



# The Marxist Tradition

~~Contemporary Political Ideologies~~  
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**K**arl Marx (1818–1883) and his followers produced one of the dominant ideologies from World War I into the early 1990s—communism—and a number of variants that have been influential in many parts of the world. Because it has been, and remains, so important, communism is the focus of this chapter. But because some of the confusion surrounding and debates over communism are the result of confusion among various lines of Marxist thought, other forms of Marxism are discussed.

Communism is based on the writings of Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895),<sup>1</sup> and the theoretical structure based on these writings is still widely respected. Interestingly, that respect is today greater in the West than in the East.

Communism was the result of a line of intellectual and political development from Marx and Engels through V. I. Lenin (original name Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, 1870–1924) and others that emphasized the authoritarian and centralist aspects of Marx's thought. An alternative Marxist tradition has always been available that stressed decentralist and democratic aspects of Marx's thought, but it has always been a minority position. It is this latter tradition, together with

<sup>1</sup>For our purposes Marx and Engels can be treated together. They differ, but their differences on the questions discussed in this chapter are not great. For a complete discussion of Engels, see Friedrich Engels, *Selected Writings*, ed. W. O. Henderson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967); and Fritz Nova, *Friedrich Engels: His Contributions to Political Theory* (London: Vision Press, 1967). Also see Henrich Gemkow et al. *Friedrich Engels: A Biography* (Dresden, Germany: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1972).

what are widely recognized as Marx's fundamental insights into social relations in general and the effects of capitalism in particular, that explain Marx's continuing importance. In addition, the collapse of communism has not convinced all Communists that communism has failed. Thus, it is still important to understand various parts of the Marxist tradition.

## KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS

To do so, it is essential to look first at the philosophic basis found in the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and then to turn to the developments and changes made by others.

### Alienation—the Young Marx

In his twenties Marx wrote a number of works that have proven controversial to this day. Most writers now argue that these early writings are central to any understanding of Marx and that the later writings grow out of and develop the themes of the early writings. Those who stress the early writings argue that authoritarian communism lost sight of the human concerns that motivated Marx.

The central concept in these early writings is *alienation*, particularly found in the work known as *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (first published in full in 1932). Alienation refers to a relationship between two or more people or parts of oneself in which one is cut off from, a stranger to, or alien to, the other. It has been a major theme in modern literature, with works such as Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1945), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), to name four of the best known, depicting various forms of alienation.

For Marx it meant something more specific. He argued that in capitalism, for reasons that will become apparent later, individuals become cut off from—out of tune with—themselves, their families and friends, and their work. They are not and cannot be whole, fully developed human beings in a capitalist society.<sup>2</sup>

For Marx, private property and alienation are intimately linked because the most basic form of alienation is alienated labor, or labor that is sold like an object. Of course, what is being sold is part of a human being. A worker sells her or his strength, effort, skill, and time; so for much of the worker's life someone else has purchased and, thus, has the use of the worker (and in Marx's time this was usually a minimum of twelve to fourteen hours a day, six or seven days a week). Alienated labor produced an alienation of self; no longer whole human beings, workers could not establish full human relationships with others, who were in the same situation. This is the human meaning of capitalism for

<sup>2</sup>For extended commentaries, see István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1970); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976); and "The Alienation of Labor: A Philosophical Problem," *Social Praxis* 3, nos. 1-2 (1975):

Marx: people cut off from self, others, and work. It is this condition that Marx was determined to change; it was the reason for his writings and his revolutionary activity.

## Marx's Critique of Capitalism

The Marxian analysis of society and the forces operating in it is a commentary on and condemnation of industrial capitalism. Marx argued both that capitalism was an essential stage in the development to socialism and that capitalism was the most progressive economic system developed so far. Marx attributed most of the ills of contemporary society to the capitalist system. Many evils were inherent in developing industrialism, and Marx was not the only one to point them out. His comments are interesting, though, because they indicate a great deal about Marx and the way he viewed the world. In addition, both Marxian communism and contemporary communism are attempts to solve the problems of industrialism. Much of the appeal of Marxism is found in these criticisms of the industrial system. An understanding of communism is impossible without a careful consideration of these criticisms. For Marx economic relationships are the foundation of the entire social system; therefore, his economic criticisms must be considered first.

