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The Significance and Shortcomings of Karl Marx

Abstract

In this essay I explain both why Karl Marx remains an important thinker and why he is in some respects inadequate. I focus on the central issue of 'materialism vs. idealism,' and briefly explore ways in which contemporary intellectuals still haven't assimilated the insights of historical materialism. In the last section of the paper I examine the greatest weakness of Marxism, its theory of proletarian revolution, and propose an alternative conceptualization that both updates the theory for the twenty-first century and is more faithful to historical materialism than Marx's own conception was.

Keywords

Karl Marx, Marxism, socialism

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I often have occasion to think that, as an “intellectual,” I’m very lucky to be alive at this time in history, at the end of the long evolution from Herodotus and the pre-Socratic philosophers to Chomsky and modern science. One reason for my gratitude is simply that, as I wrote long ago in a moment of youthful idealism, “the past is a kaleidoscope of cultural achievements, or rather a cornucopian buffet whose fruits I can sample—a kiwi here, a mango there—a few papayas—and then choose which are my favorite delicacies—which are healthiest, which savory and sweet—and invent my own diet tailored to my needs. History can be appropriated by each person as he chooses,” I gushed, “selectively employed in the service of his self-creation. The individual can be more complete than ever in the past!” But while this Goethean ideal of enlightened self-cultivation is important, perhaps an even greater advantage of living so late in history is that, if one has an open and critical mind, it is possible to have a far more sophisticated and correct understanding of the world than before. Intellectual history is littered with egregious errors, myths and lies that have beguiled billions of minds. Two centuries after the Enlightenment, however, the spirit of rationalism and science has achieved so many victories that countless millions have been freed from the ignorance and superstition of the past.

Few thinkers deserve more credit for the liberation of the human mind than Karl Marx. Aside from the heroes of the Scientific Revolution—Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, a few others—and their philosophical ‘translators’—Francis Bacon, [Spinoza](#), Voltaire, Diderot, David Hume—hardly any come close. But not only did Marx contribute to our intellectual liberation; he also, of course, made immense contributions to the struggle for liberation from oppressive power-structures (a struggle that, indeed, is a key component of the effort to free our minds). These two major achievements amply justify the outpouring of articles on the bicentennial of his birth, and in fact, I think, call for yet another one, to consider in more depth both his significance and his shortcomings.

My focus in this article is going to be on his ideas, not on his life or his activism. He was certainly an inspiration in the latter respect, but it is his writings that are timeless. The fanatical and violent hatred they’ve always elicited from the enemies of human progress, the spokesmen of a [power-loving, money-worshipping misanthropy](#), is the most eloquent proof of their value.

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The central reason for Marx’s importance and fame is, of course, that he gave us the most sophisticated elaboration of the most fundamental concept in social analysis: class.

He was far from the only thinker to emphasize class. One might even say that the primary of class verges on common sense (despite what postmodernists think—on whom, see below). In his *Politics*, Aristotle already interpreted society according to the divergent interests of the poor and the rich. The semi-conservative James Madison, like other Enlightenment figures, agreed, as is clear from his famous *Federalist No. 10*:

[T]he most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors,

and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes actuated by different sentiments and views.

Could anything be more obvious than this proto-historical materialism?

But Marx was unique in systematically expounding this materialism and grounding it in rigorous analysis of production relations—the concept of which he practically invented, or at least self-consciously elevated to a determining status and analyzed with exhaustive thoroughness. As everyone passingly familiar with Marxism knows, such notions as exploitation, surplus, surplus-value, and class struggle acquired a quasi-scientific—which is to say exact and precisely explanatory—character in the context of Marx’s investigation of production relations, in particular those of capitalism.

Given that historical materialism is often ridiculed and rejected, it isn’t out of place here to give a simplified account of its basic premises, an account that shows how uncontroversial these premises ought to be. This is especially desirable in a time when even [self-styled Marxists](#) feel compelled, due to the cultural sway held by feminism and identity politics, to deny that class has priority over other variables such as gender, sexuality, and race.

The explanatory (and therefore *strategic*, for revolutionaries) primacy of class can be established on simple *a priori* grounds, quite apart from empirical sociological or historical analysis. One has only to reflect that access to resources—money, capital, technology—is of unique importance to life, being key to survival, to a high quality of life, to political power, to social and cultural influence; and access to (or control over) resources is determined ultimately by class position, one’s position in the social relations of production. The owner of the means of production, i.e., the capitalist, has control over more resources than the person who owns only his labor-power, which means he is better able to influence the political process (for example by bribing politicians) and to propagate ideas and values that legitimate his dominant position and justify the subordination of others. These two broad categories of owners and workers have opposing interests, most obviously in the inverse relation between wages and profits. This antagonism of interests is the “class struggle,” a struggle that need not always be explicit or conscious but is constantly present on an implicit level, indeed is constitutive of the relationship between capitalist and worker. The class struggle—that is, the structure and functioning of economic institutions—can be called the foundation of society, the dynamic around which society tends to revolve, because, again, it is through class that institutions and actors acquire the means to influence social life.

