

## KARL MARX OVERVIEW

Marx's stated desire was to 'turn Hegelianism on its head.' As the very title of a seminal work by Marx indicates, German Idealism was nothing more to Marx than an ideology. *Ideology* was a term first coined by a Frenchman, Destutt de Tracy, in 1796. As used by Marx, it denotes that the ideas which comprise our consciousness are socially derived, to be precise, derived from the economic, social and political structure of the society in which one lives. More precisely, the term implies that our ideas are those characteristic of a particular economic *class* of individuals, a particular socio-economic bracket, within that society and whose interests they subtend. (The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines the 'economy' as the distribution of resources and, thus, wealth of a given community, especially in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services.) Most importantly, in this context, the term also suggests that our ideas are more often than not erroneous interpretations which humans impose upon the natural and social worlds which they inhabit. From this perspective, Marx's point is that Hegel's world view is simply wrong.

There are a number of important differences separating Marx from Hegel. Firstly, Marx was a *materialist*, that is, he was of the view that this physical world is neither an imperfect reflection of some spiritual world beyond the physical (Plato's view) nor the material expression of Spirit or God (Hegel). There is no God and no heaven as a result of which the physical world is all there is. As such, the history of humanity is not tantamount, as Hegel claimed, to the progressive self-realisation of Spirit in matter. Human society has developed not as the result of some divine plan but contingently, that is, in response to the sheer necessity of ensuring the physical survival of its inhabitants. Secondly, accordingly, humans have no soul. There is no spiritual or non-material *essence* to human identity, no *essential self*, that pre-dates our birth and post-dates our death. Human nature or identity or selfhood or subjectivity is not eternal (that is, it is not immortal) nor is it universal (humans are not everywhere alike). Rather, Marx believed that the contents of our consciousness and, by extension, our identity are entirely the product of or function of or *determined by* the demands of physical and social existence. In other words, the social and historical context expresses itself through the consciousness of humans, rather than the other way around, as Hegel believed. As this context changes, so too does the precise nature of human consciousness. For example, during earlier more 'primitive' hand-to-mouth stages of human history (e.g. tribal societies of hunters and gatherers), it is a matter of simply ensuring one's physical survival. The economy in this context was a much simpler affair. Human consciousness evolved at this stage in response to and was, thus, shaped by the sheer imperatives of physical survival. In more recent times, it is the complex economic, social and political interdependency which marks what we like to think of as the sophisticated industrialised societies of today that shapes our consciousness. In short, by contrast to Hegel, Marx is of the view that mankind's ideas are the effect and not the cause of the ways in which human societies have developed economically and, thus, come to be socially organised.

Marx offers two useful tools for understanding the nature of human society and history: what has come to be known as the *Base / superstructure model* of society and a *dialectical* model of history which, though inspired by Hegel, is in fact materialist (this has given rise to a philosophy, a way of interpreting things, called *historical materialism*).

### PREFACE TO A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY (1859)

Marx's Base / Superstructure model functions as something akin to a template that can be

theoretically imposed upon any given community in an effort to understand the society peculiar to a particular place and time. According to this famous (if somewhat crude) architectural metaphor, any society at any given period of history may be thought of as consisting of two levels: what he calls the *Economic Base* (he figures this as the lower level, the foundation) and the *political / ideological Superstructure* (the upper level which sits, as it were, on the economic foundation). For Marx, everything in the superstructure is reducible to (or is determined by) the economic forces located in the base. From this perspective, things such as politics or literature or religion, that at first glance do not seem to have much to do with economics, are ultimately best grasped in terms of identifiable economic causes. In much the same way that Freudians more often than not seek to reduce phenomena to their sexual aetiologies (or causes), so do Marxists tend to reduce things to their economic causes. The charge of *economic reductionism*, that is, the tendency to reduce everything to economic factors, is often directed at Marxism.

The Base is the primary element in any society and may in turn be subdivided into:

- the *means of production* (the geographical circumstances, the raw materials and the technology available at a given stage of history – the plough and land during the Middle Ages, for example, as opposed to the factory of later periods – involved in the production of the means of survival),
- the *forces of production* (the nature of the producers involved in the production of the means of survival, for example, predominately men as opposed to women, or educated as opposed to uneducated, or rural peasants as opposed to the urban proletariat), and
- the *social relations of production* (the division of the society in question into economic classes – some people, for example, are wealthy because they own the land or the factories (the term for this is *capital*) as opposed to others who merely work for these owners, etc. – which results in the asymmetrical distribution of economic wealth and, thus, power).

The *Superstructure*, on the other hand, is secondary in that it is derived from the primary Base and is comprised of:

- various *social institutions* (to wit, a state [i.e. some form of political administration], a legal system, religious organisations [one of which will probably predominate], an educational system [schools and universities], a particular philosophical world view, a moral code, and specific artistic and cultural practices), and
- the political, legal, religious, philosophical, moral, and aesthetic ideologies that correspond to these institutions (in other words, the political, legal, religious, philosophical, moral and aesthetic ideas that predominate within these institutions).

