

KARL MARX : An Account of
His Time and Ideas

by

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Introduction:

Karl Marx is one of the most written-about men of all time. Merely to compile a bibliography showing where he has been referred to would be a project lasting years. Obviously, any new paper about his ideas must be incomplete because of the gargantuan task of researching this vast literature. The attempt here is to throw as much light on this man his ideas as is feasible in the space allowed.

The plan of this paper is as follows: Part One is a sketch of the period of history in which Marx lived; Part Two is a sketch of Marx's life; Part Three is a discussion of Marx's theories; and Part Four is a discussion of Marx's relevance in today's sociology and in today's world, including some criticism of his theories.

This entire paper will be presented in a manner which allows for only concise handing of the material. Hopefully, this approach will accomplish two ends: (1) this paper will be rescued from becoming the wordy monstrosity it could easily degenerate into if the attempt were made to go into great detail with Marx's ideas; and (2) An illustration for Marx ideas and theories will be explained, including some criticism. His influence on the field of sociology will be also presented.

The World of Marx:

'The fundamental ideas of European sociology are best understood as responses to the problem of order created at the beginning of the nineteenth

century by the collapse of the old regime under the blows of industrialism and revolutionary democracy.¹ Nisbet's evaluation of sociological thought states very nicely the world into which Karl Marx was born.

Nisbet goes on to say that there are two historical forces which must be understood if we are to understand nineteenth century Europe, the time and place of Marx's life. These two forces may be two dimensions of the same thing, but it is convenient to look at them separately. He is speaking of the forces of industrialism and revolutionary democracy, as indicated above in the quotation.

Certain historical events and movements illustrate the existence and nature of these forces. As stated by Fromm as well as many others, (medieval European feudalism and Catholicism started to break down as certain developments took place.)² The Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the rise of capitalism all had the effect of altering Europe radically. With capitalism came industrialism and urbanization. With the changing religious and intellectual atmosphere came the nation-state and a striving for individuality. It is useless here to attempt to pinpoint cause - and - effect relationships between these various historical developments; suffice it to say that the aggregate of these interdependent and interacting variables led Europe to be what it was toward the end of the eighteenth century.

The French Revolution is generally considered to be the beginning of the modern period of European history. At about the same time, the American Revolution took place. Both events have been interpreted by many writers to be indicative of the striving for individuality and democracy. As stated above, Nisbet has termed these events 'revolutionary democracy', as well he may. Such democracy (revolutionary) was again seen in the French insurrection

of 1848 and in Prussian persecution during the same period.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, England had gone through the Industrial Revolution and other nations on the continent were becoming more industrialized. America also was growing industrially as well as population-wise. The result of this was, of course, continued urbanization in America and in Europe. With industrialization and urbanization came the splitting up of families and the new role of man as an extension of the machine. Alienation from one's family and from one's work was the resulting consequence. With the continued centralization of capital and political power came alienation from the means of production and from self-rule. Economic and political exploitation were very real elements in the time of Marx. Democratic ideal were set aside for the exploitation arising from the relatively new capitalist system. It is no wonder that Marx could write as he did, given the very ugly world (by his standards) into which he was born.

The Life of Marx:

The following is based very heavily on Untermeyer's . Makers of the Modern World. (3)

His full name was Heinrich Karl Marx.. He was born on May 5, 1818 in Trier in the Garman Rhineland. Both sides of his family had been deeply religious Jews, including many rabbis. His father was an intellectual liberal and a distinguished advocate. Since Jews weren't allowed to practice in the higher courts, he had adopted Christianity when Karl was six years old and Karl was so baptized. Karl is said to have had a happy childhood and was the oldest son of a large family. His gifted mind was recognized early. Karl loved to write verse and his father feared that he might become a common poet rather than something worthwhile.

At seventeen he entered the University of Bonn. Hegel, his idol and mentor, was interested in Karl's studying religion. Karl, however, was interested more in law. He soon found out that law wasn't his field either. After a year at Bonn, he went to the University of Berlin. He hadn't distinguished himself in any field at Bonn and seemed incapable of organizing himself. While at Bonn he became engaged to a childhood playmate, Jenny, daughter of Baron von Westphalen. She was a very beautiful girl and of 'good' ancestry. She was four years older than Karl and had many suitors. But, seven years later she and Karl were married.