These simple, commonsense reflections suffice to establish the meaning and validity of Marx’s infamous, “simplistic,” “reductionist” contrast between the economic “base” and the political, cultural, and ideological “superstructure.” Maybe his language here was misleading and metaphorical. He was only sketching his historical materialism in a short preface, the [Preface](#) to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and could hardly have foreseen that generations of academics would later pore over his words, pick at them, cavil at them, fling casuistries at each other until a vast scholarly literature had been produced debating Marxian

“economic determinism.” As if the relative primacy of economic institutions—which is to say relations of production, class structures—that are, by definition, directly involved in the accumulation and distribution of material resources and thus power, isn’t anything but a truism, and can be seen as such on the basis of [such elementary reasoning](#) as in the preceding paragraph.

The *Communist Manifesto*’s epoch-making claim, therefore, that the history of all complex societies has been the history of class struggle is *not* ridiculous or oversimplifying, contrary to what has been claimed a thousand times in scholarship and the popular press; it is, broadly speaking, accurate, if “class struggle” is understood to mean not only explicit conflict between classes (and class-subgroups; see the above quotation from Madison) but also the implicit antagonism of interests between classes, which constitutes the structure of economic institutions. Particular class structures/dynamics, together with the level of development of productive forces they determine and are expressed through, provide the basic institutional context around which a given politics and culture are fleshed out.¹

Thus, to argue, as feminists, queer theorists, and confused Marxists like [Peter Frase](#) are wont to, that class is of no special significance compared to group identities like gender and race is quite mistaken. Neither feminism nor anti-racist activism targets such institutional structures as the relation between capitalist and worker; or, to the extent that these movements do, they become class-oriented and lose their character as strictly feminist or anti-racist. If you want a society of economic democracy, in which economic exploitation, “income inequality,” mass poverty, imperialism, militarism, ecological destruction, and privatization of resources are done away with, the goal of your activism has to be to abolish capitalist institutions—the omnipotence of the profit motive, the dictatorial control of capitalist over worker—and not simply misogyny or vicious treatment of minorities. These issues are important, but only *anti-capitalism* is properly revolutionary, involving a total transformation of society (because a transformation of the *very structures* of institutions, not merely who is allowed into the privileged positions).

Moreover, as plenty of feminists and Black Lives Matter activists well know, you can’t possibly achieve the maximal goals that identity politics pursues while remaining in a capitalist society. Most or all of the oppression that minorities experience is precisely a result of capitalism’s perverse incentives, and of the concentration of power in a tiny greedy elite. This ties into the fact that, since the time of Marx and Engels, a colossal amount of empirical scholarship has shown the power of the Marxian analytical framework. (I summarize some of the scholarship [here](#).) Even ideologies of race, nation, and gender are largely a product of class—of [slavery and its aftermath](#) in the U.S., of [European imperialism](#), of [attempts by the Victorian upper class](#) to control working-class women’s lives and sexuality.

¹ In [my summary of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix’s 1981 masterpiece](#) *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, I added the following thoughts to the foregoing account: “Class struggle is central to history in still more ways; for instance, virtually by analytical necessity it has been, directly or indirectly, the main cause of popular resistance and rebellions. Likewise, the ideologies and cultures of the lower classes have been in large measure sublimations of class interest and conflict. Most wars, too, have been undertaken so that rulers (effectively the ruling class) could gain control over resources, which is sort of the class struggle by other means. Wars grow out of class dynamics, and are intended to benefit the rich and powerful. In any case, the very tasks of *survival* in complex societies are structured by class antagonisms, which determine who gets what resources when and in what ways.”

In the case of religious fundamentalism in the U.S., for example, [historians](#) have [shown](#) that since early in the twentieth century, and especially since the 1970s, conservative sectors of the business community have subsidized right-wing evangelical Christianity in order to beat back unionism and liberalism, which have been tarred and feathered as communist, socialist, godless, etc. More generally, for centuries the ruling class has propagated divisive ideas of race, religion, nationality, and gender in order, partly, to fragment the working class and so control it more easily and effectively. By now, leftists see such arguments, rightly, as truisms.

On the other hand, most intellectuals, including many academically trained leftists, also see Marxian “economistic” arguments as overly simplifying and reductivist. Mainstream intellectuals in particular consider it a sign of unsophistication that Marxism tends to abstract from complicating factors and isolate the class variable. “Reality is complicated!” they shout in unison. “You also have to take into account the play of cultural discourses, the diversity of subjective identities, etc. Class isn’t everything!” Somehow it is considered an intellectual *vice*, and not a *virtue*, to *simplify* for the sake of *understanding*. It’s true, after all, that the world is complex; and so in order to understand it one has to simplify it a bit, explain it in terms of general principles. As in the natural sciences, a single principle can never explain *everything*; but, if it is the right one, it can explain a great deal.

