Karl Marx

Life and Works

Karl Heinrich Marx was a German philosopher, political economist, historian, political theorist, sociologist, and communist revolutionary. Marx was born on May 5, 1818 in Trier, Prussia to Jewish parents. His father, Heinrich Marx, converted to Lutheranism prior to Karl's birth in order to better the chances of a law career for his future son. In 1835 Marx enrolled at the University of Bonn, but was soon compelled by his father to move to the University of Berlin. There, in 1840, Marx met the Young Hegelians who were the more radical followers of the late Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. After receiving his PhD in 1841, Marx was forced to move to Paris where he published the first and only issue of the "Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher" (German-French Yearbook) in 1843, where he published his article "On the Jewish Question." In this article Marx began to explore and formulate his materialist theory of history. During his stay in Paris, Marx worked on his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts which were not published until the 1930s. Around the same time, Marx met fellow philosopher Friedrich Engels. Engels, a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie, admired Marx so much that he financially supported him for the remainder of his life. Marx's stay in Paris was short-lived, however, as he was forced to leave the city for Brussels in 1845, where he published his German Ideology. In 1848, a year known as "The Year of Revolutions" in Europe, he published perhaps his most famous work, the Manifesto of the Communist Party ("the Manifesto"). Soon after the publication of the Manifesto, Marx was once again forced to leave the country. This time he went to London, where he spent the next 10 years doing research in the British Museum. Between the 1850s and the time of his death, he published some of his more famous works such as _The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon_ in 1852, _Capital, Vol. 1_ in 1867, and the _Critique of the Goethe Program_ in 1875. Marx remained in London until his death in 1883. After his death, Engels worked to finalize and publish Marx's unfinished manuscripts of _Capital, Vol. 2_ and _Capital, Vol. 3_ which were published in 1885 and 1894, respectively.

Philosophy

Marx's philosophical ideas stand in contrast with many of the traditional philosophical theories regarding society, history, and political economy of his contemporaries. Political economists such as Adam Smith used methods like methodological individualism and held that the theory of private property was self-evident (in other words, they took for granted that it should exist), and based their economic theories, including those regarding private property itself, upon that foundation. Marx, however, questioned the concept of private property as a whole and pointed out the circularity of their arguments, which he claimed altogether to be a petitio principii (assuming the initial point to prove the same point). He pointed out that if property and ownership were derived from labour, then labour must be something uniquely inherent to each individual person. Through his principles of alienation, however, Marx demonstrates that labour is not inherent to people at all, but rather something that can be alienated from the individual and used against him.

Rather than methodological individualism, Marx used a methodology coined "historical materialism." Though he never uses either term specifically, Marx does refer to a materialist conception of history, which is used both to explain past and predict future conflicts. Historical materialism is not a chronology of biological history, as in a history of man's existence, but rather the history of society, seen as the gradual resolution of conflicting and contradictory forces, that must eventually resolve themselves. Marx argued that society was initially born with the production of the means to satisfy humans' needs; in other words it began with the production of the means of production (181). For him, this is the first historical act, when people realize that their continued existence is contingent on the ability to produce adequate materials for the needs of life. Since this inception, society evolves and revolves around these means (181).

Marx furthered his questioning of private property by suggesting that the manifestation of human labor as an object used for trade created what Marx referred to as the Alienation of Labor.

Because of the existence of private property, there is the existence of a need to acquire such property through labor. The labor force exists based on the idea of private property; wages are exchanged for labor so that the working class can purchase property that are means of subsistence (food). Capitalists control means of production and exploits the workers to produce goods that are the property of capitalists. Marx defines social classes by their respective means of acquiring capital or wealth. In other words, it is their occupation and how they get their money.