At Berlin he continued his study of law, but soon felt that law was a parasitic profession. He decided to study history and philosophy. He became more and more fascinated by Hegel's rationalism. He studied vigorously in his new fields. He confined himself to academic circles and wanted to become a teacher. But, by the time he received the doctorate degree, he had acquired a reputation as a 'dangerous thinker' and no school would hire him.

Unable to teach, he turned to journalism. He started writing for radical journals as his writing got bolder. At the age of twenty-five he joined the staff of the Rheinische Zeitung and moved to Paris. His new bride went with him.

In Paris he met Friedrich Engels who was little older than Marx. Engels became his disciple and collaborator, and eventually the editor of Marx's posthumous work. Engels was the son of a cotton manufacturer and a student of economics. He had rebelled against his own class and taken up the cause for the poor.

Paris grew oppressive; tightening censorship and other pressures caused him to move to Brussels. There he organized the German Workingmen's Association and, with Engels, wrote The Communist Manifesto, the first public declaration of international socialism.

After the defeat of the French insurrection of 1848, political conditions on the continent grow worse. All socialist groups became secret societies and went underground. Marx was arrested for high treason and put on trial in Cologne. He was acquitted, but was expelled from all territory controlled by Prussia.

He returned to Paris only briefly. France had just recovered from a bloody insurrection, so men like Marx weren't very desirable at the time. He moved to London and lived there the rest of his life, Engels helped him financially at times, but Marx and his family lived in poverty from then on. There was only one advantage in living in his shabby flat in Bloomsbury: it was close to the British Museum. He spent an enormous amount of time reading there. His family's situation was saddening, though; three of his six children died in their early years. At thirty, Marx was a heavy-set man wearing a fixed and nearly forbidding expression. Except with his family, which is reported to be a very meaningful relationship, he never seemed to have any inclination or time for the pleasant trivialities of day-to-day living.

At the age of sixty his health began to fail. Jenny, his wife, died of cancer in 1881 while Marx was suffering from pleurisy. He never really recovered his full health; fifteen months later, on March 14, 1883, he died at the age of sixty-five.

The Theories of Marx:

In discussing the theories of Marx, it is convenient to organize his ideas into the two common categories of 'organization' and 'change'. Within each category we may consider the two sub-categories of 'determining factors' and 'results'. The following outline is, therefore, developed.

A. Organization of Society

1. Determining Factors.

a. Materialism.

b. Economics.

2. Results

- a. Exploiter and Exploited
- b. Alienation of the Exploited.

B. Change in Society

1. Determining Factors

- a. Economic Determinism and Inevitability
- b. Dialectic Process

2. Results

- a. Classless and Stateless Society
- b. End of the Dialectic Process

A. Organization of Society

1. Determining Factors

a. Materialism

"Marx's philosophy was materialistic-and materialism forms the basis of his sociology. According to Marx, only matter exists, consciousness being an epiphenomenon, a manifestation of motion in brain cells. This view reflects the influence on Marx of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), a left-wing Hegelian philosopher."⁴

According to Sabine, Marx was a militant atheist.⁵ Materialism meant, for Marx, a rejection of the mystical notions put forth by Hegel and the religious institution; religion was the 'opium of the people'.⁶ Marx equated materialism with science.⁷

Materialism, according to Marx, consists of the following :

1. A means of explaining the world in terms of perceived phenomena, i.e., matter-as opposed to religious or mystical phenomena, i.e., spirit; the human brain is a complex IBM-machins-type of organism which stores, cross-references, and handles data much like our modern computers; non-physical phenomena are illusions;

2. Religion (dogma of the spirit) serves to deaden the pain of the reality experienced by the majority of men; as such, religion doesn't alter reality, but serves to justify the conditions of reality;
3. Science is the procedure whereby one understand reality; science has no dealings with spirits;
4. It is the material reality (not spirits) which determines the organization, functions, and processes of societies . (This point is better understood after a discussion of the following section concerning economics.)

