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# KARL MARX

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## Key Concepts

- historical materialism
- dialectic
- mode of production (relations and forces)
- proletariats, capitalists, bourgeoisie
- means of production
- base/superstructure
- alienation
- ideology

Karl Marx (1818–83) was a German political philosopher. He was born in Trier, Germany, to liberal Jewish parents who had become Protestant (Evangelical Established Church) in order to advance the law career of his father. In 1836, after a year at the University of Bonn, he entered the University of Berlin, where he concentrated on philosophy. Deeply influenced by Hegelian thought, he was a member of a student group known as the Young Hegelians who espoused a radical, atheistic version of Hegel's dialectic.

Marx's doctoral thesis on Greek philosophy was accepted in 1841. Unable to find a university position, he became a journalist for the liberal newspaper the *Rhenish Gazette*. He wrote articles on a wide range of topics, touching especially on political and social concerns, and served briefly as the paper's editor before it was censored by the Prussian government for, among other things, articles about worker conditions.

In 1843 Marx, newly married, moved to Paris to take a position as co-editor of a new publication, the *German-French Annals*. This journal expressed communist ideas and failed to draw the interest of the French. Deemed subversive by the Prussian government, the publication was confiscated and its editors sought for arrest. Once again unemployed, and now unable to return to Germany, Marx devoted his energy to writing a work of political philosophy that would express his socialist views. At this time (1844), Marx befriended Friedrich Engels

(1820–95), socialist son of a German industrialist, who became Marx's life-long collaborator and benefactor.

At the insistence of the Prussian government, the French expelled Marx and other German communists from Paris. Marx moved to Brussels, supported financially by Engels. In 1847 Marx and Engels attended the Congress of the Communist League in London, where Marx asserted his views on how to bring about a communist revolution. As a result, he and Engels were commissioned to articulate the league's working doctrines. This commission led to the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* (published in German in 1848).

After the 1848 French revolution, Marx moved first to Paris, then to Cologne, then back to Paris as conservative factions regained control of Germany, and then, late in the summer of 1849, to London, where he remained throughout the rest of his life. Marx lived in poverty for a time, but with Engels's support and his own family inheritances, he eventually enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle in London with his family. He continued to organize social movements and to write. In 1852, and continuing for ten years, he became a regular contributor to the *New York Tribune*. Marx published the first volume of *Das Kapital* (*Capital*), a critique of capitalist economics, in German in 1867. *Das Kapital* brought attention to Marx's ideas and a second edition was published in 1871. Translations into other languages soon followed, though an English translation did not appear until after Marx's death. Two subsequent volumes of *Das Kapital* remained unfinished at Marx's death and were completed later by Engels.

Marxism, or Marxist theory, is based on ideas formulated by Marx and Engels as a critique of industrial capitalism. It focuses attention on social history in relation to political economy, especially class struggle. From a Marxist perspective, history is not driven by ideas, values, or some over-arching spirit. Rather, it is a record of struggle, rooted in material existence, for food, shelter, products of labor, and control over the means of production. Marx's ideas—disseminated, in part, through various interpretations of and elaborations on Marxism—had a tremendous impact on twentieth-century politics as well as on critical theory, literary theory, cultural studies, history, sociology, economics, the arts, philosophy, and religion.

We can conceive of Marxist theory in at least two ways. First, Marxist theory is a revolutionary critique of capitalist society. Marx was personally concerned with the need for social change in light of what he saw as the injustice and oppression caused by nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and the economic relations it engendered. His analysis of how industrial capitalism operated and caused oppression was directed at changing this system, thereby ending the human suffering that it produced. Second, and more important for our purposes, Marxist theory is a way to analyze not only economic relations, but also those values and viewpoints created by industrial capitalism that impact ostensibly nonpolitical endeavors such as religion, literature, and other cultural

products and practices. Marxist theory underscores the ideological nature of all human enterprises.

Central to Marxist thought is Marx's philosophy of history. Known as **historical materialism**, it views historical change as the result of the actions of human beings within the material world, and not as the hand of God or some other extrahuman or spiritual force. In this materialist view of history, Marx was influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), who emphasized the material conditions of the world and was critical of the idealism of Hegelian thinking, which stressed ideas and the spiritual nature of the universe and historical change. For Marx, what propels history is a **dialectic** expressing economic and other conflicts between social classes. Hegel, too, had understood history as dialectical, with change taking place as a series of successive movements from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Whereas Hegel saw this as a history of the human spirit, Marx saw it as a history of human struggle over material goods and their production. This is why Marx is said to have stood Hegel on his head. Material circumstances shape ideas, not vice versa.