Noam Chomsky, with characteristic eloquence, defended this point in [an interview in 1990](#). I might as well quote him at length. Since he is in essence just an idiosyncratic and anarchistic Marxist—in fact [one of the most consistent Marxists of all](#), despite his rejection of the label—his arguments are exactly those to which every thoughtful materialist is committed.

Question: But you're often accused of being too black-and-white in your analysis, of dividing the world into evil élites and subjugated or mystified masses. Does your approach ever get in the way of basic accuracy?

Answer: I do approach these questions a bit differently than historical scholarship generally does. But that's because humanistic scholarship tends to be irrational. I approach these questions pretty much as I would approach my scientific work. In that work—in any kind of rational inquiry—what you try to do is identify major factors, understand them, and see what you can explain in terms of them. Then you always find a periphery of unexplained phenomena, and you introduce minor factors and try to account for those phenomena. What you're always searching for is the guiding principles: the major effects, the dominant structures. In order to do that, you set aside a lot of tenth-order effects. Now, that's not the method of humanistic scholarship, which tends in a different direction. Humanistic scholarship—I'm caricaturing a bit for simplicity—says every fact is precious; you put it alongside every other fact. That's a sure way to guarantee you'll never understand anything. If you tried to do that in the sciences, you wouldn't even reach the level of Babylonian astronomy.

I don't think the [social] field of inquiry is fundamentally different in this respect. Take what we were talking about before: institutional facts. Those are major factors. There are also minor factors, like individual differences,

microbureaucratic interactions, or what the President's wife told him at breakfast. These are all tenth-order effects. I don't pay much attention to them, because I think they all operate within a fairly narrow range which is predictable by the major factors. I think you can isolate those major factors. You can document them quite well; you can illustrate them in historical practice; you can verify them. If you read the documentary record critically, you can find them very prominently displayed, and you can find that other things follow from them. There's also a range of nuances and minor effects, and I think these two categories should be very sharply separated.

When you proceed in this fashion, it might give someone who's not used to such an approach the sense of black-and-white, of drawing lines too clearly. It purposely does that. That's what is involved when you try to identify major, dominant effects and put them in their proper place.

But instead of trying to systematically explain society by starting from a general principle and evaluating its utility, then proceeding to secondary factors like race or sex and using them to elucidate phenomena not explained by the dominant principle, the approach that tends to prevail in the humanities and social sciences is a sort of methodological relativism. In [historical scholarship](#), for example, especially social history, you're generally expected just to describe things from different perspectives. You should discuss gender, and race, and class, and various relevant "discourses," and how people identified themselves, how they reacted to given developments, and perhaps issues of sexuality and the body, etc. Some knowledge may be gained, but often this work amounts to unanchored description seemingly for its own sake—[description from an idealist perspective](#), not a materialist one. The anti-Marxian idealism is an essential quality of this mainstream writing, and is quite dominant in the humanities and social sciences.

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On the bicentennial of Marx's birth, it's intellectually shameful (though predictable) that idealism is still the primary tendency in scholarship and journalism. I've criticized bourgeois idealism elsewhere, for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), but it is worth discussing again because of how dominant it is, and how damaging.

What idealism means, of course, is an emphasis on ideas or consciousness over material factors, whether "social being"—economic conditions, institutional imperatives (the need to follow the rules of given social structures), *interests* as opposed to ideals or ideologies, and the necessities of biological survival—or, in the context of [philosophical idealism](#) such as that of Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and the [logical positivists](#), the existence of mind-independent matter. Philosophical idealism, while no longer as respectable as it once was, persists in forms less honest and direct than that of Berkeley, especially in postmodernist circles and schools of thought influenced by the Continental tradition (e.g., phenomenology) and even American pragmatism. More important, though, is the type of idealism that disparages class and social being.

This idealism comes in different varieties. Its most common manifestation is the uncritical tendency to take seriously the rhetoric and self-interpretations of the powerful. As Marx understood and Chomsky likes to point out, humans are expert at deceiving themselves, at attributing noble motives to themselves when baser desires of power, money, recognition, institutional pressures, etc. are what really motivate them. The powerful in particular love to clothe themselves in the garb of moral grandeur. They insist that they're invading a country in order to protect human rights or spread democracy and freedom; that they're expanding prisons to keep communities safer, and deporting immigrants to keep the country safe; that by cutting social welfare programs they're trying honestly to reduce the budget deficit, and by cutting taxes on the rich they only want to stimulate the economy. When journalists and intellectuals take seriously such threadbare, predictable rhetoric, they're disregarding the lesson of Marxism that *individuals* aren't even the main actors here in the first place; *institutions* are. The individuals can tell themselves whatever stories they want about their own behavior, but the primary causes of the design and implementation of political policies are institutional dynamics, power dynamics. Political and economic actors represent certain interests, and they act in accordance with those interests. That's all.

