 2: the two peaks at about 1860 and after the 1871 are there. After the 1886 the true Marx rises.

3) A standard synthetic control model (with penalization) is implemented (as in Fig. 2), using the exponentially smoothed number of mentions in English as the dependent variable. The smoothness of the outcome variable is a possible requirement of

the SCM application (Abadie (2021)); and since mentions' patterns are quite spiky, we run this SCM with a smoothed outcome variable.

We apply an Exponential Weighted Moving Average (EWMA) to the outcome variable (*CiteEnglish*) in the DataFrame. Algebraically, EWMA is defined as: $\hat{y}_t = \alpha \cdot y_t + (1 - \alpha) \cdot \hat{y}_{t-1}$ with $\alpha = 0.4$. The results are displayed in Fig. 9.

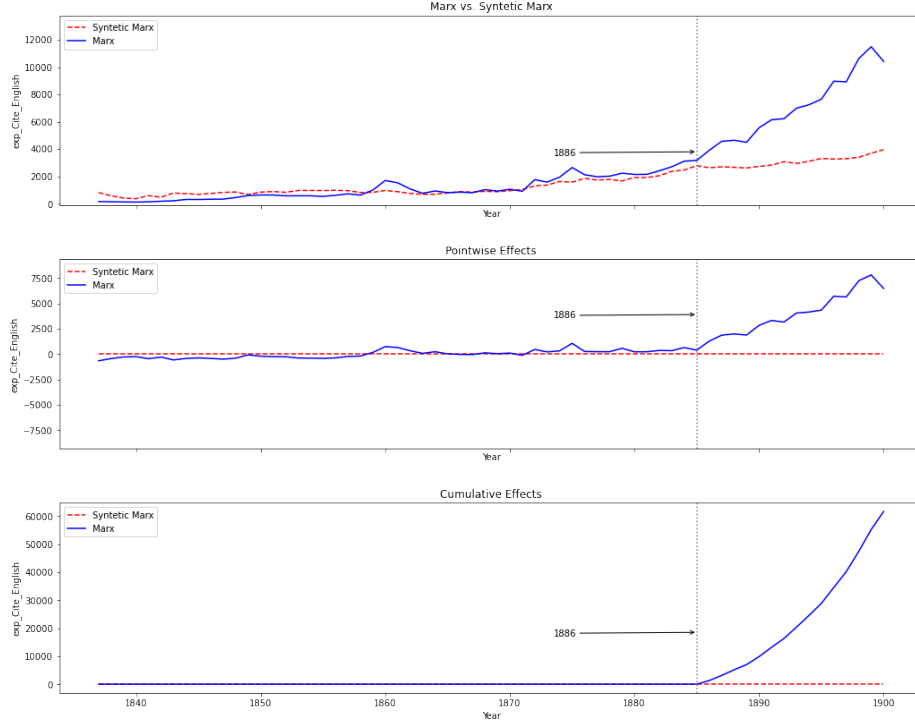


Figure 9: Synthetic control with smoothed outcome variable

4) An alternative way of doing inference with the synthetic control method is to calculate (with 'synth' library in R Studio, while 'ngramr' has been used for downloading data from Google Ngram) the average treatment effect as a joint standardized p-value. Since the outcome variable in this run is standardized, the joint standardized p-value can be interpreted as the proportion of authors with a ratio between post/pre RMSPE at least as large as Marx's one. An in-time placebo in this setting produces a p-value for each year and assesses the significance of the treatment in that year. Data shows that the year before the treatment (1885)²⁵ is not significant, while from the 1886 onwards the treatment is almost always significant, as displayed in Tab. 9.

²⁵I included in the table just one year, but all the years previous the 1885 were not significant.

Year	p.value
1885	0.7770870
1886	0.0003
1887	0.0006
1888	0.0004
1889	0.0059
1890	0.0018
1891	0.0000
1892	0.0013
1893	0.0041
1894	0.0002
1895	0.1344
1896	0.0000
1897	0.2598
1898	0.0000
1899	0.6535
1900	0.5789

	Estimate	S.E.	CI.lower	CI.upper	Average treatment effect (p.value)
ATE	0.12029494	0.001426594	0.00119338	0.00286560	0.0000

Table 9: Yearly and average treatment effect

The years where the treatment is not significant are the 1895, the 1897 and the last two. These p-values are obtained from the regression run with the normalized dependent variable (share mentions in english in the Google Books), which in algebraic terms means: $y_{t,norm} = \frac{y_t - Min(Y)}{Max(Y) - Min(Y)}$ where $Min(Y)$ and $Max(Y)$ are the minimum and maximum value assumed by the english mentions in the dataset respectively. The Average treatment effect is 0.12 in magnitude and the p-value is significant at any confidence level. The S.E., CI.lower and CI.upper are the standard error, the lower, and the upper bound of the confidence interval respectively.

