

## 24. The Works of Karl Marx

**K**ARL MARX was a humanist. It is easy to forget this truth when the focus has been on his economic and political ideas and their revolutionary impact on large parts of the world. But Marx was first and foremost a humanist, not only because he rejected religion but also because he wanted to see it replaced with a more humane alternative.

He was born on 5th May 1818 in the city of Trier in the Prussian Rhineland into a wealthy middle class family. His father, a lawyer with rational Enlightenment views, was nominally Jewish but converted to Protestantism in 1824 in order to avoid the effects of antisemitic legislation. His father clearly played a part in Marx's rejection of religion early in his youth. His atheism was sealed when he studied philosophy at Bonn and later Berlin, where he came under the influence of the philosophy of Hegel, who had been Professor of Philosophy and then Rector at the University until his death in 1831.

Hegel was an idealist in that he believed concepts and ideas are fundamental to the world and material things are expressions of ideas. In particular, there is an underlying 'universal spirit' or 'absolute idea'. Marx joined a group known as the Young or Left Hegelians, who in the decade or so after Hegel's death were not only disciples but also critics of the philosopher. Hegel believed in what he called freedom and reason and also thought that they had reached their embodiment in the Prussian state. The Right Hegelians followed their master in believing that the dialectic of history had indeed come to an end. The Young Hegelians also believed that freedom and reason can and should exist in the world, but they rejected any suggestion that they had come to fruition. And, although they agreed that the division between mind and matter is a fundamental question, they argued that matter is basic and that ideas are expressions of material circumstances.

They also rejected Hegel's view that philosophy and religion go hand in hand: that religion represents the truths of philosophy in immediate form. For them, the central task of philosophy is the critique of religion. As Marx wrote in his doctoral dissertation, the struggle is "against the gods of heaven and earth who do not recognise man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity".

He was also influenced by another Young Hegelian Ludwig von Feuerbach, whose major work was *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Feuerbach argues that God is a human invention in which we take all our best qualities and project them onto God as an ideal model. Inevitably, however, we fall short of this impossible standard and so, rather than being life-affirming, religion alienates human beings from themselves by reinforcing a negative image. Feuerbach's alienation is spiritual, whereas Marx believed it was basically economic. The projection results from an unjust, inhuman society. Poverty prevents most people from finding true happiness in this life, but religion tells them to accept their lot because they will find true happiness in the next.



Marx developed his ideas more fully in a manuscript written in 1843, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which remained unpublished during his lifetime. In it, he declares that "the criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism". It also contains his famous assertion that "religion is the opium of the people". Here is a fuller extract:

*"The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce*

*religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.*

*"Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. 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.*

*"The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo".*

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Marx is asserting that an understanding of religion should go in conjunction with an understanding of the social conditions that give rise to it. Religion is the symptom of more fundamental and oppressive realities, not the disease. It is created as an escape from life's miseries. In describing it as the heart of a heartless world, he is implicitly suggesting that the study of religion is not a mere philosophical exercise but the first step in giving the world a new heart. As he put it in his unpublished *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in the words engraved on his tombstone in Highgate Cemetery: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it".

That required, first of all, an analysis of the nature of the heartless world in which most people lived. Its main

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characteristic after the early stage, according to Marx, was a class struggle between the rulers and the ruled. These ideas were discussed in later works, especially *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), co-written with Frederick Engels, and *Kas Kapital* (1867-1894). In Europe he identified six basic stages. The first was primitive communism in which all was shared by the tribe to ensure its survival. The second stage was slave society, in which the idea of class appeared and the major division was between the slave-owning ruling class and the slaves themselves. The slave society eventually collapsed because of the need to build up empires and capture more and slaves to do most of the work. In the third, feudal, stage, corresponding to the Dark and Middle Ages, land was the basis of wealth and power, and the ruling class was the aristocracy at the peak of which were monarchs and lords, while the serfs at the bottom of the pyramid were little more than slaves.