The example I like to give of academics' idealism is Odd Arne Westad's celebrated book [*The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*](#), which won the Bancroft Prize in 2006. Its thesis is that "the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics. Locked in conflict over the very concept of European modernity... Washington and Moscow needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies..." It's a remarkably unsophisticated argument, which is backed up by remarkably unsophisticated invocations of policymakers' rhetoric. It rises to the level of farce. At one point, after quoting a State Department spokesman on George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq—"I believe in freedom as a right, a responsibility, a destiny... The United States stands for freedom, defends freedom, advances freedom, and enlarges the community of freedom because we think it is the right thing to do"—Westad states ingenuously that the Iraq invasion was a perfect example of how "freedom and security have been, and remain today, the driving forces of U.S. foreign policy." As if gigantic government bureaucracies are moved to act out of pure altruism!

Related to this idealism is the self-justifying faith of liberal intellectuals that ideals truly matter in the rough-and-tumble of political and economic life. John Maynard Keynes gave a classic exposition of this faith in the last paragraph of his *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, which has stroked academic egos for generations:

...[T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. [?!] Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas... [S]oon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

These are backward fantasies, which grow out of a poor sociological imagination. The point is that the ideas that come to be accepted as gospel are *those useful to vested interests*, which are the entities that have the resources to propagate them. (In the typically bourgeois language of impersonal ‘automaticity,’ Keynes refers to “the gradual encroachment of ideas.” But ideas don’t spread of themselves; they are propagated and subsidized by people and institutions whose interests they express. This is why “the ruling ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class,” which has the resources to spread them.)

Keynes’ famous book itself contributed not at all to the so-called Keynesian policies of FDR and Hitler and others; in fact, such policies were already being pursued by Baron Haussmann in France in the 1850s, because they were useful in giving employment to thousands of workers and raising aggregate demand and thereby economic growth. Is it likely that had Keynes not published his book in 1936, the U.S. government during and after World War II would have pursued radically different, un-Keynesian economic policies? Hardly. Because they were useful to vested interests, those policies were bound to be adopted—and economists, tools of the ruling class, were bound to systematize their theoretical rationalizations sooner or later.

But liberals continue to believe that if only they can convince politicians of their intellectual or moral errors, they can persuade them to change their policies. Paul Krugman’s columns in the *New York Times* provide amusing examples of this sort of pleading. It’s telling that he always ends his analysis right before getting to a realistic proposal: he scrupulously avoids saying that for his ideas to be enacted it’s necessary to revive unions on a systemic scale, or to organize radical and disruptive social movements to alter the skewed class structure. Such an analytic move would require that he step into the realm of Marxism, abandoning his liberal idealism, and would thus bar him from being published in the *New York Times*.

If I may be permitted to give another example of liberal idealism: I recall reading a few years ago Richard Goodwin’s popular book [*Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties*](#) (1988), a memoir of his time as speechwriter and adviser to John F. Kennedy. It’s a flabby centrist whitewashing of history, a nostalgic apotheosis of Kennedy and America and democracy, etc., not worth reading on its merits. However—[to quote myself](#)—

The book is enlightening as a window into the mind of the Harvard liberal, revelatory of the sort of thoughts this person has, his worldview. Liberalism from the inside. A prettified ideology, bland but appealing, with the reference to spiritual truths, reason, ideals of harmony and peace, a rising tide lifting all boats, the fundamental compatibility of all interests in society (except for those we don’t like, of course), the nonexistence of class struggle, government’s ability to solve all social ills, history as a progressive battle between knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness, reason and unreason, open-mindedness and bigotry, and any other set of binary abstractions you can think of. The whole ideology hovers above reality in the heavenly mists of Hope and Progress. It’s all very pretty, hence its momentary resurgence—which quickly succumbed to disillusionment—with Barack Obama. And hence its ability to get through the filters of the class structure, to become an element in the hegemonic American

discourse, floating above institutional realities like some imaginary golden idol one worships in lieu of common sense. It serves a very useful purpose for business, averting people's eyes from the essential incompatibility of class interests toward the idea of Gradual Progress by means of tinkering at the margins, making nice policies.

Such is the function of liberal idealism for the ruling class.

One other type of idealism that must be mentioned is the postmodernist variety (or rather varieties). It's ironic that postmodernist intellectuals, with their rejection of "meta-narratives" and the idea of objective truth, consider themselves hyper-sophisticated, because in fact they're less sophisticated than even unreflective doctrinaire Marxists. They're not so much post-Marxist as pre-Marxist, in that they haven't assimilated the important intellectual lessons of the Marxist tradition.

