

# Karl marx: the structure-agency problem



A hugely influential revolutionary thinker and philosopher, Marx did not live to see his ideas carried out in his own lifetime, but his writings formed the theoretical base for modern international communism. Karl Marx (1818-1883), was a German economist, philosopher, and revolutionist whose writings form the basis of the body of ideas known as Marxism. One of Marx's most important intellectual influences was the philosophy of George Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel's signature concept was that of the dialectic, a word that originally referred to the process of logical argumentation and refutation. Hegel's influence on Marx is evident in Marx's belief that history is evolving through a series of conflicts in a predictable, unavoidable direction. Hegel also influenced Marx in his characterization of the modern age. Marx's theory, which he called "historical materialism" is based on Hegel's. Hegel claims that history occurs through a dialectic, or clash, of opposing forces. Hegel was a philosophical idealist who believed that we live in a world of appearances, and true reality is an ideal. Marx accepted this notion of the dialectic, but rejected Hegel's idealism because he did not accept that the material world hides from us. With the aid of Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) he produced much of the theory of modern Socialism and Communism. Marxism is the political philosophy and practice derived from the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism holds at its core a critical analysis of capitalism and a theory of social change. The powerful and innovative methods of analysis introduced by Marx have been very influential in a broad range of disciplines. The economic and political theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that hold that human actions and institutions are economically determined and that class struggle is needed to create historical change and that capitalism will ultimately be superseded by

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communism. A Marxist's thought is based on this daily practice, a philosophy called dialectics. Thus, Marxism is both a theory and a practice. The theories of Marxism are sometimes called dialectical materialism; theory is based on a particular set of conditions that are always finite, and thus, any theory is necessarily limited. To test the validity of theory, Marxists rely on practice as the criteria of truth. Using such a methodology Marx and Engels examined history, which led them to elaborate theories of the class struggle, the basis of social relations through economics, and the form of society that could follow capitalism.

The bourgeoisie or capitalists are the owners of capital, purchasing and exploiting labour power, using the surplus value from employment of this labour power to accumulate or expand their capital. The proletariat are owners of labour power (the ability to work), and mere owners of labour power, with no resources other than the ability to work with their hands, bodies, and minds. Marx studied the differences arising between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie are interested mainly in developing a capitalist society, using advanced methods of production. The bourgeoisie are the capitalist who own the factories, the product made in the factories and controlled all the trade. The Proletariats have gained nothing in society but the thrill of their own labour. The proletariats feel that they are treated poorly from bourgeoisies; they receive only enough in life to survive and have no chance of achieving a higher, class status. The proletariats helped to improve production in society, which developed Capitalism and helped it to grow faster. The proletariats were not getting the wages they deserve for the labour that was accomplished. Marx wanted the proletariats

to stand up to the bourgeoisie and cause a class conflict. The distribution of political power is determined by power over production (i. e., capital). Capital confers political power, which the bourgeois class uses to legitimize and protect their property and consequent social relations. Class relations are political, and in the mature capitalist society, the state's business is that of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, the intellectual basis of state rule, the ideas justifying the use of state power and its distribution, are those of the ruling class. The intellectual-social culture is merely a superstructure resting on the relation of production, on ownership of the means of production. Marx used the term mode of production to refer to the specific organization of economic production in a given society. A mode of production includes the means of production used by a given society, such as factories and other facilities, machines, and raw materials. It also includes labour and the organization of the labour force. The term relation of production refers to the relationship between those who own the means of production (the capitalists or bourgeoisie) and those who do not (the workers or the proletariat). According to Marx, history evolves through the interaction between the mode of production and the relations of production. The mode of production constantly evolves toward a realization of its fullest productive capacity, but this evolution creates antagonisms between the classes of people defined by the relations of production-owners and workers.

