

KARL MARX AND MARXISM

The influence of **Karl Marx (1818-1883)** has been prodigious. During the 1980s, people who called themselves Marxists or who lived under Marxist governments numbered about one half of the planet's inhabitants. The Chinese alone account for one billion; although, until the collapse of Communism, the Russian claimed to be the leading Marxists. There are or rather were, more Marxists in the world than Christians. We should remember that the Soviet version of Communism was but one aspect of Marxism. The historian Walter Laquer joked that by the 1980s, there were probably more believing Marxists in American universities than in the entire Soviet Union. By any objective reckoning, Karl Marx was the most influential modern thinker. He was certainly the greatest social scientist of the last two centuries. Marx must be numbered among the founders of the modern study of history, sociology, and economics. But he is most often remembered as the prophet of proletarian revolution.

Biography: Marx the Man

Karl Marx was not of working class stock, but the son of a well-off lawyer in the Rhineland city of Trier. His life story can be told in broad strokes, since for our purposes, Marx was a man of thought not action. He began his career as a university student aiming at a law degree and later aiming at a professorship in philosophy. If the situation in Germany had been different, if the Prussian government would have allowed it, he most probably would have been a professor. Instead, he became an intellectual outsider and critic, a professor of revolution. He became a teacher of revolutionaries rather than a revolutionary himself.

Graduating with a Ph.D. from the prestigious University of Berlin in 1836, Karl Marx began to write for a liberal weekly newspaper, *Rheinische Zeitung*, and his articles began to gain him widespread attention. The Prussian censors closed down the journal in March, 1843 and Karl Marx found himself unemployed. For the rest of his life, Marx made a living as a free-lance writer. For many years he was the European correspondent for Horace Greeley's newspaper, the *New York Tribune*. All in all, Marx wrote about 500 articles for the Tribune. He deprecated his newspaper writing: "*The continual newspaper muck annoys me. It takes a lot of time, disperses my efforts and in the final analysis is nothing.*"

He was exiled from Germany for radical activities in 1849, a few months later he was asked to leave France. After a brief time in Brussels, he settled in London in 1851. For the rest of his life, Marx and his growing family lived in London, often in extreme poverty and isolation. There was considerable revolutionary unrest throughout Europe in 1848, but the era of revolution was over. Marx never accepted this. For the rest of his life he looked for signs of the inevitable overthrow of capitalism. For the rest of his life, he worked in isolation writing drafts of his book *Das Kapital*. Although he lived in London for almost forty years, he never felt at home there or even learned the English language. He would go to the reading room of the British museum every day and read and make notes for his researches into economic matters.

In his early London years, the family was very poor. His wife had to pawn her jewelry to pay the rent. Sometimes Marx could not even leave his lodgings because his suit was at the pawnbrokers. His wife, Jenny von Westphalen, a charming aristocratic woman who lived with Karl through thick and thin, suffered through grinding poverty because her husband was not much of a provider. Marx wrote to Engels about his wife's "*floods of tears the whole night long which tire my patience and make me angry. I feel pity for my wife.*" (Mazlish, p. 55) Karl Marx wrote to his friend Friedrich Engels in 1852:

My house is a hospital and the crisis is so disrupting that it requires all my attention. My wife is ill, Jennychen is ill and Lenchen has a kind of nervous fever. I couldn't and can't call the doctor, because I have no money for the medicine. For ten days I have managed to feed the family on bread and potatoes, but it is doubtful whether I can get hold of any today. How can I deal with all this devilish filth? (Rius, p. 96)

Later on, as Marx published more and as his family friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels set up a pension, the Marx's were better off. Although he certainly loved his wife, Marx was not the sort of man to put his family ahead of his writing. He later remarked that he had but one regret, if he "*had the choice to make again, he would not have married.*" As one biographer of Marx, David McClellan wrote, "*the price of Marx's vocation was high: of his seven children (one died at birth) only two survived him, and both of these committed suicide.*" (Mazlish, p. 64) His family certainly did not qualify as a model marriage: Marx was an avid collector of "French Postcards" and he fathered at least one illegitimate child.

Few doubted Marx's intellectual gifts, but many found him to be a most difficult personality. Marx was a fierce hater and he was a man given to sarcastic verbal attacks on all who disagreed with him. Carl Schurz, a German-American politician and personal friend of President Abraham Lincoln commented:

Everyone who contradicted him he treated with abject contempt; every argument that he did not like he answered either with biting scorn at the unfathomable ignorance that had prompted it, or with opprobrious aspersions upon the motives of him who had advanced it. I have never seen a man whose bearing was so provoking and intolerable. Everyone who contradicted him he treated with abject contempt. (Mazlish, p. 69)

Marx directed his anger even more towards his fellow revolutionaries. Mikhail Bakunin, his Russian rival and the founder of anarchist, said: "*He called me a sentimental idealist and he was right. I called him vain, treacherous, and morose; and I too was right.*"

