

Marxist Theory: *A Fast Primer*

John Simpson

PHIL366-F16

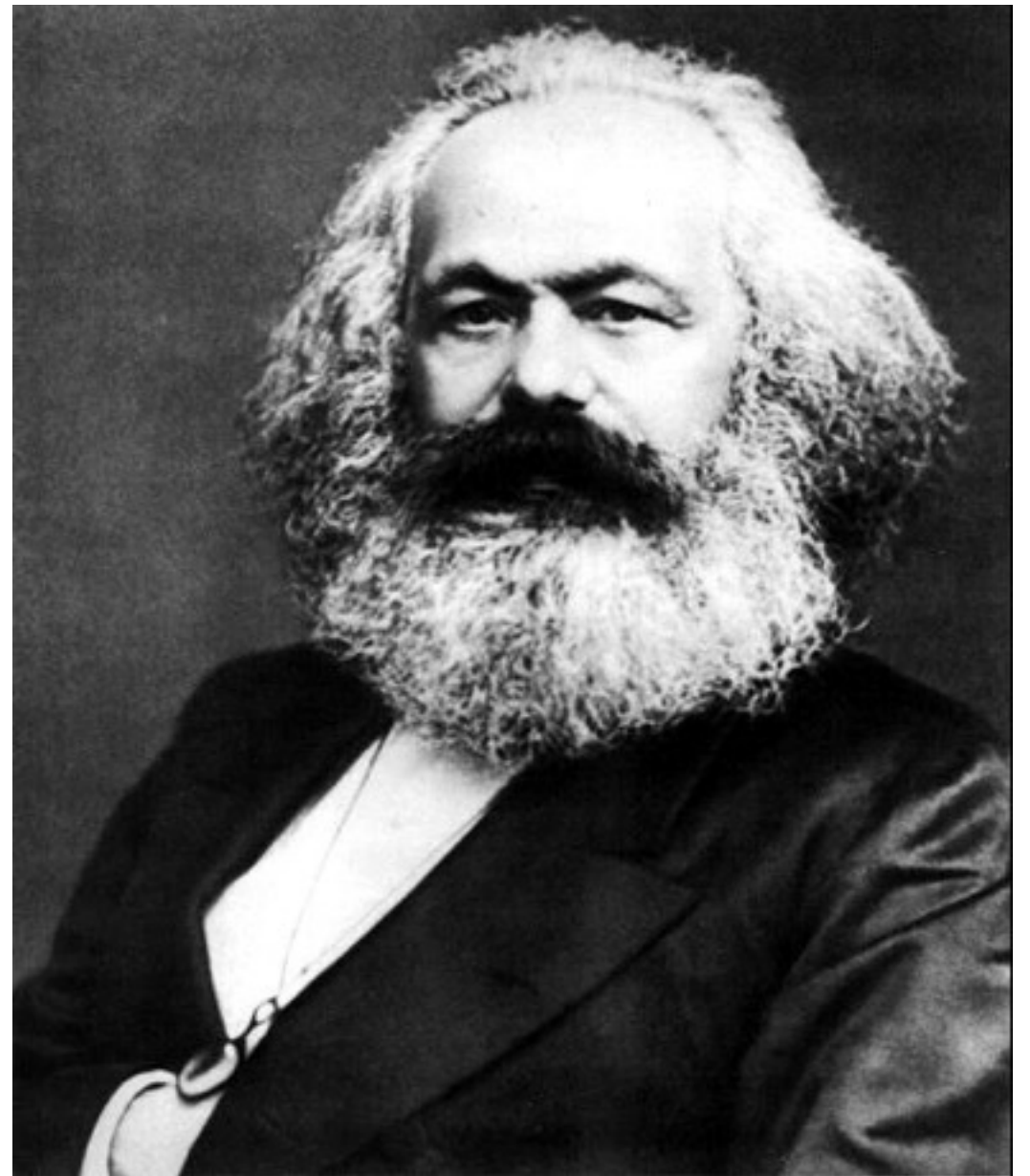
Karl Marx

b. 1818 d. 1883

Studied law and earned a
PhD in Philosophy

Collaborated with Fredrich
Engles

Writing during the
Industrial Revolution and
was heavily influenced by
what he saw



Why study Marx?

Marx's ideas have been enormously influential

Socialist and progressive political thought
20th century Communist regimes

Have Marx's ideas been discredited?

Economic theory, predictions, particular prescriptions

Philosophical ideas of enduring importance

The nature of freedom and equality.

What's most important in life and whether social conditions help or hinder our pursuit of it.

The relevance of the social shaping of attitudes & behaviour.