Capitalism is a mode of production based on private ownership of the means of production. Capitalists produce commodities for the exchange market and to stay competitive must extract as much labour from the workers as possible at the lowest possible cost. The economic interest of the capitalist is

to pay the worker as little as possible, in fact just enough to keep the workers alive and productive. The workers, in turn, come to understand that their economic interest lies in preventing the capitalist from exploiting them in this way. As this example shows, the social relations of production are inherently antagonistic, giving rise to a class struggle that Marx believes will lead to the overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat. The proletariat will replace the capitalist mode of production with a mode of production based on the collective ownership of the means of production, which is called Communism. Marx describes how the worker under a capitalist mode of production becomes estranged from himself, from his work, and from other workers. Drawing on Hegel, Marx argues that labour is central to a human being's self-conception and sense of well-being. By working on and transforming objective matter into sustenance and objects of use-value, human beings meet the needs of existence. Labour is as much an act of personal creation and a projection of one's identity as it is a means of survival. However, capitalism, the system of private ownership of the means of production, deprives human beings of this essential source of self-worth and identity. The worker approaches work only as a means of survival and derives none of the other personal satisfactions of work because the products of his labour do not belong to him. These products are instead expropriated by capitalists and sold for profit. In capitalism, the worker, who is alienated or estranged from the products he creates, is also estranged from the process of production, which he regards only as a means of survival. Estranged from the production process, the worker is therefore also estranged from his or her own humanity, since the transformation of nature into useful objects is one of the fundamental facets of the human condition.

The worker is thus alienated from his or her “ species being”, from what it is to be human. Finally, the capitalist mode of production alienates human beings from other human beings. Deprived of the satisfaction that comes with owning the product of one’s labour, the worker regards the capitalist as external and hostile. The alienation of the worker from his work and of the worker from capitalists forms the basis of the antagonistic social relationship that will eventually lead to the overthrow of capitalism.

The labour theory of value states that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labour that went into producing it. Marx defines a commodity as an external object that satisfies wants or needs and distinguishes between two different kinds of value that can be attributed to it. Commodities have a use-value that consists of their capacity to satisfy such wants and needs. For the purposes of economic exchange, they have an exchange-value, their value in relation to other commodities on the market, which is measured in terms of money. Marx asserts that in order to determine the relative worth of extremely different commodities with different use-values, exchange-value, or monetary value, must be measurable in terms of a property common to all such commodities. The only thing that all commodities have in common is that they are a product of labour. Therefore, the value of a commodity in a market represents the amount of labour that went into its production. The labour theory is important in Marx’s work not because it gives special insight into the nature of prices but because it forms the foundation of Marx’s notion of exploitation. In the simplest form of exchange, people produce commodities and sell them so that they can buy other commodities to satisfy their own needs and

wants. For Marx, the enterprise is the nucleus of class war both capital and labour are united by certain latent interests which, being contradictory, places them on the opposite sides of a conflict relation. Classes are conflict groups under conditions of absence of mobility, superimposition of authority, property, and general social status, superimposition of industrial and political conflict, and absence of effective conflict regulation.

For Marx alienation is a physical and psychological condition which arises out of the conditions of modern work. Since the worker does not own what he produces, since he lives as an extension of the machine, since he hates what he does, then the worker does not own his own life, he is in a basic sense simply a human machine. He exists to himself as an alien object; the reality of capitalism for Marx is that it is not free. For Marx the connections between the theory of capitalism and the conditions of modern life are all too clear.

Marx believed society was an evolving struggle. He believed Capitalism was an evolving structure. However, unlike Adam Smith, Marx did not believe this evolution was always smooth, nor did he believe it evolved for the best. In fact Marx, predicted the collapse of Capitalism. Marx placed great value on economic forces for explaining social structures. Marx examined society and argued that the wealth of capitalists was based on paying labour less than their true labour value (underpaid labour). This difference between the true labour value and the wages paid led to the accumulation of money capital. Workers were abused and disenfranchised. As capitalism developed, Marx predicted, workers would become increasingly alienated and seek to overthrow the capitalist class. Growth was not guaranteed but could become

volatile leading to periods of economic slump. Marxists certainly point to the Great Depression of a vindication of how capitalism can fail.