

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Lecture 24

The Age of Ideologies (2): Reflections on Karl Marx

History does nothing, it "possesses no immense wealth," it "wages no battles." It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; "history" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own gains; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his names.

Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family* (1845)

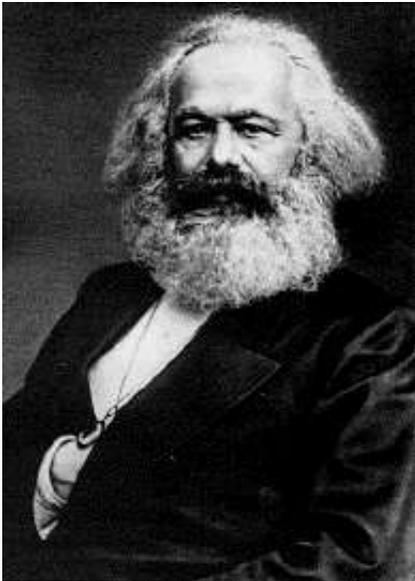
No thinker in the 19th-century has perhaps had so direct, deliberate and powerful influence upon mankind as Karl Marx. The strength of his influence was unique. He completed the bulk of his work between 1844 and 1883, a period of democratic nationalism, trade unionism and revolution. Great popular leaders and political martyrs appeared upon the historical stage, their words stirring the enthusiasm of their audiences. Indeed, within Marx's lifetime, a new revolutionary tradition was born, and Marx's name would be forever associated with that tradition.

Yet Marx was not a popular writer or orator. Like most Victorians, Marx wrote extensively. The [*Grundrisse*](#), a work not published in Russian until 1941, or in English until 1973, is really little more than a series of preliminary notes Marx made in preparation for his three volume masterpiece, [*Das Kapital*](#). The *Grundrisse* is a 900 page notebook. The three volumes of *Das Kapital* weigh in at 2500 pages, and the three volume appendix, *The Theory of Surplus Value* adds yet another 2000 pages.

Neither Marx's mind nor his pen ever stopped moving. Despite his penchant for lengthy diatribes against the evils of industrial capitalism, few people read Marx until the 1870s. By this time, people were reading Marx -- not just in Germany but in Paris, Brussels, Moscow and London. By the 1890's, Marx's books were translated into English and found their way to Chicago and New York. The desire to read Marx was not so much due to the intrinsic quality of the works as it was to the growth of the notoriety of the movement to which Marx and Engels appended their names, i.e., socialism and communism. Marx was not a great popular leader -- he was not a popular agitator. In this respect, he was quite unlike some of his more vocal contemporaries, men with names like Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist, or Ferdinand Lassalle, the German socialist. Even that monumental old bore, Robert Owen, was clearly a much more popular orator. The better part of Marx's working life was spent in obscure corners of North London or at his writing table in the main reading room of the British Library. His public appearances were rare and uneventful. When he addressed an audience at banquets or public meetings he commanded the respect of his audience, but not their enthusiasm. Marx was a theorist -- Marx was an intellectual. In an odd twist, Marx avoided direct contact with the masses for whom his entire life was certainly devoted. He wrote slowly and painfully, perhaps incapable of dealing with the speed of his own ideas. This may perhaps explain why his early works, let's say those published before 1859, were really nothing more than notes for

the great work which lay ahead -- the systematic explanation of the capitalist mode of production.

But Marx was endowed with a powerful mind, an active, concrete, if unsentimental mind. He had an acute sense of injustice and was repelled as much by the rhetoric of the intellectuals as he was by the complacency of the bourgeoisie. The intellectuals chattered aimlessly, remote from reality. The bourgeoisie were hypocritical and deceived -- they were blinded by wealth and status. His sense of living in a hostile and vulgar world was intensified by his dislike of the fact that he was born a Jew. Although the Marx family contained a long line of rabbis, Marx's father Heinrich was not a practicing Jew. In fact, Marx's father had something of the 18th century rationalist about him. Before Marx was born, his father converted the family to German Protestantism in order to keep his job as lawyer.



KARL MARX (1818-1883) was an insensitive man -- he was not that concerned about the feelings of those individuals with whom he came in contact. The majority of men, he thought, were either fools or sycophants. His public attitude was over-bearing, offensive and unyielding. But, within his circle of friends and family, he was quite intimate. Here, in the bosom of his family, Marx was secure, happy, considerate and generous. It is odd that throughout his entire life Marx remained an isolated figure among other revolutionaries of the period. But mid-19th century European revolutionaries were a diverse lot. Whether or not they believed in violent revolution, there is at least one thing they did have in common -- they appealed explicitly to moral standards common to all mankind. They criticized and condemned the existing condition of humanity in terms of an ideal, of a system whose desirability was self-evident to all men of moral vision. Their schemes varied -

- some were utopian, some were not. But they were agreed on the ultimate end which needed to be pursued. In their minds, what needed to be done was (1) ascertain the kind of world you wanted to see built, (2) consider how much of the present state of things ought to be retained and (3) find the most effective means of accomplishing the desired transformation. This is an attitude of the vast majority of revolutionaries and reformers, not only in 1850 but at earlier times as well. Marx would have nothing to do with this attitude. He was convinced that human history is governed by scientific laws which cannot be altered by the mere intervention of individuals embracing one idea or another.

