

**THE HISTORY
OF ALL HITHERTO EXISTING
SOCIETY
IS THE HISTORY OF
CLASS STRUGGLES**

KARL MARX (1818–1883)

IN CONTEXT**BRANCH****Political philosophy****APPROACH****Communism****BEFORE**

c.1513 Niccolò Machiavelli discusses class struggles in ancient Rome and Renaissance Italy in *Discourses on Livy*.

1789 The French Revolution provides the template for most 19th-century philosophical arguments about revolution.

1800s Georg Hegel develops a theory of historical change through intellectual conflict.

AFTER

1880s Friedrich Engels tries to develop Marx's theories into a fully-fledged philosophy of historical materialism.

1930s Marxism becomes the official philosophy of the Soviet Union and many other communist countries.

Can the complex history of the human species be reduced to a single formula? One of the greatest thinkers of the 19th century, Karl Marx, believed that it could. He opened the first chapter of his most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto*, with the claim that all historical change comes about as the result of an ongoing conflict between dominant (upper) and subordinate (lower) social classes, and that the roots of this conflict lie in economics.

Marx believed that he had gained a uniquely important insight into the nature of society

through the ages. Earlier approaches to history had emphasized the role of individual heroes and leaders, or stressed the role played by ideas, but Marx focused on a long succession of group conflicts, including those between ancient masters and slaves, medieval lords and serfs, and modern employers and their employees. It was conflicts between these classes, he claimed, that caused revolutionary change.

The Communist Manifesto

Marx wrote the *Manifesto* with the German philosopher Friedrich Engels, whom he had met when they were both studying academic philosophy in Germany during the late 1830s. Engels offered financial support, ideas, and superior writing skills, but Marx was acknowledged as the real genius behind their combined publications.

In their private manuscripts from the early and mid-1840s, Marx and Engels emphasized that while previous philosophers had only sought to interpret the world, the whole point of their activities was to change it. During the 1850s and 60s Marx refined his ideas in many short documents, including *The Communist Manifesto*, a pamphlet of about 40 pages.

The *Manifesto* seeks to explain the values and political plans of communism—a new belief system put forward by a small and relatively new group of radical German socialists. The *Manifesto* claims that society had simplified into two classes in direct conflict: the bourgeoisie (the capital-owning class) and the proletariat (the working class).

The word “bourgeoisie” is derived from the French word *bourgeois*, or burgher: a property-owning tradesman who had risen above the general populace to own



Intellectual debate was widespread in Germany at the time Marx was writing, though he himself believed that it was the task of philosophy not to discuss ideas, but to bring about real change.

and run his own business. Marx describes how the discovery and colonization of America, the opening of the Indian and Chinese markets, and the increase in the commodities that could be exchanged had, by the mid-19th century, led to the rapid development of commerce and industry. Craftsmen no longer produced enough goods for the growing needs of new markets, and so the manufacturing system had taken their place. As the *Manifesto* relates, “the markets kept growing, demand ever rising.”

Values of the bourgeoisie

Marx claims that the bourgeoisie, who controlled all this trade, had left no link between people other “than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’” People were once valued for who they were, but the bourgeoisie “has resolved personal worth into exchange value.” Moral, religious, and even sentimental values had been cast aside, as

See also: Niccolò Machiavelli 102-07 ■ Jean-Jacques Rousseau 154-59 ■ Adam Smith 160-63 ■ Georg Hegel 178-85 ■ Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach 189 ■ Friedrich Nietzsche 214-21

everyone—from scientists and lawyers to priests and poets—had been transformed into nothing but a paid laborer. In place of religious and political “illusions”, Marx writes, the bourgeoisie had “substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.” Charters that had once protected people’s freedom had been cast aside for one “unconscionable freedom—Free Trade.”

The only solution, according to Marx, was for all the instruments of economic production (such as land, raw materials, tools, and factories) to become common property, so that every member of society could work according to their capacities, and consume according to their needs. This was the only way to prevent the rich from living at the expense of the poor.