Marx outlines the system of exchange in capitalism with two equations: C-M-C and C-M-C*". For Marx, C-M-C is the less damning of the two capitalist equations, because it begins and ends with use-value. The equation acknowledges that the purpose of exchange is to maintain subsistence, with money being an intermediary factor that does not have value in and of itself, for its value lies in the use-value of the second commodity attained. M-C-M* is the true devil behind Capitalism -- it explains the rampant desire for wealth and the accumulation of capital. Commodity fetishism is best described by this equation, for the buyer lays out money with only sly intention of making a profit (p.484). As such, commodity fetishism is driven by exchange-value, which has no value in and of itself -- commodities no longer represent usage, they represent value. The system then, according to Marx, becomes endless and oppressive, because the only acceptable M* must be additional exchange-value, in other words, surplus-value. Marx points out that there is no reason for M-C-M* to exist, because M and M* should be equal (the capitalist should not profit).

Because of the differences in means of wealth acquisition, there are also discrepancies in wealth among different people. Because of the idea of private property, people are always striving to gain more of it and this inner desire of self-interest in the form of private property gives rise to class struggles. He attributes various social conflicts to the existence of a class system, a system that is inherent in a capitalistic society. For Marx the only way to resolve such conflicts is the obliteration of the class system, achieved by the elimination of private property. Without classes, there would be no division or separation of peoples in society. Furthermore, the lack of such differences would eliminate social conflict. This is what Marx aims for in communism.

Political economy

Marx believes that private property in the system of capitalism leads to the alienation of labor from the worker. According to Marx, this alienation is manifest in four ways:

1. Alienation from the product
   2. No longer receiving and personally owning the objects that you exert labor upon
2. Alienation from the process of labor
   - No longer enjoying the act of working for the sake of being productive
3. Alienation from species-being
   - No longer enjoying the fruits of your creativity/consciousness/humanity, as your species-being is no longer directed into personal objects
4. Alienation from other humans
   - No longer able to socialize as you are being forced to compete with others for jobs/wages

In light of this alienation of the human from his own humanity, Marx says the only way we can recapture what it means to be human is by abolishing private property, which has many benefits, including the abolition of class struggles. This is what Marx calls communism, which would require a revolution against the current capitalist state. In communism each worker would produce for the common good, therefore avoiding the alienation of his labor, his species-being, and other workers. Marx also generally criticizes political economy as using the assumptions of Capitalism in order to argue for capitalism.

**Marx's theories in practice**

The very first overt political manifestation of communism came with the October Revolution in Russia which led to the overthrow of Imperial Russia, and the creation of the Soviet Union. Several of Marx's writings, especially the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, were ostensibly used as building blocks in creating both the government structure and society that followed the fall of the monarchy of Tsarist Russia. But Marx's writings were strongly subject to the personal interpretation of Russian Communist leaders such as Lenin and Stalin, which some argue ultimately led to a divergence from Marx's "true" philosophy. An example would be that Soviet leaders saw the state as a necessary apparatus for Communism, whereas Marx believed that true communism came with the dissolution of the State after a purely transitional period with a "workers' state."

Although several countries (The Soviet Union, China, North Korea, et cetera) have attempted "communist" revolutions, Marx would have most likely not believed that any of these revolutions accurately represented his views, considering he did not approve of the revolutions that occurred during his lifetime. In addition, Marx requires that the world revolutionize itself to a communist system in order for his vision to be accomplished and work as he envisioned.

**On Emancipation**

Marx separated emancipation into two broad categories: political and human. Below are parts of human and political emancipation as Marx saw them.

**Political Emancipation**

- Abolishing religion won't do away with religion
- Equal rights assumes an isolated individual
- Man has an abstract life in the state, concrete differences in reality
- Rights don't conceive of man as a species being
- Feudalism starts the process of individualism, ends under capitalism

**Human Emancipation**

- Putting an end to alienation
- Reclaiming true social relations between men

**Impact**

The political impact that Marx’s writings had were not strongly felt until World War I and the October Revolution which led to the creation of the Soviet Union. To this day, Marx is viewed as being synonymous with the actions and ideas presented by Soviet Russia, but many disagree as to whether this is an accurate view.

Marx provided a fresh perspective on a way of overcoming several societal problems such as class struggles and private property. While he does not provide an ideal description of what the solution is, which would be utopian, Marx points out flaws in capitalism, why they're flaws, and how they can be resolved, proposing a slight alternative of capitalism.