5) Lastly, since the dataset has been recently enlarged to 103 authors, an SCM with this wider donor pool is run. Results are reported in Fig. 10.

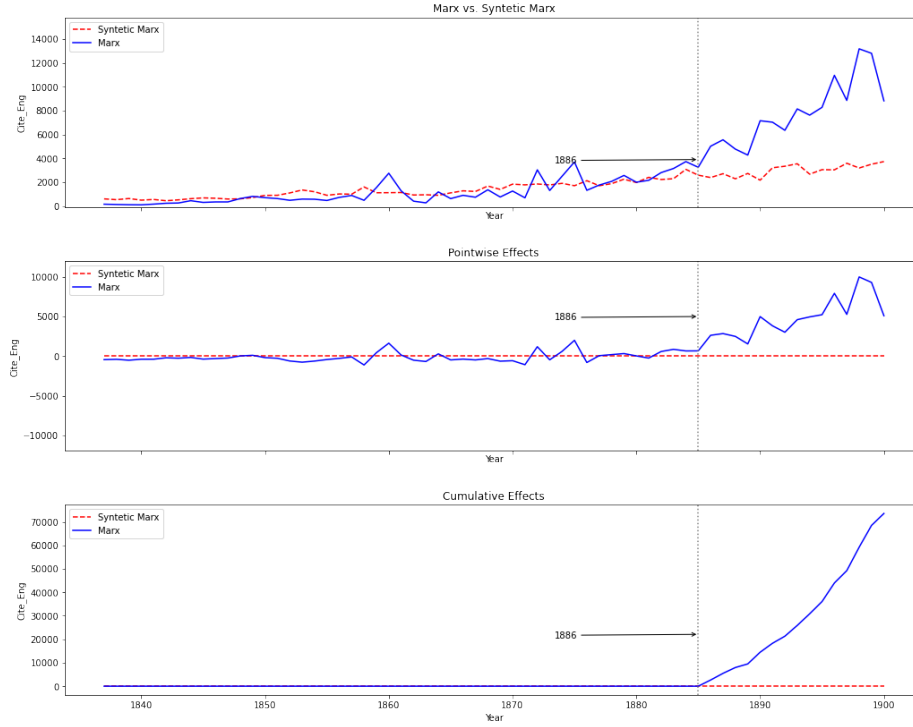


Figure 10: Synthetic control with 103 authors

Results of this appendix largely confirm the robustness of the result in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.

ROBUSTNESS OF THE GERMAN CASE

The synthetic Marx for the German case is resumed in Tab. 10 and Tab. 11 below.

Author	Weight
Lassalle	0.509327
Robert Owen	0.028084
Rodbertus	0.247490
John Locke	0.209887

Table 10: Synthetic Marx composition

	Marx	Synthetic Marx	WMAPE	Importance
Socialist	1.00	0.90	0.10	0.10
YearofTranslationtoEnglish	1887.00	1878.36	12.80	0.00
wrote_English	0.00	0.32	0.32	0.10
wrote_German	1.00	0.62	0.38	0.10
wrote_French	0.00	0.05	0.05	0.10
Cite_French	763.63	1198.23	950.65	0.10
Cite_German	2097.33	1874.15	2643.07	0.09
Cite_English	1193.24	1193.72	1207.12	0.12
Cite_Italian	174.16	449.98	414.53	0.08
Cite_Esp	35.43	87.44	81.00	0.09
Cite_Russian	593.29	500.18	559.89	0.12

Table 11: Comparison between synthetic and real Marx

Tab. 10 and Tab. 11 summarize the composition of the synthetic Marx and its characteristics for the German case. The inference procedure is the in space placebo test of Fig. 11; the resulting RMSPE are in Fig. 12.

