

Marx

MARX

THE ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM

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Introduction

As long as there is class division and social inequality, Karl Marx will be the most relevant social thinker of the twenty-first century. Consider the opulence of Dubai. Originally a tiny port for pearl fishermen, it has become a fantasy playground for the wealthy.¹ The Palm Island project contains 2,000 villas, 40 luxury hotels and shopping malls, which are supposedly visible from the moon. The ocean bed had to be dredged to create artificial islands, which mirrored the intricate shape of a palm tree. Coincidentally, this also solved the ‘beach shortage’ problem² by creating private inlets for the super-wealthy. Another construction project, The World, was designed as a vast concrete map of the planet where individual ‘countries’ could be owned by consortia of property speculators. There is also an indoor ski resort with real snow in the middle of the desert and a special Tiger Woods Golf Course which consumes over four million gallons of water every day. The water supply for these projects came from desalination plants powered by burning gas. The demand was so high that the electrical grid, which also relied on gas, began to falter and Dubai turned to its US ally for help in building a nuclear power plant. At 145 million gallons of water a day, the rich of Dubai were so opulent that they needed a nuclear power plant just to meet their needs.

Dubai is just one extreme symbol of an uneven, class-divided world. According to UNICEF, about 26,000 children die each day in some of the poorest villages on earth.³ One of the causes of their deaths is diarrhoea, for 1.1 billion people, or one in six people in the world, do not have adequate access to water.⁴ Millions of women spend several hours every day in back-breaking toil, collecting water or finding the means to cook. Some 2.5 billion people rely on firewood, charcoal or making animal dung patties by hand to cook their meals.⁵ Despite the vast technological capacities of the twenty-first century, a quarter of humanity lives without electricity⁶ while 80 per cent lives on less than €70 a week.⁷

Marx was not the first person to write of class conflict but he was unique in suggesting that it was a driving force for how societies change. His vision directs our attention constantly to social class and this has become even more important in a world of soothing

images, which invite escapist fantasies. The magazine sections of many Sunday newspapers run features on Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's largest tower block. The reader is invited to ogle at a hotel interior decorated by Giorgio Armani or the Atmosphere restaurant located on the 122nd floor and to imagine staying in one of its bedrooms as a VIP. By contrast, the Indian peasant woman gathering cow dung by hand is rendered invisible. The names, images and short biographies of children whose lives are struck short by diarrhoea are erased from existence by a culture in pursuit of the latest tittle-tattle on celebrities.

More than 150 years ago, Marx wrote that:

It is true that labour produces wonderful things for the rich – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back into barbarous types of labour and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence – but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism.⁸

His words cut across a comforting escapism to ask: who were the builders of playgrounds like Dubai? Under what conditions did they work? How was the wealth created to fund these fantasy constructions? Answering Marx's questions means discovering, for example, that the opulence of Dubai rests on work undertaken by 600,000 workers who were recruited from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Often crammed seven to a room, in facilities located near open sewers, they live in labour camps out of sight of the wealthy. Despite claims about the new freedoms brought on by globalisation, their passports are often withheld to force them to work in blistering heat of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.⁹ However, as Marx predicted, these workers are not just victims, but also rebels and fighters. Despite threats of deportation, they have marched, rioted and gone on strike against their inhuman conditions in Dubai. Siding with, and celebrating, that resistance is also part of the vision of Marx.

Playgrounds like Dubai are only possible because the top 2 per cent of humanity hold 50 per cent of all personal wealth.¹⁰ Numbered among them is Microsoft boss Bill Gates, who owns €40 billion, and the arch-speculator Warren Buffet, who owns €37 billion.¹¹ Which begs an obvious question: what possible reason could justify one person having €40 billion of the world's resources while a quarter

of people do not even have electricity? In past centuries, people believed that huge inequalities of wealth were the result of God's design. God was supposed to have selected one family from the mass of humanity to be his representatives on earth and one of their number was given the honour of being a king or queen. Around them were formed concentric circles of nobles, courtiers, barons, knights and, somewhere in the dark periphery, the peasantry. These fables were shattered by Enlightenment writers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, who thought that society originated in a 'social contract' to which people gave their consent. In the far distant past, they suggested, people came together and agreed to give up some of their individual freedom to found a state with a monarch at its head. In other words, inequality resulted from human action rather than God's design and so could be changed again in a more enlightened age. More radical figures, such as Rousseau went further in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men* and argued that 'it is obviously contrary to the law of nature, however it may be defined ... for a handful of people to gorge themselves on superfluities, while the starving multitude lacks necessities of life.'¹²

