The Philosophical Legacy of Karl Marx in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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ARTICLE SUMMARY

Widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the modern period, Karl Marx wrote on subjects as diverse as economics, history, and sociology. The philosophical underpinnings of his social and economic theories—particularly his theory of historical development—are apparent in his early writings and in his most famous work, The Communist Manifesto (1848), cowritten by Friedrich Engels. Despite the fact that the bulk of his mature works were devoted to an economic analysis of capitalism, the full range of Marx’s thinking exercised a profound influence on philosophers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Collectively, his writings and those cowritten with Engels form the basis of the body of thought known as Marxism.

Though he is today best known for having formulated social and economic theories that have inspired revolutionary movements and given rise to communist regimes across the globe, the intellectual roots of Karl Marx’s (1818–1883) thinking can be traced to his nineteenth-century philosophical background. The youthful Marx studied law and philosophy at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. His early writings, most of which were never published during his lifetime, emphasize social ethics and ontology. In developing his views on human nature and society, Marx was influenced by two important philosophers of the early nineteenth century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), who, like Marx, belonged to a group of Hegel’s radical disciples known as the Young or Left Hegelians. From these two philosophers, Marx borrowed ideas around which he would later construct his own multifaceted system of thought. For example, Marx relied on Hegel’s notion of the dialectic to develop his own theory of historical change.

In a similar manner, Marx’s understanding of alienation in society—a concept that was at the core of his moral argument against capitalism—was largely derived from Feuerbach’s writings on the subject. Yet despite having devoted some of his earliest writings to a critique of the leading philosophers of his day, Marx ultimately rejected philosophy as a means of fully comprehending the larger social and economic questions that preoccupied his thinking. That belief is summed up in the oft-quoted phrase: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (McLellan 2000, 173). The next phase of Marx’s thinking, therefore, represented a decisive break with his earlier philosophical training. From the late 1840s on, Marx would be concerned with elaborating what he considered to be a scientific theory of historical change, which was shaped by sociological and economic principles and grounded in an empirical foundation.

Marx’s first systematic exposition of what became known as historical materialism can be found in The Communist Manifesto (1848), a political pamphlet he cowrote with his lifelong intellectual companion and collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–1895).

Scientific Socialism

If we follow the historical timeline of socialism offered by Marx and Engels, the modern socialist movement dates from the publication of their Communist Manifesto in 1848. The term communism, which came into common usage in this same period, was often used in connection with the idea of socialism, though the former tended to have a more militant connotation. This is most likely why it was used by the group (the Communist League) that commissioned Marx and Engels to write The Communist Manifesto. As Engels later explained, the word communism carried with it the idea of common ownership, and, above all, it helped to distinguish the ideas of Marx and Engels from those of the so-called utopian socialists in that it lent itself better to association with the idea of the class struggle and with the materialistic conception of history.

The publication of The Communist Manifesto coincided with the revolutionary tide that swept through Europe between 1848 and 1849. Marx and Engels were still correcting the proofs of their soon-to-be famous pamphlet when the first barricades of the 1848 period were being erected in Paris. But while it is true that the Manifesto was issued during a period of political tumult, it did not have a profound impact on the revolutionary movements that arose at this time. Nevertheless, it was an important document, above all because it presented in outline form the theoretical basis for modern socialism.

The Manifesto’s Historical Analysis

Perhaps the boldest and most incisive argument advanced by Marx and Engels was their critique of present and past societies. According to them, society’s political and cultural arrangements (superstructure) are shaped primarily by the forces of material production (base). When the productive modes and relations have developed as far as they can within the existing framework of political and economic structures of society, the conditions arise for a thoroughgoing social revolution, a process which inevitably brings about a transmutation of these older forms into more progressive ones. In this way, societies are able to advance progressively from more primitive states (e.g., feudalism) to more sophisticated ones (e.g., capitalism).
In their discussion of the relationship between state and class, Marx and Engels identify further dimensions of their stages view of history that were to become cornerstones of scientific socialism. Because they regard the state as an essentially a class-based institution—expressing the will and exclusive interests of the dominant political and economic groups—its apparatuses are seen as essential features of the superstructure that overlays the economic base of society. Under capitalism, the authors say, the bourgeoisie seek both to expand their base—which is too narrow to accommodate the wealth created by them—and to overcome the economic crises caused by the development of productive forces beyond the point compatible with capitalism. By so doing, they begin to dig their own graves, for the scramble for new markets inevitably creates new problems that cannot possibly be resolved within the framework of the one created by the bourgeoisie. They argue that it is the ongoing and ceaseless dialectical struggle between the dominant and subordinate classes that provides the necessary dynamic for the development of social and economic development. With the advent of revolution, the control of the state and its forms passes into the hands of the new dominant class (the working classes), thus paving the way for the development of new forces of production.