In both its subjectivism and its focus on "discourses," "texts," "meanings," "vocabularies," "cultures," and the like, postmodernism is idealistic—and relativistic. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, for example, tends to ignore class and particular economic and political contexts, instead concentrating on the opinions of reformers, philosophers, politicians, and scientists. (Far better—more illuminating—is Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's Marxist classic *Punishment and Social Structure*, published in 1939.) Later on things got even worse, as with Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's much-heralded collection *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (1997). I can't go into depth here, so suffice it to say that this book, like so much of postmodernism, consists essentially of playing around with ideas of cultural "contestations" and the tensions involved in people's "negotiations" of disparate identities. The analyses are so particularistic and so purely *descriptive*, focusing, say, on (the *cultural* dimensions of) some little village in Senegal or some protest movement in Ecuador, that no interesting conclusions can be drawn. Instead there is a fluctuation between hyper-particularity and hyper-abstractness, as in the typical—and utterly truistic—"arguments" that the colonized had agency, that colonized cultures weren't totally passive, that "colonial regimes were neither monolithic nor omnipotent" (who has ever said they were?), that "meanings" of institutions "were continually being reshaped," and so on. After all the "analysis," one is left asking, "Okay, so what?" It's all just masturbatory play undertaken for the sake of itself. No wonder this sort of writing has been allowed to become culturally dominant.

The postmodern focus on the body, too, is, ironically, idealistic. Subjectivistic. Which is to say it's more politically safe than Marxism, since it doesn't challenge objective structures of class (except insofar as such subjectivism, or identity politics, allies itself with a class focus). Any intellectual who finds himself being accepted by mainstream institutions, as hordes of Foucault-loving postmodernists and feminists have—contrary to the treatment of materialists like Gabriel Kolko, Thomas Ferguson, Jesse Lemisch, David Noble, Staughton Lynd, [Rajani Kanth](#), Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, Glenn Greenwald, and many others—should immediately start to question whether his ideas get to the heart of the matter or do not, instead, distract from the workings of power.

Said differently, the problem with identity politics is that it doesn't completely reject Margaret Thatcher's infamous saying, "There is no such thing as society." It takes a semi-individualistic approach to analysis and activism. A revolutionary answers Thatcher with the statement, "There is no such thing as the individual"—in the sense that the focus must be on institutional structures, which mold us and dominate us. To the degree that the focus turns toward the individual, or his identity, his body, his subjectivity, the radicalism becomes more anodyne (while not necessarily ceasing to be oppositional or important).

There is a great deal more to be said about postmodernism. For instance, I could make the obvious point that its particularism and relativism, its elevation of fragmentary "narratives" and its Kuhnian emphasis on the supposed incommensurability of different "paradigms," is just as useful to the ruling class as its idealism, since it denies *general truths* about class struggle and capitalist dynamics. (See Georg Lukács' masterpiece [The Destruction of Reason](#) for a history of how such relativism and idealism contributed to the cultural climate that made Hitler possible.) Or I could argue that the rationalism and universalism of the [Radical Enlightenment](#), which found its fulfillment in Marxism, is, far from being dangerous or containing the seeds of its own destruction—as postmodernists and confused eclectic Marxists like [Theodor Adorno](#) have argued—the only hope for humanity.

Instead I'll only observe, in summary, that idealism is not new: it is as old as the hills, and Marx made an immortal contribution in repudiating it. Idealism has always afflicted mainstream intellectual culture, all the way back to antiquity, when Plato viewed the world as consisting of shadows of ideal Forms, Hindus and Buddhists interpreted it in spiritual terms and as being somehow illusory, and Stoics were telling "the slave in the mines that if he would only think aright he would be happy" (to quote the classicist [W. W. Tarn](#)). Idealism persisted through the Christian Middle Ages, Confucian China, and Hindu India. It dominated the Enlightenment, when *philosophes* were arguing that ignorance and superstition were responsible for mass suffering and a primordial conspiracy of priests had plunged society into darkness. Hegel, of course, was an arch-idealist. Finally a thinker came along who renounced this whole tradition and systematized the common sense of the hitherto despised "rabble," the workers, the peasants, the women struggling to provide for their children—namely that *ideas* are of little significance compared to class and material conditions. The real heroes, the real actors in history are not the parasitic intellectuals or the marauding rulers but the people working day in and day out to maintain society, to preserve and improve the conditions of civilization for their descendants.

