

Karl Marx

Is Communism the 'Riddle of History Solved?'

Key Concepts: Social Class, Communism, Alienation of Labour, Historical Materialism
Key Work: *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *Das Kapital* (1867) [with Friedrich Engels]

"Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!"

The closing lines of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx (1848)

Historical Materialism: The materialist view of history is a theory of world history in which practical human activity (production), instead of thought, plays the crucial role. Marx's theory of history is a view of human beings in a state of *alienation*. In some ways he claimed to be able to map out the future stages of history

Alienation of Labour: Work should be fulfilling, but work in a factory (for the *bourgeoisie*) makes people feel divorced/disconnected from what they produce. The worker does not like work, since it crushes his body and mind. "The worker becomes someone else's subject. His labour is no longer his own... directed by another who treats him as a mere tool of production."

Proletariat: Working-class people (when considered as a group). They are 'wage-earners' who don't own property. Instead they make a living by selling their labour (the work that they can do). A Marxist society would be run by a *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. For Marx, the Proletariat were the group that could bring about the "liberation of all humanity".

Bourgeoisie: The 'capitalist' or 'property-owning class', i.e. they own the land and the factories (*'the means of production'*). Their main concerns are the value of their property and keeping their 'capital' (wealth in whatever form) to make sure that they maintained their strong position within society (the economic system). Below this level were the '*petite bourgeoisie*' who were people like shopkeepers and small business owners.

The Industrial Revolution

Marx was writing at the height of the Industrial Revolution, at a time when there were massive changes taking place to the structure of society. Remember your 2nd year history???

There was huge movement of people from agricultural production to the cities. They had lost their traditional way of sustaining themselves and now faced terrible working conditions in the factories of industrial cities. Marx visited Manchester in the 1840s while studying economics with his collaborator (and financial backer) Friedrich Engels.

In order to help overcome the disadvantages of the working class, Marx was involved in setting up the **International Workingman's Association** in 1864, a forerunner to modern trade unions. (We'll return to that when we think about Marx's impact in the modern world.)

'Capitalism' and 'Private Property' make labour into a commodity

Workers are alienated from the things they produce, which in turn alienates them from their work, their sense of self (personal identity) and from their fellow human beings

Communism would abolish both Capitalism and Private Property, and thereby put an end to 'alienation'



Communism is the riddle of history solved...!

The 'Class' Struggle

The Class Struggle, sometimes known as 'Class Warfare', comes about because these two groups want completely opposite things.

The *Bourgeoisie* want to keep wages as low as possible to maximize their profit, but the *Proletariat* want higher wages to maximize what they get for their labour. This split in aims leads to inevitable conflict.

In modern Ireland some of this conflict has been diminished because of '*Social Partnership*', where 3 groups (Government, Employers, and Unions) reach agreements over 'pay and conditions' to help promote economic growth and avoid strike action.

Key Definition: The word 'class' has many meanings. In general, it just means any group of things that have common attributes, (class-action law suit, or 2nd class in primary school) but in a Marxist sense, it refers to 'social class'. Today, we usually think in terms of Upper Class, Middle Class, and Working Class...

Who has the power?

Is it true that, in our capitalist society, social class is an important way of categorising who has and who has not got power? (L.O. 2.6) Think about the process of “lobbying”. The business owning class regularly donate money to political parties. In return, they expect that their ‘policy priorities’ (what they want to get done) will be promoted above the needs of others. Ask yourself, how much attention do politicians pay to the homeless, refugees, or asylum seekers when they’re making political decisions. The 2010 US Supreme Court case “*Citizens United ‘vs’ Federal Election Commission*” decided that the freedom of speech clause in the constitution meant that the government couldn’t limit many types of political spending, leading a few billionaires (such as the Koch brothers on the ‘Right’ or George Soros on the ‘left’) to invest massively in political campaigns and thereby massively increase their political power. In the US, at least, it seems that the adage “Money Talks” has never been truer.

