



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Key Concepts: Power and Decision Making, the Role of the State, Social Class

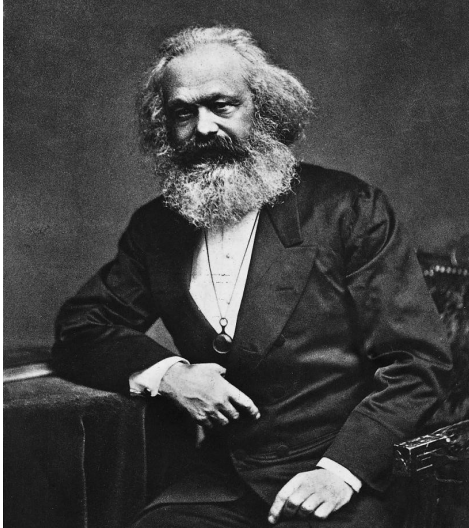


Influential Work: *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *Das Kapital* (1867)

Marx, Karl

Karl MARX

(1818 to 1883)



Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist and political theorist. He has had a huge influence on modern social and political theory and practice. Revolutions have been carried out in his name and states have been purported to be governed according to his principles. His work presents a philosophical theory on the nature of social and historical development, but also a theory about how society can be changed. He wrote, *'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it'*.

Capitalist Society

Central to Marx's writings is a critique of western capitalist society. Marx lived in an age that was increasingly rationalist, an age where religion was losing its appeal. It was also a time of great physical and technical achievement. He was enthusiastic about the achievements of humankind. The capitalist age, he wrote *'has accomplished wonders...it draws all nations into civilisation...it has created enormous cities...it witnessed the subjection of nature's forces to man, the development of new machinery, the application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, the clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers...'*

While Marx saw the achievements of the age, he also saw the high price that was paid. He believed that capitalist society had left intact *'no other bond between man and man but naked self-interest...callous cash payment... It has dissolved personal dignity into exchange value...torn off the veil of feeling and affection from family relationships and reduced them to purely financial connections'*. For him it was not only an age of great achievement but one also of great suffering and inequality.

Marx sought to understand how the corruption at the heart of capitalist society had established itself over time but also how this situation could be changed.

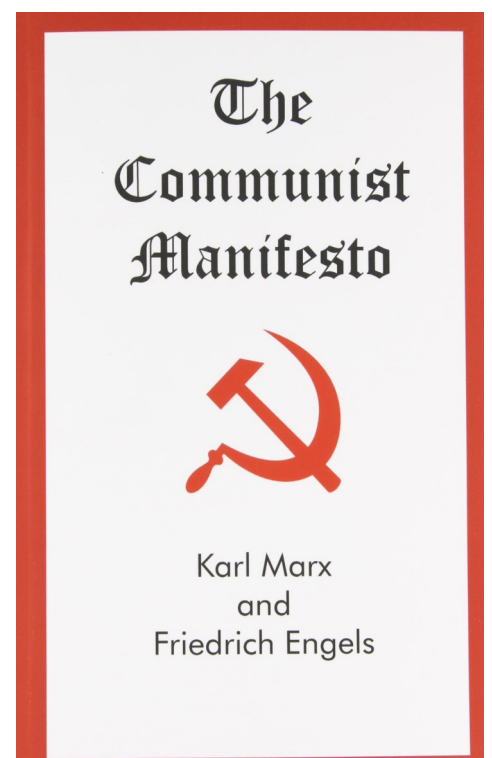
His message is primarily contained in two of his main texts, Das Capital and The Communist Manifesto. In both he provides a philosophy of history that outlines why capitalism is doomed to failure and socialism is destined to replace it.

To understand how Marx envisaged this revolution coming about, his theory of social development through history needs to be examined.

Dialectical Materialism: Historical and Social Development

Marx believed that he had uncovered laws of historical and social development. His analysis of the past, a method he called dialectical materialism, was grounded in an economic interpretation of history. To Marx's mind, all the events of history are determined by economic conditions.