Had there been no Marx or Engels, revolutionaries and activists would still have targeted class structures, as they were doing before Marxism had achieved widespread influence. Unions would have organized workers, radicals would have established far-left organizations, insurrections would have occurred in countries around the world. Marx's role has been to provide clarity and guidance, to serve as a symbol of certain tendencies of thought and action. His uniquely forceful and acute analyses of history and capitalism have been a font of inspiration for both thinkers and activists, a spur, a stimulus to keep their eyes on the prize, so to speak. His prediction of the collapse of capitalism from its internal contradictions has given hope and confidence to millions—perhaps *too much* confidence, in light of the traditional over-optimism of Marxists. But having such a brilliant authority on their side, such a teacher, has surely been of inestimable benefit to the oppressed.

As for the narrow task of “interpreting the world,” the enormous body of work by Marxists from the founder to the present totally eclipses the contributions of every other school of thought. From economics to literary criticism, nothing else comes remotely close.

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Marx did, however, make mistakes. No one is infallible. It’s worth considering some of those mistakes, in case we can learn from them.

The ones I’ll discuss here, which are by far the most significant, have to do with his conception of socialist revolution. Both the timeline he predicted and his sketchy remarks on how the revolution would come to pass were wrong. I’ve addressed these matters [here](#), and at greater length in my book [*Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States*](#), but they deserve a more condensed treatment too.

Regarding the timeline: it has long been a commonplace that Marx failed to foresee Keynesianism and the welfare state. His biggest blind-spot was nationalism, or in general the power of the capitalist nation-state as an organizing principle of social life. Ironically, only a Marxian approach can explain why national structures have achieved the power they have, i.e., why the modern centralized nation-state rose to dominance in the first place. (It has to do with the interconnected rise of capitalism and the state over the last 700 years, in which each “principle”—the economic and the political, the market and the state—was indispensable to the other. See, e.g., Giovanni Arrighi’s [*The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*](#).)

In essence, while Marx was right to locate a capitalist tendency toward relative or even absolute immiseration of the working class, he was wrong that this tendency could not be effectively counteracted, at least for a long time, by opposing pressures. That is, he underestimated the power of tendencies toward integration of the working class into the dominant order, toward “pure and simple trade-unionism,” toward the state’s stabilizing management of the economy, and toward workers’ identification not only with the abstract notion of a social class that spans continents but also with the more concrete facts of ethnicity, race, trade, immediate community, and nation. These forces have historically militated against the revolutionary tendencies of class polarization and international working-class solidarity. They have both fragmented the working class and made possible the successes of reformism—the welfare state, social democracy, and the legitimization of mass collective bargaining in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Marx was too optimistic.

On the other hand, he was right that capitalism isn’t sustainable—because of its “contradictions,” its dysfunctional social consequences, and also its effects on the natural environment. No compromises between capital and wage-labor, such as the postwar Keynesian compromise, can last. The market is just too anarchic, and capital too voracious. Stability is not possible. Sooner or later, with the continued development of the productive forces, capital mobility will increase, markets—including the labor market—will become more integrated worldwide, elite institutional networks will thicken worldwide, and organized labor will lose whatever power it had in the

days of limited capital mobility. In retrospect, and with a bit of [analysis](#), one can see that these tendencies were irresistible. Genuine socialism (workers' democratic control) on an international or global scale never could have happened in the twentieth century, which was still the age of oligopolistic, imperialistic capitalism, even state capitalism. In fact, it wasn't until the twenty-first century that the capitalist mode of production was consolidated across the entire globe, a development Marx assumed was necessary as a prerequisite for socialism (or communism).

The irony, therefore—and history is chock-full of dialectical irony—is that authentic revolutionary possibilities of post-capitalism couldn't open up until the victories of the left in the twentieth century had been eroded and defeated by hyper-mobile capital. The corporatist formations of social democracy and industrial unionism, fully integrated into the capitalist nation-state, had to decline in order for class polarization in the core capitalist states to peak again, deep economic crisis to return, and radical anti-capitalist movements to reappear on a massive level (as we may expect they'll do in the coming decades). Many Marxists don't like this type of thinking, according to which things have to get worse before they get better, but Marx himself [looked forward to economic crisis](#) because he understood it was only such conditions that could impel workers to join together *en masse* and fight for something as radical as a new social order.

The best evidence for the “things have to get worse before they get better” thesis is that the relatively non-barbarous society of the postwar years in the West was made possible only by the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, which mobilized the left on such an epic scale and so discredited fascism that the ruling class finally consented to a dramatic improvement of conditions for workers. Similarly, it's quite possible that decades from now people will think of neoliberalism, with its civilization-endangering horrors, as having been a tool of (in Hegel's words) the “cunning” of historical reason by precipitating the demise of the very society whose consummation it was and making possible the rise of something new.