A. Organization of Society

1. Determining Factors

h. Economics

Marx saw the factor of economics as being the only basic factor in determining the organization, functions, and processes of societies. Economic determinism is "...the view that the economic factor is the fundamental determinant of the structure and development of society. This factor, consisting essentially of the technological means of production, determines the social organization of production, namely, the relations in which men must and do enter to goods more effectively than they could if working separately. These relations, according to Marx, develop independently of human will. Moreover, the organization of production (called by Marx "the economic substructure of society") not only limits but also, in the final analysis, shapes the whole superstructure; political organization, law, religion, philosophy, art, literature, science, and morality itself."⁸

Marx, then, said that virtually everything comprising a culture could be explained in terms of the economic factor. As will be discussed in the following part of this paper, this approach to explaining a culture is generally not taken by social scientists. The more common approach is to consider the many

interdependent cultural factors without claiming any of them to be the fundamental causal agent of the resulting cultural web. Marx has 'put all his eggs into one basket', so to speak, by stating that economics can explain everything.

Without this element in Marx's work however; what remains would make little sense. His whole line of reasoning is based on this notion of economic determinism. He looks at society and explains the organization he sees in terms of economics. As indicated above, every aspect of a society is based on economics: politics, religion, art, science, etc. To remove economic determinism from Marx's theories would leave them without foundation. (This includes his ideas on social change, to be discussed in a later section.)

A. Organization of Society

2. Results

a. Exploiter and Exploited

Marx sees society in his time as being organized so that the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) exploits the working class (the proletariat). The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and hires the labor of the proletariat. In Das Kapital Marx presents his ideas of surplus value.⁹ He says that the workers do not receive in wages the true value of their labor; instead, they receive less than the value and the remainder (the surplus value) is retained by the bourgeoisie to create profit. This profit is used, in part, to purchase additional means of production, thereby increasing bourgeois ownership of capital (the means of production). This process is repeated and the result is great centralization of capital. The capitalists have, therefore, robbed the workers of the surplus value of their labor and have used it to strengthen their position over the workers.

The bourgeoisie is the class which arose from the dying feudal system. The medieval nobility was eventually eliminated, allowing for the merchant class (the bourgeoisie) to become the elite class. As capitalism became more entrenched and the power of the capitalists grew, all other persons in society fused to form the exploited class of proletarians. A two-class system emerged: exploiters and exploited.

Due to the determining factor of economics, the bourgeoisie controlled the political organization, as well as the other elements of their culture (art, religion, law, etc.) This means that the bourgeoisie not only owned the means of production and exploited the majority of individuals making up the society, but their control of capital also enabled them to maintain and justify their control of society by their inherent influence over all aspects of society. In other words, by controlling the economy, they also controlled the state—if Marx's theory of economic determinism is correct. By controlling the economy, they controlled religion—if Marx's theory of economic determinism is correct. The same is true of the philosophy, art, science, and other aspects of the society. This notion of economically determined power is that it implies that the capitalists were able to: (1) use coercive means to maintain their superior status, and (2) use more subtle means to do this, such as: influencing the churches to preach a doctrine which justified the status quo, encouraging scientists to produce with the aim of contributing to the gain of the capitalists, and influencing the writers of the time to glorify the tenets of capitalism.

A. Organisation of Society

2. Results

b. Alienation of the Exploited

Alienation can be defined simply as being a condition of detachment.

from something when it is generally agreed that it is bad to be so detached. We may speak of a general condition of alienation existing in a group, or we may speak of an individual's condition of alienation.

There are various kinds of alienation. We can say that the person who is a 'loner' is alienated from other people. A man may feel that his job is essentially meaningless and feels detached from it : alienation from work. Political alienation is a condition in which a person or group feels that there is little that can be done to influence the political structure. There is a kind of alienation, also, in which one is alienated from himself; this would be the case of a man who was simply " going through the motions" of life and never finding real meaning in what he does.