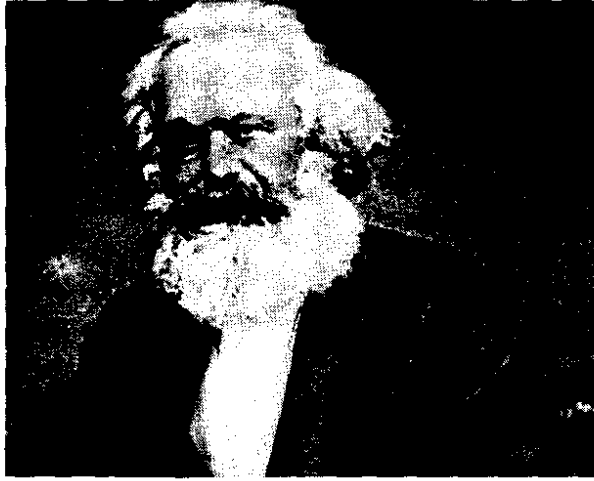
For Marx, the most fundamental fact of life is that people must produce goods before they can do anything else. They must also reproduce themselves, but they cannot even do that unless they are capable of feeding themselves. Thus material production or economic relationships are basic to all life.

The primary points in Marxian economics are the *labor theory of value*, the doctrine of *subsistence wages*, and the theory of *surplus value*. Marx used *value* in the sense of real costs in labor. Nothing else was considered. In other words, the value (not the price) of any manufactured object was based on the amount of labor time consumed in producing it.

Marx argued that nothing had value without labor. Neither capital nor land is of any value until labor is added. This is the labor theory of value. An individual has to work a certain number of hours or days to produce enough to provide a living. Marx assumed that the capitalist would pay workers only enough to keep them alive, a subsistence wage. Marx made this assumption because:

1. There was a surplus of laborers, and there was no need to pay more.
2. He could not conceive of the capitalist paying more than absolutely necessary.
3. He assumed that the capitalist would be faced with a series of economic crises that would make it impossible for the capitalist to pay more.

In addition, Marx believed that the profit of the capitalist was taken from the amount produced over and above the wages paid the worker. This is the theory of surplus value and can be used to explain more fully the doctrine of subsistence wages. As capitalists replaced workers with machines (sometimes called dead labor), they would have to reduce wages to keep up their rate of profit since profit came only from surplus value extracted from labor. They would also be able to reduce wages because replacing workers with machines



Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the father of modern communism. His work as a philosopher, political thinker, and economist has made him one of the single most influential thinkers of all time. Born in Germany, Marx spent much of his life in England studying contemporary society and actively working for revolution. In association with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), he published their famous call for revolution, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in 1848. He published the first volume of his study of contemporary economics, *Capital*, in 1867; Engels undertook the publication of the other volumes. Today, every word that Marx wrote is carefully studied by a wide range of scholars and revolutionists for clues to his thought. (*Library of Congress*)

produced a pool of unemployed workers who must compete for whatever wages the capitalists choose to pay. Of course, the real reason that capitalists are constantly pushing down wages is to maximize profits, and Marx was certainly aware of that fact.

Hence Marx's major economic criticism revolved around the exploitation of the majority, the proletariat or workers, by the minority, the bourgeoisie or capitalists. His concern was not purely economic but was also centered on the extent to which the system kept proletarians from ever fulfilling their potentials as individuals. It was impossible for them to improve themselves in any way, and they were denied education and were thereby kept from any real understanding of their deplorable position.