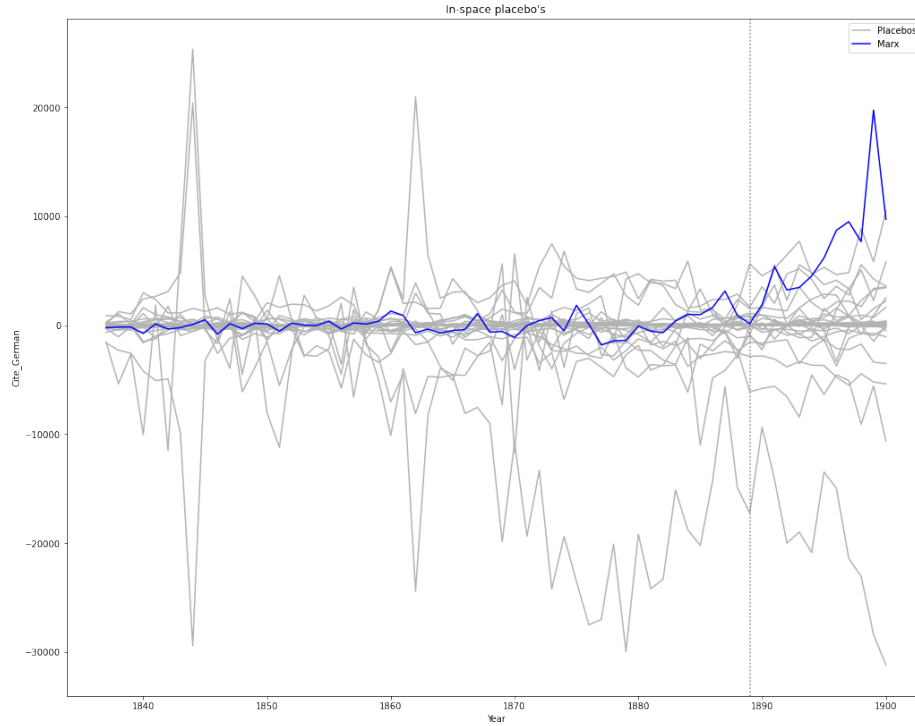


Figure 11: In space placebo. The impact of the German edition of 'Das Kapital' (1890) supervised by Engels on the German mentions of 'Marx'

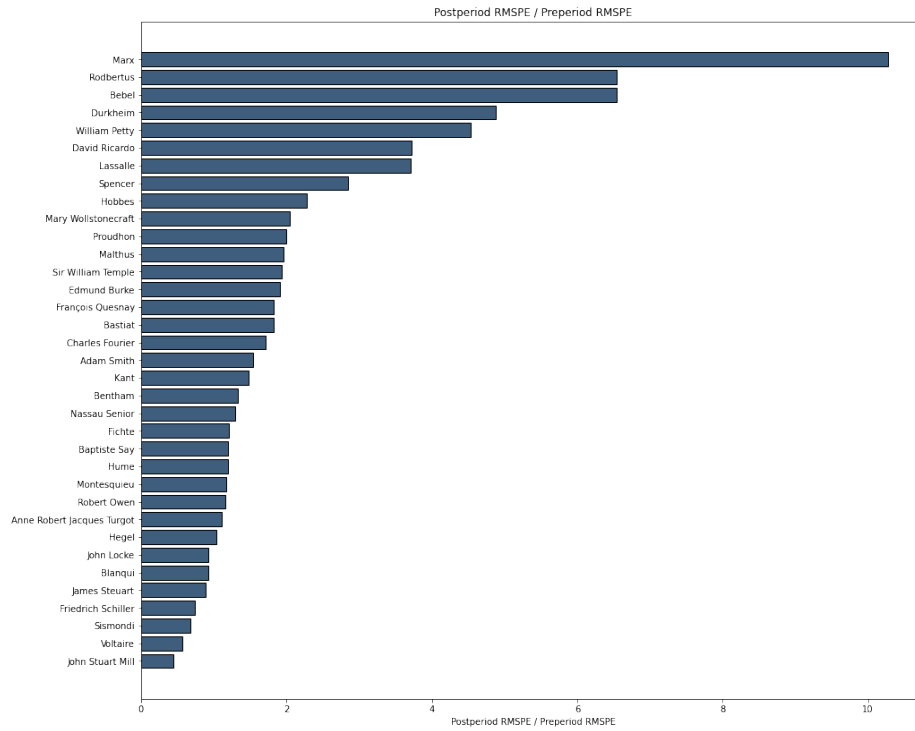


Figure 12: The RMSPE of the permutation test in the German case

PALL MALL GAZETTE ON MARX



Figure 13: 'The textbook of modern socialism', from the Pall Mall Gazette (Friday 06 May 1887). The article contains a critique of the theory of value.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research is part of the PRIN *LexEcon* project. *The Economic Teacher: A transnational and diachronic study of treatises and textbooks of economics (18th to 20th century). Intra and interlingual corpus-driven and corpus-based analysis with a focus on lexicon and argumentation.* (Link here.)

