

Lecture 1

# Karl Marx

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Lecture 1: Biography and Philosophy of History

Lecture 2: Alienation

Lecture 3: Ideology

Lecture 4: Marxist Economics and Socialist Utopia

## 1. Biography and Historical Context

a programme for Marx's life and work:

11th thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

1818–1883

historical context:

- Industrial Revolution, population explosion, urbanisation, growing industry and infrastructure (railroads, canals)
- period of conservative restoration after defeat of Napoleon
- 1848: Year of Revolutions across Continental Europe and its Latin American colonies
- 1871: Paris Commune after the turmoil following the Franco-Prussian War and the abdication of the French king in 1870

intellectual context:

- Marx studies philosophy in Bonn and Berlin
- Hegel dies in 1831, his work is hugely influential and used for political purposes across the entire spectrum
- left Hegelians like Feuerbach are fired from their academic positions, especially for their critique of religion

political context:

- Marx quickly sympathised with socialist/communists advocating a 'post-private property' society
- socialists have no lasting political wins during Marx's lifetime, but socialist policies are often instituted by their conservative opponents

Marx:

born in Trier, Rhineland, Prussia, one of nine children

parents both have Jewish heritage

no proletarian

a journalist at Rheinische Zeitung

Lenin: "Marx's journalistic activities convinced him that he was insufficiently acquainted with political economy, and he zealously set out to study it"

exile in Paris, Brussels, London

"In London at that time was assembled the entire fine fleur of the refugees from all the nations of the continent" writes Engels.

Marx wrote pieces of very different genres.

- contextualisation is therefore vital for interpretation: something may be a manifesto, something else a polemic, a third text academic political economy

Marx was also terrible at finishing pieces of writing. A lot of the early writings weren't published by Marx during his lifetime, Capital Vol. 1 was, but Vol. 2 and 3 are Engels editing of Marx's notes.

- was the Marx we know from his texts the Marx he really was?
- how much did Engels destroy or improve?
- which is the good Marx—the early, the late, or the notebook-Marx?

## 2. Philosophy of History

Marx on his own intellectual contribution:

And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering (0) the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic anatomy of classes. What I did that was new was to prove:

- (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with the particular, historical phases in the development of production
- (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society. (Letter to Weydemeyer March 5, 1852)

(0) classes and class struggle:

what is a class?

- a group with a common situation: relations of production divide people into economic roles
- a group with a common interest
- a group with an organisation into trade unions etc.
- a class is also a group with historical significance

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (*Communist Manifesto*), fighting for one's interests

(1) a theory about history/a philosophy of history/historical materialism:

- an old question about ontology: what is the world made of? more particular: what is history made of? (*Theses on Feuerbach*)
- two established answers: materialism or idealism
- Marx dissatisfied with both: materialism ignores human beings, idealism ignores the productive ability of human beings.
- instead, human being as producers: “Industry is the actual historical relationship of nature ... to man” (1844 Manuscripts)

building blocks of historical materialism  
(most explicitly stated in 1859 Preface; Cohen 1978):

(A) Development Thesis:

productive forces tend to become more productive over time  
(why? to save labour and thereby increase profits)  
productive forces: means of production + knowledge for production

(B) Primacy Thesis:

“The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.” (1859 Preface)  
society’s economic structure can be explained by state of productive forces (modern bourgeois/capitalist mode of production: means of production owned privately, by a minority, who use it to maximise their own profit)  
superstructure can be explained by economic structure  
[ideology can be explained by economic structure—see lecture 3]

example: »The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.« (*The Poverty of Philosophy*)

(C) social revolution: “The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.” (1859 Preface)

example: “the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder” (*Communist Manifesto*)

prediction: the same will happen to capitalism, it will be replaced by communism

explained how? functional explanation (Cohen): social relations exist because they have the function of developing productive forces, social relations change when the old ones no longer fulfil this function

**matters of interpretation:**

- does a functional explanation make sense? what **ensures** that the function is always fulfilled (see Elster 1985)?  
Cohen responds by pointing to functional explanations in biology—is this convincing, where is the chance variation in societies?
- is this a form of **determinism**? what role do individuals, their willing, and their action play? are they reduced to marionettes of history?  
cf. Cohen (2000, ch. 3 and 4) on obstetric motive: proletariat as midwife of history. “the working class have no ideals to realize but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant”

- what is **the point of this philosophy of history**? is it really meant as a prediction of the future or rather as a mere demonstration of the possibility of communism—a possibility that requires people who take it up.  
Bloch *The Principle of Hope*: Marx highlights the “not yet realised objective-real possibilities of the world” (1959, 727) for the sake of “liberation from blind fate, from inscrutable necessity” (729).
- is this sketch of a philosophy of history even the **right thing to focus on** in Marx’s work? isn’t an analysis and critique of capitalism his main concern? or does such an analysis and critique become obsolete given that history?

#### points of external critique:

- is the prediction a functional explanation gives **accurate**?
- is development of the means of production **uni-linear**?
- is historical development **mono-causal**, determined by technological progress only?
- is there no way to **short-circuit** capitalism and speed up historical development? cf. Lenin, Stalin, Russia (cf. Moore 1975)
- **the more productivity, the better**? cf. later Marx, Saito 2023: Marx’ idea of a metabolic rift (e.g. guano; Marx reading biologist Liebig 1862, *Agricultural Chemistry*) goes against this optimism about productivity.

### 3. What is wrong with Capitalism?

- it enslaves workers
- it is alienating (see lecture 2)
- it is ideological (see lecture 3)
- OR perhaps the question is wrongly posed. Perhaps there is nothing *wrong* with capitalism generally, only it is *transitory and has reached the end of its day where only its anachronistic persistence causes problems* (see lecture 4)

### 4. Recommended Reading

Marx, Karl. 1859. Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Marx, Karl. 1939. Fragment on Machines. In his *Grundrisse*.

Cohen, G.A. 1978. *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*. esp. chs. 6, 10.

Carver, Terrell. 1991. *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*.