Because men are conditioned by the material world into which they are born, their ideas assume objective proportions. Under this influence, men misinterpret the nature of the world in which they breathe, work, love, suffer and die. They misunderstand their position and the meaning of their position. Later Marxists would eventually label this misinterpretation "false consciousness," a predicament intensified by the appearance of industrial capitalism.

Bourgeois society was the result of those laws of social development which made it inevitable that at a certain stage of historical development one social class pursuing its own interests, should dispossess and exploit another social class.

Marx held that values could not be contemplated in isolation from their historical context. True insight into the historical process, without the aid of moral standards, make clear to a rational being what steps it is proper for him to adopt. As a result, Marx had no new ethical or social ideal to press upon mankind. He made his appeal

solely to reason, to the practical intelligence. So, Marx denounced the existing state of things by making his appeal to history and not to a set of ahistorical ideals as the Utopian Socialists and liberal bourgeois reformers had done before him. Bourgeois society was the result of those laws of social

development which made it inevitable that at a certain stage of historical development one social class, pursuing its own interests, should dispossess and exploit another social class. The oppressors are threatened not with deliberate retribution on the part of their victims, but with the inevitable destruction which history has in store for them. As a class, the bourgeoisie are doomed to disappear and without knowing it, they have dug their own graves. Marx's language is always that of the herald or prophet. He speaks not in the name of human beings but of universal laws. He seeks not to rescue, nor to improve, but to warn and condemn, to reveal the truth and to refute falsehood.

By 1845, Marx had completed the first stage of his work. He had acquainted himself with the nature, history and laws of the society in which he found himself. He concluded that the history of human society was the history of man seeking to attain mastery of himself and nature by means of his creative and productive labor. This labor is manifest in the struggles of opposing social classes, one of which must emerge triumphant. Progress is constituted by the succession of victories of one class over another, a theme propounded in *The German Ideology* (1846) and elsewhere. Having identified the rising class in the struggle of his own time with the proletariat, Marx devoted the remainder of his life -- nearly forty years -- to planning victory for those at whose head he had placed himself. History itself would reveal this process, but Marx believed it was possible to make this transition with less friction, less conflict, and with less waste of humanity and time. All that is important during the actual war -- that is, during the actual war of class conflict -- is accurate knowledge of one's own resources and those of the adversary. Knowledge of the history of class struggles, the history of society and the scientific laws which govern history -- all of this is indispensable. Marx's most important work, *Das Kapital*, was his attempt to provide such a knowledge.

Das Kapital is immense -- it is the product of a systematic thinker. On one level, *Kapital* is Marx's attempt to understand the history of the Industrial Revolution (see [Lecture 17](#)). But nearly absent from Marx's *Kapital* is an explicit moral argument. There are few appeals to conscience or to principle. There is also a striking absence of a detailed prediction of what will or should happen after victory in the class war is secured. Marx rejects natural rights as a bourgeois invention. Socialism does not make appeals -- it demands. It speaks not of rights but of the new form of life which replaces the old social order. Marx looked with contempt to liberals and utilitarians alike. As members of the bourgeoisie, they believed that the interests of all men are ultimately the same. A measure of benevolence on the part of everyone would make it possible to manufacture some kind of compromise. Marx disagreed -- class warfare is inevitable, history shows it to be thus. It is no wonder that Marx condemned the bourgeois radicals as well as the Utopian Socialists. Men like Fourier (see [Lecture 21](#)), Owen and Saint-Simon (see [Lecture 22](#)), or P. J. Proudhon gave society panaceas -- band-aids. Marx offered practical solution based upon the inexorable laws of history itself. Where the Utopian Socialists were imbued with moralisms (Robert Owen is perhaps the classic case), Marx saw revolutionary *praxis* (practice). Marx detested romanticism, emotionalism, sentimentalism and humanitarianism of any kind. They were bourgeois. He did not want to appeal to the idealistic feelings of his audience. The manifestoes, histories, outlines and critiques which he wrote make little or no reference to moral progress, eternal justice, the rights of man, the fight for civilization or any other species of bourgeois rhetoric. The class war must and will be fought.

The proletariat must be taught that existing society is doomed to swift extinction. Men will find this difficult to accept -- they hide, secure, behind a facade of moral, religious, political and economic assumptions. The ruling class creates this facade -- it is what Marx meant by the expressions "dominant ideology" or "ruling ideas." What is required is the courage to see through the bourgeois smoke screen. For Marx, knowledge of the facts themselves must determine rational behavior. To denounce the historical process -- and the conflict through which man discovers his powers -- was for Marx, nothing more than childish subjectivism. Such an attitude reveals an attachment to the old world -- it is a symptom of the incomplete emancipation from its values. With reality there could be

no compromise -- what is dangerous is the avoidance of the open fight -- the class war.