But how will such a revolution occur? This is another point on which Marx tripped up. Despite his eulogy of the non-statist Paris Commune, Marx was no anarchist: he expected that the proletariat would have to seize control of the national state and then carry out the social revolution from the commanding heights of government. This is clear from the ten-point program laid out in the *Communist Manifesto*—the specifics of which he repudiated in later years, but apparently not the general conception of statist reconstruction of the economy. It's doubtful, for example, that he would have rejected his earlier statement that “The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class.” Moreover, he seems to have endorsed Engels' statement in *Anti-Dühring* that “The proletariat seizes state power, and then transforms the means of production into state property.” It appears, then, that both he and Engels were extreme statists, even though, like anarchists, they hoped and expected that the state would (somehow, inexplicably) disappear eventually.

In these beliefs they were mistaken. The social revolution can't occur *after* a total seizure of state power by “the proletariat” (which isn't a unitary entity but contains divisions)—for several reasons. First, this conception of revolution contradicts the Marxian understanding of social dynamics, a point that few or no Marxists appear ever to have appreciated. It exalts a centralized

conscious will as being able to plan social evolution in advance, a notion that is utterly undialectical. According to “dialectics,” history happens behind the backs of historical actors, whose intentions never work out exactly as they’re supposed to. Marx was wise in his admonition that we should never trust the self-interpretations of political actors. And yet he suspends this injunction when it comes to the dictatorship of the proletariat: *these people’s* designs are supposed to work out perfectly and straightforwardly, despite the massive complexity and dialectical contradictions of society.

The statist idea of revolution is also wrong to privilege the political over the economic. In supposing that through sheer political will one can transform an authoritarian, exploitative economy into a liberatory, democratic one, Marx is, in effect, reversing the order of “dominant causality” such that politics determines the economy (whereas in fact the economy “determines”—loosely and broadly speaking—politics).² Marxism itself suggests that the state can’t be socially creative in this radical way. And when it tries to be, what results, ironically, is overwhelming bureaucracy and even *greater* authoritarianism than before. (While the twentieth century’s experiences with so-called “Communism” or “state socialism” happened in relatively non-industrialized societies, not advanced capitalist ones as Marx anticipated, the dismal record is at least suggestive.)

Fundamental to these facts is that if the conquest of political power occurs in a still-capitalist economy, revolutionaries have to contend with the institutional legacies of capitalism: relations of coercion and domination condition everything the government does, and there is no way to break free of them. They can’t be magically transcended through political will; to think they can, or that the state can “wither away” even as it becomes more expansive and dominating, is to adopt a naïve idealism.

Corresponding to all these errors are the flaws in Marx’s abstract conceptualization of revolution, according to which revolution happens when the production relations turn into fetters on the use and development of productive forces. One problem with this formulation is that it’s meaningless: at what point exactly do production relations begin to fetter productive forces? How long does this fettering have to go on before the revolution begins in earnest? How does one determine the degree of fettering? It would seem that capitalism has fettered productive forces for a very long time, for example in its proneness to recessions and stagnation, in artificial obstacles to the diffusion of knowledge such as intellectual copyright laws, in underinvestment in public goods such as education and transportation, and so forth. On the other hand, science and technology continue to develop, as shown by recent momentous advances in information technology. So what is the utility of this idea of “fettering”?

In fact, it can be made useful if we slightly reconceptualize the theory of revolution. Rather than a conflict simply between production relations and the development of productive forces, there is a conflict between *two types of production relations—two modes of production—one of which uses productive forces in a more socially rational and “un-fettering” way than the other*. The more progressive mode slowly develops in the womb of the old society as it decays, i.e., as the old dominant mode of production succumbs to crisis and stagnation. In being relatively dynamic

² In reality, of course, political and economic relations are fused together. But analytically one can distinguish economic activities from narrowly political, governmental activities.

and ‘socially effective,’ the emergent mode of production attracts adherents and resources, until it becomes ever more visible and powerful. The old regime can’t eradicate it; it spreads internationally and gradually transforms the economy, to such a point that the forms and content of politics change with it. Political entities become its partisans, and finally decisive seizures of power by representatives of the emergent mode of production become possible, because reactionary defenders of the old regime have lost their dominant command over resources. And so, over generations, a social revolution transpires.

This conceptual revision saves Marx’s intuition by giving it more meaning: the “fettering” is not absolute but is *in relation to* a more effective mode of production that is, so to speak, competing with the old stagnant one. The most obvious concrete instance of this conception of revolution is the long transition from feudalism to capitalism, during which the feudal mode became so hopelessly outgunned by the capitalist that, in retrospect, the long-term outcome of the “bourgeois revolutions” from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries was never in doubt. Capitalism was bound to triumph after it had reached a certain level of development.

