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Karl Marx: A Failed Vision of History

Philosopher Karl Marx believed he had discovered the key to history: Capitalism would be overthrown by communism and oppressed workers would finally be free. History did not work out that way.

In the late 1700s, the [Industrial Revolution](#) began in England. Powered machines and factory time schedules replaced the natural rhythms of farm life. Men, women, and children labored at repetitive mechanical tasks, making goods that they did not own. For the first time, masses of people depended entirely on money wages to survive.

The era of [capitalism](#) was beginning. Landowners had dominated the old era. They gradually lost power. A new class of business people--merchants, bankers, and industrialists--rose to power.

During the early years of industrialization in England, workers had no say in what their wages or working conditions would be. The typical workday was 12 hours not counting meal times. Children under 10 commonly worked in the factories and coal mines.

Up to about the 1880s, worker living conditions were awful in English industrial cities such as Manchester. Entire families crowded into single-room apartments. Dirt, garbage, sewage, industrial wastes, foul air, and polluted water poisoned the environment. In the English industrial cities, 25 percent of all children under age 5 died of disease and malnutrition.

As the new industrial owners, called capitalists, gained more political power, the English Parliament repealed worker protection laws going back to the time of Queen Elizabeth I. New legislation made worker attempts to form labor unions illegal under criminal conspiracy laws.

The increasingly powerful capitalists pointed to the economic ideas of [Adam Smith](#) to support their vision of freedom. In 1776, the year the American Revolution began, Adam Smith had written *Wealth of Nations*, the first complete description of a new economic system called capitalism. Smith had called for the freedom of capitalists to operate their businesses as they saw fit with little interference from government.

A German philosopher, Karl Marx came to live in England at the peak of its Industrial Revolution. He had a far different vision than Smith. He focused on the exploited and impoverished industrial workers.

The Alienated Worker

Karl Marx was born in 1818 in a part of Germany then called [Prussia](#). As a young university student, he spent a lot of time drinking and getting into bar fights. He still managed to study hard.

Marx joined a group of students who studied the German philosopher, [Georg Hegel](#). Hegel taught that every important idea (thesis) produced another idea that was its opposite (antithesis). The resulting conflict or struggle between them resulted in an entirely new idea (synthesis). Later in his career, Marx would build on Hegel's philosophy to explain how class struggle in history leads to a final, perfect society. Hegel had been idealist. He believed ideas shaped history. Marx, however, was a materialist. He believed economics shaped history.

Marx earned his doctor's degree in philosophy at age 23. For a brief time, he wrote for a German newspaper, attacking Prussian censorship laws. He also wrote philosophical essays.

In one of them, Marx coined one of his most memorable phrases, calling "religion the opium of the people." By this he meant that religion acts like a narcotic, easing the pain of the poor and oppressed in a "heartless world." But like a narcotic, it failed to cure the oppression. Although Marx's parents were born Jews, his father converted to Christianity. Marx was indifferent about religion all of his life.

In 1843, Marx married Jenny von Westphalen, the attractive daughter of a liberal-minded aristocratic father and middle-class mother. The young couple soon moved to Paris, where Marx found work as a journalist.

Paris was a hotbed of radical thinking. Marx dived into the study of economics. He reached the conclusion that the new industrial workers labored for wages that barely kept them alive while creating enormous wealth for their capitalist employers.

In 1844, Marx wrote that the worker was alienated, or separated, from the fruits of his own labor. To correct this injustice and achieve true freedom, Marx said the workers must first overthrow the capitalist system of private property. The workers would then replace capitalism with a communist economic system, in which they would own property in common and share the wealth they produced.

While in Paris, Marx befriended [Friedrich Engels](#), also a German. Engels' father owned a share in several textile mills in Manchester, England. Although Engels worked in the family business, he soon began to publish works critical of capitalists.

Engels published a report on the dreadful conditions of the working class in England. "A horde of ragged women and children swarm about here," he wrote, "as filthy as the swine that thrive upon the garbage heaps and in the puddles."

In 1845, the French government expelled Marx for his political writings. Marx, his wife, and their year-old daughter moved to Brussels, Belgium, where Engels soon joined them.