Marx conceived his instrument -- his social microscope, if you will -- almost casually. He was engaged in a controversy with the Prussian government over an economic question of purely local significance. At this time (1843) Marx was serving as an editor of the German radical newspaper, *Rheinische Zeitung*. What happened is that he became aware of his ignorance of the history of economic development. By 1848, his education was complete. With an unprecedented thoroughness he constructed a complete theory of society and its evolution. This indicated with precision where and how all the answers to such questions must be sought and ultimately found. He provided a solution to a hitherto unsolved problem. But Marx was not one to deny his debt to others nor to over-emphasize his own originality. As Marx himself admitted, "I am performing an act of historical justice, and am rendering to each man his due." Marx sought truth and not novelty. When he found truth in others he sought to incorporate it into his own rigorous synthesis. What is original in the result is not any one element, but the central hypothesis -- the "guiding thread" -- by which each is connected with the others. This is so that the parts appear to follow from each other and support each other in a single, systematic whole. And the "guiding thread" of which Marx speaks is nothing less than the materialist conception of history. The most precise elaboration of Marx's "guiding thread" appeared in the Preface to [A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy](#) (1859):

The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows: In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or -- what is but a legal expression for the same thing -- with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation of the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations, a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic -- in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

How did Marx arrive at such a conclusion? What was the "guiding thread" of which Marx makes so much in the previous quotation? Marx's ideas are an amalgam of conceptions current in mid-19th century Europe. For instance, the notion of the communal ownership of property and with it, the abolition of private property has a long history. [Plato](#) talked about it in the [Republic](#). The Apostles of the Early Church certainly seemed to live a life in common without personal possessions. And, of course, more than half of [Sir Thomas More's Utopia](#), is about an island called Utopia in which

private property has been abolished. But closer to Marx's own age, the early French communists such as Morelly or Babeuf had argued for the necessary abolition of private property and they, of course, were immersed in the French Revolution and in Rousseau (see [Lecture 19](#)).

The idea of historical materialism -- the materialist conception of history -- was more or less fully developed by the French philosopher [Paul d'Holbach](#) in the 1750s. In the 17th century, the Dutch philosopher [Benedict de Spinoza](#) (1632-1677) hinted at it as had the Italian philosopher of history, Giambattista Vico (see [Lecture 10](#)). And in Marx's own day, it was the Young Hegelian, [Ludwig Feuerbach](#) (1804-1872), who had discussed such an idea with, however, different intentions.

An appreciation of the story of history as the history of class struggle was an idea already embraced by Saint-Simon, well before Marx sat down to write his works which explained such warfare. Not only that, numerous French Jacobins and *sans-culottes* were aware of this in the 1790s as were many of their democratic radical brethren across the English Channel. The idea of economic cycles of boom and bust which Friedrich Engels identified had already been expressed by the Swiss historian and economist, Jean Sismondi (1773-1842), in his *New Principles of Political Economy* in 1819. Babeuf and his Conspiracy of Equals had been quite specific about the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the 1790s. This idea was further developed by numerous French and German socialists in the first quarter of the 19th century. And the importance of industrial work and industrial workers in any future order was fully worked out by men like Robert Owen, Saint-Simon and by Louis Blanc in the 1820s and 30s. The labor theory of value comes straight from [John Locke's](#) *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690). You find the same idea implicit in the arguments of [Adam Smith](#) in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) and in [David Ricardo's](#) *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). The theory of exploitation of one class by another is implicit in the rantings of Charles Fourier. So too is the theory of surplus value, one of the key notions in all Marx's ideas and writings. We can also find the theme of exploitation developed by numerous members of the English [Chartist movement](#) of the 1830s and 40s. The theory of alienation had already been proposed by the radical anarchist and Young Hegelian, [Max Stirner](#) (1806-1856). The idea can also be found in Feuerbach's greatest work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). And of course, to Hegel Marx owed perhaps the greatest debt. Thanks to Hegel and Marx's criticism of Hegel, Marx was able to construct a metaphysics, an epistemology, a social theory, a philosophy of history, a political philosophy and a theory of revolution.

When all is said and done, we are left with a man whose ideas and importance even non-Marxists can not deny. His analysis of the capitalist mode of production serves as a near history of the Industrial Revolution in England. His discourse on alienation is as provocative today as it was in 1844 when he first discussed it in the *Paris Manuscripts*. And few historians can escape Marx's discussion and perceptive analysis of ideology and ideologies. Whether Marx was right or wrong, for me, is immaterial. But to admit that it is now unnecessary to study Marx because of the collapse of Soviet Communism, as some politicians would have it (historians too), is the worst kind of historical error. Marx was an intellectual, a philosopher, historian and revolutionary whose total life experience was that of the 19th century.

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