Dialectical change

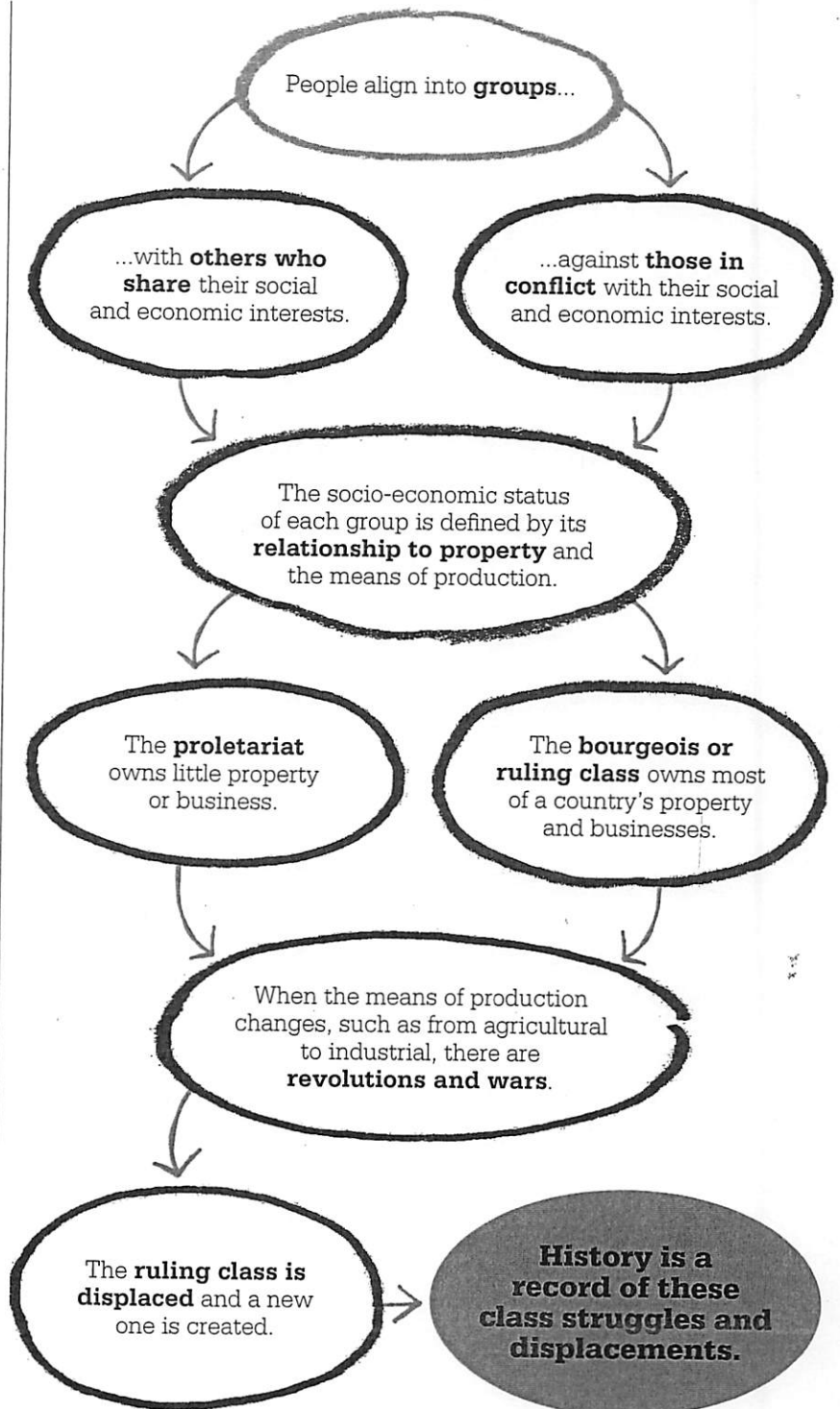
The philosophy behind Marx’s reasoning on the process of change came largely from his predecessor, Georg Hegel, who had described reality not as a state of affairs, but as a process of continual change. The change was caused, he said, by the fact that every idea or state of affairs (known as the “thesis”) »

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From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.