Interested in Socialism?
Want to Fight Against Capitalism?
Join

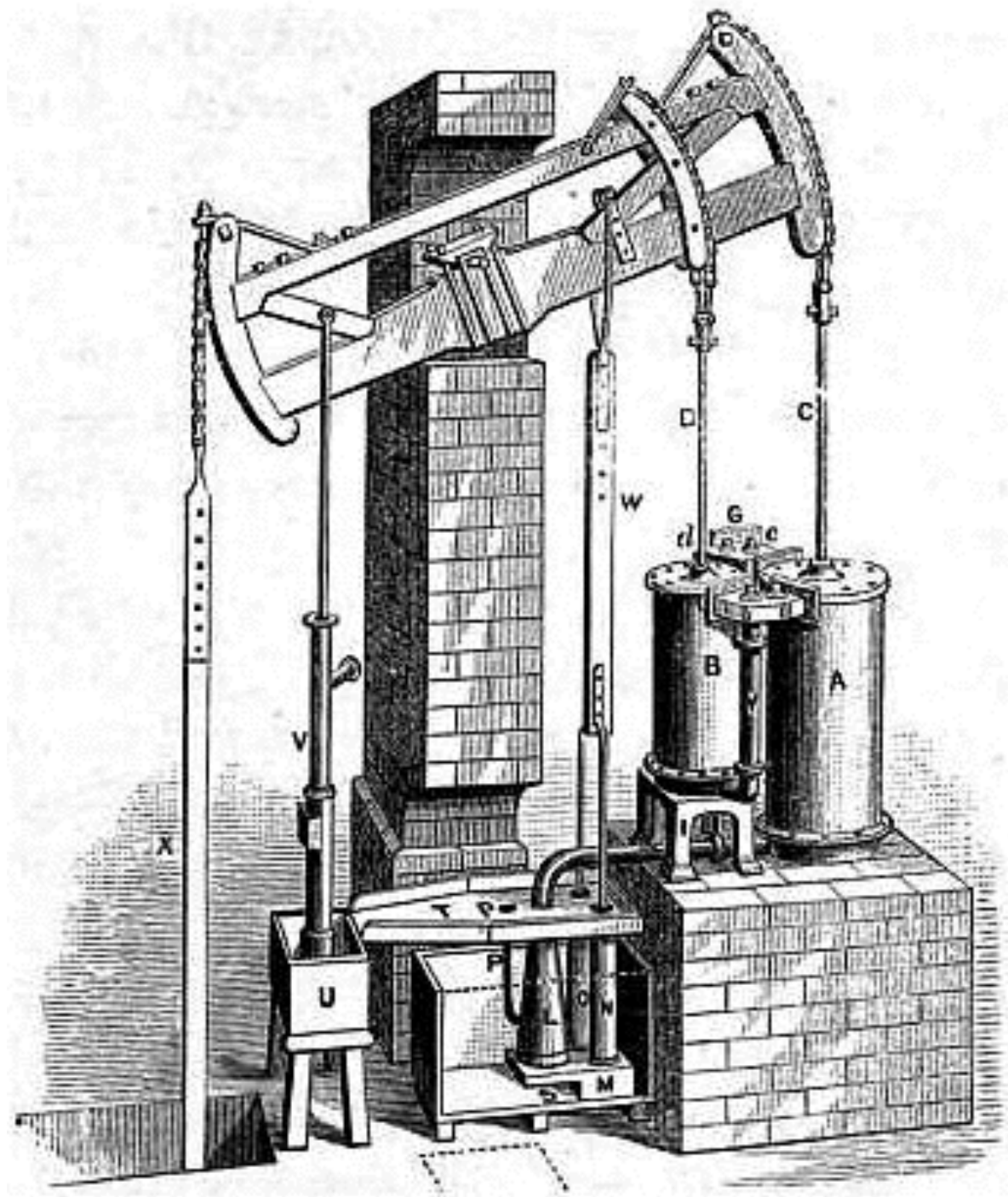
SOCIALIST FIGHTBACK



marxist.ca edmonton@marxist.ca
facebook.com/fightbackedmonton

Fightback
A Marxist Voice of Labour and Youth

Industrial Revolution



Technological Innovations

Textile manufacturing

The steam engine

Metallurgy

...

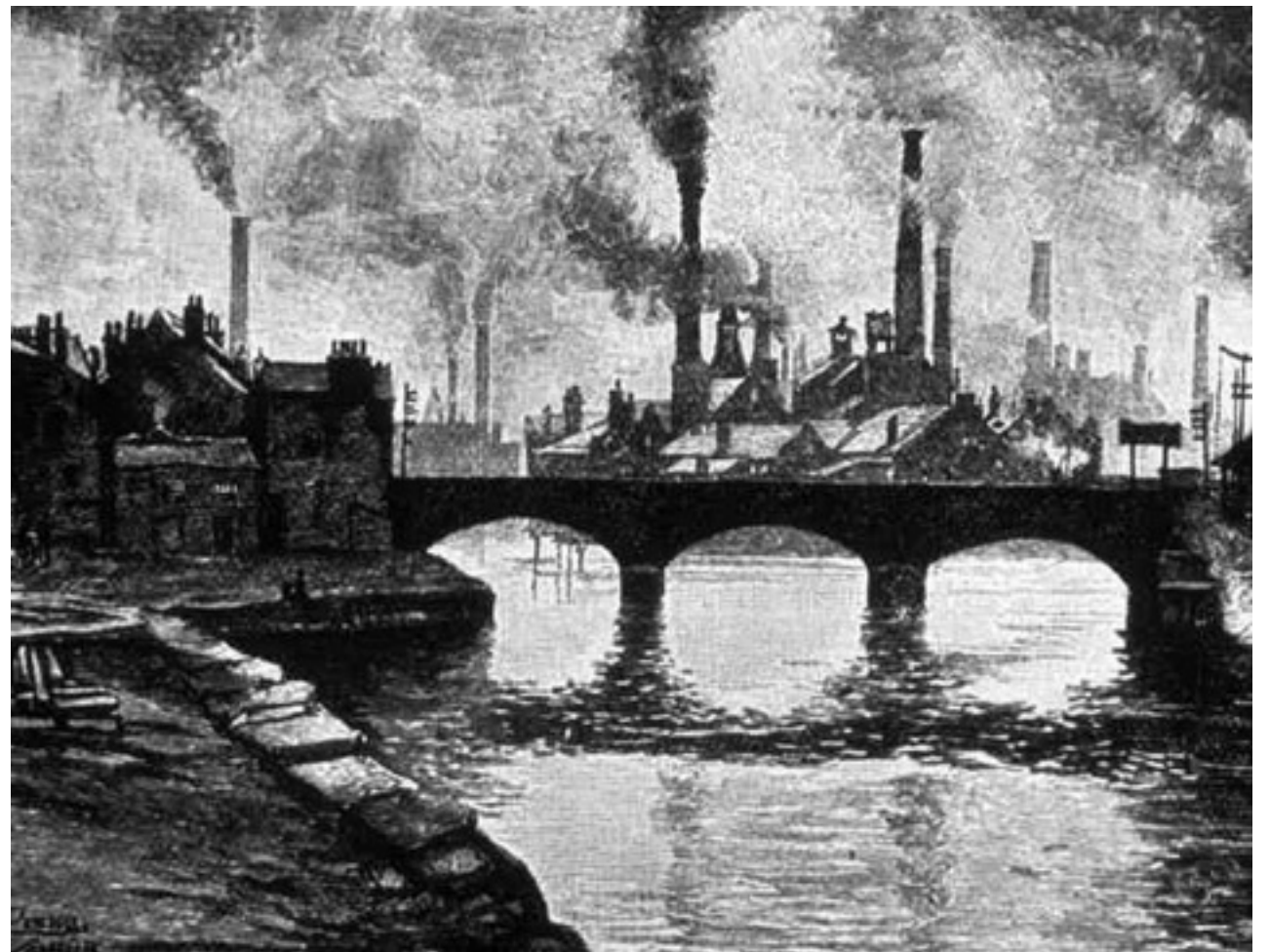
Industrial Revolution

Economic organization

Consolidation of productive assets in large firms

Displacement of small craftspeople, agricultural labourers

Competition for urban manufacturing jobs



Industrial Revolution



Poverty & Labour Conditions

Subsistence wages

Long hours

Dangerous conditions

Child labour

...