The state was the tool of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, and was used to suppress, violently if necessary, any attempt by the proletariat to better themselves. To Marx and most other radical theorists of the day, the *state* referred to all those officials, such as the police, the army, bureaucrats, and so forth, who could be, and were, used to suppress the workers. In addition, Marx contended that as long as the bourgeoisie was the dominant class, the government would be its tool and could not be made responsive to the needs of other classes. Marx always saw the state or the government as the tool of the dominant class, whatever class that might be, and he believed the state would so remain as long as there was more than one class. For many radicals the state is the epitome of evil, the symbol of all that is bad about society. This is particularly true among the

anarchists and will be discussed in detail in the chapter on anarchism. This concept is also true of Marx and some of Marx's followers, particularly those prior to Lenin. This notion probably developed because the state, through the bureaucracy, the police, and the army, represents and controls the forces that oppose workers' demands. The history of the labor movement in the United States, for example, reveals the frequent use of the police, the army, and the National Guard to put down strikes, break up demonstrations, and, in general, oppose the labor movement.<sup>3</sup> Thus Marx's ultimate goal, Full Communism, has no state. In this he is similar to the anarchists.

The religious system was also in the hands of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, and Marx said religion was used to convince the proletariat that if they obeyed the state and their bosses they would be rewarded in another life. This is what Marx meant by his famous statement that religion is the opium of the people. The proletariat was lulled into accepting its way of life by the vision of heaven. This life might well be harsh, but, if the workers stood it for a brief time, they would be rewarded in the next life. Marx believed this kept the workers from actively seeking to change the system. In this way, the religious system was a major focus of Marx's criticisms of contemporary society. He saw religion used by the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, to hold the proletariat in its downtrodden position. As a result, Marx made many scathing attacks on religion and argued that the future society in which the proletariat would rule would have no need for religion. Also, of course, Marx's materialistic position was diametrically opposed to any idea of religion. At the same time, it must be recognized that Marx argued that religion contains the highest expression of the ethical sense of people. The fact that the institution of the church and the beliefs of the masses were used to control people did not mean that Marx rejected all aspects of the content of religious belief.

The state and the religious system were both part of what Marx called the *superstructure*. They were not fundamental economic structures of society; they were a reflection of the relations of production and would change as these relations changed. Thus, as class antagonism was overcome, both the state and religion would begin to disappear.

The capitalist system degraded workers in all of their relationships. Since they had to fight against others of their own class for bare subsistence, they could never hope to establish any sort of valid relationship with another person. For example, Engels wrote bitterly of the effect capitalism had on marriage and the family. To him, the family system of his day was a repetition of the class struggle. The husband symbolized the bourgeoisie and the wife, the proletariat. The contemporary marriage system under capitalism was monogamy supplemented by adultery and prostitution, and it could not change until capitalism ceased to exist. The contemporary marriage system had originated as an institution of private property at about the same time private property in land and goods had originated. It developed in order to ensure that a man's property would be

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<sup>3</sup>For studies from differing viewpoints, see John R. Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: Kelly, 1955), and Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1934).

handed on to his sons. The only way this could be done was to endow the sons of one woman with a particular legal status. This did not limit the man's relationships with other women; it supposedly limited the wife's relationships with other men. In practice, as shown by the incidence of adultery, this latter proscription did not work. It failed because of "individual sex-love." Sometime after the development of monogamous marriage, there developed the tendency to find one sex-love partner and no other. This could, of course, occur after marriage, and it explained the existence of adultery. But, as will be seen later, it also provided the basis for the true monogamous marriage, which Marx believed would develop after the revolution.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to see how many of Marx's criticisms of capitalism stemmed from the concerns found in his early writings. He was also impressed by Engels's description of the position of industrial workers in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), which depicted the extreme poverty in which the workers lived and the dehumanizing lives they led as mere extensions of the machines they tended.