Marx wrote about alienation in all these forms, but most specifically in terms of alienation from work. For example: "... individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests."¹⁰ And: "... the object produced by man's labor-its product-now confronts him in the shape of an alien thing, a power independent of the producer. The reduction of labor to a mere commodity-in short the dehumanization of work goes so far that the worker is reduced to the point of starving to death. So remote from life has work become that the worker is robbed of the real things essential not only for his existence but for his work... so much does appropriation of his product by others appear as alienation that the more things the worker produces, the fewer can he possess... All these consequences flow from the fact that the worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien thing.... the poorer he becomes in his inner life....."¹¹

We can infer from Marx's views on alienation from work and his views concerning the existence of the two-class system of exploiter and exploited

that he sees other forms of alienation arising from the overall situation. Certainly, the workers were politically alienated, since they were essentially powerless in a state run by the capitalists. Urbanization had brought an end to the extended family situation for the industrial workers, producing alienation from relatives and loved ones. Without real pride in one's work, a man would experience alienation from his neighbors and from himself. It is easy to see that Marx's view of the condition of the workers is quite accurate .

What is most significant about Marx's ideas on alienation is that he spelled out in detail the conditions of the workers with all their ugly manifestations. Probably the greatest value of Marx's work, along with the work of social critics before and after him, was that of stating the case for the common working man. This Marx did, regardless of how valid or invalid his theories of societal organization and change may be.

B. Change in Society

1. Determining Factors

a. Economic Determinism and Inevitability

It was said above that economic determinism was the foundation for Marx's ideas on the organization of society. It is also the foundation for his ideas on social change. The economic factor is the one basic factor which determines when and how a society will change.

Along with this idea of economic determinism is the idea of inevitability. Not only must society change as a result of the economic factor-this change must take place, and in a certain way. The following section is a consideration of the certain way. For now, let us look at this idea of inevitability.

Marx's theory of change is "... an evolutionary theory of society in which the whole system of natural law fell into place as the ideology appropriate to a specific state of development."¹² And, "tendencies that work out with an iron necessity toward an inevitable goal".¹³

Thus, we can say that Marx's ideas on social change are similar to other social thinkers who thought in terms of "progress" and "evolution of society". Mankind was moving toward a specific goal, thought Marx, and there is really nothing man can do to stop this movement.

B. Change in Society

1. Determining Factors

b. Dialectic Process

Marx borrowed from Hegel the notion of the dialectic. History moves in terms of a thesis (the existing order of things), its antithesis (the opposition to the order of things), and a synthesis (the resulting order of things after the clash of the thesis and antithesis). The synthesis becomes a new thesis and the process continues. As Timasheff puts it: "...Social change must be understood in terms of its three ever-present phases. This is the dialectical scheme borrowed by Marx from the German idealistic philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831), whom he was proud to have turned upside down (by applying the scheme not to fundamental spirit, as Hegel did, but to matter). Everything in the world, including society itself, passes by a kind of dialectical necessity through the three stages of affirmation or thesis, negation or antithesis, and reconciliation of opposites or synthesis. On this higher level of synthesis the dialectical process continues with new conflicts and accommodations always making the historical process".

The dialectic process, of course, must occur and keep on occurring. Marx

said, as indicated in the preceding section, that change is inevitable. The nature of change, then is also inevitable, according to Marx. The dialectic process continues inevitably.

B. Change in Society

2. Results

a. Classless and stateless Society

In the section above was concerned with the exploiters and the exploited in Marx's time, we see an existing thesis, as was said there, such a societal structured was the result of the rise of the bourgeoisie over the nobility of the feudal system. Marx saw the nobility and its social structures as a thesis; the rising capitalist class was its antithesis. The synthesis was the elimination of the nobility making the capitalist elite a new thesis.

The new antithesis (in opposition to the thesis of capitalist elite) was ~~the proletariat, the working class~~. Marx predicted a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; he further predicted that the resulting synthesis would be the rise of the proletariat over the elimination of the bourgeoisie.

Marx also said, as discussed above, that the class in power controlled all the other elements of society, including the political organization. If the proletariat rises to power, then it will control the political organization.