Classes

The “Bourgeoisie”

Own capital / means of production (Machinery, buildings, land, raw materials)

Don't labour themselves

Hire other people (proletarians) to labour

The “Proletarians”

Do not own capital

Get paid wages in exchange for labouring for the Bourgeoisie

Do unskilled work using the industrial technology owned by the Bourgeoisie

Classes

The “Bourgeoisie”

Born into conditions of privilege; inherit ownership of means of production

Needn't do any work*, but continue to earn vast returns on the capital they own

*(Ok, so maybe they balance their cheque books or tell other people what to do...)

The “Proletarians”

Born into conditions of extreme poverty; inherit no property

Must work to survive, even as children

Little chance to obtain education

Work extremely hard and earn nothing more than subsistence

Revolution and Communism

Marx thought that the inefficiencies of capitalism would cause the Proletariat to revolt, overthrow the Bourgeoisie, and establish a communist society

Just like in previous eras the inefficiency of the old class relations had caused revolutions and changes in which class was dominant

But this revolution would be special in that the Proletariat is the vast majority of the world's population

With dissolution of the Bourgeoisie there would be only one class left, and Communist society would be classless

The establishment of Communism would finally end the history of struggles between social classes





COMMUNISM

IT'S A PARTY

Communist Society

Marx didn't say much about Communist society, but it's clear he thought it would be free of the social problems that plague Capitalism

In the absence of class struggle, all are equal; no oppression or exploitation

Ideological attitudes are absent; people are able to live in line with their authentic desires to engage in creative work, and contribute to each others' flourishing

No need for a state

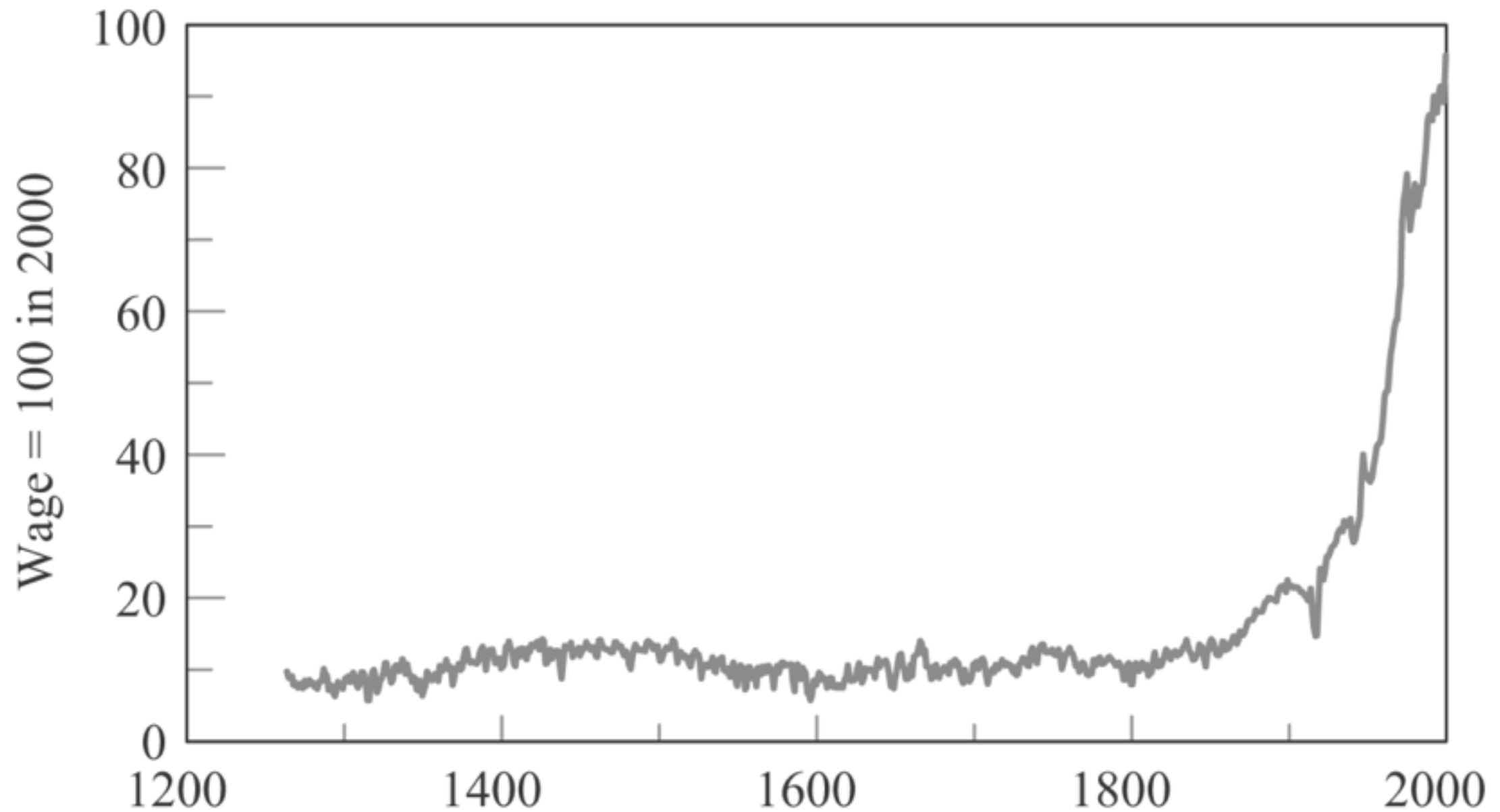
Were the 20th century societies that called themselves 'Communist' anything like Communist in Marx's sense?

Predictive Failures?

How successful have Marx's predictions been?

What sorts of explanations might a Marxist give for why we haven't yet seen a Proletarian revolution?