Thus both Marx and Engels saw capitalism as destroying the humanity of the workers and the bourgeoisie, since wage slavery was degrading to both buyer and seller. Marx and Engels set out to understand capitalism, to destroy it, and to found a new, better world in its place.

### Philosophical Basis—Materialism

For Marx, general theoretical positions must always be related to the concrete, material world and vice versa. Questions of theory are never separated from practice; they are always closely related.

The basis of Marx's philosophy is found in the influence of the conditions of life on people. Although Marx did not develop the basis of this notion thoroughly himself, he once spelled out in capsule form the fundamental thesis, saying it "served as the guiding thread in my studies." Although the jargon is a bit difficult to follow, it is best to have this statement in Marx's own words; it summarizes thoroughly his basic ideas. The meaning will become clearer later.

In the social production of their means of existence men enter into definite, necessary relations which are independent of their will, productive relationships which correspond to a definite state of development of their material productive forces. The aggregate of these productive relationships constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a juridical and political superstructure arises, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social condition that

<sup>4</sup>Engels discussed the family at length in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1985). For a modern Marxist commentary, see Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971).

determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing productive relationships within which they had moved before. From forms of development of the productive forces these relationships are transformed into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution opens. With the change in the economic foundation the whole vast superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.<sup>5</sup>

The fundamental point, which is a truism today, is that the way people think is greatly affected by the way they live. As was noted in the introduction, the whole process known as socialization is the means by which an individual gains the values of his or her particular society. The point made there was that an individual, by her or his position in life economically, socially, and so forth, and by family and religious background, educational experiences, and such daily influences as the mass media, is presented with a picture or a group of pictures of the world that helps form his or her basic value system. In other words, the way an individual lives does quite clearly affect the way she or he thinks.

But the point generally accepted today is not quite the same as the point Marx was making. Marx argued that the forms taken by the law, religion, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and so forth, which he called the *superstructure*, are largely determined by the economic structure and processes of society.

Marx is often, with considerable truth, called an economic determinist, and taken at face value, that is the meaning of the phrase "their social condition . . . determines their consciousness." But earlier in the same passage Marx uses the word *conditions* instead of *determines*. In the simplest formulation, Marx can be read as saying there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the economic structure of society and the superstructure. However, Marx thinks of interactions, not simple cause-and-effect relationships. In this case there is a continuing interaction between economic structure and superstructure, where changes in one produce changes in the other back and forth constantly. Marx's analysis is an analysis of a continuing process of change, with all aspects of both the economic structure and the superstructure constantly interacting. The economic structure is the driving force of social and intellectual change, but it is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship, even though Marx can be, has been, and still is read as a simple economic determinist.

The distinction here is a subtle but important one. For Marx, economic relationships are the most important factor determining the social forms produced at any time and place; but these economic relationships interact with some aspects of the superstructure, opening up possibilities for changes in economic relationships that will then produce further changes in the superstructure, and so on. Thus Marx is almost a simple determinist, but not quite.

Today, based in large part on the original insights of Marx, we tend to say

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<sup>5</sup>Karl Marx, "Preface," in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. T. Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), pp. 11–12.

that economic relationships are among the most important factors influencing the social and intellectual forms produced, but they are not always the most important factors.

In developing his materialistic approach, Marx was attacking a school of German philosophy known as idealism. Its major exponent had been Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and it was particularly against Hegel that Marx directed his attack. Hegel's ideas and the diverse influence they had on Marx are a complex subject and cannot be explored thoroughly here. But some attempt at explanation must be made because Hegel's influence on Marx, both in what Marx accepted and what he rejected, was so great. Hegel's basic proposition, from Marx's viewpoint, was the existence of an Absolute Spirit—sometimes Hegel called it God—that gradually revealed more and more of itself as higher and higher stages of human freedom. In Hegel's philosophy the ideal and the material, or concrete, as he called it, were intimately connected, but not as cause and effect. The two were closely bound together, each influencing the other, even though ultimately the ideal was more important than the material.