References

- Abadie, A. (2021). Using synthetic controls: Feasibility, data requirements, and methodological aspects. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 59(2):391–425.
- Abadie, A., Diamond, A., and Hainmueller, J. (2010). Synthetic control methods for comparative case studies: Estimating the effect of california’s tobacco control program. *Journal of the American statistical Association*, 105(490):493–505.
- Amini, B. (2016). A brief history of the dissemination and reception of karl marx’s capital in the united states and britain. *World Review of Political Economy*, 7(3):334–349.
- Dawson, W. H. (1888). *German socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle: a biographical history of German socialistic movements during this century*, volume 29. S. Sonnenschein.
- Dilke, C. W. (1885). *Industrial Remuneration Conference: The Report of the Proceedings and Papers: Read in Prince’s Hall, Piccadilly Under the Presidency of... Sir Charles W. Dilke... on the 28th, 29th and 30th January 1885*. Cassell.
- Ely, R. T. (1883). *French and German socialism in modern times*. Number 75. Harper.
- Engelbrektson, O. (2021). Why synthetic control estimators are biased and what to do about it: Introducing relaxed and penalized synthetic controls. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2111.10784*.
- Flaherty, S. (2018). *HM Hyndman, EB Bax, and the Reception of Karl Marx’s Thought in Late-Nineteenth Century Britain, c. 1881-1893*. PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London.
- Geloso, V. and Pavlik, J. B. (2021). The cuban revolution and infant mortality: A synthetic control approach. *Explorations in Economic History*, 80:101376.
- Gilchrist, D., Emery, T., Garoupa, N., and Spruk, R. (2023). Synthetic control method: A tool for comparative case studies in economic history. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 37(2):409–445.

- Green, T. (1881). *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract: A Lecture*. Slatter and Rose.
- Groenewegen, P. (1995). A soaring eagle: Alfred marshall 1842–1924. *Books*.
- Hobsbawm, E. (2015). *Worlds of labour*. Hachette UK.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1964). Dr. marx and the victorian critics. *EJ Hobsbawm, Laboring men: Studies in the history of labour*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1974). La diffusione del marxismo (1890-1905). *Studi storici*, 15(2):241–269.
- Hyndman, H. M. (1911). *The record of an adventurous life*. Macmillan.
- Kaufmann, M. (1879). *Utopias: Or, Schemes of Social Improvement. From Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx*. CK Paul & Company.
- King, J. E. and Howard, M. C. (2014). *A History of Marxian Economics, Volume I: 1883-1929*. Princeton University Press.
- Kolakowski, L. (1978). Main currents of marxism: its rise, growth, and dissolution. *Philosophy*, 54(210).
- Leopold, D. (2014). Karl marx and british socialism. *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, page 416.
- Leslie, T. C. (1875). The history of german political economy. *Fortnightly*, 18(103):93–101.
- Lin, Y., Michel, J.-B., Lieberman, E. A., Orwant, J., Brockman, W., and Petrov, S. (2012). Syntactic annotations for the google books ngram corpus. In *Proceedings of the ACL 2012 system demonstrations*, pages 169–174.
- Macdonell, J. (1875). Karl marx and german socialism. *Fortnightly*, 17(99):382–391.
- Mackenzie, W. D. (1890). The socialist agitation. *Westminster review, Jan. 1852-Jan. 1914*, 133(1):495–508.
- Magness, P. W. and Makovi, M. (2023). The mainstreaming of marx: Measuring the effect of the russian revolution on karl marx’s influence. *Journal of Political Economy*, 131(6):000–000.
- Marx, K. (1975). Engels f: Marx and engels collected works.
- Marx, K. F. H., Engels, F., and Gruppi, L. (1966). Opere scelte. (*No Title*).

- Michel, J.-B., Shen, Y. K., Aiden, A. P., Veres, A., Gray, M. K., Team, G. B., Pickett, J. P., Hoiberg, D., Clancy, D., Norvig, P., et al. (2011). Quantitative analysis of culture using millions of digitized books. *science*, 331(6014):176–182.
- Pechenick, E. A., Danforth, C. M., and Dodds, P. S. (2015). Characterizing the google books corpus: Strong limits to inferences of socio-cultural and linguistic evolution. *PloS one*, 10(10):e0137041.
- Pigou, A. C. (1966). Memorials of alfred marshall.
- Rae, J. (1881). The socialism of karl marx and the young hegelians. *The Contemporary review, 1866-1900*, 40:585–607.
- Rae, J. (1887). Li.-social philosophy. *The Contemporary review, 1866-1900*, 51:145–150.
- Rae, J. (1890). State socialism and social reform. *The Contemporary review, 1866-1900*, 58:435–454.
- Rae, J. (2019). *Contemporary socialism*. Good Press.
- Russell, B. and Russell, A. W. P. S. (1896). *German social democracy: Six lectures*. Number 3. Longmans, Green, and Company.
- Sraffa, P. (1961). Production of commodities by means of commodities. *Science and Society*, 25(2).
- Trevor-Roper, H. (1956). Marxism and the study of history. *Probs. Communism*, 5:36.
- Wicksteed, P. H. (1885). The jevonian criticism of marx. *To-day: monthly magazine of scientific socialism*, 3(16):177–179.
- Willis, K. (1977). The introduction and critical reception of marxist thought in britain, 1850–1900. *The Historical Journal*, 20(2):417–459.
- Wilson, H. (1964). The relevance of british socialism. (*No Title*).