

# Did marx condemn capitalism as unjust sociology essay



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Marx's 1848 discussion of theoretical Communism is widely held by historians as one of the most influential political texts ever written. Its principles formed the basis of the Communist movement and offered an alternative to the growing capitalism within various societies around the world. However, many of the principles that Marx offered have been debated by political commentators and historians through the ages. For example, Cohen argues the following: " Now, there exists a debate about whether or not Marx regarded capitalist exploitation as unjust. Some think it obvious that he did believe it to be unjust, and others think that he patently did not." (1995, p. 195).

This premise will be examined in this essay, drawing on various academic works in order to provide credibility to the argument that Marx did indeed condemn capitalism as unjust.

Before analysing Marx's argument against capitalism, it is necessary to examine it and draw conclusions as to what the implications within the text actually are. The Communist Manifesto and German Ideology both deal with social dynamics and the interactions between capitalism, production, the proletariat and Communism. Marx actually identifies capitalism as the following: " To be a capitalist is to have not only a purely personal but a social status in production. Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion." (2002, p. 236).

As such, he actively asserts that capitalism is a manufactured state that is borne out of selfishness and the personal need to be materialistically rich.

This implies that capitalism does not benefit the collective, instead being of benefit to the individual looking to climb the social ladder. Despite this, as capital is a collective notion and so this gives the impression that it can be used to benefit everyone if it is utilised in the correct manner. This would create an equality that would ensure that nobody need ever suffer within society again. In German Ideology, Marx explains why this has not yet occurred:

“...the patriarchal relationship between journeyman and master continued to exist; in manufacture its place was taken by the monetary relation between worker and capitalist - a relationship which in the countryside and in small towns retained a patriarchal tinge, but in the larger, the real manufacturing towns, quite early lost almost all patriarchal complexion.” (1970, p. 74)

Patriarchal societies had existed for centuries and implied that there was some sort of responsibility being taken for those less fortunate than the business owners, even if there was a major disparity in terms of wealth. The fact that Marx asserts that the patriarchal element of society has been removed speaks volumes about the level of social responsibility that he thought existed following the development of capitalism. The social responsibility that every individual had for his fellow man had disappeared and so it became every individual for himself, which not only led to social climbing but also led to a greater gulf between the classes than previously existed (Jacoby, 1976, p. 206). This is just one of the reasons why it can be argued that Marx believed capitalism to be unfair and unjust.

The fact that every individual became concerned with what he could get and forgot about his fellow man was just the start of Marx's damning social commentary. The impact that this had upon the proletariat was far more profound in retrospect than anybody imagined beforehand. However, Marx predicted the unjust treatment of the waged people that Hampsher-Monk highlights:

“ There was a battle to establish – against the remnants of political and economic feudalism – the institutions of a liberal and commercial state, and there was, for some others at least, the battle to establish a socialist answer to the veils of developing capitalism, the poisoning and maiming of workers and children in regulated factories, the discharge of untreated poisons, the destruction of familial stability and resulting poverty...” (1992, p. 487)

Reports of the events outlined above had begun to filter through when *The Communist Manifesto* and *German Ideology* were published but got worse after the spectre of capitalism began to grow. Those events within the quote represent just a sample of the treatment that the waged people had to experience and they aptly highlight the problems that capitalism provided them with. Unable to escape industry because they needed to feed their families, the proletariat were subjected to awful conditions for their bosses to make a profit and the latter did not care providing their own wealth grew. This is yet another example of how and why capitalism was indeed unjust. By highlighting these events and the lack of care from the higher social classes, Marx actively and effectively argues that capitalism is unjust and uses the very principles of capitalism to do so:

“ It is important to remember that the assumptions Marx begins from are assumptions about capitalism taken from capitalism’s own ideologues. His is a picture of a buoyant and innovative capitalism, competitive, and with plenty of capital accumulation through profits.” (McClelland, 1996, p. 558).

By using the ideology of capitalism to frame his argument, Marx is able to highlight the social injustice that capitalism can bring within its own framework, thus highlighting the negatives that lie behind the presented positives.