Karl Marx

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contains within it an internal conflict (the "antithesis") that eventually forces a change to occur, leading to a new idea or state of affairs (the "synthesis"). This process is known as the dialectic.

Hegel believed that we can never experience things in the world as they are, but only as they appear to us. For him, existence primarily consists of mind or spirit, so the journey of history, through countless cycles of the dialectic, is essentially the progress of spirit, or *Geist*, toward a state of absolute harmony. But it is here that Hegel and Marx part company. Marx insists that the process is not a journey of spiritual development, but of real historical change. Marx claims that the final, conflict-free state that lies at the end of the process is not the spiritual bliss that Hegel predicted, but the perfect society, where everyone works harmoniously toward the good of a greater whole.

The formation of classes

In earlier ages, humans had been entirely responsible for producing everything they needed—such as

clothing, food, and habitation—for themselves, but as the early societies began to form, people came to rely more on one another. This led to the form of "bargain making" described by the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, as people exchanged goods or labor. Marx agrees with Smith that this system of exchange led people to specialize in their labor, but he points out that this new specialization (or "job") had also come to define them. Whatever a person's specialization or job, be it agricultural laborer or hereditary landowner, it had come to dictate where he or she lived, what they ate, and what they wore; it also dictated with whom in society they shared interests, and with whom their interests lay in conflict. Over time, this led to the formation of distinct socio-economic classes, locked into conflict.

According to Marx, there have been four major stages in human history, which he sees as based on four different forms of property ownership: the original tribal system of common property; the



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The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

Karl Marx

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ancient communal and state system of ownership (where both slavery and private property began); the feudal or estate system of property; and the modern system of capitalist production. Each of these stages represents a different form of economic system, or "mode of production", and the transitions between them are marked in history by stormy political events, such as wars and revolutions, as one ruling class is displaced by another. *The Communist Manifesto* popularized the idea that through understanding the system of property ownership in any one society, in any particular era, we can acquire the key to understanding its social relations.

Rise of cultural institutions

Marx also believes that an analysis of the economic basis of any society allows us to see that as its system of property alters, so too do its "superstructures"—such as its politics, laws, art, religions, and

The wealthy bourgeoisie enjoyed the luxuries of life in the late 18th and 19th centuries, while the workers in their companies and on their estates endured terrible poverty.

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The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for real happiness.

Karl Marx

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philosophies. These develop to serve the interests of the ruling class, promoting its values and interests, and diverting attention away from political realities. However, even this ruling class is not, in fact, determining events or institutions. Hegel had said that every age is held in the sway of the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, and Marx agrees. But where Hegel saw the *Zeitgeist* as determined by an Absolute Spirit developing over time, Marx sees it as defined by the social and economic relations of an era. These define the ideas or “consciousness” of individuals and societies. In Marx’s view, people do not make a stamp on their era, molding it into a particular shape; the era defines the people.

Marx’s revision of Hegel’s philosophy from a journey of spirit to one of social and economic modes of production was also influenced by another German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach believed that traditional

religion is intellectually false—it is not corroborated in any way by reasoning—and that it contributes to the general sum of human misery. He claimed that people make gods in their own image from an amalgamation of humanity’s greatest virtues, and then cling to these gods and invented religions, preferring their “dreams” to the real world. People become alienated from themselves, through an unfavorable comparison of their selves to a god that they have forgotten they created.