Communist Manifesto

In Brussels, Marx and Engels joined a small radical workers' group and persuaded the members to name it the Communist League. The league then asked Marx and Engels to write a manifesto, a statement of the group's beliefs. During the winter of 1847-48, Marx did most of the writing of what became his most famous work: the *Communist Manifesto*.

"A specter is haunting Europe--the specter of Communism." This is how Marx began the *Communist Manifesto*. He went on to describe what he believed to be a scientific and economic explanation of how history had progressed in the past and would unfold in the future.

The history of society, Marx wrote, "is the history of class struggles." Marx attempted to show that throughout history one economic class always oppressed another: "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman." But eventually the downtrodden class rose up, overthrew its masters, and created an entirely new society.

Marx wrote that the industrial capitalists and others using private property to make profits made up the oppressive class of his time. Marx called this class the bourgeoisie, which used its wealth and control over government to exploit the industrial working class. Marx named this class the proletariat.

According to Marx, the value of a product is based on the labor used to manufacture it. Marx pointed out that workers' wages fell far short of the price of the products they made. This was because the capitalists made a profit on what they sold. Marx called the profit "surplus value" and thought that it exploited the workers. Marx said that capitalists had alienated the worker from the results of his labor, forcing him to become "enslaved by the machine." This exploitation, argued Marx, would soon bring about a new class struggle that would end with the "violent overthrow" of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat.

Marx described communists as those who best understood the class struggle. They would unify the proletariat, lead it in the revolution, and take control of the government.

During what Marx called the "socialist phase" of the revolution, the new proletarian government would confiscate all capitalist private property like factories, mines, farms, and other businesses. The government would then operate these enterprises for the benefit of the workers.

When the proletariat finally controlled economic production, Marx declared that all classes would disappear and class struggles would end. In this "communist phase," there would no longer be a need for a government.

Marx expected that the proletarian revolution would soon occur in Germany or England and then take place worldwide. He ended the *Communist Manifesto* with these rousing words:

Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of the world unite!

A New Home in England

By the time Marx published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, worker uprisings had broken out in Germany and several other European countries. Marx and Engels moved to Germany where they wrote articles, attacking the government. By 1849, however, the European governments had crushed all the revolts. Marx concluded that the revolts had been premature.

Expelled from Belgium and again from France, Marx took his wife and family to London, which remained his home for the rest of his life. In London, he gave lectures and wrote articles for newspapers (including Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*). But he never held a steady job.

Harassed constantly by creditors and threatened with eviction, Marx appealed to Engels for financial support. Engels, who was working for his father's textile firm in Manchester, responded generously.

With help from Engels and some timely family inheritances, Marx supported his growing family. Marx adored his children and loved to make up stories to tell them. He was devastated when three of them died within a few years of one another, leaving three surviving daughters.

In between firing off numerous essays critical of other European radicals, Marx spent his time in the British Museum researching capitalism. In 1867, after many delays, distractions, and health problems, Marx finally published the first volume of *Capital*, a major analysis of capitalism and his most important work.

In *Capital*, Marx pointed out numerous contributions that capitalism had made to economic progress, especially in the area of technology. But he wrote that capitalism was doomed. He predicted that as capitalism developed, a small number of powerful monopolies would drive many enterprises out of business. To successfully compete against one another, these "cut throat" monopolies would reduce worker wages. Finally, a class struggle between the workers and the capitalists would bring on a revolution, replacing capitalism with communism.

Marx was quite vague in his description of society after the revolution. In an 1875 essay, he described the government during the "socialist phase" as "the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat." But he stated that this dictatorship would act in the best interests of the workers and would gradually disappear.

Marx also expected that once the proletariat had taken control of all capitalist property, wealth would flow more abundantly for the benefit of all. Then in the "higher phase of communist society," individuals would finally be free to develop their abilities and talents

to the fullest. Marx put it this way: "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

In 1882, Marx published his last writing, a short preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. Russia was mainly a rural peasant society with little industrial development. Thus, Marx had ignored it as lagging far behind in the march toward revolution. He now, however, admitted that the Russian peasants were at "the starting-point for a communist development."

Karl Marx died in London on March 14, 1883. Only 11 people showed up at the funeral. His lifelong friend and benefactor, Friedrich Engels, spoke at his graveside. Engels predicted that Marx's "name and work will endure through the ages." After Marx's death, Engels assembled Marx's notes and published volumes two and three of *Capital*.

