

Marxism

Karl Marx (1818-1883) claimed the mantle of a “scientific socialism” and turned his political philosophy into one of the most influential movements in history. From a middle-class family, Marx studied philosophy and law in college and eventually fell in with German radicals. Working for a series of left-wing publications, Marx hailed the revolutions of 1848 as the beginning of the socialist age. Marx’s lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), was the son of a German textile owner who rebelled against his inheritance and had published *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844) to highlight the inequalities generated by capitalism. Together the two produced the famous pamphlet, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), urging the working class to unite and throw off their chains. Though the revolutions of 1848 failed, the manifesto established the outlines of Marxian socialism and a program of nationalization of property, universal suffrage, and the redistribution of property. As the collaborators worked within the newly established First International – founded in 1864 to promote a union of working-class parties – Marx labored at his masterwork of political economy, *Capital*; later finished by Engel in the 1880s. Marx and Engels wove together three diverse strands into their comprehensive critique of capitalism: German philosophy, British industrialism, and French radicalism. Marxian socialism comprises the following pillars:

Alienation of labor – In his early writings, Marx blamed the increasing division of labor (i.e., specialization) for alienating (or creating a feeling of separation) the worker from his product, his labor, himself, and his fellow man, who exploits him.

Labor theory of value – Borrowing from the British classical economists, Marx held that the value of a product equaled the amount of labor that went into producing it. Therefore, the difference between the worker’s wages and the ultimate price of the products-what the factory owner calls profit-robs the worker of his uncompensated “surplus labor.”

Dialectical materialism – Marx took Hegel’s historical notion of the clash of opposing forces as producing change (thesis → antithesis → synthesis) and applied it to clashing systems of production. Whereas Hegel emphasized a dialectic of ideas, Marx held that antagonistic material forces produced change, called economic determinism. Marxism, thus, offered a complete view of history, in keeping with German philosophy.

AP ACHIEVER

Class struggle – Each economic system is associated with a dominant class that owns the means of production. In feudalism, for example, the aristocracy owns the essential resource (land) and exercises power based on this ownership. The bourgeoisie who own capital (factories, banks, etc.) represent the most productive class in history, but their exploitation of the propertyless unskilled workers who are forced to sell their labor, the proletariat, inevitably produces the system opposing capitalism-socialism. As workers increase in number, they will develop class identity (consciousness) and eventually unite to overthrow those who oppress them.

Revolution – Marx condemned early utopian socialists and the anarchists of eastern and southern Europe for what he considered unrealistic schemes. Rule by the oppressed proletariat would only result from organization, agitation, and planning, not by separate communes and assassinations. Though Marx hoped for a worldwide movement of the working class, he believed it possible, if unlikely, that the revolution might succeed through democratic means in some nations.

Marxism exercised wide influence among all working-Class movements, both revolutionary and democratic. Even those who rejected Marx's critique of capitalism had to confront his powerful ideology of change. Many have claimed that the appeal of Marxism lies in its similarity to an organized religion, though Marx rejected religion as the "opiate of the masses." Marxism offers its adherents religious-like symbols: prophets (Marx and Engels), holy books (Marx's writings), a chosen race (proletariat), and an end of the world (history's culmination with communism, where the state "withers away"). Marxism would finally gain power in the 20th century, though some claim that these national experiments represent a distortion of Marx's doctrine, suggesting that there may be "as many Marxisms as there are Marxists."

• SKILL SET

This section distills orthodox Marxism; however, the theory has been altered and fitted to many contexts, including the most backward of the industrial powers (during the Russian Revolution) and used by anti-colonial powers to establish economic independence and promote global equality (CCOT).