These attacks on inequality were directed at a pre-modern society and its claims about blood and family lines. But what about modern society, where wealth arises from the normal workings of 'the market'? How do vast inequalities arise in a society where people are 'free to choose' whether to sell their labour or 'take a risk' and establish businesses? In a world where there is no compulsion to stay on the land, where people can buy and sell commodities, it is often suggested that wealth arises from initiative, innovation or simply excess human energy

Marx is the key thinker who cut through the rhetoric about market 'choice' to explain how class relations arise. He argued that behind the appearance of freedom a greater robbery is taking place than in any previous society. While a figure such as Bill Gates may see himself as a philanthropist, his ability to *be* a philanthropist rests on robbery and exploitation. The fact that no armed force is used or that no special privileges are claimed by him is irrelevant to Marx. His aim was to show how capitalist robbery arises automatically through the workings of the free market itself.

Marx's writings also resonate with a moral outrage against the system. When silk manufacturers employed children for ten hours a day, Marx coolly claimed that 'The children were quite simply slaughtered for the sake of their delicate fingers, just as horned cattle are slaughtered in southern Russia for their hides and fat.'¹³ He

denounced capital as ‘vampire like, [it] lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’¹⁴ But alongside this outrage, there is something more devastating at work – Marx aimed to provide a strategy for change.

Exposing injustices can be valuable but, strangely, it can also leave the moral critic passive or even embittered. If one believes that terrible wrongs are occurring but thinks that the majority of people simply accept them, one can easily dismiss one’s fellow men and women. The ‘brainwashed masses’, it may be suggested, do not see or want to see the injustices all around them and so have become complicit in its operation. This moralism can lead to a cynical passivity or even acceptance of the present order because one thinks that only small reforms are possible. Marx provides an important starting point for breaking out of this negative mode of thinking by showing how change is possible.

Running through his writings is a vision that capitalism contains the seeds of its own demise. It has its own self-destruct button that needs to be pushed and so an end to capitalism is a real possibility. If he is right about this claim, then the critic of capitalism may not just be engaging in moral denunciation but may, through their practical activity, contribute to changing the world. This type of criticism is, of course, revolutionary and that is why universities face a difficulty in teaching Marx.

In modern universities the student is often treated as a consumer who can peruse alternative ‘theories’. Just as one chooses between brands of washing detergent in a supermarket, the university also displays its intellectual wares. Standard summaries of ideas are made available for essay writing and the ‘brighter’ student will be encouraged to find critical points for evaluation. Armed with these intellectual goods, the student can decide between Marx’s theory of social class and Weber’s theory of stratification. They can ‘compare and contrast’ Durkheim’s theory of anomie to Marx’s theory of alienation. But the notion that one might actually act on any of these theories is tacitly discouraged. Yet Marx’s whole vision is summed up in his aphorism, ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.’¹⁵

This book therefore differs from many sociological books which cut off discussion on Marx’s ideas when it comes to revolution and the alternative to capitalism. The implicit assumption is that the student should contemplate the world through Marx’s writings rather than engaging in a debate about how to change it. This, unfortunately, helps to deprive the reader of the liberating realisation

that 'Another world is possible'. The present book is written in a language that is, hopefully, accessible to a new generation who are being radicalised by the failure of twenty-first-century capitalism. To achieve this, it avoids many of the arcane debates that have arisen among Marxists in the academy. While some genuinely help our understanding of Marx, many read like the works of medieval scholastics who have different interpretations of the Bible. *Marx and the Alternative to Capitalism* provides an introductory summary of Marx's ideas but tries to relate them to the world of contemporary capitalism. This sometimes means preserving the sense of Marx's message while drawing on examples and conflicts from the current era. While this may be unsatisfactory to those who only want to use Marx's exact words, it may nevertheless help those who are more familiar with iPods and computers than how cotton and linen is manufactured.

On the 25 November 2009, when the Muslim festival of Eid coincided with the traditional US holiday of Thanksgiving, a shocking announcement was made: Dubai World, the company behind the fantasy building project, would not pay interest to international bondholders for at least six months. This thunderbolt helped to bridge a supposed 'clash of civilisations' by uniting all who worshipped at the altar of Mammon. From New York to Riyadh, worried news presenters spoke of sharp falls on the FTSE and Nikkei indices.

A symbol, perhaps, that the arrogance of wealth was beginning to disintegrate.

1

Rebel with a Cause

Karl Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, an old city on the banks of the River Moselle. His father was a lawyer who had converted from Judaism to Protestantism in 1824 to avoid anti-Semitic laws that prevented Jews having a public career. Marx's initial love was not politics but poetry. However, as he developed as a literary critic he found that his own creations were not up to his standards.¹ In his teenage years he moved to Berlin to study philosophy, completing a doctorate on two ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Epicurus.