"Everything Should Be Doubted"

Karl Marx is an important figure in philosophy, sociology, economics, and history. Marx developed a detailed explanation of the entire course of human events. For example, his theory of class struggle attempts to explain why and how human history develops. Marx also produced many insights as to how groups of people behave, how capitalism operates, and how technology sometimes has negative effects on workers.

But the proletarian revolution that Marx expected never happened in any advanced industrialized country. Contrary to Marx's predictions, economic conditions gradually improved for most workers in capitalist societies.

Marx also failed to anticipate major reforms like the expansion of the right to vote, laws abolishing child labor, social security, and the right of workers to join unions. Workers in capitalist countries seemed more interested in improving their wages and working conditions than joining a revolution.

Of course, a communist revolution did occur in Russia in 1917. Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the new Soviet Union, concentrated all power in the Communist Party. After Lenin, Joseph Stalin used violence and starvation to end private ownership of agricultural land, causing the death of millions of peasants. The Communist Party became a privileged ruling class, relying on force to stay permanently in control.

Karl Marx had a vision of a new just society based on economic plenty shared by all. Marx believed that in such a society individuals would achieve true freedom. But when the revolution finally came in Russia and later on in other countries, Marx's vision of freedom turned into tyranny.

Probably the greatest flaw in Marx's vision was his certainty that economic forces controlled history and flowed in only one inevitable direction. Perhaps he should have taken to heart his favorite motto: "Everything should be doubted."

For Discussion and Writing

1. Do you think Marx would have approved of communism in the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin? Explain.
2. Do you think it likely that a revolution as Marx described it could ever take place in the United States? Explain.
3. Which one of these forces do you think is influencing events the most in the world today: economics, nationalism, race and ethnicity, religion, or technology? Give reasons for your choice.

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Encyclopedias

[Wikipedia](#)

[Marx](#)

[Hegel](#)

[Engels](#)

[Historical Materialism](#)

[Capitalism](#)

[Columbia Encyclopedia](#)

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[The History Guide](#)

[Karl Marx](#)

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[Dead Sociologists' Index: Karl Marx](#)

[Free Online Dictionary of Philosophy: Karl Marx](#)

[Jewish Virtual Library: Karl Marx](#)

[Informal Education: Karl Marx](#)

[Victorian Web: Karl Marx](#)

[InDepthInfo: Karl Marx](#)

[Philosophy Pages: Karl Marx](#)

[Lucidcafe: Karl Marx](#)

[By his daughter Eleanor Marx](#)

Directories

[Bjorn's Guide to Philosophy: Marx](#) Many links.

[Google Directory: Marx, Karl](#)

[Yahoo Directory: Karl Marx](#)

[Open Directory Project: Karl Marx](#)

Hegel

[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#) Short biography.

[G.W.F. Hegel \(1770-1831\) Social and Political Thought](#) From the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

[Hegel Society of America: Links](#)

[Hegel.net](#)

[Hegel and Marx](#) A short examination of the two philosophers. By Duncan Richter, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology and Philosophy, Virginia Military Institute.

Writings and Analyses

[Marx & Engels Internet Archive](#) Collected works, biography, and photographs.

[Marx and Engel's Writings](#)

[Great Books Index: Karl Marx](#) Complete text of *Capital* and *Communist Manifesto*.

[Classic Notes: Karl Marx](#) Biography and summary of *Communist Manifesto*.

[Study Guide for the Communist Manifesto](#) From Paul Brians, Department of English, Washington State University, Pullman.

[Spark Notes](#)

[Das Kapital](#)

[Communist Manifesto](#)

[Marx's Masterpiece at 150](#) A 1998 review of the *Communist Manifesto*. From New York Times Book Review.

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[Ghost of Karl Marx Still Speaks to Some](#) From Newsday.

Books

[*Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work \(1927\)*](#) An online book by David Riazanov.

[*Karl Marx: The Story of His Life \(1918\)*](#) An online book by Franz Mehring.

[*Marxism 1844-1990, Origins, Betrayal, Rebirth*](#) by Roger S. Gottlieb.

[*Karl Marx, A Life*](#). By Francis Wheen.

[Review by *New York Times*](#).