

Karl Marx: Alienation, Class Struggle, and Class Consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Why should one bother to read Marx, one might ask, particularly after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? These historic events, it has been argued, have brought the Cold War to an end, and with this a victorious West is able to establish a liberal, capitalist, and democratic world order. Yet Marx continues to be of interest, less so because of his failed predictions than for his analysis of the structure of power in capitalist societies and his comprehensive view of the close interrelationship of economic class dominance, political power, and ideology. These structural relationships have much to recommend them to the student of society for they point to significant questions of economic, social, and political power and provide us with a view of history that explains how, and under what conditions, these relationships change. Although Marx claimed to be committed to a scientific study of society, his unique dialectical approach allowed him to fuse his philosophical views about human emancipation with his sociological and historical analyses of social change and revolution.

Marx was born in Trier in 1818 to a middle-class German Jewish family. He attended the University of Bonn and later the University of Berlin, where he became associated with a group of intellectuals, the Young Hegelians, who applied Hegel's philosophical approach to a radical critique of German politics. Hegel's dialectical approach attempted to capture the reality of dynamic change in the world by urging that we examine things as they are and as they have the potential to become in the future. Just as the seedling gives rise to the tree so too do individuals and societies have the potential to develop and realize themselves under appropriate conditions. It was Marx's objectives to recount the conditions of human development under capitalism and logically to project the dynamic changes that would ensue, bringing people to a fuller realization of their free and creative potentialities.

In 1843 Marx left Germany for Paris, where he worked as a journalist and wrote the essays that were eventually published as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. It was in Paris that Marx met up with Frederick Engels,

who was to become his greatest friend and colleague. In 1845 Marx visited London, where he and Engels worked together on *The German Ideology*. Later, in 1847, a socialist group called "The League of the Just" commissioned Marx and Engels to write the *Communist Manifesto*.

Revolutionary upheavals against the old monarchical order were sweeping across Europe in 1848, the year the *Manifesto* was published. Marx returned to London following these failed revolutions and spent the greater part of his remaining life in exile there. He was supported primarily by his rich friend Engels and earned a small income from his work for the *New York Daily Tribune* as their European correspondent.

The period between 1848 and 1863 was a particularly difficult one for Marx. The revolutions of 1848 having failed, Marx was left without an audience for his work. Yet he continued to write his masterpiece, *Das Kapital*, encouraged by Engels and driven by his vision of historical progress and revolutionary transformation. In 1863 Marx discovered an audience for his work once again with the founding of *The International*, an organization of representatives from various European worker parties dedicated to ending the prevailing system of economic domination. Marx became heavily involved with the organization, writing speeches and pamphlets and eventually becoming its head, as he worked tirelessly to forge a united front out of the various ideological viewpoints that were represented. When the first volume of *Das Kapital* was published in 1867, it was well received among Russian and German socialists and by the membership of *The International*, who celebrated Marx and his work as scientific socialism and accorded it canonical status.

Internal conflicts brought about the dissolution of the *The International* in 1876, and Marx completed very little serious intellectual work in his later life. He died in 1883 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery.

Marx believed that, through labor, humankind would be able to realize its "species-being," i.e., its potential for creative and purposeful activity through work. Human labor was not simply energy expended for subsistence, although it was clearly that under capitalism. What Marx envisioned was the use of labor for enhancement of human life beyond material necessity, for the creation of a society in which aesthetic as well as material needs could be fulfilled. Labor could potentially provide such an opportunity, for it allowed persons to display creative and purposeful activity through their work under the appropriate conditions.

Under capitalism, however, the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie, are in control of the productive process. Whereas Marx assumed that the determination of what labor produces, how labor produces, and how the products of labor are distributed should be made by the working class, under capitalism the bourgeoisie pays workers a wage and then appropriates and disposes of what they produce. In other words, the conditions under which labor produces are alienating conditions insofar as workers are no longer in control of the object of their labor, i.e., its product. All the important determinations are made by others. Not being permitted to perform the inherent functions of a species-being, or even to view one's labor-power as one's own, the worker feels demoralized and dehumanized.

As a mode of production, capitalism entails structured relationships between labor and capital which result in the alienation of workers from the most important aspects of their labor. They are alienated first from their productive activity. The industrial labor force is organized on the assembly line, in which specific, repetitive, and tedious tasks must be performed. Work becomes a mechanical means to an end, requiring neither intelligence nor imagination, and the worker reverts to a subhuman condition instead of being elevated to

realize “species-being.” Workers are also alienated from the products they produce. Their energy is congealed in those products, but workers do not own what they produce. Finally, workers are alienated from their fellow workers as capitalists promote competition among them for the available jobs at subsistence wages. Instead of the solidarity and comradeship that comes from working together on a collective project, the work force is deliberately kept at subsistence wages, engendering great fear in workers that they will not be able to survive if their jobs are taken from them. The reserve army of labor, as Marx called the mass of the unemployed, acts as a constant threat to workers who may try to organize themselves and demand higher wages. Thus alienated and mechanized, the worker feels inhuman in the activity which should most naturally express humanity.

Marx viewed history as a record of oppression and domination in which members of the upper classes were able to exploit those in the lower classes. However, history is also progressive and points in the direction of improved conditions and greater freedom. Capitalism is but a stage in that historical development. Just as feudalism gave way to capitalism when the economic conditions were ripe, so too will capitalism give way to socialism and later communism, as the ultimate form of an emancipated existence. How this would come about is recounted below in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Marx’s categories for social analysis still have considerable validity. In attempting to analyze a society, Marx questions how the social order has come to be what it is, what the structures of power are that maintain it, and what the relationship is between wealth and power. These are the questions that should be uppermost in the reader’s mind in reading the materials in this chapter.

Central to Marx’s theory of society was his view that the way in which production is organized is a key to understanding the important

relationships in any social order. The mode of production, be it a slave economy, a feudal system, a capitalist order, or a socialist system must be analyzed in terms of the basic relationships that define that system. Moreover, the economic base of society, its substructure, was seen to influence, if not determine the superstructure, i.e., the ideas, values, laws, and social and political institutions. The content of our consciousness and our ideological orientation to the world are a function of the material, or productive, base of society. Changes in the economic substructure produce changes in the political and ideological superstructure. In *The German Ideology*, Marx recounts his materialist conception of history and fully develops his ideas concerning the interrelationship of the economy to politics and society.

In his view of capitalist society Marx reveals a theory of class structure. The class that controls the means of production is also the dominant political and ideological force in society. The ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class, Marx tells us. The content of consciousness under capitalism centers on the liberal ideas of individual rights, principally property rights. Power is maintained by the ruling class, at least in part, because the proletariat does not, in the early stages of capitalism, possess “true consciousness.” Only after the progressive immiserization of the proletariat does it begin to see itself as a class, gradually mobilize, and develop an alternative ideology that posits the objective relations of labor and capital.

Marx believed that history was driven by class struggle and that important social changes were the outcomes of inevitable conflicts between irreconcilable interests. Capitalism would give way as the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat could no longer be contained by the framework of law and social institutions. The *Communist Manifesto* offers a brief historical analysis of how the bourgeois class came into being, demonstrates how the bourgeoisie no longer has con-

trol over its dominions, and delineates the basic doctrines of the usurping class: the proletariat. Marx believed that socialism would replace capitalism and that the triumph of the

proletariat would usher in a new and progressive order that would fulfill mankind's highest aspiration for a free and creative social order.