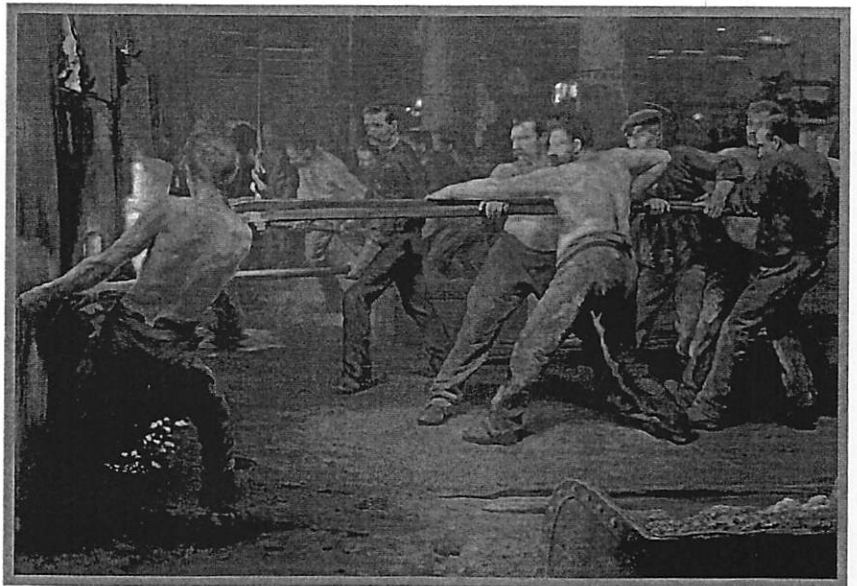
Marx agrees that people cling to religion because they long for a place in which the self is not despised or alienated, but he says that this is not due to some authoritarian god, but to material facts in their actual, daily lives. The answer for Marx lies not only in the end of religion, but in total social and political change.

A Marxist utopia

In addition to its general account of human history leading to the rise of the bourgeois and proletarian classes, *The Communist Manifesto*

makes a variety of other claims about politics, society, and economics. For example, it argues that the capitalist system is not merely exploitative, but also inherently financially unstable, leading to the recurrence of increasingly severe commercial crises, the growing poverty of the workforce, and the emergence of the proletariat as the one genuinely revolutionary class. For the first time in history, this revolutionary class would represent the vast majority of humanity.

These developments are seen as underpinned by the increasingly complex nature of the process of production. Marx predicted that as technology improved, it would lead to increasing unemployment, alienating more and more people from the means of production. This would split society in two, between the large numbers of impoverished people and the few who owned and controlled the means of production. Following the rules of the dialectic, this conflict would result in a violent revolution to establish a new, classless society. This would »



The Industrial Revolution saw the formalization of specialized skills into paid employment. People then formed into groups, or classes, made up of those with similar socio-economic status.



be the utopian, conflict-free society that marked the end of the dialectic. Marx thought this perfect society would not require government, but only administration, and this would be carried out by the leaders of the revolution: the communist "party" (by which he means those who adhered to the cause, rather than any specific organization). Within this new kind of state (which Marx called the "dictatorship of the proletariat") people would enjoy genuine democracy and social ownership of wealth. Shortly after this final change in the mode of production to a perfect society, Marx predicted, political power as it had previously been understood would come to an end, because there would be no good reason for political dissent or criminality.

Political power

Marx predicted that the outcome of the intense class struggles in Europe between the bourgeoisie

and the wage-earning working class would become evident only when the great mass of people had become property-less and were obliged to sell their labor for wages. The juxtaposition of poverty with the great wealth of the few would become increasingly obvious, he thought, and communism would become increasingly attractive.

However, Marx did not expect the opponents of communism to give up their privileges easily. In every period of history, the ruling class has enjoyed the advantage of controlling both the government and the law as a way of reinforcing their economic dominance. The modern state, he said, was actually a "committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeois class", and struggles by excluded groups to have their own interests taken into account—such as the battle to extend the right to vote—were simply short-term ways in which the more fundamental economic conflict

Socialist-inspired revolutions swept through Europe just after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. These included the February Revolution of 1848 in Paris.

found expression. Marx saw political interests and parties as merely vehicles for the economic interests of the ruling classes, which were forced to appear as though they were acting in the general interest in order to gain and maintain power.