Historical Materialism

We do not study Karl Marx for his biography, but rather for his ideas. Let's begin with the basics. What is Marxism? Marxism is a philosophy of history. It is also an economic doctrine. Marxism is also a theory of revolution and the basic explanation for

how societies go through the process of change. Marxists believe that they and they alone have the analytical tools to understand the process of historical change, as well the key to predicting the future. As Marx put it, “*Communism is the riddle of history solved.*” Marxists also believe that they and they alone have an empirical, scientific approach to human history and society: “*Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.*” (Engels, 1884)

There are two basic ideas in Marxism:

1. Materialism

2. Class Struggle

By materialism, Marx meant that the engine that drives society is the economy. Economic forces are more complex and pervasive than we think; according to Marx, they even determines how we think: “*Consciousness is from the very beginning a social product.*” (Mazlish, p. 94)

The Mode of Production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Berlin)

The Role of Ideas

Marx extended this argument to suggest that individuals really do not think independently at all; rather, the great majority of people simply repeat the dominant ideas of their time in place of thinking. Do any of us really think on our own, or do we simply repeat the ideas and attitudes we hear every day? Since the people who control the economy also control the political arena, it is not surprising that most simply (once again, according to Karl Marx, merely parrot the rhetoric of the ruling class. As he put it in a famous quote: “*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.*” (Mazlish, p. 98)

In other words, everything you know is wrong! According to Marx, we think and believe the way we do because we are products of the mode of production (i.e. we are all products of capitalism). Men eat before they reason. On one level, this is pretty simple. Marx used one historical event as an example: In 1846, a failure of the potato crop in Ireland led to widespread famine—the population of Ireland was reduced by 20%—“*the Irish potato famine killed a million people, but it killed poor devils only. To the wealthy it did not have the slightest effect.*” It made no difference if the victims were Catholic or protestant, or liberal or conservative, man or woman. In other words, ideas played no role here whatsoever: those who could afford food lived. Ideas do not move the world; rather, it is the other way around. In another famous sentence Marx declared, “*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*”

(Mazlish, p. 91) Once again, the task of history will be to “*establish the truth of this world.*” (p. 78)

Therefore: “*The history of humanity must always be treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange, independent of the existence of any political or religious nonsense.*” (Mazlish, p.93). Please note that Marx is dismissing political history and political life as “nonsense.” The Marxist term for such things is Superstructure. Although politics and religion are objectively mere distortions of reality—there is no “Social Contract” anymore than there is a God—(once again, according to Marx), to worry about. But that does not mean that ideas or even religion, for that matter, are unimportant. Both are tools of the dominant class in society; both are means of controlling the masses. Hence, Marx’s famous dictum: “*Religion is the opiate of the masses.*”

Class Struggle

The second basic rule of Marxist analysis takes historical materialism a step further. All of human history can be explained and predicted by the competition between antagonistic economic classes; or as Marx put it, “*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.*”

In political terms, this means that the social classes are competing in essence for control of the state—or, as Marxists would put it: the class that controls the Mode of Production also controls the State. In general, Marx did not spend much time examining the state or political institutions. Political life is an illusion or distortion of reality, so why study that distortion? It is better to concentrate on the reality behind the veil of politics: the economic structure of society.

Thus the ancient state above all was the slave-owner's state for holding down the slaves, as the feudal state was the organ of the nobles for holding down the serfs, and the modern state is the instrument of the exploitation of wage-labor by capitalism.

Marx argued that the state exists primarily as an instrument of coercion; or to put it another way, no fundamental change can occur in the political sphere without a social and economic revolution. For Marx, political life is an illusion, and:

it follows from this that all struggles within the State, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another. (Mazlish, p. 97)

Political life is only veil for the real struggle: **Capital** versus **Labor**. Democracy is a sham-- workers can expect no significant help from the state. *Marxism is then a combination of these two basic ideas: everything is a product of the Mode of Production (in this case, Capitalism) and the whole process of history is characterized by endless competition between antagonistic economic classes.*

To Marx, the fundamental division in every society is that between the exploiters and the exploited, between the owners of the means of production those who have to sell their labor to the owners to earn a living. But the landscape of exploitation was entirely new as a result of the Industrial Revolution:

Our epoch the bourgeois epoch, has simplified the class antagonisms. Society is more and more splitting up into two hostile camps, directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

Let's define terms here briefly:

1. *Bourgeoisie:* This term in the Marxist vocabulary, simply means capitalist, or management. Those who control the means of production.

2. *Proletariat:* The industrial working class -- wage labor. But Marxists look very carefully at who belongs here -- no artisans, no peasants, no farm laborers. The Proletariat is the factory workers, "Those who have nothing but their hands."

Marxism is an optimistic creed. If the Industrial Revolution has caused mass misery and exploitation in the short run; in the long run, it is creating a vast increase in wealth and productive capacity. The key is to seize control of the productive process and to make it work in favor of the exploited masses instead of enriching a tiny minority of capitalists. The good news was that Marx analyzed the social situation and convinced himself that a fundamental social revolution was not only desirable but also inevitable. Let's look briefly at the classical Marxist theory of Revolution.