Marx directed his main attack against Hegel's idealism. As Marx put it, he set Hegel on his feet by emphasizing the material rather than the ideal. Marx, of course, stressed economic relationships in his definition of the material, rather than physical nature or the like. By stressing the material, Marx was able to argue that his position was scientific (Marx's approach is often called *scientific socialism*)<sup>6</sup> because matter, the material, is subject to objective scientific analysis and laws; it behaves in a predictable manner. Marx was one of the first to argue that economics could be treated scientifically, that it followed certain laws. He also contended history followed certain patterns and these patterns could be discovered and projected into the future. Marx did not claim he could predict the future with certainty; he simply argued that, if conditions continued as they were at the present, certain things would probably happen in the future. If conditions changed, which they did (Marx had argued that they probably would not), the future would be different. Since they did change even within his lifetime, some of Marx's positions changed. Finally, it must be noted that Marx believed history was moving not only to a different stage but also to a better one.

**Dialectical materialism.** The pattern Marx found in history, which he thought was a basic tool of analysis, was the dialectic. Hegel, too, had argued that history was moving to different and better stages; he also used the dialectic as his basic tool of analysis.

Marx's position is sometimes referred to as *dialectical materialism*. The dialectic seems to have originated in ancient Greece as a means of attaining truth through a process of questions and answers. In answer to an original question, such as the meaning of courage, beauty, justice, or the like, a position is stated.

<sup>6</sup>The best statement of this argument is still Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880). Many editions are available.

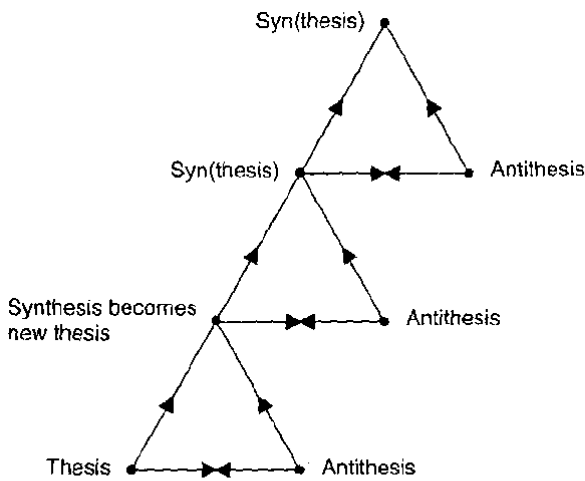


Figure 7-1 The dialectic.

The questioner then criticizes this position through the question-and-answer process until an opposite or significantly different position is taken. Then, by a continuation of the process, an attempt is made to arrive at the truth contained in both positions. The process is then continued until all are satisfied that the correct answer has been reached. The most famous illustrations of this process can be found in the dialogues of Plato, such as the *Republic*.

Marx took the dialectic from Hegel, who argued that all ideas develop through this dialectical process of thesis (first position), antithesis (second position), and synthesis (truth of the opposites), which becomes a new thesis, and, thus, continues the process. Figure 7-1 represents the most common and simple way of picturing the process. This illustration shows us something of what both Hegel and Marx are saying. Starting at the bottom with the original thesis (first position), we see its “opposite” antithesis (second position). This opposition is not one of complete difference; it is produced from the thesis in one of two ways, which are spelled out in the first two laws of the dialectic.