It is important to note that in this model, the Base *determines* or shapes everything to be found in the Superstructure. To put this another way, the Superstructure is a *reflection* of the Base. From this vantage-point, the economy is the *cause* of all the components of the superstructure which are, in turn, the *effects* of the economy.

Marx's basic argument is that the distribution of economic resources has rarely, if ever, been fair. Some individuals have always gained social ascendancy over their fellows by 'cornering' the access to these resources (they are said to 'own the means of production') and thus wielding effective power in that society. Human societies are consequently economically stratified into *classes*, that is, divided into rich and poor and those categories in between. The class-structure of a particular society *determines* or shapes or moulds the institutional and ideological framework of that society. Ideas in particular concerning the 'natural' order of things (e.g. the view that the poor will always be with us or that rulers rule by 'divine right' or a belief in the existence of God) belong to

and serve the interest of the *ruling class* (those who own the means of production) and form what Marxists term the *dominant ideology* in the society in question. The point of view of the ruling class becomes dominant because it is in a position to impose these ideas upon the *ruled classes* who then unthinkingly assimilate them. It is in this way that the ruling class seeks to legitimate and perpetuate its own stranglehold upon society. Both rich and poor human beings largely exist, consequently, in a state of what Marxists term *false consciousness*. That is, they are ignorant of the fact that they are deluded as to the true nature of society and invent all sorts of excuses for and rationales on behalf of the status quo which have no bearing upon the true nature of social reality. From this point of view, for example, Marxists argue that God did not create mankind in His own image. Rather, man created God in order to justify his existence and his actions.

To put the foregoing another way, given their economic dominance, the ruling class of any given society at any particular stage of history hold the reins of political and legal power. For this reason, their outlook necessarily constitutes the *dominant ideology* or world view of that place and time. In other words, it is their views on how a society should be governed, what is lawful, the meaning of life, on the arts, etc. which are the most important views in circulation and which are consequently imposed on the other, less powerful classes. This is why both the institutions and their concomitant ideologies subtend the interests of the ruling class in that society. In other words, the state, the legal system, the dominant religion, and so on are all instruments by which the ruling class extends its domination.

Hence, the following schematic representation of the Base / Superstructure model:

#### INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL SUPERSTRUCTURE

- Ideologies (political, legal, religious, philosophical, moral, aesthetic, etc.)
- Social Institutions (the State, the legal system, the dominant religion, education system, etc.)

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#### ECONOMIC BASE / ECONOMIC MODE OF PRODUCTION (INFRASTRUCTURE)

- Social Relations of Production (SROP) (class structure)
- Forces of Production (FOP) (the nature of the labour force)
- Means of Production (MOP) (the medium by which production proceeds)

#### THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY (1844-1845)

Historical Materialism is the term often used to describe Marx's model of history in order to differentiate it from Hegel's idealist model. The term history is synonymous with change, as opposed to stasis. The nineteenth century is often described as the period during which *historicism*, a consciousness of the historicity of all things, of the inevitability of change, and of the need to comprehend all phenomena in relation to the social and historical factors which necessarily shape them, came to the fore. Hegel is a key figure in this regard as is Marx.

Like Hegel, firstly, Marx contends that the history of humankind is divisible into successive *stages* but these are not viewable as part and parcel of the progressive self-realisation of Spirit in matter. Historical change derives, for Marx, from differences in the way that human beings ensure their continued physical existence upon Earth. As a result, each stage of history corresponds to a particular *Economic Mode of Production*, that is, it is differentiated by the peculiar way in which the physical needs of its inhabitants are met and the specific nature of the social relationships which are associated therewith. This gives rise, in turn, to a particular institutional and ideological superstructure, a particular set of political, legal, religious, and other structures as well as their concomitant ideologies, that is, a particular conception of the state, of what is lawful, a specific set of religious beliefs, and so on. Like Hegel, secondly, Marx argues that history progresses *dialectically*. However, Marx's understanding of this process is different from Hegel's. For Marx, each stage of history sows the seeds of its own undoing and produces its antithesis (e.g. the capitalism which emerged during the early modern period was the antithesis of the mode of production that predominated during the Middle Ages and out of which it emerged). The reason for this is that the different elements that comprise the economic mode of production, the means of production, the forces of production and the social relations of production, reach a point in any mode of production where they become out of synch relative to each other and thus come into conflict. Thirdly, like Hegel, Marx believed that history has a certain teleology, to be precise, that it is inevitably heading in a certain direction. Marx fervently believed that humanity was heading in the direction of a classless society, one in which the divisions on the basis of wealth which have long plagued humanity would be a thing of the past. This would be the inevitable outcome of that dialectical process of change outlined above.