Under the feudal system we can see three distinct classes: the nobility, the merchant class (bourgeoisie or middle class), and the serfs. Under capitalism we see only two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The classes have been reduced from three to two. With the elimination of the bourgeoisie, there would only be one class left—the workers (proletariat). Since there will be only one class, the society has become, in reality, a classless society.

The purpose of the political organization, said Marx, was to maintain the privileges and power of the elite class. Without classes, there will be no need for a state since there is no elite to be maintained. Therefore, the society will be stateless.

For further clarification of these points, one may refer to Timasheff¹⁵, Sabine¹⁶, or to the many other informative sources available.

B. Change in Society

2. Results

b. End of the Dialectic Process

When the proletarian succeeds in eliminating the capitalists, the dialectic process will stop. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".¹⁷ Without class struggles, there will be no need for history to continue so it has in the past. Instead of struggles, man will be experiencing the best of all possible worlds, so to speak.

Sabine explains that the transition to the classless and stateless society will be accomplished in two stages. After the means of production are in the hands of the workers, surplus value will be given to the workers. But, the transition won't be complete until the division of labor is abolished and the "Social product" is increased to realize the goal of the communist ideal: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Between capitalism and communism there will be a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which will serve to set the stage for real communism. In other words, communism can't be established overnight; there must be a period of readjustment."¹⁸

The Theories of Marx-A Summary

Marx viewed society as being organized, at any point in time, on the basis of materialistic factors. The most fundamental factor is economics—the term

"economic determinism" arising from his notions. The nineteenth century European world was a capitalist-dominated world in which there were two classes: the capitalist elite and the exploited working class (bourgeoisie and proletariat, respectively). The capitalists controlled all aspects of society. The working people, the vast majority of the population, had become alienated from their work, their state, their families and friends, and themselves.

Change in society is determined by the economic factor and this change is inevitable, leading to a specific goal. The process of change is the dialectic: a clash between thesis and antithesis, resulting in a synthesis which becomes a new thesis. Feudal society had evolved into capitalist society in this manner. The capitalist society would evolve into the classless and stateless society of communism by the same dialectic process. When communism is achieved, the dialectic process will cease because the element making for historical change (class struggle) will have been eliminated.

The Relevance of Marx:

This paper is written as a study in sociology. Therefore, two of Marx's points of relevance may be disposed of quickly because they have no significant bearing on sociology.

The first is Marx's relevance as a philosopher and a historian who chooses a 'materialistic' point of view. Bertrand Russell presents a brief discussion of Marx's brand of materialism and theory of knowledge in A History of Western Philosophy.¹⁹ Just as there is apparently no way to prove or disprove whether there is a God, there is apparently no way to prove or disprove Marx's conception of materialism. It would be ridiculous to argue Marx's atheism in this paper.

The second point which is not especially significant from a sociological frame of reference is Marx's influence on world politics. Obviously, the world today is caught up in a struggle between the so-called 'capitalists' and 'communists', or West and East respectively. Marx's work has been turned into 'scripture', says Sorokin. and Marx's influence has been to a 'theological interpretation' by those who had reasons to need such material.²⁰ Whether or not Marx himself would today be a 'Marxist' is a moot point. The point is that his writings have served the cause of the 'Marxists'.

In Contemporary Sociological Theories, Sorokin unleashes a scathing discussion of Marx's theories and relevance.²¹ Nearly all of the ideas presented in the preceding part of this paper are discussed and found efficient by Sorokin. The reader may wish to refer to the outline of Marx's theories, on page 5 of this paper, before Sorokin's criticism is considered.

One very significant point made by Sorokin is that Marx had very few original ideas. Sorokin goes to great length to show how nearly all of Marx's ideas had been presented by earlier writers. He goes on to say that Marx didn't improve on the older ideas he borrowed; instead, he confused them and presented them in an ambiguous ways. Marx's prediction of social revolution had been shown erroneous also.