Real Wage, London 1200-2000



Real Wage, Developing Countries

Doesn't seem that Marx's theory can be saved by claiming that rich countries "outsourced" the falling real wages of the Proletariat to developing countries

Poorer countries actually tend to grow faster than richer countries

Significant improvements in living standards in poor countries over time

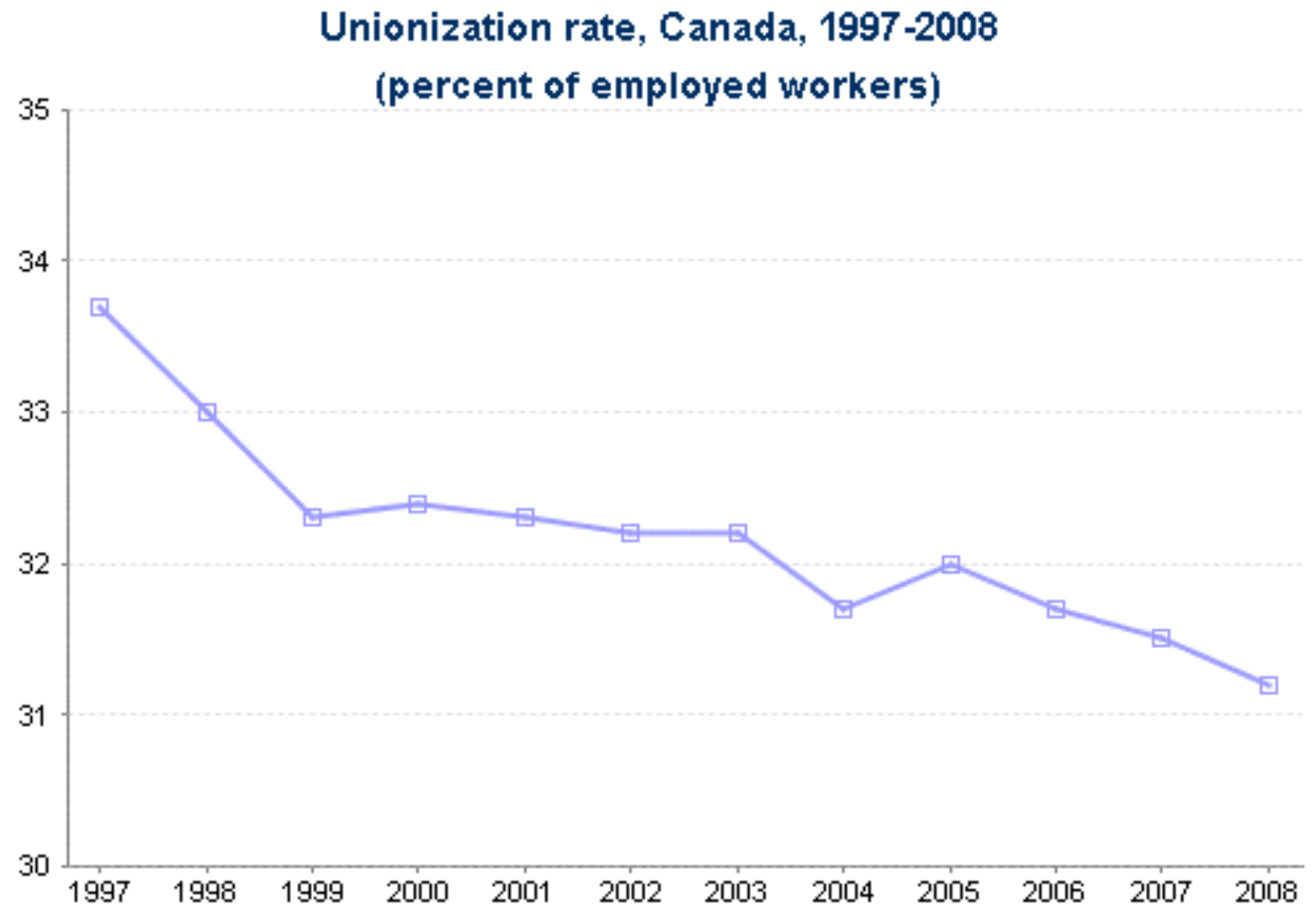
Recall from our lesson on Singer:

WB: number living on less than 1.25 USD has fallen from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion today (2012)

Number of children who die each year of poverty related causes has fallen from 20 million in 1960 to 9 million today (2012)

Declining Unionization

Marx thought that Communist revolution would be facilitated by the concentration of workers in unions and the development of “class consciousness”



But unionization rates seem to be declining
In the U.S., from > 33 % in 1945 to 24.1 % in 1979 to 13.9 % in 1998

Distribution in Work and Ownership

Marx predicted stratification into a Bourgeoisie that owns everything and does no work and a Proletariat that owns nothing and does all the work

Kuhn and Lozano found that in 2006, 27% of men in the top income quintile work more than 50 hours per week (compared to only 13% of men in the bottom quintile)

Table 5a: Concentration of stock ownership in the United States, 2001-2004

Wealth class	Percent of all stock owned:	
	2001	2004
Top 1%	33.5%	36.7%
Next 19%	55.8%	53.9%
Bottom 80%	10.7%	9.4%

Table 5b: Amount of stock owned by various wealth classes in the U.S., 2004

Wealth class	Percent of households owning stocks worth:		
	More than \$0	More than \$5,000	More than \$10,000
Top 1%	93.3%	93.2%	92.8%
95-99%	93.5%	92.7%	91.0%
90-95%	87.4%	85.6%	80.3%
80-90%	84.3%	77.0%	71.5%
60-80%	65.5%	54.4%	47.1%
40-60%	46.4%	28.7%	20.3%
20-40%	31.6%	13.4%	8.3%
Bottom 20%	12.2%	2.5%	1.1%
TOTAL	48.6%	36.4%	31.1%

Economic Planning Failures

Marx thought that one of the first steps towards Communism would be the control of productive assets by a democratically elected government
In the 20th century “Communist” regimes did try to centrally manage their economies

Soviet Union, Soviet Satellites (e.g. Poland, East Germany), China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba

Central planning led to inefficiency and stagnation

Most Communist countries abandoned such planning in favour of a system of privately owned capital (China, Vietnam)

Central Planning Failures

Even if we assume that people are super altruistic, acting through markets might still be the best way to make basic economic decisions that serve the greater good

Unparalleled ability of markets to coordinate decentralized information in real time through prices

What people most want produced, the most efficient use of productive inputs

Corruption

Centralizing economic power in the hands of an elected government gives it the means with which to be unresponsive to the electorate

If the government owns everything, and doesn't feel like leaving office, how easy will it be to get them to leave office?

Why is there money in politics anyway?

Regardless of the apparent failures of prediction does the division that Marx witnessed seem fair?

Can you think of any other historical societies that this might be compared to?

Can you think of any contemporary complaints of a similar character?