The road to revolution

Marx's originality lies in his combination of pre-existing ideas rather than the creation of new ones. His system uses insights from German idealist philosophers, especially Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach; from French political theorists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and from British political economists, particularly Adam Smith. Socialism had become a recognized political doctrine in the first half of the 19th century, and from this Marx derives several insights about property, class, exploitation, and commercial crises.

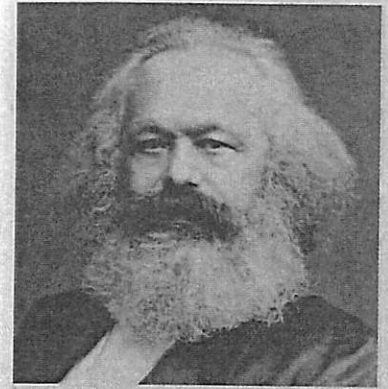
Class conflict was certainly in the air when Marx composed the *Manifesto*. It was written just before a succession of revolutions

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A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.

Karl Marx

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Karl Marx

The most famous revolutionary thinker of the 19th century was born in the German city of Trier. The son of a Jewish lawyer who had converted to Christianity, Marx studied law at Bonn University, where he met his future wife, Jenny von Westphalen. He then studied at the University of Berlin, before working as a journalist. The favor he bestowed on democracy in his writing led to censorship by the Prussian royal family, and he was forced into exile in France and Belgium. During this time he developed a unique theory of communism in collaboration with his German compatriot Friedrich Engels.

Marx returned to Germany during the 1848–49 revolutions, but after they were quashed he lived in exile in London for the rest of his life. He and his wife lived in extreme poverty, and when Marx died stateless at the age of 64, there were only 11 mourners at his funeral.

Key works

1846 *The German Ideology*
1847 *The Poverty of Philosophy*
1848 *The Communist Manifesto*
1867 *Das Kapital: Volume 1*

against the monarchies of many continental European countries broke out in 1848 and 1849. In the preceding decades, a significant number of people had migrated from the countryside to the towns in search of work, although continental Europe had not yet seen the industrial development that had taken place in Britain. A wave of discontent felt by the poor against the status quo was exploited by a variety of liberal and nationalist politicians, and revolutions rippled across Europe, although ultimately these uprisings were defeated and led to little permanent change.

However, the *Manifesto* acquired an iconic status during the 20th century, inspiring revolutions in Russia, China, and many other countries. The brilliance of Marx's theories has been proved wrong in practice: the extent of repression in Stalinist Russia, in Mao Zedong's China, and in Pol Pot's Cambodia, has widely discredited his political and historical theories.

Criticism of Marxism

Although Marx did not foresee communism being implemented in such a barbaric manner in these primarily agricultural societies, his



Marxist states of the 20th century promoted themselves as utopias. They produced a proliferation of paintings and statues glorifying the achievements of their happy, newly liberated citizens.

ideas are nevertheless still open to a variety of criticisms. First, Marx always argued for the inevitability of revolution. This was the essential part of the dialectic, but it is clearly too simplistic, as human creativity is always able to produce a variety of choices, and the dialectic fails to allow for the possibility of improvement by gradual reform.

Second, Marx tended to invest the proletariat with wholly good attributes, and to suggest that a communist society would give rise somehow to a new type of human being. He never explained how the dictatorship of this perfect proletariat would be different from earlier, brutal forms of dictatorship, nor how it would avoid the corrupting effects of power.

Third, Marx rarely discussed the possibility that new threats to liberty might emerge after a successful revolution; he assumed that poverty was the only real cause of criminality. His critics have also alleged that he did not sufficiently understand the forces of nationalism, and that he gave no proper account of the role of personal leadership in politics. In fact, the 20th-century communist movement was to produce immensely powerful personality cults in virtually every country in which communists came to power.

Lasting influence

Despite the criticism and crises that Marx's theories have provoked, his ideas have been hugely influential. As a powerful critic of commercial capitalism, and as an economic and socialist theorist, Marx is still considered relevant to politics and economics today. Many would agree with the 20th-century Russian-British philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, that the *The Communist Manifesto* is "a work of genius." ■