From an early age Marx came up against a deeply repressive society. After a rally for free speech in a nearby town, the police raided his school and removed seditious literature. Two years later, the mathematics and Hebrew teachers were arrested and charged with the crimes of 'atheism' and 'materialism'.² This repression produced in Marx a burning desire to rebel and debunk authority. His doctorate on two Greek classical philosophers might seem like a dry-as-dust subject, but Marx's opening page displayed an unusual passion.

As long as a single drop of blood pulses in her world-conquering and totally free heart, philosophy will continually shout at her opponents the cry of Epicurus: 'Impiety does not consist of destroying the gods of the crowd but rather in ascribing to the gods the ideas of the crowd'. Philosophy makes no secret of it. The proclamation of Prometheus – 'In one word, I hate all gods' – is her profession, her own slogan against all gods in heaven and earth who do not recognize man's self consciousness as the highest divinity. There shall be none other beside it.³

This sentiment was directed not just against the gods but against all those who oppressed the masses to promote their own greatness. He stuck with it for the rest of his life.

The Confederation of Germany in which Marx grew up was a loose association of 39 states, dominated by Prussia and Austria.

Its towns were tiny and bounded by walls and gates that were closed at night. Just eight years before Marx was born, serfdom – the obligation to provide free labour to aristocrats – was formally abolished but, as a concession, the aristocrats were allowed take more common land as their private property.⁴ This old imperial nobility had special privileges and sometimes their landed estates effectively amounted to states within states. In Prussia, there was no constitution and the king could rule as he pleased. The only concession to wider representation throughout Germany were provincial parliaments where seats were reserved for the Church and the aristocracy. The property qualification for voting was so high that only 70 people qualified in the duchy of Nassau.⁵ Censorship, bans on political discussion and adherence to the official religion of Christianity were the order of the day.⁶

In this extremely repressive society, philosophy was one of the few areas where there was no regulation and standing at its pinnacle was the towering figure of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who had died in 1831. In his youth, he supported the French Revolution and privately welcomed Napoleon's invasion of Germany, hoping it would bring greater liberty.⁷ By liberty he did not mean freedom for the individual against society but rather 'a recovery of society where men are free and undivided ... in which public life is a common expression of the citizens rather than being imposed by unchallengeable authorities on subjects'.⁸ This was a more radical vision than that held by other Enlightenment writers who saw society as a collection of independent, atomised individuals. The defeat of the French Revolution and the restoration of absolute monarchy in Germany formed the backdrop to Hegel's philosophy.

Although it was extremely complex, a brief summary is necessary to understand Marx's own development. The radical aspect of Hegel's outlook was that change, process and development were at the heart of human experience. These did not occur randomly and history was not a story of disparate battles, betrayals and individual foibles. With some justice, Hegel argued that things could not be seen in isolation but must be viewed in their relationships. Everything that was had to be produced – it did not appear from nowhere. The state, cultural practices, political ideas had all emerged from somewhere and were in a process of birth and eventual decay. Change, however, could only occur because of division and contradiction. There was first a unity, then a split and finally a reconciliation at a higher unity. Through these mechanisms there was a pattern in history – it was

a march towards freedom. 'The history of the world,' Hegel wrote, 'is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom'.⁹

While there was a revolutionary kernel to this outlook, the weakness of the progressive forces in Germany meant that Hegel saw history as a mystical process. Philosophy has traditionally divided on the question: What exists? For a *materialist* matter exists and all forms of consciousness must be rooted in the life process of the brain or the wider social community from which we derive language and culture.¹⁰ For an *idealist* it is Spirit (or God or Thought) that really exists and human society is but an expression of it. The most radical idealism was Plato's philosophy where men were imagined to live in caves, watching shadows on a wall that were faint traces of a higher Spirit that lay outside, shining through one of the cracks.

In his idealist outlook, Hegel was not far removed from Plato because he thought Spirit (*Geist*) was at the origin of all existence. This Spirit had become alienated from the world it created and so had to 'go through a cycle, a drama, a division in order to return to unity'.¹¹ This sounds like a retelling of the Christian story of the division between God and the world but with one important difference. Whereas in traditional religion God stood alone in the heavens in all his perfection, Hegel had the temerity to suggest that 'Without the world, God is not God'.¹² The Spirit has to make the journey back to an identity with the world and so man became 'the vehicle for *Geist's* spiritual journey'.¹³ Or to put it more scandalously, history is the autobiography of God.¹⁴

The progress of the Spirit towards the world, or in Hegel's language, self-awareness, was manifested in the unfolding of human history. Hegel had a brilliant, encyclopedic mind and drew on examples from religion, art, law and politics to show that there was a certain unity in the culture of any particular society. This unity was an expression of the journey of the Spirit at a particular stage. However, the 'mole of history' only moved through great contradictions and clashes before it could advance to a new stage. Its end point was a universal state that rose above all the divisions of civil society and offered freedom to all its citizens. The state was, for Hegel, the embodiment of reason and bestowed on man whatever value he had. Civil society was just 'society as a human herd'¹⁵ where each individual treated everyone else as a means to an end.

