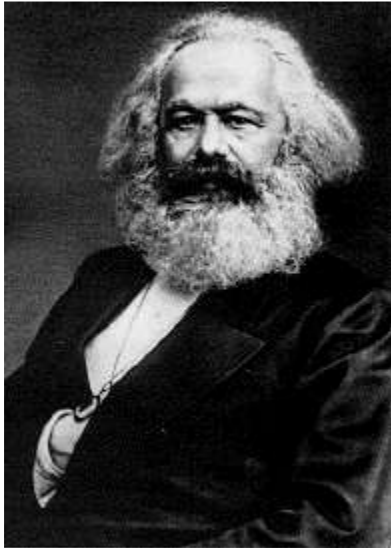


The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Karl Marx, 1818-1883



The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion to the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity -- and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally.

Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844)

The philosopher, social scientist, historian and revolutionary, Karl Marx, is without a doubt the most influential socialist thinker to emerge in the 19th century. Although he was largely ignored by scholars in his own lifetime, his social, economic and political ideas gained rapid acceptance in the socialist movement after his death in 1883. Until quite recently almost half the population of the world lived under regimes that claim to be Marxist. This very success, however, has meant that the original ideas of Marx have often been modified and his meanings adapted to a great variety of political circumstances. In addition, the fact that Marx delayed publication of many of his writings

meant that it has been only recently that scholars had the opportunity to appreciate Marx's intellectual stature.

Karl Heinrich Marx was born into a comfortable middle-class home in Trier on the river Moselle in Germany on May 5, 1818. He came from a long line of rabbis on both sides of his family and his father, a man who knew Voltaire and Lessing by heart, had agreed to baptism as a Protestant so that he would not lose his job as one of the most respected lawyers in Trier. At the age of seventeen, Marx enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bonn. At Bonn he became engaged to Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of Baron von Westphalen, a prominent member of Trier society, and man responsible for interesting Marx in Romantic literature and Saint-Simonian politics. The following year Marx's father sent him to the more serious University of Berlin where he remained four years, at which time he abandoned his romanticism for the Hegelianism which ruled in Berlin at the time.



Marx became a member of the Young Hegelian movement. This group, which included the theologians Bruno Bauer and David Friedrich Strauss, produced a radical critique of Christianity and, by implication, the liberal opposition to the Prussian autocracy. Finding a university career closed by the Prussian government, Marx moved into journalism and, in October 1842, became editor, in Cologne, of the influential *Rheinische Zeitung*, a liberal newspaper backed by industrialists. Marx's articles, particularly those on economic questions, forced the Prussian government to close the paper. Marx then emigrated to France.



Arriving in Paris at the end of 1843, Marx rapidly made contact with organized groups of émigré German workers and with various sects of French socialists. He also edited the short-lived *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* which was intended to bridge French socialism and the German radical Hegelians. During his first few months in Paris, Marx became a communist and set down his views in a series of writings known as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), which remained unpublished until the 1930s. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx outlined a humanist conception of communism, influenced by the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach and based on a contrast between the alienated nature of labor under capitalism and a communist society in which human beings freely developed

their nature in cooperative production. It was also in Paris that Marx developed his lifelong partnership with Friedrich Engels (1820-1895).

Marx was expelled from Paris at the end of 1844 and with Engels, moved to Brussels where he remained for the next three years, visiting England where Engels' family had cotton spinning interests in Manchester. While in Brussels Marx devoted himself to an intensive study of history and elaborated what came to be known as the materialist conception of history. This he developed in a manuscript (published posthumously as [The German Ideology](#)), of which the basic thesis was that "the nature of individuals depends on the material conditions determining their production." Marx traced the history of the various modes of production and predicted the collapse of the present one -- industrial capitalism -- and its replacement by communism.



At the same time Marx was composing *The German Ideology*, he also wrote a polemic ([The Poverty of Philosophy](#)) against the idealistic socialism of [P. J. Proudhon](#) (1809-1865). He also joined the [Communist League](#). This was an organization of German émigré workers with its center in London of which Marx and Engels became the major theoreticians. At a conference of the League in London at the end of 1847 Marx and Engels were commissioned to write a succinct declaration of their position. Scarcely was [The Communist Manifesto](#) published than the 1848 wave of revolutions broke out in Europe.

Early in 1848 Marx moved back to Paris when a revolution first broke out and onto Germany where he founded, again in Cologne, the [Neue Rheinische Zeitung](#). The paper supported a radical democratic line against the Prussian autocracy and Marx devoted his main energies to its editorship since the Communist League had been virtually disbanded. Marx's paper was suppressed and he sought refuge in London in May 1849 to begin the "long, sleepless night of exile" that was to last for the rest of his life.

Settling in London, Marx was optimistic about the imminence of a new revolutionary outbreak in Europe. He rejoined the Communist League and wrote two lengthy pamphlets on the 1848 revolution in France and its aftermath, [The Class Struggles in France](#) and [The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#). He was soon convinced that "a new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis" and then devoted himself to the study of political economy in order to determine the causes and conditions of this crisis.



During the first half of the 1850s the Marx family lived in poverty in a three room flat in the Soho quarter of London. Marx and Jenny already had four children and two more were to follow. Of these only three survived. Marx's major source of income at this time was Engels who was trying a steadily increasing income from the family business in Manchester. This was supplemented by weekly articles written as a foreign correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*.