The Role of the Proletariat

Another distinguishing aspect of the doctrine appearing in the Manifesto has to do with the special historical mission that Marx and Engels assign to the proletariat. Unlike previous insurgent classes, which developed their importance and strength within the preceding social order, Marx and Engels contend that the laboring class under capitalism is driven to revolt through its own increasing misery. Once they have wrested political power from the middle class, the authors believe that the proletariat will be able to establish their own hegemony, which was construed more concretely in later writings as a dictatorship. Over time, during which the material conditions are created for the construction of socialism, their class rule will give way to a classless and stateless society, communism.

As regards the relationship between communists and the working classes, Marx and Engels assert that the former were the most advanced and politically resolute segment of the proletariat in every nation, not least because they had the advantage of seeing more clearly than others the direction in which society is moving. As revolutionaries, their role was to assist the exploited workers in three ways: (1) to raise their class consciousness so that they can realize their role in history, (2) to overthrow the bourgeoisie, and (3) to establish working-class control of the state and its ruling apparatuses (i.e., to form a dictatorship).

It is important to keep in mind that the Manifesto cannot be regarded as a full exposition of Marxist doctrine. While Marx sets forth many of the basic tenets of his viewpoint in it, at that point in his career he had not worked out his complete system of thought, which was carefully developed over many years, culminating with the publication of his magnum opus, Das Kapital (Capital, first published in 1867). Nonetheless, both Marx and Engels continued to expand upon the views of the Manifesto even after most of the content that was rendered irrelevant by the course of events and the continuing relevance of this important document, then, had less to do with its predictive powers than with its potency as a clarion call for revolution. The Manifesto is full of memorable and moving phrases, none more inspirational than the closing statements: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of all Countries, Unite!” (McLellan 2000, 271).

The teleological understanding of history presented in the Manifesto was also compelling to successive generations of socialism. In their scientific critique of the bourgeois society with which they were acquainted, Marx and Engels manage to invest history with both a dramatic purpose and a desirable destination. History was, according to them, moving towards a higher goal that could only be obtained through class struggle and social revolution. It was thus the moral message embedded in their theory of historical materialism that made The Communist Manifesto a landmark publication in the history of modern socialism.

A General Theory of Marxism

The German Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch (1886–1961) has made the point that the theoretical views expressed in The Communist Manifesto “could not subsist unaltered throughout the long years of the second half of the nineteenth century” (Korsch 2012, 29). In fact, as we have already noted, Marx later developed an empirically driven general theory of Marxism that was given its fullest expression in Das Kapital. In this work, Marx set out to identify the immutable laws governing the capitalist system. It is in the theoretical part of this work that Marx introduces various economic categories that form the core of his analysis of capitalism. Of these, the notion of surplus value was perhaps the most significant. Described by Engels as Marx’s principal discovery in economics, Marx’s characterizes surplus value as the specific way exploitation occurs under capitalism. According to Marx, this phenomenon is the outcome of that part of (variable) capital represented by labor power. In the process of production, he contends, labor power undergoes an alteration of value. It both reproduces the equivalent of its own value as well as an excess or surplus value. This unpaid labor (understood by Marx as a type of commodity) is appropriated by the capitalist. Thus, the greater the worker’s productivity, the greater is the surplus value extracted in the form of profit. By laying bare the inner workings of the capitalist system in this way, Marx believed that it was possible not only to understand but also to predict the course of capitalist development. Its demise, Marx concluded, was inevitable not just because of its own structural flaws or contradictions but also because it represented a transitional phase of history that would, according to the laws of historical materialism, be superseded by another one.