After Prussia's defeat by Napoleon in 1806, the monarch, Frederick William III, was forced to embark on an era of reform and appoint liberal ministers such as Baron Von Stein and Baron

Altenstein. Economic tariffs between the provinces were lifted, Jews given some civil rights and the political interests of the middle class championed.¹⁶ As part of the liberalisation, Hegel was given the post of university professor in the newly established Berlin university where he championed the reforming administration. But he went further and argued the reformed Prussian state was the final reconciliation of the Spirit with the world, the end of human history. Which is why, not surprisingly, he was proclaimed Germany's official philosopher.

This was clearly a conservative and absurd conclusion. Even before his death in 1831, the reactionary clique around Frederick William III undermined the reforms and restored the absolute monarchy. A young left Hegelian movement emerged using a radical version of the philosophy to attack the state. They focused on Hegel's method rather than his wider system because this allowed them to make connections between different aspects of culture, thinking of them as a 'totality'. So religion, philosophy and art all had a certain unity as an expression of a particular society. But each totality was made up of the unity of opposites and would undergo change through great clashes. No society would persist for more than a limited time and would eventually be surpassed as History continued its march towards freedom.

One typical Hegelian approach was to argue that ideas and social practices were not wrong but that the need for them had been surpassed. David Strauss's book *The Life of Jesus*, published in 1835, provides a good example of this. This treated the Gospels as another text and showed, through its inconsistencies, that they were an expression of the collective consciousness of early Christian communities. By ignoring the debate about whether or not the Gospels were true, Strauss's book was even more devastating because it treated them merely as a cultural expression that had been surpassed.

The radical implications of this method were particularly dangerous. If history was a journey towards Reason and Freedom, then the existing society could be criticised as falling short and all social institutions could be measured against the possibility of a society where 'the rational was real and the real was rational'.¹⁷ Viewed from this standpoint, monarchy and aristocratic privileges were soon-to-be relics that should be swept aside to speed up the march of history. Even if the older Hegel shrank from these conclusions, his Young Hegelian followers were determined to press the point home.

When Marx first began to study philosophy in Berlin in 1836, he rejected ‘the harsh, grotesque, melody’ of Hegel’s philosophy¹⁸ but later he joined the Doctors’ Club, a group of Young Hegelians who took the radical content of Hegel’s doctrine seriously. They accepted Hegel’s view of history as moving towards an ideal state but did not think that the Prussian state had reached that stage. In particular, they believed that its development had been stifled by the links between the state and the Church. The task of philosophy, they believed, was to liberate the state from religion and to promote ‘Critical Criticism’.¹⁹ By this they meant free thought in a free society.

Initially, the Young Hegelians had high hopes in Friedrich Wilhelm IV who ascended to the throne in 1840, but the new king proved to be as reactionary as the old. He suppressed the Young Hegelian journal, the *Hallische Jahrbucher*, and appointed Hegel’s arch-enemy, Friedrich Schelling, as Professor of Philosophy at Berlin, with instructions to root out the ‘dragon seed of Hegelianism’.²⁰ In 1842, Bruno Bauer, the leader of the Young Hegelians, was sacked from his academic post for promoting atheism after which Marx gave up all hope of being appointed a lecturer.

The philosophers who were driven out of the lecture halls then sought positions in the editorial offices of newspapers. Fortunately, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which had been founded by liberal businessmen in Cologne who distrusted Prussian domination, began to employ a number of the Young Hegelians. One of their number was Karl Marx and in October 1842 he became the paper’s editor. Marx’s first published article was a vociferous attack on censorship of the press and, in a sign of things to come, he also attacked the half-hearted liberals who did not wage a strong enough fight. He suggested that ‘the absence of freedom of the press makes all other freedoms illusory. One form of freedom governs another, just as one limb of the body does another.’²¹ His opposition to censorship and his contempt for the bureaucratic Prussian state turned him into an extreme democrat who despised all suggestions that the people had to be guided by their superiors. Rule by the people might bring all sorts of mistakes but Marx replied to paternalistic arguments for restricting freedom:

For [the advocate of paternalism] true education consists in keeping a person swaddled in a cradle all his life, for as soon as he learns to walk he also learns to fall, and it is only through falling that he learns to walk. But if we all remain children in swaddling