Exploitation & Oppression

What does it mean to *exploit* someone?

What does it mean to *oppress* someone?

In what sense does Marx think that the Proletarians are exploited and oppressed and that the Bourgeoisie are the exploiters and the oppressors?

Exploitation & Oppression

Benevolent Master. Mike the master owns Scott the slave in an arrangement similar to 18th-19th century U.S. chattel slavery. Mike is, however, the most benevolent of masters, and lets Scott do exactly as he pleases. Suppose we (and Scott) actually know for certain that Mike will never interfere with Scott's living as he likes. Still, Mike does own Scott and could treat him however he wants if he were so inclined.

Freeman. Scott lives his life exactly as he does in Benevolent Master, except here Mike does not own Scott. Again, Mike will never try to interfere with him. The only difference between this case and Benevolent Master is that here Mike could not treat Scott however he wanted if he were so inclined.

Does Scott have a kind of freedom in Freeman that he lacks in Benevolent Master?

Exploitation & Oppression

Prostrate Proletarian. Suppose that Ben the Bourgeois hires Peter the Proletarian to work in his factory. The hours are long and the work is hard, but Peter gets paid enough to feed his children. Peter can quit, but he has few alternatives and his children might well starve if he lost his job. Ben, on the other hand, has many alternatives to employing Peter – there are many worse of than he who would be happy to take the job.

Private Producer. Suppose that Peter owns his own widget shop. In order to keep his children fed he must work just as long and hard as he must in Prostrate Proletarian, and he has just as few alternatives to producing widgets as he has in that case. The only difference is that in this case there is no Ben on which Peter depends for his livelihood

Does Peter have a kind of freedom in Private Producer that he lacks in Prostrate Proletarian?

Exploitation & Oppression

Suppose that Will owns a well. Unexpectedly there is a drought, and all the rivers and streams in the area dry up, leaving only the water in the well. Desperate, Vickie goes to Will to buy water. Suppose Will offers to sell Vickie a single bucket of water in exchange for all of her worldly possessions.

Would this be exploitative?

Exploitation & Oppression

Suppose that Will owns a well. Unexpectedly there is a drought, and all the rivers and streams in the area dry up, leaving only the water in the well. Desperate, Vickie goes to Will to buy water. Suppose Will offers to sell Vickie a single bucket of water in exchange for all of her worldly possessions.

Would this be exploitative?

Suppose that Will (who Vickie does not otherwise want to sleep with) offers to give Vickie a large tank full of water in exchange for sleeping with him.

Would this be exploitative?

Exploitation & Oppression

What is it to oppress someone?

To unjustly coerce her or deny her freedoms to which she is entitled

In what sense are the Proletarians coerced?

Lack of genuine outside options

What is it to exploit someone?

To take advantage of a situation to get more from a situation than you would be able to otherwise

In what sense are the Proletarians exploited?

Unequal bargaining power leads to situations they would not choose otherwise.

Exploitation & Oppression

At points Marx seems willing to grant that the Proletarians are sometimes better off than they might have been otherwise

“The bourgeoisie...has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life” (Communist Manifesto, 190)

But even if the Proletarians have more opportunities than they would have had otherwise, they have less bargaining power than the Bourgeoisie

They are in a position of unequal, inferior power

Could unequal power relations be problematic even if the less powerful are well off in other respects?

Worries About Capitalism

Marx referred to the industrial economic system of Bourgeoisie and Proletarians as 'Capitalism'

Broader use: system in which productive assets are privately owned, freely exchanged, and employed in ways that seek to maximize profit

Could a capitalist system be oppressive and exploitative even if the labourers were reasonably well off materially?

Would there be any way for a capitalist system to avoid being oppressive and exploitative?

Worries About Capitalism

Marx also thought that the Bourgeoisie oppressed the Proletarians more directly, by controlling the state and depriving them of an effective voice in their governments (e.g. property requirements on voting)



Perhaps there are ways for monied interests to influence politics *even in democracies with universal suffrage*

Does this happen? How?

Worries About Capitalism

Marx also thought that the Bourgeoisie oppressed the Proletarians more directly, by controlling the state and depriving them of an effective voice in their governments (e.g. property requirements on voting)

Perhaps there are ways for monied interests to influence politics *even in democracies with universal suffrage*

Does this happen? How?

If economic inequalities translate into inequalities of political power, do we have a further reason to view economic inequalities as unjust?

Alienation & Species Being

In addition to the worries highlighted above, Marx also thought that:

1. Capitalism keeps us **alienated** from much of what's really most important in life.
2. Under capitalism [as under previous economic systems] many of our beliefs and values are **ideological**.

Work During Industrial Revolution

Massive gains in productivity via:

Increased mechanization

Increased division of labour

Fordism, Taylorism

Work became quite monotonous and tedious



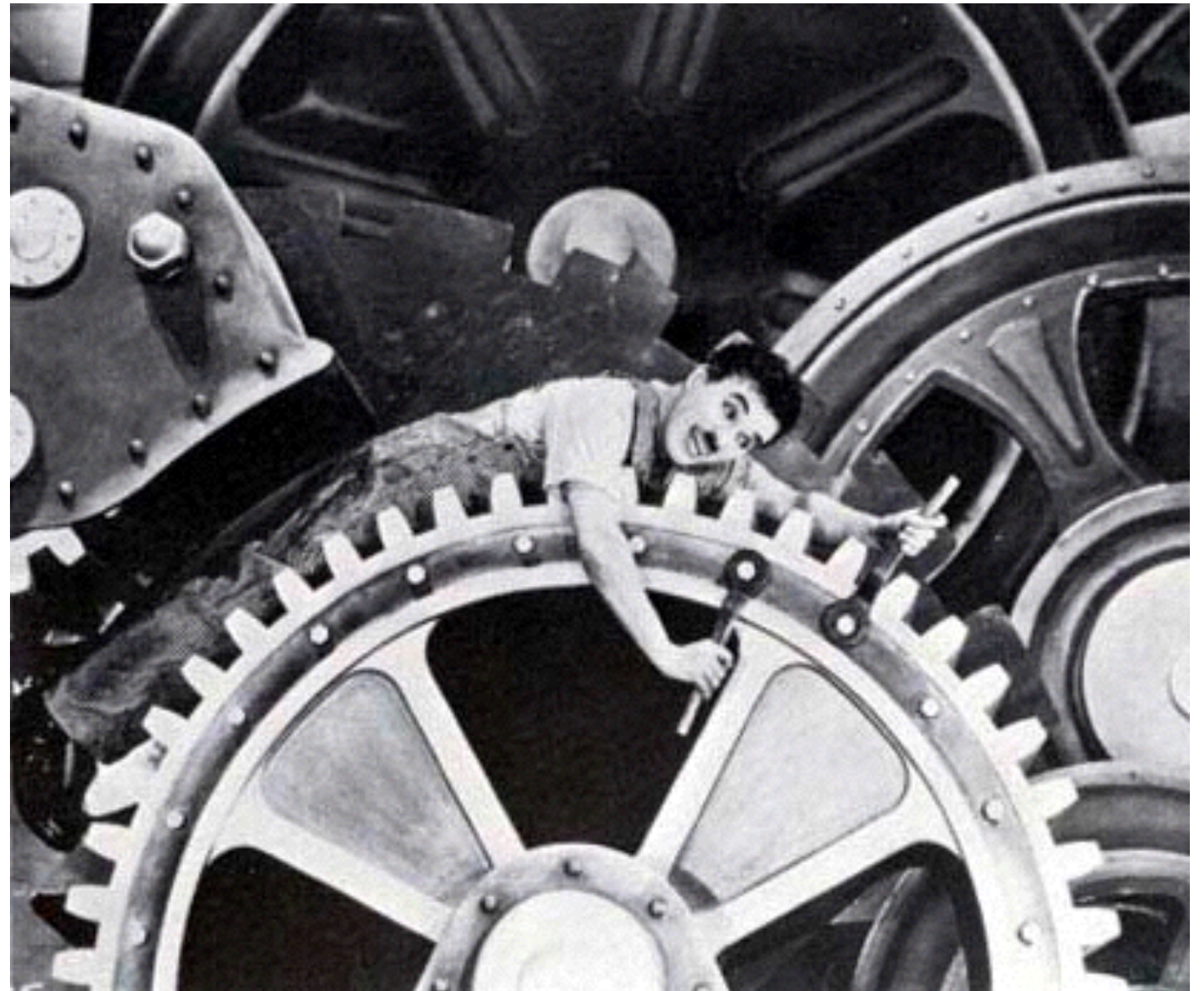
Work During Industrial Revolution



“The work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack that is required of him.”
(Communist Manifesto, 192)

Work During Industrial Revolution

“The more his product is shaped, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work, the more powerless the worker; the more intelligent the work, the duller the worker”
(Estranged Labour, 176).



Estranged [Alienated] Labour

Work under these conditions has the problematic effect of alienating a person from several of the most important things in life:

Her product

The process of production

Her “species being”

Other people

The guiding worry: much of what's most important in life is to creatively pursue worthwhile projects
But most of us aren't able to do this under capitalism

Alienation from Product



When you work for someone else in exchange for a wage, you don't get to keep what you make.

Don't have a sense of ownership of your product

Don't personally benefit from what you put into it

Don't have any say over what's done with it.

Alienation from Process

Work under capitalism is undertaken merely as a means to the end of getting paid a wage.

“The worker does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence, the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is...not voluntary but forced...It is...not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself.”

(Estranged Labour, 177)



“It's not that I'm lazy, it's that I just don't care....if I work my [butt] off and Initech ships a few extra units, I don't see another dime, so where's the motivation?... my only real motivation is not to be hassled, that, and the fear of losing my job. But you know, Bob, that will only make someone work just hard enough not to get fired”

--Peter Gibbons,
Office Space, 1999

Alienation from “Species Being”

Marx is particularly concerned about people not taking an intrinsic interest in their work

Engaging creatively in productive activities is one of the most important things for us to have in our lives

Given our species being or species nature, we're the kind of creatures that need to structure our lives around creative, intrinsically interesting work in order to flourish

Species Being

Marx isn't [plausibly] talking about species in a biological sense

Infants and some special cases of older humans don't need to be doing creative work in order to be well off

Space aliens with the same psychology as us would presumably need the same things to flourish

The basic idea: different beings are set up psychologically in such a way that they can most fully appreciate different things

Your "species being"

=

Your "natural potential" or your "most authentic" activities

Species Being - Birds

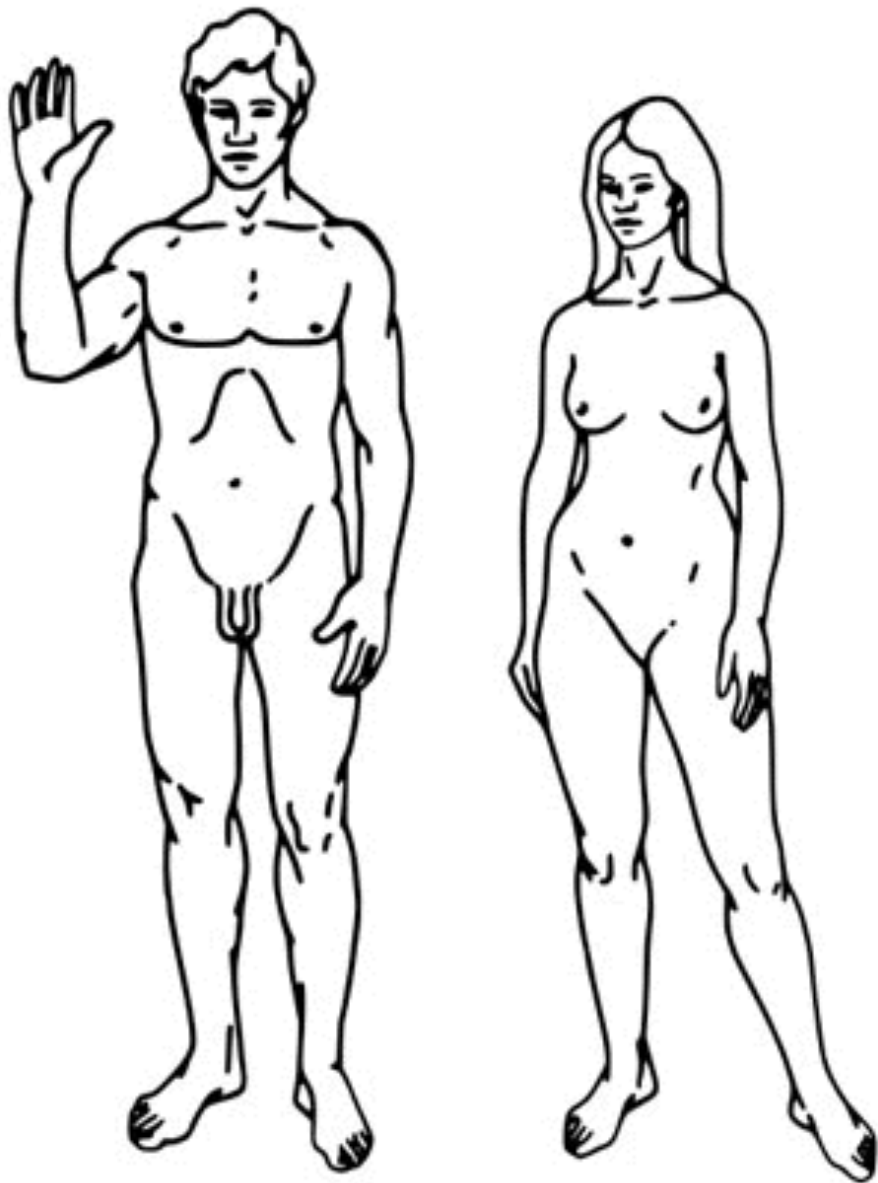
If you're a bird (or being with the mental life of a bird), you'll get most engrossed in and find most rewarding things like:

