

We still have a lot to  
learn from marx  
essay



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The global economic downturn stimulates a resurgence of enthusiasm for the philosophical works of Karl Marx, particularly *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*.

Marx remains one of the world's few modern philosophers able to integrate weighty theoretical concepts into a practical form applicable to both intellectual and non-intellectual society. What, precisely, do we still need to learn from Marx? In a word: revolution. Said revolution will be quite quiet, and distinctly personal, and so will occur mainly within the confines of individual skulls.

This revolution requires no weapons; no bloodshed or violence ensues. The only death, per se, will be the death of delusion. We need to adopt a revolutionary mindset in order to grasp the one salient truth that may prove to be the emancipation of all humans, not simply one select class. The Truth Revolution involves the comprehension that ownership itself is a myth, a myth which in turn shapes a dangerous and destructive delusion that forms the beating heart of capitalism: the illusion of control.

Critical speculation abounds as to how Marx would characterize the current financial crisis, characterized by "frantic efforts by merchants to unload onto the consumer, at almost any price, the vast surplus of unsold commodities that have accumulated since the credit crisis began to take hold" (Hitchens 2009, 89).

Certainly, several of Marx's key theories, namely "the bitter struggle between finance capital and industrial capital," prophesied the global economic meltdown, as Hitchens reflects, in a manner that borders on

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downright eerie (Hitchens 2009, 89): “[T]he pride of American capitalism has seized up and begun to rust, and...automobiles may cease even to be made in Detroit as a consequence of insane speculation in worthless paper “ derivatives.”

The lines of jobless and hungry begin to lengthen, and what more potent image of those lines do we possess than that of the “ reserve army” of the unemployed – capital’s finest weapon in beating down the minimum wage and increasing the hours of the working week?” (Hitchens 2009, 89).

Marx did not grasp the whole picture, however, as Hitchens carefully notes. Perhaps the philosopher’s own pride or arrogance swayed him to underestimate the tenacity and creativity of capitalist imagination, particularly in regards to the former stalwarts of communism, Russia and China.

“ Who was predicting even 30 years ago that Russia and China would today be turbocharged capitalist systems, however discrepant in type? (Hitchens 2009, 89). While Marx may have felt in his time that he was sounding the death knell of capitalism, Hitchens highlights the philosopher’s “ failure, in *Das Kapital*, to grasp quite how revolutionary capitalist innovation really was.

The chapter on new industrial machinery opens with a snobbish quotation from John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*: “ It is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being.” This must have seemed absurd even at the time, and it appears preposterous after the third wave of technological revolution and

rationalization that modern capitalism has brought in its train" (Hitchens 2009, 95).

However, what Hitchens misses from *Das Kapital* is Marx's vital clarification of the social role of money and capital. "The value of commodities more and more expands into an embodiment of human labour in the abstract...one function of money, namely, [is] to serve as the form of manifestation of the value of commodities, or as the material in which the magnitudes of their values are socially expressed" (Marx 1996, 69).

The Truth Revolution stems from this concept - the idea that both money and value are social agreements. Marx understood that "man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, the state, society" (Marx 1990, 79). Just as "man makes religion; religion does not make man," humans created money, the idea of value, the economy, capitalism, the markets, and, most definitely, the crash itself (Marx 1990, 79).

This may seem obvious and simplistic, but upon reflection, we can see tremendous power in the simple but profound understanding that what is, has been made, and can just as easily be unmade. This understanding is the root of revolution: the only absolute in life is death.

Leo Panitch expounds on this speculation of Marx's reaction, were he alive today, to the crash. "Marx would certainly relish pointing out how flaws inherent in capitalism led to the current crisis. He would see how modern developments in finance, such as securitization and derivatives, have

allowed markets to spread the risks of global economic integration” (Panitch 2009, 142).

The deep penetration of finance into all strata of society, according to Panitch, means that “ consumer demand (and hence, prosperity) in recent years has depended more and more on credit cards and mortgage debt at the same time that the weakened power of trade unions and cutbacks in social welfare have made people more vulnerable to market shocks” (Panitch 2009, 142). This increasingly unstable and volatile global system of finance has “ contributed to overall economic growth in recent decades.

But it also produced a series of inevitable financial bubbles, the most dangerous of which emerged in the U. S. housing sector. That bubble’s subsequent bursting had...profound impact around the globe precisely because of its centrality to sustaining both U. S. consumer demand and international financial markets” (Panitch 2009, 142). In global capitalism, in other words, the snake eats its own tail.

Panitch loses the thread, however, when he asserts that “ capitalism, by its nature, breeds and fosters social isolation” (Panitch 2009, 142). It is not capitalism that creates social isolation. Instead, the myth of ownership and the delusion of control manufacture a false world wherein those with material possessions believe that through said “ ownership,” they are somehow better off – more in control of their lives – than those who lack material possessions.

Nicholas Capaldi, in his religiously themed polemic *Spiritual Capitalism: Envy and Social Engineering, Not the Market, are to Blame for our Malaise*, attacks <https://assignbuster.com/we-still-have-a-lot-to-learn-from-marx-essay/>

Marx's philosophy on the grounds that "the use of "social science" to explain human relations has blinded scholars to the true sources of this philosophy. Having abandoned Weber for Marx, Durkheim, Freud, and deconstruction, social scientists totally miss the spiritual roots of the liberal order.