Marx's major work on political economy made slow progress. By 1857 he had produced a gigantic 800 page manuscript on capital, landed property, wage labor, the state, foreign trade and the world market. The [Grundrisse](#) (or *Outlines*) was not published until 1941. In the early 1860s he broke off his work to compose three large volumes, *Theories of Surplus Value*, which discussed the theoreticians of political economy, particularly [Adam Smith](#) and [David Ricardo](#). It was not until 1867 that Marx was able to publish the first results of his work in volume 1 of [Capital](#), a work which analyzed the capitalist process of production. In *Capital*, Marx elaborated his version of the labor theory value and his conception of surplus value and exploitation which would ultimately lead to a falling rate of profit in the collapse of industrial capitalism. Volumes II and III were finished during the 1860s but Marx worked on the manuscripts for the rest of his life and they were published posthumously by Engels.

One reason why Marx was so slow to publish *Capital* was that he was devoting his time and energy to the First International, to whose General Council he was elected at its inception in 1864. He was particularly active in preparing for the annual Congresses of the International and leading the struggle against the anarchist wing led by [Mikhail Bakunin](#) (1814-1876). Although Marx won this contest, the transfer of the seat of the General Council from London to New York in 1872, which Marx supported, led to the decline of the International. The most important political event during the existence of



the International was the [Paris Commune of 1871](#) when the citizens of Paris rebelled against their government and held the city for two months. On the bloody suppression of this rebellion, Marx wrote one of his most famous pamphlets, [The Civil War in France](#), an enthusiastic defense of the Commune.

During the last decade of his life, Marx's health declined and he was incapable of sustained effort that had so characterized his previous work. He did manage to comment substantially on contemporary politics, particularly in Germany and Russia. In Germany, he opposed in his [Critique of the Gotha Programme](#), the tendency of his followers [Wilhelm Liebknecht](#) (1826-1900) and [August Bebel](#) (1840-1913) to compromise with state socialism of Lasalle in the interests of a united socialist party. In his correspondence with Vera Zasulich Marx contemplated the possibility of Russia's bypassing the capitalist stage of development and building communism on the basis of the common ownership of land characteristic of the village *mir*.



Marx's health did not improve. He traveled to European spas and even to Algeria in search of recuperation. The deaths of his eldest daughter and his wife clouded the last years of his life. Marx died March 14, 1883 and was buried at Highgate Cemetery in North London. His collaborator and close friend Friedrich Engels delivered the following eulogy three days later:

On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think. He had been left alone for scarcely two minutes, and when we came back we found him in his armchair, peacefully gone to sleep -- but for ever.

An immeasurable loss has been sustained both by the militant proletariat of Europe and America, and by historical science, in the death of this man. The gap that has been left by the departure of this mighty spirit will soon enough make itself felt.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means,

and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

But that is not all. Marx also discovered the special law of motion governing the present-day capitalist mode of production, and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has created. The discovery of surplus value suddenly threw light on the problem, in trying to solve which all previous investigations, of both bourgeois economists and socialist critics, had been groping in the dark.

Two such discoveries would be enough for one lifetime. Happy the man to whom it is granted to make even one such discovery. But in every single field which Marx investigated -- and he investigated very many fields, none of them superficially -- in every field, even in that of mathematics, he made independent discoveries.

Such was the man of science. But this was not even half the man. Science was for Marx a historically dynamic, revolutionary force. However great the joy with which he welcomed a new discovery in some theoretical science whose practical application perhaps it was as yet quite impossible to envisage, he experienced quite another kind of joy when the discovery involved immediate revolutionary changes in industry, and in historical development in general. For example, he followed closely the development of the discoveries made in the field of electricity and recently those of Marcel Deprez.

For Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation. Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity and a success such as few could rival. His work on the first Rheinische Zeitung (1842), the Paris Vorwarts (1844), the Deutsche Brusseler

Zeitung (1847), the Neue Rheinische Zeitung (1848-49), the New York Tribune (1852-61), and, in addition to these, a host of militant pamphlets, work in organisations in Paris, Brussels and London, and finally, crowning all, the formation of the great International Working Men's Association -- this was indeed an achievement of which its founder might well have been proud even if he had done nothing else.

And, consequently, Marx was the best hated and most calumniated man of his time. Governments, both absolutist and republican, deported him from their territories. Bourgeois, whether conservative or ultra-democratic, vied with one another in heaping slanders upon him. All this he brushed aside as though it were a cobweb, ignoring it, answering only when extreme necessity compelled him. And he died beloved, revered and mourned by millions of revolutionary fellow workers -- from the mines of Siberia to California, in all parts of Europe and America -- and I make bold to say that, though he may have had many opponents, he had hardly one personal enemy.

His name will endure through the ages, and so also will his work.

Marx's contribution to our understanding of society has been enormous. His thought is not the comprehensive system evolved by some of his followers under the name of dialectical materialism. The very dialectical nature of his approach meant that it was usually tentative and open-ended. There was also the tension between Marx the political activist and Marx the student of political economy. Many of his expectations about the future course of the revolutionary movement have, so far, failed to materialize. However, his stress on the economic factor in society and his analysis of the class structure in class conflict have had an enormous influence on history, sociology, and study of human culture.

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