1. *The transformation of quantity into quality.* Changes in degree gradually produce a change in quality or kind. The usual example is the change in water from a solid (ice), to a liquid, to a gas. The changes Hegel had in mind were more basic, say  $H_2O$  to  $H_2O_2$ . In this process the combination of oxygen and hydrogen first produces  $H_2O$ , which is totally different from either hydrogen or oxygen. The continued addition of oxygen produces  $H_2O_2$ , which is again different.
2. *Unity or identity of opposites.* Contradictions in the thesis become the antithesis. Thus the opposites are actually similar since they are composed of similar elements. In addition, the thesis and antithesis become unified, differently, in the synthesis. This unification of the thesis and the antithesis is produced through the third law of the dialectic.
3. *Negation of the negation.* Contradictions continue to accumulate until another qualitative change occurs and the synthesis is reached. The synthe-

sis, or the unity of the opposites, is a qualitative change, as was the original step from the thesis to the antithesis. In other words, a new position is reached that is not simply the combination of the thesis and antithesis. In a similar way, chemists sometimes speak of synthesizing a new product from two or more products. Thus water (H<sub>2</sub>O) is a synthesis of two parts hydrogen with one part oxygen to produce a product that is significantly different from the original components. The synthesis is then treated as a new product, and the process continues in the same manner. These three laws are often neglected or slighted by students of Marx, but, as will be seen later, they help to provide an understanding of the pattern taken by his analysis of history.

Marx did not attempt to apply the dialectic systematically to the material world. Some of his followers, such as Engels and Lenin, tried to view nature as changing dialectically and spoke vaguely of scientific laws operating dialectically, but these attempts were not very successful.<sup>7</sup>

The general form of the dialectic is the interaction and intermingling of ideas, beliefs, and positions, not the specific form used here as an example of the dialectic. The dialectic is a way of understanding the constant interaction that characterizes the world. For a particularly relevant example, none of the ideologies presented here is, by itself, an accurate reflection of the world, but, on the other hand, each of them has something valuable to contribute to the understanding of how people behave. Ideological positions constantly interact in the world and are changed by that interaction. This very complex constant interaction and change is a more accurate description of the dialectic.

**Historical materialism.** Marx applied the dialectic to his interpretation of history. Since any change in the economic system is reflected in changes in the entire superstructure, Marx argued that it would be possible to interpret all history from this perspective. He also contended it might be possible to make some general statements about the future on the same basis. Marx did not say he could predict the future. He said there were patterns in history that would in all probability continue into the future. Thus an understanding of history should make it possible to argue that if conditions remain the same, certain things are likely to take place in the future.

Although Marx contended economics is an exact science and is basic to an understanding of his scientific socialism, he nowhere clearly and unambiguously defined the most important element in his economics, the *modes of production*. Most of the time they consist of (1) available natural resources and (2) productive techniques. At times Marx includes the organization of production as a third element, but this is more properly part of the superstructure.

Natural resources become available as we learn how to use them. Human

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<sup>7</sup>The student who is interested in these attempts should consult the following work: Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. and ed. Clemens Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1940). For a more recent consideration, see Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

knowledge is basic to both of the modes of production; this illustrates the interactive nature of Marx's materialism. Tools and knowledge grow together, each improvement in tools adding to knowledge and each improvement in knowledge making it possible to improve tools. Through this process more natural resources become available for use, and techniques of production change.

As humans gain knowledge of the uses of natural resources, their modes of production change, and they begin to develop more tools and manufacturing processes. They begin to produce pottery or weave baskets; they learn to form metals into tools and weapons. These changes in turn lead to further changes in both the modes of production and the superstructure.