But be critical... Is this always true? Modern “**Trade Unionism**” is an excellent example of when ‘collective action’ (power ‘with’) can be used to multiply the power of people who, acting on their own, can achieve little. Think how effective mass protest marches have been in recent years... Political parties (traditionally ‘left-wing’ groups like the Labour or Socialist parties) are the way in which trade unions (like SIPTU) bring that power to bear in the ‘*corridors of power*’.

The ‘Footprint’ of Marxism

- Between the early 1950s and the late 1980s, about 40% of the world’s population lived under governments that considered themselves Marxist and used his ideas to decide what policies they should implement
- The two most dominant Communist countries during the ‘Cold War’ were the USSR and China who were **ideologically** opposed to the ‘capitalist’ West, led by the USA and Western Europe
- Today, there remains only a few vestiges of communism in the world, such as North Korea and certain aspects of Cuban life, but even these has moved away from what we would traditionally view as Marxism or Communism.
- Communism in Ireland has had many incarnations (versions). The Communist Party of Ireland (reformed in 1993) has a very small membership, and like most left-wing parties has had splits over ideological disputes
- **Marxist feminism** is feminism focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property. It highlights the need to share the burdens of ‘reproductive labour’ and payment for the ‘domestic labour’ upon which capitalism depends
- On a personal level, how did you feel when the ASTI went on strike in 2016 when fighting for equal pay scales for recently appointed teachers who had been hit by the impact of FEMPI (Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) passed during the 2008-9 financial crisis
- Even the most capitalist of companies can be brought to the bargaining table. Consider the impact of the recent Ryanair Pilot strike, and how it resulted in improved pay and conditions for its pilots.

What aspects of Marx’s work receive the most criticism? Would you agree with those criticisms?

1. Social Democrats reject the claim that socialism can only be brought about as a result of class warfare and a proletarian revolution.
2. The requirement to suppress individual rights makes it completely inimical (contrary) to our modern understanding of a ‘Liberal Democracy’. The American economist Milton Friedman argued that under socialism the absence of a ‘free market economy’ would inevitably lead to an authoritarian political regime. The experience of the USSR seems to bear this out...
3. The abolition of ‘Private Property’ fails to take into account the human tendency towards greed and competition.
4. Marx notes that ‘Capital is merely the accumulation of labour’, but blames this on the capitalist system. This also runs contrary to the ‘Matthew Principle’ from the New Testament that notes that “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer” or the Pareto Principle (the 80:20 rule), which has been observed to hold true in medicine, land ownership, computer programming, and many more areas of human creative endeavour. Marx’s insights might therefore be seen as mixing up ‘*correlation*’ with ‘*causality*’, a common problem when diagnosing a problem without all the required information...
5. The fact that he claims to take a scientific approach to the study of capitalism has been demonstrated to have many holes in the process. Instead, Karl Popper described Marx’s approach as ‘*pseudo-science*’.
6. Economists argue that most activity comes about as a result of ‘incentives’. Some critics of egalitarian (where all are equal) socialism argue that income sharing reduces individual incentives to work reducing the effectiveness of any communist state.

When will I need to refer to Marx in my exam?

Marx might fit in under any essay question that asks you to consider issues such as ‘inequality’, ‘social class’, ‘social change’, ‘collective action’, ‘the structure of society’, or even seemingly unconnected ideas such as different perspectives on Human Rights.

Marx in the Age of Globalization

Many versions of communism were viewed as transcending national boundaries, much like modern economic globalization. If life in 19th Century factories was bad, what will be the consequence of mass unemployment that is emerging due to plant automation and the impact of Artificial Intelligence. Consider the potential for the new idea of a “Universal Basic Income” as a possible solution to this looming crisis. How much more ‘alienating’ is global capitalism going to become...????

To interpret this cartoon, you'll need to realize that it illustrates 'Social Stratification' by 'Social Class' & 'Economic Inequality'

This illustration of the 'Capitalist System' will help you to get your head around the Marxist view of the world. It embodies a 'Hierarchy' of power and wealth.



At the top of the Pyramid of Power is **MONEY**, the thing that decides everything!