Interacting with other birds
Foraging for seeds
Exploring new territory
Building a nest

If for some reason you were unable to do these sorts of things, something important might seem to be missing from your life, and you might find yourself distressed or depressed



Species Being - Humans



Psychologically typical adult humans are set up in a way that certain things are central, authentic sources of satisfaction for them

Can you “get into” creative/challenging work/activity more than other stuff?

Is this what you’d do if it weren’t constrained by necessity, overpowered by temptation, etc.?

If Marx is right, capitalism doesn’t just deprive us of something that it would be nice to have, *it deprives us of one of the most centrally important things we can have given the way we are.*

Alienation from Other People

Marx thinks that another *part of our species being is social*

Relating to others on cooperative terms and promoting the flourishing of others

Think about the way you can get into collaborative projects and projects that help others

Marx worried that under capitalism we compete rather than cooperate and don't do work in order to benefit others



Marx on Ideology

Marx thought that many of our beliefs and desires are socially conditioned.

“Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?”
(Communist Manifesto, 208)

“In the place of old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes”
(Communist Manifesto, 189)

Ideological Attitudes

“Ideological” beliefs and values: beliefs and values that people have simply because their having them plays some economic role

Slavery and racist beliefs
Advertising and desires for products

Don't need conspiracy theories to explain the market or politics

Self-serving attitudes, wishful thinking, rationalization, conditioning
A result of individual actors

Influence of Class on Ethical Views

Marx: our moral and political beliefs are deeply influenced by our economic circumstances

“Law, morality, religion, are...so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests”
(Communist Manifesto, 197)

“Don’t wrangle with us so long as you apply...the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, etc.. Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property.”
(Communist Manifesto, 205)

Can we ever escape from ideology
or do we simply shift from one to
another?

Historical Materialism

The last “big idea” from Marx that we will look at is historical materialism. This is his explanation for how the world progresses.

It is this idea that “turns Hegel on his head”



Ideas determine economic structures

Historical Materialism

The last “big idea” from Marx that we will look at is historical materialism. This is his explanation for how the world progresses.

It is this idea that “turns Hegel on his head”

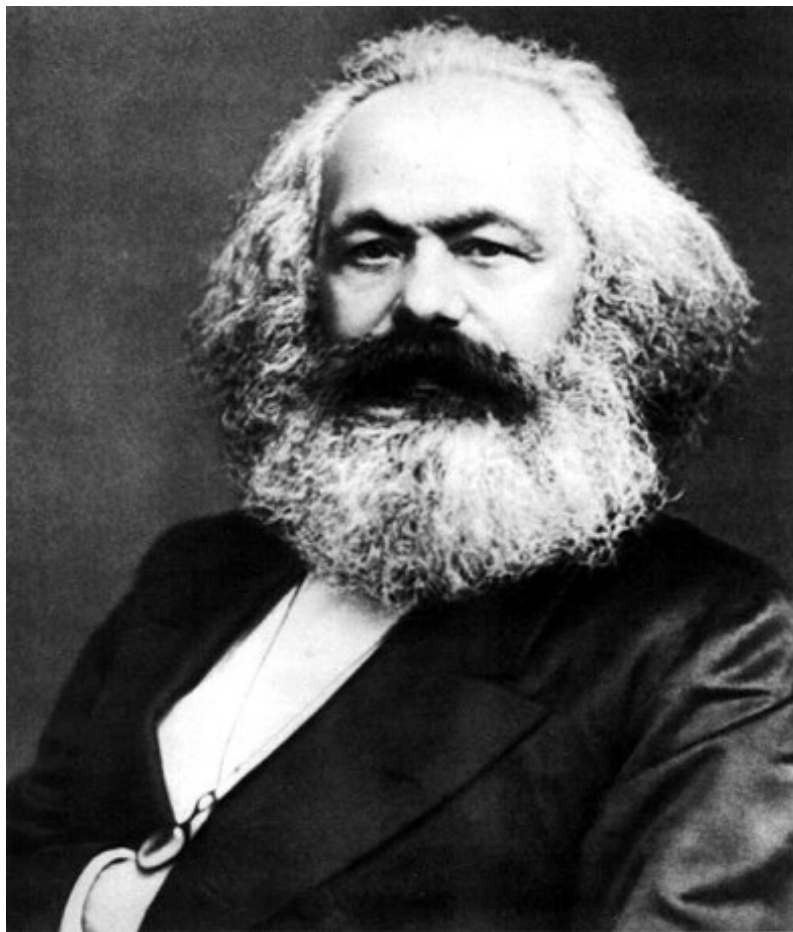


Economic structures determine ideas

Historical Materialism

The last “big idea” from Marx that we will look at is historical materialism. This is his explanation for how the world progresses.

