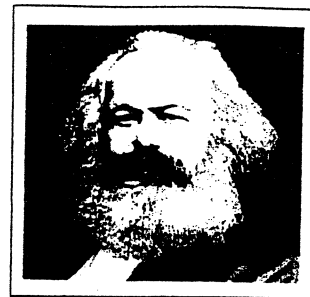


Biographical Note: Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Karl Marx was born in Trier, Germany, the son of a successful Jewish lawyer who later converted to Christianity. Marx's acquaintances considered him brilliant, but he was also stubborn and quarrelsome. Throughout his life he broke with one associate after another, the only exception being Friedrich Engels, his lifelong friend, collaborator, and benefactor.

Marx studied at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, hoping first to become a poet. After a resounding failure at poetry, he entered a circle of young philosophers in Berlin, all devoted followers of Hegel, whose ideas about the crucial role of history in understanding current events, art, and science had recently swept German universities. The young Hegelians, however, were radical in their opposition to Hegel's religious views, and this attitude may have influenced Marx's later attacks against religion. Marx received his doctorate of philosophy at the age of 23, meanwhile having married ("above his station") Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of his father's closest friend. Jenny's family opposed the marriage, and, as it turned out, their reasons were justified, since Marx was never able to support her. Much of their lives was spent in great poverty, and the deaths of three of their six children were probably the result of privation.

After a brief stint as a newspaper editor, Marx's troubles with the authorities propelled him first out of Germany and then Paris and Belgium. It was in Paris that Marx first met Engels, and in Brussels they together wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, a revolutionary pamphlet that was the only writing of Marx's to achieve wide circulation during his lifetime. After the demise of the revolutions that shook all of Europe in 1848, but in which Marx played little part, he fled finally to London where he spent the rest of his life. There



Marx helped form revolutionary groups, and otherwise spent most of his time cloistered in the British Museum studying the history of economic thought and writing *Das Kapital*. Aside from some meager earnings as correspondent for *The New York Tribune*, a job he held for about ten years, Marx lived entirely on money given to him by Engels (who, although an anticapitalist, nevertheless owned factories in Manchester and Germany) and by other admirers.

Marx was never very successful in organizing revolutionary groups, and he finally engineered the breakup of The First International, the revolutionary organization that he helped found and develop but which seemed about to fall into the hands of opponent radicals. Marx finished writing volume I of *Capital* and saw it published in 1867. He had previously written most of volumes II and III, but never completed them in the 15 years that remained to him. It was left to Engels to edit and publish these volumes after Marx's death. Marx died in 1883, two years after the death of his wife, Jenny, and only several months after the unexpected death of his eldest daughter, Jenny Longuet.

Throughout his life Marx attracted and fascinated many people by his brilliance and through the force of his personality and ideas. And though most of his associates eventually became estranged from Marx the man, almost all retained their allegiance to his ideas.

an important determinant of the timing of revolutionary unrest, but unrest does not necessarily peak at the moment in history when the lowest classes have the most to gain from it.

On the Nature of Communist Society

Among the many thousands of pages Marx wrote and published, and among those published by others after his death, there are scarcely a dozen dealing with the nature of the economy under socialism (which Marx never distinguished clearly from communism). Marx did tell us that socialism must come, and that it must begin with "the dictatorship of the proletariat," though this concept too, is left somewhat fuzzy. There is no doubt, however, about his ideology

He clearly and repeatedly stated that this "higher form of society" will be dedicated to "the full and free development of every individual," with work transformed into a stimulating and pleasant activity and the deadening effects of extreme specialization brought to an end.

Perhaps Marx's most famous passage on the nature of socialism appears in one of his last economic writings, in which he envisions the post-capitalist society passing through two stages. In the first, there is already "common ownership of production." But this early socialist society is "still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges." In this stage, the income of the individual is exactly equivalent to the amount of labor he contributes.

He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labour . . . and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as costs the same amount of labour. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another. [However,] . . . in a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and with it also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but itself life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!²

About the only other concrete attribute of a communist society described in Marx's writing is the abolition of the division of labor, which, claimed Marx, transforms workers from creative, satisfied humans into discontented, alienated near-machines. According to Marx and Engels:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowboy or critic.³

Certainly these are fascinating notions, but they tell us nothing about the coordination of production, the planning of new plant and equipment, the arrangements for industrial research, the devising of a monetary policy (if money is to be used), and the many other issues that must be settled in designing any (even a communist) economy.

It seems clear that Marx did not intend to provide detailed guidance to the leaders of communist societies. Rather, his work was devoted to a meticulous analysis and critique of capitalism.

Commodities, Productive Labor, and Capital

One of the reasons it is hard to understand Marx is that he often employed words to mean things other than what they mean in ordinary usage. (Marx was, after all, an economist!) Since Marx considered it so important to distinguish

²Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), pages 17–18.

³K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology, Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), page 47.