But the important point is that capitalist interests could never have decisively “seized the state” until the capitalist economy had already made tremendous inroads against feudalism. Likewise, socialist or post-capitalist interests can surely not take over national states until they have vast material resources on their side, such as can only be acquired through large-scale participation in productive activities. As the capitalist economy descends into global crisis/stagnation over the next twenty, fifty, and a hundred years, one can predict that an “alternative economy,” a “solidarity economy” of cooperative and socialized relations of production will emerge both in society’s interstices and, sooner or later, in the mainstream. In many cases it will be sponsored and promoted by the state (on local, regional, and national levels), in an attempt to assuage social discontent; but its growth will only have the effect of hollowing out the hegemony of capitalism and ultimately facilitating its downfall. And thereby the downfall, or radical transformation, of the capitalist state.

I can’t go into the detail necessary to flesh out this gradualist notion of revolution, but in my abovementioned book I’ve argued that it not only radically revises the Marxian conception (on the basis of a single conceptual alteration), in effect updating it for the twenty-first century, but that it is thoroughly grounded in Marxian concepts—in fact, is truer to the fundamentals of historical materialism than Marx’s own vision of proletarian revolution was. The new society has to be erected on the foundation of emerging production relations, which cannot but take a very long time to broadly colonize society. And class struggle, that key Marxian concept, will of course be essential to the transformation: decades of continuous conflict between the masters and the oppressed, including every variety of disruptive political activity, will attend the construction—from the grassroots up to the national government—of anti-capitalist modes of production.

Glimmers of non-capitalist economic relations are already appearing even in the reactionary United States. In the last decade more and more scholars, journalists, and activists have investigated and promoted these new relations; one has but to read [Gar Alperovitz](#), [Ellen Brown](#), and all the contributors to [Yes! Magazine](#), [Shareable.net](#), [Community-Wealth.org](#), etc. A transnational movement is growing beneath the radar of the mass media. It is still in an

embryonic state, but as activists publicize its successes, ever more people will be drawn to it in their search for a solution to the dysfunctional economy of the *ancien régime*. Local and national governments, unaware of its long-term anti-capitalist implications, are already supporting the alternative economy, as I describe in my book.

I'll also refer the reader to the book for responses to the conventional Marxian objections that cooperatives, for instance, are forced to compromise their principles by operating in the market economy, and that interstitial developments are not revolutionary. At this point in history, it should be obvious to everyone that a socialist revolution cannot occur in one fell swoop, one great moment of historical rupture, as “the working class” or its Leninist leaders storm the State, shoot all their opponents, and impose sweeping diktats to totally restructure society. (What an incredibly idealistic and utopian conception that is!) The conquest of political power will occur piecemeal, gradually; it will suffer setbacks and then proceed to new victories, then suffer more defeats, etc., in a century-long (or longer) process that happens at different rates in different countries. It will be a time of world-agony, especially as climate change will be devastating civilization; but the sheer numbers of people whose interests will lie in a transcendence of corporate capitalism will constitute a formidable weapon on the side of progress.

One reasonable, though rather optimistic, blueprint for the early stages of this process is the British Labour Party's [Manifesto](#), which lays out principles that can be adapted to other countries. Such a plan will necessarily encounter so much resistance that, early on, even if the Labour Party comes to power, only certain parts of it will be able to be implemented. But plans such as this will provide ideals that can be approximated ever more closely as the international left grows in strength; and eventually more radical goals may become feasible.

But we must follow Marx, again, in shunning speculation on the specifics of this long evolution. He is sometimes criticized for saying too little about what socialism or communism would look like, but this was in fact very democratic and sensible of him. It is for the people engaged in struggles to hammer out their own institutions, “to learn in the dialectic of history,” as Rosa Luxemburg said. Nor is it possible, in any case, to foresee the future in detail. All we can do is try to advance the struggle and leave the rest to our descendants.

*

Marx is practically inexhaustible, and one cannot begin to do him justice in a single article. His work has something for both anarchists and Leninists, for existentialists and their critics, cultural theorists and economists, philosophers and even [scientists](#). Few thinkers have ever been subjected to such critical scrutiny and yet held up so well over centuries. To attack him, as [usefully idiotic lackeys of the capitalist class do](#), for being responsible for twentieth-century totalitarianism is naïve idealism of the crudest sort. Ideas do not make history, though they can be useful tools in the hands of reactionaries or revolutionaries. They can be misunderstood, too, and used inappropriately or in ways directly contrary to their spirit—as [the Christianity of Jesus](#) has, for example.

But in our time of despair and desperation, with the future of the species itself in doubt, there is one more valid criticism to be made of Marx: he was too sectarian. Too eager to attack people on

the left with whom he disagreed. In this case, Chomsky's attitude is more sensible: the left must unite and not exhaust its energy in internecine battles. Let's be done with all the recriminations between Marxists and anarchists and left-liberals, all the squabbling that has gone on since the mid-nineteenth century. It's time to unite against the threat of fascism and—not to speak over-grandiosely—save life on Earth.

Let's honor the memory of all the heroes and martyrs who have come before us by rising to the occasion, at this climactic moment of history.