The Inevitable Revolution

Capitalism appears triumphant, but appearances are deceiving. The rapid expansion of the economy and of the factory system is the most important thing that has ever happened in human history and its consequences cannot be avoided. The more that production is concentrated into factories, the more the revolutionary working class is strengthened -- the more acute becomes the competition and antagonism between bourgeoisie and Proletariat, capital and labor. There is no escape from this inevitable social struggle. ***“What the bourgeoisie produces above all, is its own gravediggers.”***

Remember as well that even the ideology of capitalism itself tends to aid the coming revolution. Capitalists pretend to believe in competition. Under the cut-throat competition of the market place, the bourgeoisie will simply begin to devour itself. Ownership of capital will become concentrated in hands. Many former capitalists will fail and sink down into the proletarian mass. In the end, there inevitably will be a few super rich capitalists exploiting the labor of a great mass of miserably exploited proletarians:

The expropriation is brought about by the operation of the laws of capitalist production. The centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor reach a point where they prove incompatible with their capitalist husk. The

husk bursts asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

This is how the revolution will come—it will come whether the workers want it or not. With the proletarian revolution the dialectic of class struggle will end because there will be no more exploiters and no more exploited. The State too will disappear, or "*wither away*" -- the state is simply an instrument of coercion and coercion will no longer be necessary. Organized religion and bourgeois morality will also be swept away, their function as tools of manipulation and exploitation revealed at last. In a sense, the whole pre-history of humanity will end and truly human history will begin:

In place of the old bourgeois society, with classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. **(Mazlish, p. 105)**

These ideas were all expressed in one of the great literary documents of the nineteenth century, the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. It is these ideas that serve as his legacy for Marx was always a writer, not a man of action. All of his life, he had contempt for the kind of revolutionary that makes homemade bombs in some cellar. It was through his writing that Karl Marx came to dominate the revolutionary movement. Marx tried his hand at organizing an international workers party but met limited success. But by the time of his death in 1884, Marx left a movement with thousands of followers in most European countries known as the Social Democratic Party, which was a vigorous and growing factor in French and German politics.

The Communist Party of Russia was a subsequent offshoot of this movement. Others following in the road laid out by Karl Marx would use his thought to justify the iron dictatorship of the Soviet Union, the liquidation of social classes as Josef Stalin did during the 1930s or appalling atrocities such as the "Killing Fields" of Cambodia. Towards the end of his life, Marx read a pamphlet purporting to explain Marxism; aghast at what was said in his name, he broke out laughing and exclaimed, "Thank heaven, I am not a Marxist!"

Errors

Is it even necessary to point out that Marx was wrong? From the point of view of an historian, it should be mentioned that Marx made the basic error of assuming that conditions he observed during the economically troubled decade of the 1840s would not, could not be altered in any fundamental way without a revolution. In 1867, for example the year that Marx published the first volume of *Capital*, the British Parliament extended the vote to the British working class. If he did not foresee the course of political reform, neither did he foresee the consumer society; he assumed that capitalists would behave in rapacious ways at all times and in all situations. In Marxism there is no accounting for an industrialist like Henry Ford, who granted his workers the unheard of wage of \$5.00 per day, because, "*If I don't pay them enough to buy my cars, who is going to buy them?*" **(Mazlish, p. 117)** In fact no socialist revolution of the 20th century has occurred according to the Marxist model—all successful Revolutions have occurred in relatively backward, non-industrialized nations.

Marx's concept of class struggle is historically suspect, to say the least. Once again, the basic problem with class struggle is the use of an analytic tool appropriate to a certain time period as an historical universal concept. As a theoretical insight, "Class Struggle" is less an acute historical generalization than a perceptive description of a contemporary situation. **(Mazlish, p. 133)** It is also obvious that he did not take psychology into account; after all, there was no academic discipline of psychology during his lifetime. It is not surprising that social psychologists have been among the most determined critics of Marx. As Sigmund Freud put it: "*[Marx argues the very questionable position that] economic motives are the only ones that determine the behaviour of human beings in society.*" **(Mazlish, p. 134)** Marx was, in the famous phrase of Jakob Burckhardt, the first of the "terrible simplifiers." But his insights increasingly seem anachronistic in post-industrial society. His analysis of bourgeoisie and proletariat bears little semblance to modern society. There are far more young people in college than working for general motors, the world's largest industrial concern. In an age of computers, what could be more quaint and dated than the symbol of the hammer and sickle?

In the long run, the influence of Karl Marx has been to create something resembling a secular religion. Generations of scholars have churned out thousands of books and articles subjecting Marx to the most hairsplitting analysis. In the wake of the political upheavals of the 1980s, new schools of thought and new prophets seem to be emerging to replace Karl Marx. Perhaps we will soon be able to let Marx come down from his pedestal. He should be remembered as a remarkable social scientist; perhaps he should be seen as the most original and subtle historian of nineteenth century society.