Tucker also introduced the idea of capitalism actually being “ legalized robbery” (1969, p. 43) because it deprives the individual worker of what he or she is actually entitled to: “...the wage worker under capitalism was being robbed of something that rightfully belonged to him, or that profit was theft” (1969, p. 39). In short, the individual worker is only paid a fraction of what his or her labour is worth under capitalism with the remainder going to the employer. As such, it is not the labour offered by the worker that proves fruitful but rather the exploitation of that labour by an individual from a higher class who never has to get his hands dirty in order to reap the rewards. This exploitation and lack of appropriate reward is repeatedly highlighted by Marx, especially in relation to wages: “ The average price of wage labour is the minimum wage, i. e., that quantum of the means of subsistence which is absolutely requisite to keep the labourer in bare existence as a labourer” (2002, p. 236). This particular quote highlights how unjust capitalism actually is in relation to the present and the future. It also provides evidence that there are no just rewards available for the proletariat.

Designed to maintain the status quo, much as feudalism was, it actually  
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provides a worse situation for the working class because they become further entrenched in capitalism. There is no hope of relief because of the lack of patriarchal values and opportunity to advance in the workplace or life in general. When placed alongside Marx's ideological system of equality, capitalism is proven to be unjust.

Husami asserts that "... no social system has ever been condemned more radically, indicted more severely, and damned more comprehensively than capitalism was by Marx. It is a system of domination of men by men, of men by things, and of men by impersonal forces." (1978, p. 27). In doing so, he effectively makes the case for Marx arguing that man is subordinate to the machine under capitalism. In fact, this is evident within all of Marx's political texts. The proletariat is considered to be the commodity in that it is effectively the machine. If the proletariat did not work then the machine would not work, but a machine does not have needs. A person and indeed a society does. This is another reason why capitalism is so unjust. The needs of the individual wage worker are ignored and so are in no way fulfilled. In becoming a cog in the capitalist machine, the wage worker is forced to forego all rights and individual wants and needs he may have. As Husami argues, everything becomes impersonal and nobody is treated with the respect and individualisation they deserve. In stripping every wage worker of his humanity and rendering him a faceless machine part, it is easy to ignore the individual without focusing too much on what he is being deprived of. Capitalism makes that possible and ensures that "...the threat of unemployment [is] hanging permanently over their heads" (McClelland, 1996, p. 537). This, in turn, ensures that wage workers remain in their social

place and do not have a voice to use unless they come together as a collective. As such, this is the basis of the argument for the onset of Communism that Marx presents within his ideological texts. The workers have to come together in order to create a movement strong enough to overthrow the unjust capitalism.

However, not all academics agree that Marx argues that capitalism is unjust, citing that there are "...explicit denunciations and sustained criticisms of social thinkers (such as Pierre Proudhon and Ferdinand Lassalle) who did not condemn capitalism for its injustices or advocated some form of socialism as a means of securing justice, equality, or the rights of man." (Wood, 1972, p. 244). Whilst it is true that the views of the social thinkers did stand opposed to Marx's views, this argument can be perceived in a number of ways. For example, Marx himself denounced Proudhon because "his petty bourgeois leanings had a tendency to wish to resort to authoritarian solutions" (Thomas, 1990, p. 237). As such, it could be argued that the way in which social thinkers viewed capitalism did not match up with the way Marx himself perceived it, meaning that he neither thought it completely unjust or worthy of total eradication. In fact, it is possible to read *The Communist Manifesto* in a way that agrees with this perspective. For example, if "Capital is a collective product" (Marx, 2002, p. 236) then the lower classes control it as much as the upper classes do. However, even with all of the above in mind, there is too much evidence available to prove that Marx did consider capitalism as unjust. Marx's use of language and words like robbery, embezzlement, booty, theft, plunder and usurpation betray his feelings towards the concept of capitalism for all to see (Husami, 1978, p. 43). This

dichotomy just serves to prove that "...capitalism can be both just or unjust, depending on one's class interests and the conditions which determine them." (Kain, 1991, p. 160). Marx's perspective definitely belonged to the latter category and not the former.

In conclusion, whilst an alternative reading is possible as a result of the nature of the debate itself and Marx's condemnation of social thinkers that followed in his footsteps, it is quite clear from in depth analysis that he believes that capitalism was unjust. His argument against capitalism characterises it as dehumanizing, disenfranchising and downright unfair based on the contribution of workers to society. Although there is no direct argument against the modernisation, there is an argument against the social condition that it imposes on the workers. In terms of the rewards that the individual gets, capitalism most certainly is unjust and the Marx argument can still be applied to society today.