In 1961 a student of sociology and economics must have spent a lonely Christmas in Munich. There was no money to travel home to his parents at their home in Kamen in the Ruhrgebiet. There wasn’t money for heating either. His father was a miner. Jobs as a sleeping car attendant or in the building trade were inauspicious sources of income. Nevertheless, this Christmas was to prove decisive for the 23-year-old Elmar Altvater.

A left-wing bookseller had persuaded him to buy the three volumes of Marx’s Das Kapital. This was still in the edition with the old brown cover from the GDR. They were cheap. His reading during the Christmas period ignited the extraordinary intellectual career of Elmar Altvater. He learned an important lesson right at the outset: ‘unfortunately I realised that Bertolt Brecht was right when he said that understanding Marx was an expensive process. Because one needed to buy lots of additional literature to become a good Marxist’, as he explained in an interview with editors of the history supplement in the German weekly, Die Zeit, and with Norbert Walter, the chief economist of the Deutsche Bank, who died in 2012.

The fact that someone who described himself as a Marxist is invited to have a conversation with a representative of big capital by a left-liberal newspaper, says a lot about the position that the political scientist, Elmar Altvater, had carved out for himself. His views were taken seriously not just in left-wing and Marxist circles but also in circles marked by other class interests; he was regarded – in the best sense of the word – as an authority.

After studying in Munich, Altvater worked as an Academic Assistant at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg from 1968 to 1970. It was a turbulent time. Altvater is said to have earned the reputation of a ‘Rudi Dutschke of Erlangen’. When the 68-generation had passed its zenith, Altvater moved to one of its centres: to Berlin. He became involved in the ‘Cell of Socialist Assistants’, founded the journal Probleme des Klassenkampfs (Problems of the Class Struggle) – published today as Prokla – and was active in the Socialist Office – which was based in Offenbach and was an important focal point of the New Left.

Ten years after his first reading of Marx, in 1971, Altvater became Professor of Political Economy at the Otto-Suhr Institute for Political Science at the Free University of Berlin. He was to remain there until his retirement as Emeritus Professor in 2004. Altvater thus belongs to that ‘generation of Assistants’, as the journalist Mathias Greffrath once wrote, who discovered Marx’s writing for themselves and who, ‘with German thoroughness - one is tempted to say - liberated Historical Materialism from its Stalinist bowdlerisation and ‘reconstructed’ its core, namely the critique of political economy.’
This reconstruction manifested itself in Altvater in a constant outpouring of books. His work *Grenzen der Globalisierung (Limits of Globalisation)*, jointly published with his partner, Birgit Mahnkopf, in 1996 is now a standard work in its genre, having achieved seven editions.

Altvater’s intellectual curiosity and his regular trips to South America ensured that he was constantly exploring new themes. His approach nevertheless remained committed to Marxist method. He thus devoted himself to questions of capitalist development, to state theory, to development policy as well as to the debt- and financial crisis; he also gave strong consideration to the relationship between economics and ecology. It was in this latter field that he established the standards for eco-marxist and eco-socialist debate, which is conducted more intensively in English-speaking countries than here in Germany. 'The ecological question is a social question and the social question can today only be properly processed as an ecological question', he wrote in 1992 in *Der Preis des Wohlstands (The price of Affluence)*.

The traditional socialist Left has given this insight at best lip-service. Hitherto, the Left has viewed the social and the ecological as separate categories. Marxists who talk about the development of productive forces, Keynesian trade unionists, who demand counter-cyclical state programmes, fail to account for the fact that productive forces can turn into destructive forces and that more growth consumes more natural resources and generates environmental pollution. In Altvater's words: 'Economic processes are transformations of materials and energy, which are irreversible, and which don’t operate in a circular pattern – as is presupposed in economic theory'.

Altvater was also politically active. Initially a member of the SPD (the Social Democratic Party of Germany), he participated in the foundation of the Greens at the beginning of the 1980s. The bourgeoisification of the Greens was not a reason for him to leave the Party. He would have been able to live with this and to attempt to combat the process from within, as he stated in an interview. It was only when the Greens supported the war in Afghanistan that he resigned from the Party. The delegates 'have allowed themselves to be led up the garden path by Fischer (foreign minister in the ‘Red Green’ coalition from 1998-2005). And hardly anybody felt the pain', thus Altvater. And then in 2007 - as a last alternative, so to speak – he joined *Die Linke (The Left Party)*, where he was active in the Programme Commission. Parallel to his party-political activity, he was also active in *Attac*. He once said: 'You have to dance at both weddings: politics and civil society'.

He predicted 'The End of Capitalism as we know It' in the book of the same name, published in 2005. This was prescient. Three years later, the global financial crisis broke out, with the bankruptcy of the Lehmann Brothers bank. It was a crisis that became a full-blown crisis of the world economy. It came as no surprise to Altvater. The financialisation of capitalism and its susceptibility to crises had always been an object of his analyses.
In his volume of conversations with Raul Zelik – an excellent point of entry into Altvater’s thinking, by the way – he voices a decisive point for the 'measurement of utopia': 'We – the nine billion that we will soon become – can all have an adequate life, but for this we have to do something and, at the same time, desist from doing many things. We have to reshape the earth, we have to renovate it ecologically, so to speak'. What did he mean by this? First and foremost the abandonment of fossil sources of energy and the transition to a Socialism of the Twenty-First Century. And this had to be 'solar, democratic and solidaristic'.

And now Elmar Altvater has died in Berlin at the age of 79 – on May 1st in the Year of Karl Marx. The Left, whether Marxist or not, has lost one of its cleverest minds of global significance.