We Rule You.... Below that are the 'Rulers' such as the kings, prime ministers and the major land owners

We Fool You... Marx famously said of religion that it was the 'opium of the people'. This is often misinterpreted as an outright attack on religion, but Marx meant that it was understandable that people would turn to religion for consolation, given how grim and awful their lives were. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." However, instead of challenging the oppression of the world, it merely numbs the pain and therefore should be abolished...

We Shoot you... The army is seen as the 'material force' that must be defeated by the 'material force' of the proletariat. In other words, thoughts aren't enough, there must be action to spur on the revolution...

We Eat for You... When we remember that the 'capital' of the bourgeoisie is merely the accumulation of the labour of the proletariat, we realize that the bourgeoisie consume what is produced by the workers. They literally grow fat on the blood, sweat, and tears of the workers. Capitalists are often referred to as 'fat cats'.

We Work for All... We Feed all.... This framing presents the oppressed working class who provide everything for those above them, but suffer the worst conditions. Look particularly at the imagery on the bottom layer. You see factory workers in their overalls with hammers, farm labourers with shovels, child labourers, and women all bearing the load. To the left we see the iconic 'red flag' of communism/socialism. Pay particular attention to the starving child on the bottom right of the image. It's clear that this is as much of a piece of propaganda, designed to evoke anger in its readers, as it is an attempt at a scientific explanation of the class system...

Thinker's Background

- Marx was born in Trier in Germany in 1818. His father was Jewish born, but converted to Christianity two years before his birth.
- He was educated at Bonn and Berlin and was awarded his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Jena in 1841
- He was originally a follower of the philosopher Hegel (he was a *Young Hegelian*), and even in the early 1840s was still relatively liberal in his approach to social change. This was soon left behind!
- His work as an editor in radical newspapers such as the *Rheinische Zeitung* brought him to the attention of the Prussian authorities forcing him to flee to Paris, Brussels and eventually England where he settled, always due to the radical nature of his writing
- Much of his work and living expenses were funded by his friend Friedrich Engels, with whom he co-authored *Das Kapital* in 1867
- Much of his life was marred by personal tragedy (3 of his children died before the age of 8. While in London he faced persistent poverty and poor health, living for extended periods in relative isolation, unconnected to any organized political groups.
- Marx died in London in 1883 of pleurisy (bronchitis) shortly after the death of his wife.

Look up the meaning of the words highlighted in **bold** type above:

You might even be bold enough to throw in some of the original German phrases. Instead of *alienation* you might want to try *Entfremdung*. If nothing else, it'll make your writing stand out a little bit!

Personal Response

(A.) What aspects of other LC subjects might this be relevant? (In the case of Marx, you might want to think particularly in terms of economics and history, but his view on religion might be provocative)

1. Marxism was the dominant force that brought about the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917, and is key to our understanding of the 'Cold War' after WWII
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

(B.) To what aspects of your daily life might the ideas of Karl Marx be relevant?

1. How many times in your life has 'capital' money been used as a way of coercing you?
2. If you have ever felt the joy in producing something for yourself (like a piece of art, or a piece of clothing) you'll recognize how fulfilling it can be. Does this help you to understand the idea of alienation?
- 3.

Reading Tip: *The Communist Manifesto* is a pretty short book, but it can be deceptively confusing and hard to get your head around. If you do give it a go, make sure that you get a well annotated edition, or at least one that has a good introduction to try and put some of the ideas into context...

Links to other aspects of the course

List different aspects of the course to which you think Marx might be relevant. (can you list 3-4) This list will not be *definitive*, but can be added to over time...!

1. Marx sets up a way of viewing the world that profoundly influenced many thinkers that followed, even if those thinkers didn't agree with every aspect of his work...
2. Paulo Freire....
3. Andre Gunder Frank...
4. Kathleen Lynch...
5. Sean McDonagh...
6. Marx and Shiva. In 'Das Kapital Vol. 1' Marx talks about agriculture saying, "*...all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.*"

Favourite Moment: Marx's frequently visited grave in Highgate Cemetery in London is engraved on the base with the phrase "*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it*". Although he never described what a communist state would really look like, he knew that a revolution would be needed before anything else happened!