Society is governed by inexorable laws. *'Man must eat to live'*. The survival of humankind depends on its success to produce what it wants from nature. Production is therefore the most important of all human activities. Material circumstances are fundamental to all forms of life. Since humans cannot survive without basic essential needs like food,



water and shelter, how these needs are produced shapes all others aspects of life. Production is, therefore, the most important of all human activities.

Society is a result of the attempt to secure the necessities of life. Men in association produce more than men in isolation. Social bonds are formed in order to facilitate the production and distribution of these necessities. The economic base, or modes of production, is the real foundation of society.

In Marx's view, our position within the productive forces shapes our point of view. Our daily work forms our minds. Social conditions determines consciousness. Human beings help shape the world and in turn are shaped by the world. *'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness'*.

Historical Change

For Marx, the history of all societies is the history of class conflict and struggle. The class that controls the forces of production dominates the rest. This perpetuates conflict and tension. History has been a long struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor, the exploited and the exploiter. This is an inexorable law of history.

Every society in history which falls short of perfection, that failed to adequately meet the needs of all members of society, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The driving force of historical and societal change was a process of interaction between competing forces. This interaction results in a higher stage of development. Thus, progress in society results from conflict.

Class Conflict

Capitalist society is divided into two main groups, *'two great classes facing one another: the bourgeoisie and proletariat'*. The bourgeoisie live off the ownership of productive processes. The proletariat are the propertyless classes. They live by selling their labour. Essentially, the proletariat can be seen as *'wage slaves'*.

The proletariat has been systematically exploited by the capitalist class. Economic exploitation is an essential feature of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism's quest for profits is satisfied through the extraction of surplus value from workers. Essentially, this means paying workers less than the value of the fruits of their labour. Surplus value is produced by the consumption of labour power.

The initiative, skill and intelligence of workers bring them no reward as they are turned solely to the advantage of the capitalists. For Marx, it is degrading to treat labour as a commodity.

His critique of capitalism included the notion of alienation. Capitalism has alienated or separated workers from the process of production, the objects they produce, from their true natures, and from an ability to



'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman – in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried out an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in revolutionary re-constitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes'

Karl Marx

develop their skills and talents. Capitalism denies humans the experience of free productive labour. Humans do not work to produce what they need. They work to produce commodities to be sold for profit. Work is not a social process. Work is not a fulfilling or creative experience. Labour is a commodity, to be bought. Humans are alienated from themselves and each other.

Thus for Marx, capitalism is inherently unstable and contains the seeds of its own destruction. In Marx's view, capitalism is destined to be overthrown by a proletarian revolution and a communist state will replace it over time. As economic power is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and the impoverishment of the majority of people continues, a workers' revolution would be inevitable.

Simply put, Marx's message is a revolutionary call to action to the working classes of society. *'The workers have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of the world, unite'*.

The state is an executive, repressive mechanism by which this dominant class perpetuate their power. The role of the executive or governments of the modern state is to manage and support the affairs of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, all states are an instrument of oppression that serves the interests of the dominant economic class. The state machine has to be overthrown in order to defeat capitalism.

Communist Society

Marx envisaged the classless, communist society as a society that does not meet the needs of capitalism, but one that meets the needs of humans. Humanity can realise its full potential. Society is organised and goods are distributed on the principle *'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need'*.

With the abolishment of the class system, the reason for the existence of the state disappears. There will no longer be a state. This instrument of class oppression will have come to an end as there will be no more classes to oppress.

His Influence

Marx political philosophy was wide-ranging but possibly his greatest influence is his analysis of the nature of capitalism and power of economics in all relationships. While most economists before Marx, (like Adam Smith) had assumed that capitalism was inevitable, along with the inequalities that go with it, Marx believed that capitalism was unnatural, unjust and doomed to self-destruct. Marx also pointed out the power of ideology in maintaining power. He argued that the ideas of the ruling class always become the ruling ideas. So we accept the need for stringent laws, strong government and capitalist economies, because we are encouraged to think of these institutions as benefitting all, rather than just a few. Marx suggested that most of us suffer from 'false consciousness' and accept 'majority' values, beliefs and attitudes that are not really our own.