Sorokin states that Marx's theory of change is also sociologically and logically inadequate. The 'economic determinism' of Marx is shown to be in error, as we have indicated above. So, too, is the notion of inevitability put forth by Marx. Sorokin calls it 'fatalism' and says that Marx never managed to show that history moves in such a 'progressive' manner. Marx's theory here approaches a kind of theological or mystical quality and cannot be verified historically.

The dialectic movement of history is said by Sorokin to be a theory developed from such unsound ideas as those mentioned above. Dialectical progression implies a 'progressive' change which is inevitable' and cannot be verified historically. Marx's notion that social change would cease after the 'classless and stateless' society have been accomplished is also hard for Sorokin to swallow. Why should change stop, wonders Sorokin. And what about this idea of a 'classless and stateless' society? Again, Sorokin can see no good scientific reason for thinking that such a condition must come to pass.

The above argument against Marx's theories has been very superficial, to say the least. The point was simply to get across the idea that one of today's leading sociologists has spoken out against Marx in a most scholarly manner and his criticism can be considered as representative of the whole discipline. To summarize Sorokin's criticism, we may note the following:

1. Marx presented nothing original that is sound;
2. What he presented that is sound wasn't original;
3. Marx's only merit can be that he exaggerated and generalized older ideas;
4. Marx was obscure and ambiguous in his writings, and was not logically grounded;
5. His writings were merely speculation and dogmatic deductions;
6. While Marx presented some "food for thought", he also gave rise to unrealistic ideologies;
7. His writings have hindered the social sciences;
8. Marx's work is out of the realm of science.

Sorokin says that the sound aspect of Marx's theories is his notion that the structure and change in society can best be understood in terms of

the relationship of the individual to his environment. This notion is one of the 'home bases' of sociology. But, Marx used this notion to an exaggerated extent and mainly to justify his dogma, syse sorokin.

All sociologists are looking for a certain order or pattern to use to explain social phenomena. Marx can be credited with making an attempt at this as have all other social thinkers. Marx's grand theories' may be considered erroneous today, but no more so, perhaps, than some of the full-fledged sociologists in the history of our discipline.

Marx emphasized the economic factor, as has been explained repeatedly throughout this paper, Marx saw the conditions of the working man in his time and felt that much could be done to improve his lot. Because of social critics such as Marx, a great deal has been done to improve the lot of the working man. Even though Marx's prediction of the 'revolution' has been proved false, we can note that perhaps the 'revolution' was avoided by the implementation of some of the social reforms wished for by Marx and other writers like him. Most of the factory workers in many parts of world, who know nothing about Marx (except that he is connected somehow to that greatest of all evils 'communism'), owe a large debt to Marx and the others who fought for the reforms the modern factory worker enjoys, perhaps without being aware of his good fortune.

Marx wrote about alienation, as we have shown. There is today a branch of sociology blooming which is very much concerned with the idea of alienation. For these sociologists, Marx was a pioneer in the field. Regardless of Marx's reasons for being concerned with alienation (e.g., to demonstrate the 'class struggle'), his observations of the detached position of the average person were insightful and are a great aid in the study of alienation theory today.

To summarize Marx's relevance in our time we can say that no man, since the eighteenth century, has had his name attached to a historical movement so significant as has Marx. No body was able to influence so many people so quickly as have the men who call themselves 'Marxists'. Marx's ideas of materialism, while not understood well by most people, are also of great significance in the Marxist movement. The religious and ideological elements of the East-West struggle today have much foundation in the materialism of Marx.

Marx's theories of societal organization and social change can be dismissed as unsound. Sorokin has been picked as representative of the discipline of sociology; Sorokin's criticism is, to me, sufficient to justify the conclusion that Marx's theories are unsound. That Marx attempted to write 'grand theory' of organization and change is commendable. All sociologists are aiming in this direction and many have written theories which are just as unsound as Marx's.

Marx was able to see that behavior is determined to a large degree to a large degree by one's cultural environment. In this, we can say that he was a promising sociologist. His ideas on alienation and the lot of the working man offer a good start for social reformers and sociologists interested in alienation theory. The reformers have been successful in changing society to a great extent. The sociologists interested in alienation theory have a long way to go, but there is a growing literature to show that a great deal of work is being done in this area.

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