Because it was intended as thoroughgoing analysis of the economic foundations of modern capitalism rather than as a breviary for social and political activism, it is hardly surprising that Das Kapital did not serve as a primer for those of Marx’s intellectual heirs who saw Marxism primarily as a revolutionary doctrine. Beginning in the 1880s, a special effort was made by Engels to popularize Marx’s theories, particularly among the growing reading public of workers. This was no easy task, for, apart from intellectuals, few people could easily grasp the meanings of his abstruse theorems and his penetrating critique of the intricate features of capitalist development.

In order to make such views more accessible, Engels set himself the task of defending Marx’s theories against his would-be critics. In Anti-Dühring (1878) and his best-selling posthumously published works, Engels attempted to expand upon the views of his lifelong collaborator by stressing that Marxism was not just a revolutionary theory but a scientific worldview that revealed the underlying complexities of society. By arguing in this way, Engels hoped not only to discredit rival views of socialism but also to demonstrate the continuing relevance of Marx’s theories. From a doctrinal point of view, Engels’s most enduring legacy to socialism, however, was his attempt to place Marxist philosophy on a scientific footing. More than Marx, Engels saw the march of socialism as an inexorable historical process that could be predicted with almost mathematical certainty by correctly reading the objective laws that governed the evolution of both the natural world and society. He therefore suggested a view of socialist development that linked it to a general process of change that could be measured and read by means of empirical investigations.

The certitude of the causal explanatory model sketched out in Engels’s writings concerned with the natural philosophy of Marxism—sometimes referred to as dialectical materialism—by his followers—appealed especially to the generation of socialists who came of age during the closing years of the nineteenth century, when positivism was at its height. Karl Kautsky (1850–1932), George Plekhanov (1857–1918), and Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924) were all indebted to Engels’s elaboration of Marxist doctrine along scientific lines. No less a testament to Engels’s impact on the future development of socialism is the fact that his particular reading of the materialist conception of history became an article of faith in all the regimes that declared themselves to be Marxist in the twentieth century.

Revisionism and Orthodoxy

The greatest challenge to Marxist theory at this time came not from without but from within the Marxian current of socialism.
Beginning in the late 1890s, a diverse group of so-called revisionist thinkers increasingly questioned the validity of a number of fundamental Marxist tenets. They particularly objected to how rigidly Marx’s doctrine was being interpreted by his followers in the Second International (1889–1914), the successor to the European-based International Workingmen’s Association (IWA, 1864–1876), or First International, in which Marx had played a decisive role. The foremost theoretical spokesman of the late-nineteenth century revisionist movement was Eduard Bernstein, who belonged to Germany’s Social Democratic Party. In a series of articles that first appeared in Die Neue Zeit (The New Times) between 1896 and 1899 and later published in the book Evolutionary Socialism (1899), Bernstein laid the foundation for a revisionist challenge to Marxist ideas that had long been regarded as sacrosanct. Above all, Bernstein’s writings were meant as a corrective to some of Marx’s basic economic suppositions—his theory of surplus value, for example—as well as some of his a priori claims, such as his prophecy that, by virtue of its inherent contradictions, the cataclysmic end of capitalism was inevitable. From his own observations of contemporary economic and political conditions, for example, Bernstein concluded that class tensions were easing rather than intensifying. Instead of becoming increasingly poorer, Bernstein asserted, workers were generally enjoying higher living standards, based on available statistics.

Bernstein’s intellectual assault on the reigning orthodoxy of Marxist thinking set in motion a series of debates and discussions within the Second International that did not die down until the onset of the World War I (1914–1918). Leading the opposition to Bernstein’s revisionism were Karl Kautsky, the foremost interpreter of the writings of Marx and Engels at this time, and Georgy Plekhanov, the principal architect of the Russian social democratic movement. Both attempted to defend what they regarded as the core principles of Marxism by contending that Bernstein had failed to grasp Marx’s basic notions about the relationship between economics and politics and that the antirevolutionary policies implied by his revisionism rendered socialism completely unnecessary. In the former case, for example, Kautsky explained that socialism would come about, not as a result of the increasing pauperization of the working classes, but as a result of sharpening class divisions, which were in his eyes unavoidable features of historical development.