Marx attempts to describe in The German Ideology European history from ancient Greece up to and including his own period, the nineteenth century. (In other places, he addresses the history of other regions such as India.) I cannot do justice in what follows to his detailed account. In European pre-history, during the earliest so-called 'hunter and gatherer' stages of human history, mankind initially survived largely by hunting (the men hunted, the women gathered what they killed). Survival was largely a hand to mouth affair. Marx theorised that in such societies, property was owned communally: there was no conception of private property at this time. This arose later when humans learned to grow food and herd animals, agricultural communities were formed, and food, etc. could be stored up 'for a rainy day.' In each of these cases, there is a distinct economic mode of production, a different way of harnessing resources to ensure survival, at stake: the former society is predicated largely upon hunting and gathering, the latter upon agriculture and husbandry. In each case, different social relations of production (a particular class structure) emerged in response to variations in the forces of production (e.g. hunters as opposed to farmers) and the means of production (the spear as opposed to the plough). Taken together, these three elements constitute a unique economic mode of production in each case. This is what distinguishes one stage of history from another, not the manifestation of one aspect of Spirit as opposed to another.

During classical times, circa the fifth century BC, European civilisation experienced an initial flowering. The largely agricultural economy in Greece and, later Rome, gave rise to a particular social hierarchy that sanctioned slavery, a certain set of political and legal structures (in Athens, the beginnings of democracy), a particular set of religious beliefs (gods and goddesses and what not on Mount Olympus), a particular philosophical worldview (Plato, Aristotle, et al.), and a particular aesthetics (e.g. Plato's condemnation of poetry, Aristotle's obsession with plot), and so on. Marx is particularly interested in European history from the Middle Ages onwards. During Medieval times, the economic

mode of production which prevailed was what economists term *Feudalism*: in a predominately agricultural and rural economy, social relations were oppressive: those who owned the land (the means of production) were evidently in a position of dominance over their fellows. Those that historians have come to call Feudal landlords owned immense tracts of land worked by peasants who, in return for an allowance of land to live on, gave a large part of their crop to the lords and served in their armies when need be. Government took the form of a monarchy, the legal code, such as existed, was designed to protect the interests of the landlords, Roman Catholicism predominated, and so on.

During the early modern period (anywhere from about 1600 to about 1800), the peasants so depended on by the feudal lords grew in numbers to the point where subsistence off the land became nigh impossible. Thousands emigrated to urbanised areas and learned crafts and other skills which they then sold to their neighbours. These crafts were the antecedent of the industries which would emerge in later years in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and their practitioners were the forerunners of the so-called captains of industry who would subsequently spring to prominence. As technology improved, factories developed and those who owned them (these became the principal means of production) came to depend in turn upon large amounts of cheap labour. Marx theorised in Capital that *capitalists* (those who own the means of production) make a profit only when they pay labourers less than their work deserves – he called this the extraction of *surplus value* from their labour. *Capitalism* depends upon and thus encourages cheap supplies of labour. During this time, society became even more rigidly divided on the basis of class: the *landed aristocracy* (the traditional owners of the land) coexisted with the *bourgeoisie* (the emergent middle class who grew wealthy on the basis of their ownership of the factories) and the *proletariat* (the working classes whose labour was *exploited* by the capitalists). This gave rise to a particular institutional and ideological superstructure, that is, a particular set of political, legal, religious, philosophical, and other institutions and ideologies. From the Marxist point of view, early modern philosophy as articulated by Descartes, Locke, Kant, and others is nothing more than the ideological reflex of a particular configuration of the means, forces and social relations of production peculiar to that place and time.

Under the capitalism which reigned supreme right up to Marx's own day (we are presently, according to Marxists, still living in the period of Late Capitalism), the dominant ideology expressed the interests of the bourgeoisie (the middle class) who owned the means of production and exploited the proletariat or working classes by extracting their profits out of the surplus value produced by the latter's labour (i.e. by paying them less than their labour deserved). The bourgeoisie's views were assimilated by the proletariat as the natural and inevitable way of seeing things and this is the secret of the former's grip on power. Precisely because its particular interests came to be identified with the interests of all, the ideology of the bourgeoisie served ultimately to legitimise and thereby maintain its economic and, thus, political power. Though he did not live to see it, Marx prophesied that it was the very fact of dependency which would serve to bring about Capitalism's own undoing. The mass of labourers upon which it so depended would gradually become conscious of its indispensability to those who own the means of production, organise itself to take advantage of that fact (in the form of unions, etc.) and, finally, erupt into revolution, seizing the ownership of the means of production. (See, in this regard, Marx's The Communist Manifesto.) Working class revolution would inaugurate, he contended, a utopian, because communist, society on Earth: classes and thus private property would both be abolished when the working class seized the capital of the capitalists. Thus, history is, from Marx's perspective, also *teleological*: Communism was, he argued, the inevitable end-product in this way of the march of history. History (synonymous with

change) is henceforth replaced, seemingly, by stasis, something akin to the eternal present which many Christians imagine will be their reward for their labours on Earth.