Marxism describes the historical development of different **modes of production**, a concept referring to the ways societies organize economic relations in order to allow for the production of goods. The Marxist characterization of capitalism as an oppressive and unjust system of labor and production centers on social relations and the tools used in the production of goods. Labor is not performed in isolation, but within larger human networks. Human patterns of economic organization, or **relations of production**, interact with human labor and technologies, or **forces of production**, to create the mode of production.

Modes of production differ across historical periods. Marxist cultural analysis is especially focused on industrial capitalism, viewing it as an economic system that promotes an unequal, and therefore unjust, mode of production. Marx's discussion of class struggle in capitalist society predicates that economic development progresses from primitive to feudal to capitalist, and that class struggle corresponds to the dominant mode of production in each society. It is only with the development of a socialist mode of production that class distinctions and conflicts end. Historical change can occur only within the context of dialectical conflicts between classes. Contradictions between those in control and those controlled inevitably lead to class conflict. It is the dialectic of class confrontations that engenders a new society. The ultimate goal, of course, is a socialist, classless state.

In a capitalist mode of production, the relations of production are such that workers labor to turn raw material into finished goods, and owners control the sale and distribution of these products, collecting their surplus value. Such a system, says Marx, inevitably results in creation of class distinctions in which the **proletariat**—workers who sell their labor power for a wage in order to make a living—enables the **capitalists** who own and control the **means of**

**production** (that is, the natural resources, factories, machines, and other material resources) to recover a profit at the expense of the workers. A third class, the **bourgeoisie**, are neither owners nor workers, but service providers such as teachers and doctors. Although they provide services to both other classes, they are usually identified as having the same class as capitalists.

For Marx, economic organization (that is, modes of production) shapes other aspects of society. The concepts of **base and superstructure** explain this relationship. Base refers to a society's economic mode of production, which determines its superstructure, that is, its political, social, religious, artistic, moral, scientific, and other cultural productions. From this perspective, religion, for instance, is not an independent or autonomous mode of human activity, but is conditioned and determined by a society's mode of production and the relations of production it engenders. Superstructure, then, is a materialist theory, viewing religion as part of a society's superstructure.

The economic base is supported by a superstructure that justifies the base and seeks to naturalize class differences as an overarching reality that people have no possibility of changing. Such a system is understood by Marxism as fundamentally exploitative and only changeable through the dialectical struggle between classes. Struggle occurs because the inequities and contradictions of an unequal system become evident over time. Marxism forecasts that the dialectical struggle will eventually destroy capitalism and establish a class-free socialism in its place. This event will mark the end of history in the sense that further economic change will no longer occur because unequal class relations that fueled the dialectical struggle have ceased to exist.

Marxism draws attention to processes of **alienation**, especially through the stratification of society into different social classes, in which the upper classes have privileged access to the goods produced by the lower classes. Alienation—a result of unequal class relations caused by a capitalist mode of production—occurs in two ways. First, a capitalist mode of production is a system in which workers produce goods from which only capitalist owners profit. This is labor alienated from its own efforts. Second, workers are alienated from themselves in a capitalist system. According to Marx, this occurs because workers become commodities when they must sell their alienated labor in the marketplace, just as other goods are sold. Thus, workers are alienated from their own humanity.

Marxist theory conceives of **ideology** as a false consciousness that distorts social and material reality, functioning to keep people in their place within the capitalist system. This distortion prevents people from viewing relations of production as they really are. Therefore, ideology is an aspect of superstructure: it is produced by the economic base and functions to legitimate that base. Ideologies determine what can be thought and believed about politics, religion, literature, and other aspects of culture. But ideologies are not autonomous; they depend, says Marx, on the prevailing economic mode of production and serve as a

justification for its continued existence. The Protestant work ethic, for instance, promoted the value of hard work and profit making without desire for personal gain. This way of working was understood to be the will of God. Thus profit seeking was equated with religious duty. From a Marxist perspective, the Protestant work ethic exemplifies an ideology that legitimates an economic mode of production that requires workers to toil long hours under difficult working conditions. The laborer who espouses this work ethic falsely understands his or her hard work as freely choosing to follow the will of God, but such a view is in fact a distortion of reality, promoting a mode of production that oppresses workers in order to benefit capitalist owners. One labors under the illusion of choice or free will when in fact there is none.

Marx's most famous assertion of the ideological nature of religion is found in his description of religion as "the opium of the people." This phrase refers to the Marxist claim that religion promises future reward and justice in the afterlife in order to render tolerable those injustices and oppressions experienced in this life. Religion's deferral of justice to the afterlife keeps the oppressed masses from rebelling against the ruling classes who exploit their labor. From a Marxist view, then, religion can be adequately understood only when it takes into account how texts, rituals, and other religious phenomena are implicated in a culture's material conditions, especially the dominant economic modes of production.

## Further Reading

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