

# Marx and burke's contrasting views of ideal progress



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Edmund Burke and Karl Marx would have been mortified at each other's conception of acceptable progress and the movement of history. Such repugnance, in fact, was indeed expressed by Marx, reflecting the two polar views of his and Burke's respective philosopher parents, in this quote directed at Burke: The sycophant-who in the pay of the English oligarchy played the romantic laudator temporis acti against the French Revolution just as, in the pay of the North American colonies at the beginning of the American troubles, he had played the liberal against the English oligarchy-was an out-and-out vulgar bourgeois. From *Das Kapital* Such condemnation of character- 'out-and-out vulgar bourgeois' is the most brutal of insults for Marx-outlines in the philosopher's own words how fundamentally incompatible their two perspectives are. A component of such perspective, especially emblematic of their contrary views, is their outlook on the proper movement of history. While Burke supports an 'organic', gradual constitutional reform, Marx calls (literally; evidence in the closing line of his manifesto) for massive, violent revolution. Burke, within his letter *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, employs the language of naturalness throughout, so that an organic motif emerges. This motif fits with his advocacy of gradual change-while he admits a dynamic conception of society within his philosophy, he is careful to reject any sudden, new order; things must evolve slowly, as does a plant: "Our political system is...a permanent body composed of transitory parts...which moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete" (pg. 39). Tradition also played a large role in Burke's philosophy on the natural movement of history. He sees <https://assignbuster.com/marx-and-burkes-contrasting-views-of-ideal-progress/>

it as imperative that tradition be acknowledged; this idea, of course, echoes his appreciation for incremental evolution. The rejection of the past is not to be tolerated. One can view this notion, for example, by examining Burke's theoretical support: he nearly always defends his ideas with historical examples. It is with such an attitude that Burke approaches the French Revolution. He is a fierce critic, decrying it as a violent rebellion against tradition and proper authority. Not only did he believe in private property (another point of contention with Marx), but such a blatant disregard for tradition was certain to receive his denunciation: he famously predicted that this "experiment" would end badly (this prediction was, in fact, what won the majority of his followers after an icy initial reception of his work). "The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror" (p. 36) he proclaims within *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Such a radical creation contradicts his plant model and ignores the tradition of the past-it is, in a few words, unacceptable-and doomed. What also distances Burke from Marx is his essentially reactionary views. Revolution in France is blatantly anti-enlightenment, and serves to essentially criticize the revolution. His bitter, reactionary outlook is betrayed in the text: "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded" (pg. 89). Such a quote betrays Burke's primary desires: a solid regard for tradition and the wish to slow the progression of history into controlled, incremental steps. This 'liberal conservatism'-the desire for gradual, constitutional reform-is what most fully describes Burke's outlook on historical movement. Marx's view on the progression of history is quite the opposite. His philosophy is Hegelian; he thus considers history dialectically. Within this theory there is an implied movement towards greater and greater

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rationality with each new thesis. This evolution, however, is not necessarily smooth; as Marx describes, with each change in society's mode of production (for example, feudal to the current capitalist), there comes a new class struggle. He further clarifies this theory in a (then) modern-day context. The capitalism of the time would prove catastrophic: as capitalists invest in more in technology and less so in labor, the rate of profit will fall, bringing with it the collapse of sectors of the economy. This cycle of growth, collapse, and regrowth will then further impoverish the proletariat, and empower the bourgeois. The inevitable end, then, or eschaton, in this Marxist model is brought about by a massive, violent, and well-organized revolution. What Marx stresses the most, however, is the necessity of violence: " These ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions" (pg. 44). This sentiment highly contradicts Burke's ideals of calm, legal, and marginal societal evolution. Marx also shows severe contempt for tradition (one of Burke's favorite institutions): " In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things" (pg. 44), and even more explicitly: " The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture...with traditional ideas" (pg. 44). The same tradition that Burke venerates and deems valuable, Marx cannot wait to eradicate. Marx and Burke, however, both maintain philosophies that are highly related with the progressions and inevitabilities of time, lucidly projected by Marx as a " wheel of history" (pg. 19)-a dynamic, inexorable gear that will bring about change. This concept of time, however, is where the communion of the philosophers end, as they quickly branch out onto polar schools of thought, one revolving around

steady, organic growth, the other consumed with a violent and radical new order.