# Marx on Moral Problems With the Market

“The less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life-the greater is the store of your estranged being…all passions and all activity must therefore be submerged in avarice” (K. Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts).

**Karl Marx** (1818-1883) was a German-born philosopher and economist who spent much of his life in Britain, where he wrote critiques of capitalist economic systems (or **market economies**), where a relatively small number of “capitalists” owned the means of production (or “capital”), while a larger number of workers by selling their labor to these capitalists for fixed wages. He famously predicted that capitalism would eventually collapse, and be replaced by **communism,** in which the means of production would be jointly owned by all members of society (a type of **planned economy**). While Marx himself had relatively little to say about how society or the economy *ought* to be structured, he is best remembered today as the inspiration for the communist revolutions in 20th century Russia and China. These communist revolutions notably failed to produce workable alternatives to market economies, however, with the USSR collapsing in 1991, and the PRC moving toward an increasingly market-oriented economy since the late 1970s.

**Why Care About Marx?** Marx’s confident predictions about the collapse of highly developed market economies (Britain, the US, etc.) never came to pass, and it’s unclear what he might have made of the rise and fall of Russian and Chinese communism. However, Marx’s ideas and arguments are still of interest to philosophers, political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, and others. Many of these people have argued that one can disagree with Marx’s claims regarding the inevitability/desirability of communism, while still agreeing that (at least some of) his *criticisms* of market economies are worth worrying about. In this class, we’ll be taking a “big picture” look at the sorts of issues that Marx was worried about (we’ll be ignoring the technical details of Marx’s ideas about economics, which make up a good chunk of his actual writing).

It’s also worth noting that some of the “old” responses against Marx don’t work quite as well as they used to. For example, from about 1914 to 1980, it seemed like Marx was simply wrong about the way wealth/income would end up being distributed in market economies. That is, Marx predicted that the rich would get richer, the poor would get poorer, and that this would cause political problems. The reverse happened, and most developed economies (the US, European countries) generally became more equal, even as capitalist economies beat out their communist counterparts. (And the citizens seemed to like them more!). This seemed to be a good response against Marx. However, since around 1980, levels of inequality between rich and poor have slowly been returning to their pre-1914 “norm,” and again look more like Marx would have expected/predicted. Workers in many rich countries have seen small gains in “real” income/wealth, while the upper 20% (and especially the top 1%) have seen huge increases in wealth/income. Alongside this, citizens of rich countries tend to report much higher level of dissatisfaction with their government/society than they did 50 years ago.

## What is Historical Materialism?

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (K. Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)

**What is a historical materialist (like Marx)?** A **materialist** is somebody who thinks that human beings are, essentially, just one more part of the physical or material world. Rene Descartes (of “I think, therefore I am” fame), for example, was NOT a materialist, since he thought that humans were essentially “thinking things,” or souls that somehow existed separately from the material world. Thomas Hobbes, by contrast, was an early materialist who identified humans as just one more sort of selfish, pleasure-seeking animal, whose behavior could only be controlled given the right sort of social environment. On this basis, he argued that humans *need* be ruled by an all-powerful monarch, since the only alternative to this was a hugely harmful “war of all against all.” Later socialist materialists like Robert Owen adopted Hobbes’ general materialist outlook, but offered more “progressive” forms of government or control (Owen favored making people wear colored blocks that showed everyone how well they’d behaved the previous day, on the grounds that this would incentivize them to behave better). Marx (like many others) finds these sorts of ideas about society a bit off-putting, since they seem to suggest that some people (“the elite”) are somehow capable of rising above their material circumstances, and are thus justified in ruling over everyone else. He also argues that many materialists ignore that way that humans change over time, which gives rise to his historicism.

Marx’s **historicism** arose a response to the idealism of Kant, and the historical idealism of Hegel. Basically, Kant argued that humans help create the world we live in, by imposing our own *ideas* of space, time, causality, and so on. However, these things aren’t really part of the external world; for example, an intelligent alien might live within a very different reality than a human, given the aliens’ very different ideas. Hegel took Kant’s idea one step further, and proposed that the ideas that humans use to construct reality can *change,* both over the course of an individual’s life and (more importantly) as human society progresses over time. Marx agrees with Hegel that the reality in which humans live is partially our own creation. However, he gives this idea a materialist spin: the reality in which humans live is *physically* created by us. It’s made up of buildings, inventions, languages, roads, and so on. Marx argues our interactions with our *created* environment (our technology) shape us much more than we usually recognize. The reality of an early hunter-gatherer, for example, is very different from that a primitive farmer, a medieval knight, a worker in a 19th century factory, or a 21st century college student with access to modern technology.

**So, What is Historical Materialism?** In a nutshell, Marx thinks the best way to understand humanity is to look at the world of physical objects that we have created, and which in we can use this to make *new* physical objects in response to our needs and wants. Everything else—our political/ethical/religious beliefs, our ideas about love/justice/philosophy/art, and so on.—is merely a reflection of this more basic economic relation to the world, and these ideas will change as technology (which is a sort of material stuff) changes.