In reaffirming their faith in the sacrosanct principles of Marxism, Kautsky and other orthodox thinkers hoped that they could prevent socialism from deviating from its revolutionary path. Yet despite their commitment to this understanding of socialism, the fact is that the majority of groups affiliated with the Second International at this time were already pursuing reformist policies.

**Revolutionary Marxism**

After the turn of the century, the beliefs and practices associated with Marxist doctrine underwent further major revisions within the social democratic movement inside Russia. There, the historical determinism emphasized in orthodox Marxism served as the epistemological basis of a political strategy developed by Lenin, regarded by many as the father of modern communism. Far from being innovatory on a philosophical level, Lenin’s most significant contributions to the Marxist tradition were connected to his theory of party organization and revolutionary practice. His pivotal 1902 work What Is to Be Done? (1978), for example, spells out his vision of a vanguard party comprised exclusively of professional revolutionaries who would be endowed with a revolutionary consciousness that would enable them to fulfill the revolutionary goals of the proletariat. It was this blueprint of party organization that guided Lenin and the Bolsheviks in their quest first to seize political power during the Russian Revolution (1917) and Russian Civil War (1918–1921) and then to maintain one-party rule.

Of course, Lenin was not the only theorist who attempted to reinterpret Marx’s ideas in the light of the political and economic realities of the modern era. Thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919) in Germany and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) in Russia were representative of the diverse group of Marxist intellectuals in the early twentieth century who, like Lenin, sought to develop a revolutionary theory that was consistent with Marxist principles. However, it was not until after World War I that serious progress would be made in restoring the philosophical foundations of Marxism.

**Two Marxist Innovators**

Two thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century provided valuable new perspectives on Marxism. They were the Hungarian György Lukács (1885–1971) and the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937).

**Lukács’s Return to Marx’s Roots**

Born in Budapest in 1885, Lukács became during the interwar years (1919–1939) one of the most important Marxist thinkers in Europe. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lukács was not influenced by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) or by logical positivism, the two orthodoxies that dominated the postwar intellectual circles in Austria to which he belonged. Instead, Lukács turned to another source of inspiration. In his History and Class Consciousness (1912), originally published in 1923, Lukács accomplished what had eluded many Marxists since Marx himself: he recaptured the Hegelian aspects of Marx’s thought. We have already seen how, following Marx, Engels had become the chief popularizer of Marxism in Europe. In his writings, Lukács—and Marxist philosophers like Korsch, for example—emphasized an interpretation of Marxism that was grounded in the dialectical tradition of Hegel and not in the doctrinaire and ultimately reductionist materialism that had characterized Marxist thinking since the 1890s. As we have seen, one of Engels’s greatest pupils, Lenin, understood the world in terms of dialectical materialism, a philosophy of nature that provided an all-embracing account of the universe that supplanted religion. By objecting to this sort of reasoning—for his study denied that Marxism had any bearing on natural science—Lukács was attacking the scientism implicit in the writings of both Engels and Lenin.

Another central idea developed in History and Class Consciousness was that of reification, a special type of alienation that individuals (especially workers) experienced under capitalism. Following Marx’s analysis of the fetishism of commodities in Das Kapital—in which the social relations between persons became transformed into relations between commodities—Lukács insisted that, under capitalism, the material world structured the lives of human beings in such a way that transformed them into objects. It was therefore necessary, according to Lukács, for the proletariat to overcome their alienation in modern society—which he defined as a historical loss of totality—by gaining a sense of their subjective role in the historical process. This is key, according to him, because “it is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought but the point of view of totality” (Lukács 1972, 27).

By stressing the importance of the Hegelian roots of Marxism as well as the centrality of alienation in Marx’s thinking, Lukács incurred the wrath of leading communist figures of his day. However, the importance of these themes was later confirmed during the 1930s, when the publication of Marx’s early writings on these subjects came to light for the first time. The originality of Lukács’s contributions to Marxist philosophy and to sociological theory was later acknowledged by the generation of Marxists who rose to prominence after World War II.