They presume a secular outlook in which religious belief is just another misguided epiphenomenon" (Capaldi 2010, 13). Conversely, Capaldi argues, "political individualism and free markets relate to social cohesion" (Capaldi 2010, 13). Amazingly, Capaldi lays blame for the current global economic crisis on the shoulders of insecure members of the society, specifically, envious Americans:

[T]he most serious problem within modern liberal societies is the presence of failed or incomplete individuals. Either unaware of or lacking faith in their ability to exercise self-discipline, incomplete individuals seek escape into the collective identity of communities insulated from the challenge of opportunity.

These are people focused on avoiding failure rather than on achieving success. Incomplete individuals identify themselves by feelings of envy, resentment, self-distrust, victimization, and self-pity - in short, an inferiority complex. Anti-Americanism abroad and lack of faith in American Exceptionalism at home are the clearest manifestations (Capaldi 2010, 14).

Self-discipline and faithlessness aside, the Truth Revolution transcends envy. Envy, in itself, is a product of the collective delusion maintained by capitalism, that ownership equates to control.

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Kornai lauds Marx's scholarship and lucidity of thought, and credits this with the continued vitality of his philosophy. Similarly, Kornai points to a sense of security that Marx's teachings instill in his followers: "[Marxists] possess...an analytical apparatus and a conceptual framework with a universal explanatory force. Whatever the historical event, the economic problem, or the stage performance to be considered, there...[is] an instrument in a Marxist's hands that perform[s]...the task of analysis.

This...[gives] the Marxist a sense of superiority" (Kornai 2009, 969).

Certainly, Marx's arrogance led him, and perhaps his followers also, to assume that capitalism would simply die out. Capitalism, however, remains tenacious due to the attraction of the illusion it represents. "Theory is only realized in a people so far as it fulfills the needs of the people," and the theory of capitalism fulfills the needs of consumer society to feel in charge and in control (Marx 1990, 87).

The terms equality and inequality often appear in a Marxist context. Capaldi hypothesizes that "Marx...stresses equality and...posits that far from satisfying genuine human needs, the arts and sciences are expressions of pride...and have led to consumerism and the loss of community. The...social contract is characterized as one in which the rich and powerful coerce the less fortunate into institutionalizing inequality" (Capaldi 2010, 14).

Journalist Nicholas Kristof delineates figures that underscore the wide gap between the haves and have nots in the U. S. as of 2010: "the top 1 percent of Americans owns 34 percent of America's private net worth, according to figures compiled by the Economic Policy Institute in Washington. The bottom

90 percent owns just 29 percent. That also means that the top 10 percent controls more than 70 percent of Americans' total net worth" (Kristof 2010, A37).

This unequal distribution of "ownership", according to Kristof, leads to the disbanding of society as a whole. "[W]hat happens in dysfunctional countries where the rich just don't care about those below the decks...[is] nations without a social fabric or sense of national unity. Huge concentrations of wealth corrode the soul of any nation" (Kristof 2010, A37). The Truth Revolution transcends the state of Equality and Inequality described herein. In the Truth Revolution, all are equal.

The global economic crisis, according to Hitchens, was "actually triggered by a "subprime" attempt to transform low-income people into property owners, albeit indebted ones" (Hitchens 2009, 89). The question to ask then, remains, why was the desire to own so strong in individuals who held no real means of traditional ownership? Why were low income people so driven to acquire private property, when they knew they could not sustain it?

Marx called for the "dissolution of society," embodied and spearheaded by "a particular class...the proletariat" (Marx 1990, 90). The proletariat "form[s] a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status" (Marx 1990, 90).

However, we do not need to learn to somehow physically divest ourselves of private property. We do need dissolution of private property, but only in the figurative sense. What we really need to divest ourselves of is the illusion of



ownership itself. Ownership does not equate to control; control cannot be had.

Ownership as a means to control remains the single most debilitating delusion pervasive to humanity. Why? Truth be told, we as human beings own nothing, not even our own bodies. We do not control our inner workings. We can neither stop ourselves from aging nor dying.

Our cells multiply and attack each other without our knowledge or consent. As far as material ownership goes, our stocks liquefy in our hands, our lands get wiped out by tsunamis and hurricanes, our children die or disown us, and our minds succumb to Alzheimer's, wherein we forget that we ever owned anything in the first place, and our material possessions pass along into other hands.

No amount of money guarantees control. No human made instrument prevents catastrophic loss. To be human is by definition to be a custodian. Therefore, we control nothing.

Marx's philosophy teaches that "the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses" (Marx 1990, 86). While the Truth Revolution surpasses theory, as it must, being truth, Marx correctly identifies the galvanizing social effect that a sound theory creates in a populace.

If we choose to learn from Marx, we learn that if "in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has

been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character.

Political power...is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled...by means of a revolution...to make itself the ruling class...it will...have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally" (Marx 2003, 15).

This state, this dissolution of class is the natural state, and has always existed. The illusion of ownership as a means to control, maintained through the guiding ethos of capitalist society, falsifies the true nature of life - unstable, dynamic, and entirely outside the purview of human control.

In the same way that the proletariat revolution imagined and engineered by Marx does, the Truth Revolution sweeps away all delusion, and creates the dual experience of waking the human race up while simultaneously forcing the human race to grow up.

Once we accept that it's all made up, and that no human made financial product insulates us from the random, unpredictable, uncontrollable nature of life that we are all subject to, being of life and not outside of it, the Truth Revolution creates a human race capable of feeling secure in its own insecurity.

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