## What is Alienation?

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people...The call to abandon [the people’s] illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusion” (K. Marx. Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right)

“Money is the universal, self-constituted value of all things. Hence it has robbed the whole world... of its proper value. Money is the alienated essence of man's labor and life, and this alien essence dominates him as he worships it.” (K. Marx, “On the Jewish Question”)

Concerns about **alienation** lie at the heart of Marx’s critique of capitalism. In particular, Marx argues that certain structural features of market economies alienate workers from the products of their labor, and this makes it impossible for these workers (nearly everyone, in a capitalist economy) to lead genuinely good human lives. In the long run, Marx thinks that this will lead to the collapse of capitalism, and its replacement by communism, which will solve this problem. But what exactly does Marx mean by *alienation,* and why does he think that communism could fix this problem?

**What is Alienation? The Example of Religion.** Alienation arises when (a) there is a *best* way for things to be, given human nature; (b) somehow, humans lose contact with part of what they need to achieve this good life; and (c) the thing lost “reappears,” but in an alien form that is hostile to our humanity. Marx’s example is religion: the Abrahamic idea of God represents what is good about humanity: love, knowledge, the power to control our world, and so on. However, because of the way the world actually is, humans can’t actually have this: all too often, we are lonely, ignorant, scared/hurt/powerless, etc. Given this situation, we posit these good things must actually belong someplace *else* (to a God in heaven). However, the good things that were lost now return in a hostile, alien form, as religions that dominate human life in sometimes violent and unpleasant ways (wars, harsh requirements about individual behavior). Marx, unlike many of his contemporaries, didn’t blame religion for society’s problems—instead, he argued that religion was a natural human response to humans’ unmet material needs. He argued that, if humans had better lives, this sort of religion would simply fade away on its own. (Would some other sort of religion take its place? Marx doesn’t really say much about these sorts of things, since he thinks we have a limited ability to imagine what a post-capitalist society would actually be like).

**Alienation and the Market.** Marx’s real concern is not religion, but the market economy. On Marx’s view, humans are essentially *productive* beings who meet our needs by *making* things, using both our physical and mental capacities. We plant gardens, write books, raise children, and so on; this is what makes human lives worth living. Capitalism itself arose out of individual humans making stuff this in just this way, and then trading them with one another. However, this has (unintentionally) led to a situation where humans can no longer control the products of their own labor, since these now “belong” to the capitalist, and not the laborer. People are paid low wages to pick corn, to write repetitive emails, to work at daycares, and so on, but these activities don’t provide meaning to our lives in the way the first sorts of activities do. However, just as the (lost) possibility of a good human life reappears as a vengeful God, the (lost) possibility of meaningful labor reappear in the “laws” of economics, which come to dominate our lives. In order to eat, people *have* to work, and (as Marx argues), the greater their need, the worse job they will be forced to work, and the less they will be paid to do it. Even the richest capitalist can’t escape this, since any attempt toward genuine generosity or escape will lead to their destruction by the forces of the market. Just as with religion, however, this can’t be changed unless the underlying economic conditions change.

## So, What is to Be done?

Marx himself argues that the only solution to the alienation problem is to do away with private property altogether. However (as noted above), this solution doesn’t seem too plausible, in the light of what we now about the failures of planned economies. Similarly, many contemporary thinkers have argued that Marx’s theory of religion is overly simplistic—while he might be right that there is *some* relation between our material wants/needs and our religious beliefs, is it really as simple as he makes it seem? (For example, can we “solve” the problem of religious extremism merely by focusing on issues related to poverty and wealth distribution?). In the end, even many contemporary “Marxists” have conceded that Marx may be better at identifying problems than in proposing. In practice, countries like the U.S., the U.K. managed to avoid Marx’s predicted collapse in part by modifying capitalist economies in fairly substantial ways—e.g., by instituting minimum wage laws, consumer protection laws, government pensions and health care, 40-hour-work weeks, child labor laws, expanded public education, national/state parks, and so on. However, this doesn’t mean that Marx’s worries have gone away—after all, there are still billions of people in extreme poverty, and billions more who are unemployed, underemployed, or just hate their jobs. Marx’s arguments force us to think about how (or whether) these problems might be solved.

## Review Question

1. Marx’s ideas were hugely influential and, until fairly recently, a substantial portion of the earth’s population lived in Marx-inspired “Communist” countries. However, most of these governments failed to meet the needs of their citizens (sometimes horrifically). To what extent was Marx “responsible” for this? Are these things he could have foreseen?
2. Describe the idea of “historical materialism” in your own words. To what extent do you think this is a helpful/useful idea in trying to understand human behavior? (E.g., do new technologies change the way we conceptualize the world? How?)
3. To what extent do you think contemporary society is “alienating” in the way Marx describes? (In particular, think of your own education, employment, religion, etc.). Is it possible/desirable to create a society that is NOT alienating in this way?