Eventually trade with other states threw up merchants from whom a new capitalist class emerged. They were driven by profit but held back by the feudal system where the serfs were tied to the land. The result was an epoch of revolution in which capitalism succeeded as the fourth stage, the epoch in which Marx lived. Workers in factories now work for wages, but they are not paid the full value of their labour. The surplus value is instead appropriated by the owners as profit. As the drive for profit increases, wages are driven down, the rich get richer and the poor poorer, until eventually the workers will rise up in revolution and overthrow the capitalist system, thus inaugurating the fifth stage, socialism. Here the means of production are controlled by the democratic rule of the workers – the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. This was a transitional period before the final stage of communism in which classes are abolished, there is common ownership of resources, and the state has ‘withered away’. As he suggested in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), the principle is: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

Marx was therefore following Hegel in believing in a dialectic or conflict view of history and in thinking there was an endpoint, after which there would be no more fundamental change. But he utterly rejected Hegel’s notion that reality was the embodiment of the Idea; instead, ideas are determined by the character of economic life. He also argued that he was no Utopian but a scientific socialist who had discovered the laws of history. Of course, we have the history of the world since Marx by which to judge his predictions. It was not inevitable that capitalism would give rise to socialism. Indeed, it was nascent capitalist countries like Russia and China that became socialist, not the mature capitalist societies. Nor did they necessarily herald a ‘fairer’ society. Far from the state ‘withering away’, it grew stronger and the result was militarised elites enforcing a new authoritarian form of feudalism on the people, the opposite of what Marx predicted. There is a quip attributed to JK Galbraith and others that under capitalism man exploits man, whereas under communism it is the other way round.

As for capitalism collapsing under the weight of its internal contradictions, it still endures, even if at times it seems to be on life support. Yet none of this implies that

Marx’s analysis was worthless. After the Great Depression capitalism was greatly modified by extensive state intervention and many western countries became essentially mixed economies in which the state and the market shared ownership and control of resources. In the last 30 years, however, there has been a marked reversion to an unregulated capitalist system. But again it has proved to be inherently unstable and crisis-ridden, as the recession since 2008 has indicated. Resources are more unequally distributed than ever and the ecology of planet earth is threatened by human greed. Few are fooled by the British government’s mantra that “we’re all in this together”.

One of the reasons for instability is the paradox of capitalism, namely that each employer wants to pay his workers as little as possible to reduce costs and increase profits, but he wants other employers to pay workers more, because if all employers do what he does, then wages fall, general spending collapses and goods remain unsold, so that profits also fall. In the face of this paradox, large multinationals are relying more and more on overworked, underpaid foreign labour in Asia and China, and there is a curious irony today in the dependence of global capitalism on the Chinese Communist party that provides foreign companies with cheap labour to lower prices and deprive workers of their rights.

The collapse of Soviet-style communism led to the frequent claim that Marxism was dead and buried but, on the contrary, it is still very relevant today. Arguably, it is

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now liberated from its association with totalitarian regimes and Stalinist gulags and can rethink its role in a more liberal and ‘humanistic’ form. For Marx was essentially right in demonstrating that some are more free than others. In our world there is widespread exploitation by the few, and the

many whom they exploit are not really ‘free’. Are the starving and the sick ‘free’ in any meaningful sense? Freedom from poverty, freedom from ignorance, freedom from discrimination and freedom to work are arguably as important as freedom of speech and freedom to make money. To paraphrase Francis Bacon, freedom and money, like muck, are not good unless they are well spread. In a real sense, freedom only has coherence if there is at least a fairly equal share of it.

The implication is the continuing relevance of socialism, whose core is, as Marx realised, a vision of human beings as social creatures united by a common humanity and a desire to co-operate and live at peace with their neighbours. But Marx also believed in freedom, and any modern enlightened political system must try to reconcile the two basic concepts of liberty and equality. Too much individual freedom leads to the law of the jungle and the denial of freedom to the least powerful; too much equality leads to the destruction of individual freedom.

The balance between freedom and equality, between liberalism and socialism, between the collective and the individual, is the main political question of humankind for now and the future. Even if Marx was wrong in his predictions, he was right in his diagnosis of the illusory nature of religion and its use in upholding exploitative capitalism. He was right too in seeing that we need a fairer and more just system. For these reasons he is one of history’s most important humanists.

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