It is this idea that “turns Hegel on his head”



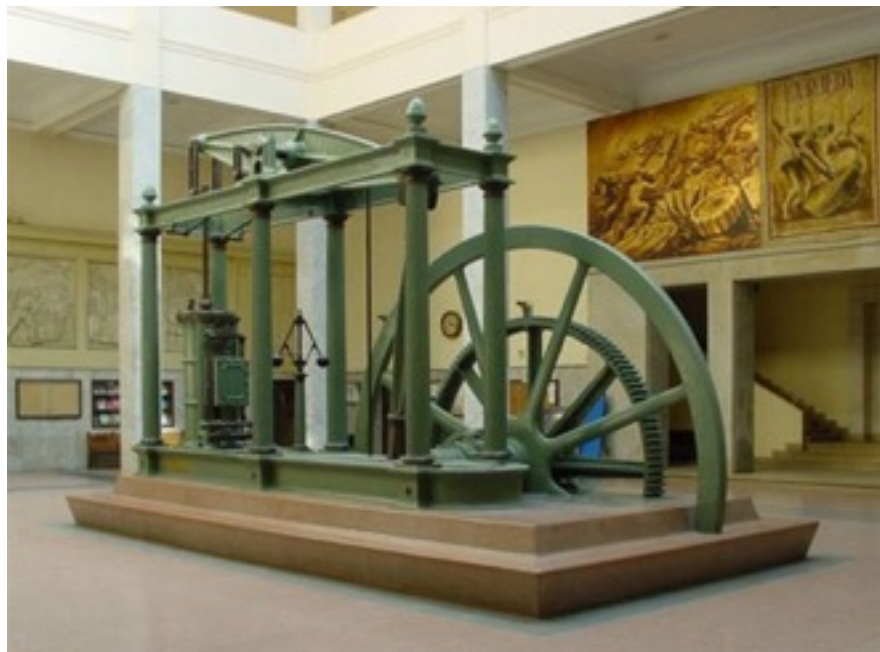
**Economic structures determine
ideas**

Productive Tech Determines Social Org



“The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist”

-- Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy (1847)



Base and Superstructure

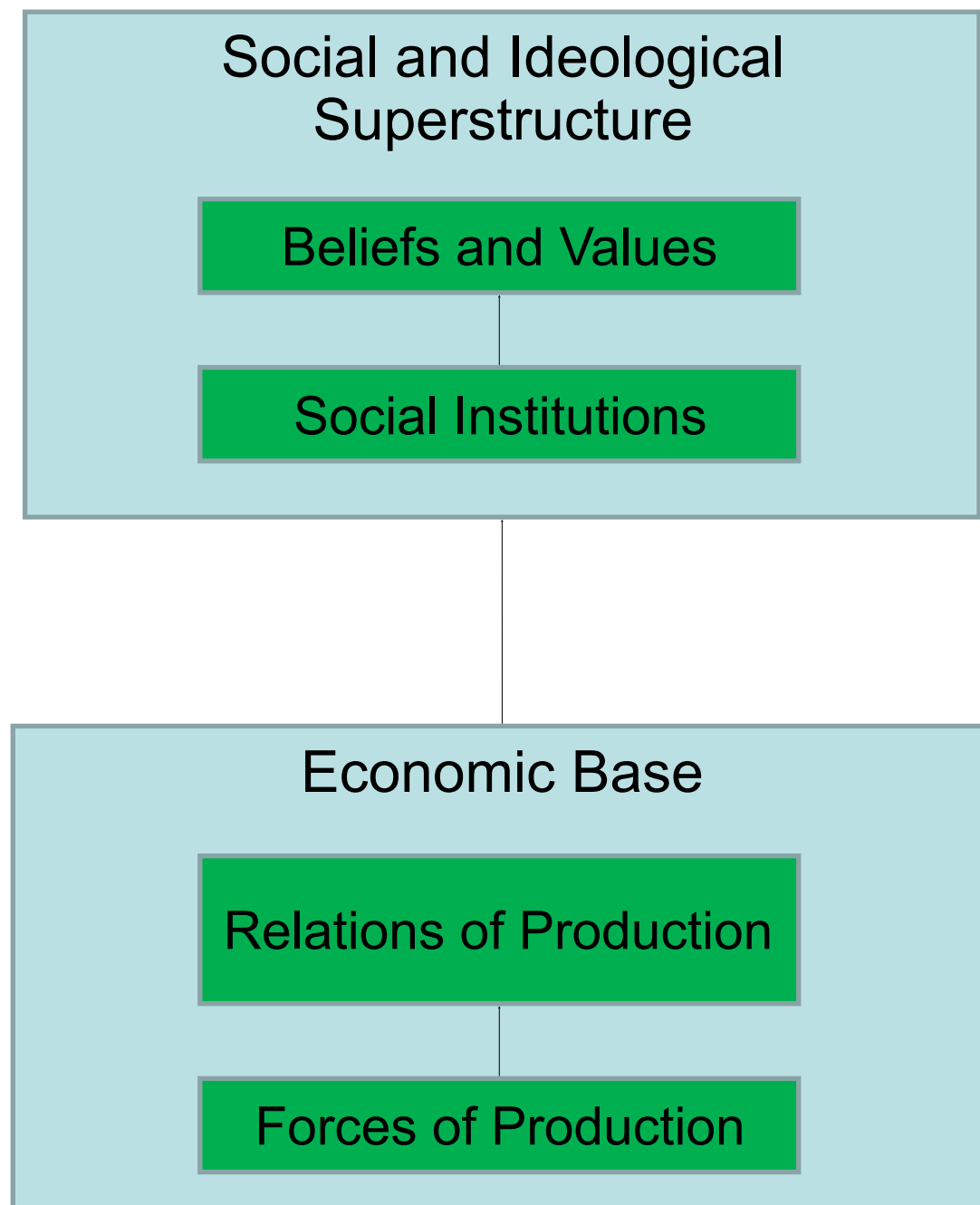
The economic system of a society determines its institutions and views

Economic Base: production technology and ownership structure (mode of production)

Social and Ideological Superstructure: government, laws, ethical and political views

1. The economic base determines who has power
2. Who has power determines what kind of social institutions they shape (to further their interests)
3. Our economic interests and social institutions shape our ethical and political views

Marx's Historical Materialism



Forces of Production:
production technology,
methods, skills, resources and
equipment

Relations of production:
who owns what and who
plays what role in producing
stuff

Take-Aways from Marx

Even if Marx was wrong that we can or should abandon markets any time soon, we might still learn valuable lessons from his work.

Unequal power relations —> exploitation, oppression

Work merely as a means to an end —> missing out on what's most important in life

Society and economic interests shape our beliefs and values —> watch out when it comes to blindly accepting those beliefs and values