**Gramsci’s Reformulated Marxism**

Another Marxist theorist living around this time who made a major contribution to twentieth-century Marxist philosophy was the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Like Lukács, Gramsci grew up during the period when the dialectical materialists dominated Marxist thinking. Frustrated by this natural teleology of thought that rejected this interpretation of Marxism and instead attempted to reformulate the doctrine of historical materialism in such a way as to allow for utopia both for the influence of ideas on history and for the impact of the individual will. This emphasis on cultural and intellectual influences rather than economic ones led Gramsci to develop his highly influential notion of hegemony, a theoretical construct that purports to demonstrate how a particular social and economic system maintains its hold and retains popular support.
The term itself had already been used by Plekhanov, Lenin, and other Russian Marxists around the turn of the century to describe the role of the proletariat in what they believed to be the coming bourgeois revolution in Russia. Gramsci extended the life of the term by enlarging upon its meaning. Drawing on his experiences of the factory council movement of 1929, Gramsci broadened the concept of hegemony to include in it an analysis of the means by which ruling classes obtained the consent of the subordinate group to their own domination. In practice this meant that the worldview generated by the traditional intellectuals becomes so thoroughly diffused that it is taken as common sense by the whole of society. For this reason, Gramsci concluded, the ruling class did not have to resort to force in order to maintain their dominance. So viewed, hegemony seemed to explain why capitalism managed to survive in the bourgeois democracies of the West. For, as Gramsci explained, as long as the bourgeoisie continued to exercise its cultural hegemony, a proletarian revolution was impossible. Above all, this was because the distorting nature of the cultural forms controlled by the bourgeoisie prevented the proletariat from seeing the contradictions of capitalism and from realizing that it was possible to transform it.

The notion of hegemony is central to Gramsci’s theory of revolution. This idea links his views on so-called organic intellectuals—those who were capable of articulating the collective consciousness of the proletarian class and were in the best position to lead them in their drive to establish their hegemony—to his concept of party, which he conceived as being deeply committed to an ideological and cultural struggle in addition to its political role. It was this insight into the nature of class dominance that would later be taken up by late twentieth-century Marxist thinkers.

The Frankfurt School and Beyond

After Gramsci, Lukács, and Korsch, the next generation of major Marxian thinkers were grouped around the Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research), which was originally based in Germany. Following the rise of Naziism in the 1930s, Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969)—the most prominent members of this institute—moved to the United States. Despite representing different scholarly disciplines, ranging from aesthetics to sociology, all members of this school adopted a style of analytical thinking that they referred to as critical theory. In addition to rejecting the positivist underpinnings of Marxist doctrine, the Frankfurt intellectuals made no attempt to integrate Marxian economics into their critical viewpoints. Instead, they focused on the philosophical dimensions of Marxism, particularly the Hegelian elements that emphasized the dialectical method of analysis. But more than just concerning themselves with recovering these strands of Marxian thought, the Frankfurt school of thinkers reflected the preoccupations of the modern era in which they lived. Philosophers like Horkheimer, in common with most members of the Frankfurt School, were also interested in drawing upon the German idealistic tradition of philosophy—as represented by thinkers like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)—in their critical examination of the subjective and psychological dimensions of social life. In the latter case, the writings of both Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas (1929–) stressed the importance of psychoanalysis and other non-Marxian beliefs in achieving liberation in the postindustrial world.

This new generation of Marxist thinkers represented a distinct break from previous ones. This was true in part because they were academics and not political activists and in part because their works engaged the abstract notions embedded in Marxist philosophy, rather than seeking an empirical grounding for their theories. From the 1970s on, subsequent iterations of this ecumenical trend in Marxist thinking could be found throughout western Europe, where most leading intellectuals had broken free of the Soviet Union’s suffocating hold over Marxist ideas. The new directions in Marxist thinking allowed for a greater dialogue between intellectuals who saw themselves working in the Marxist tradition of philosophy and those who were affiliated with disciplines concerned with themes as diverse as development studies, postmodernism, and women’s liberation. Among other things, these ongoing intellectual exchanges demonstrate both the resiliency and varied nature of Marxist thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources, works cited, and further readings


Primary Sources