Changes in productive techniques are brought about because previous changes were made. In other words, each development sets the stage for a further development. Also, major changes in productive techniques, such as the shift from herding to agriculture, produce major changes in the organization of the society and in the belief system of that society. In the case cited, Marx is right. If we look at any civilization where we know the pattern, we can see that the change from herding to agriculture was accompanied by changes in the political, religious, and social system, as different activities became important. Although the change from herding to agriculture is an obvious case where major changes in productive techniques do change the organization of society, and specifically the political system of that society, Marx is probably correct in assuming that any such major change produces a major change in society. It is again obviously true that the change from a predominantly agricultural society to a predominantly industrial society has produced many far-reaching changes in contemporary society, and many argue that similar far-reaching changes will occur as production becomes more and more highly automated.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the superstructure is a set of relations of production, or property relations. These constitute the second key to Marx's theory of history. Property relations in Marx's terminology refer to the ownership of the means of production: land, factories, and so on. These property relations change more slowly than do the modes of production, and thereby a conflict is formed that can be solved only by a change in the property relations. This point is important for an understanding of Marx's analysis of the changes in history and his criticism of contemporary society. Marx argued that property relations evolve more slowly than modes of production, and property relations will not change to meet changing needs. Since his analysis states that property relations are a product of the modes of production, it is clear that it is the property relations that must change to meet the new modes of production rather than the reverse. But, in the meantime, there is a tension between the modes of production and the property relations that is unresolved and cannot be resolved until the more slowly changing property relations have changed.

This tension produces conflict within society and is one of the major reasons for Marx's prediction of a revolution and his certainty that the proletariat will

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

win the revolution. According to Marx, the owners of property will not be willing to give up their ownership, even though that is dictated by a change in the modes of production. At the same time, they ultimately must give up such ownership because of the change in the modes of production. Thus one can see in operation the three laws of the dialectic mentioned above. There is the transformation of quantity into quality in the changes in the modes of production. There is the unity of opposites in the growing contradiction between the economic foundation and the superstructure. And, finally, there is the negation of the negation in arriving at the new synthesis of modes of production and superstructure.

In addition, Marx uses the dialectic in his concept of progress to higher and higher, or better and better, stages of society. This is an aspect of the idea of progress or the notion that the human race and society are inevitably moving to better things. An extremely popular idea in Marx's time, the idea of progress has fallen into disrepute today. Still, Marx's use of the idea of progress is worthy of some further consideration.

The idea of progress was not simply the notion of the world getting better and better every day in every way. Some believers in progress did think the world was constantly getting better and the human race had nothing to do with it. They argued that the world was moving in a straight line from some primitive state to some ultimate, perfect society in which everything would be good and beautiful; all people had to do was wait and things would get better. But most believers in progress did not accept this simple formulation. They believed that the world, although improving, constantly fell away from the line of progress into some sort of corruption, and then only by great effort, perhaps a revolution, could the world be brought back onto the correct path.

People could affect the path taken by the world in its gradual betterment both for good and evil. Marx seems to have assumed the world would gradually get better in spite of whatever humans did, but he contended that through concerted action people make a tremendous difference in the speed of improvement. Thus humanity's position would improve, but knowledgeable people such as Marx were in a position to recognize the direction that must be taken in order to achieve this.

### The Class Struggle

A central part of Marxism is the class struggle, a hypothesis Marx used to explain change. The class struggle is based on the contradiction between the modes of production and the relations of production; this contradiction produces the class struggle. Marx said that in the mid-nineteenth century the means of production were controlled by a class he called the *bourgeoisie*. This class did little if any work but reaped immense profits from its control of the means of production. The actual labor was done by a class Marx called the *proletariat*. The modes of production required the proletariat, but did not, according to Marx, require the bourgeoisie; therefore, a struggle between these two classes resulted. Each wished to control the means of production. For Marx there was no question

concerning the result—the proletariat was necessary, the bourgeoisie was not. Although both he and later Marxists applied the theory of the class struggle to all history. Marx argued that the best example of class struggle existed in the mid-nineteenth century, in which society was clearly split into these two classes, the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and the proletariat (workers).

It is important at the outset to be clear regarding the nature of classes and of these two classes in particular. Classes are economic in nature and are groups ordered according to their relationship to the nonhuman powers of production and to each other. The proletariat is the class that makes its living from the sale of its labor power. The bourgeoisie consists of the owners of the productive resources upon which the proletariat works. The bourgeoisie makes its living primarily from profit, interest, and rent, although it may earn some of its income from wages paid for managerial work and for the coordination of risk-taking ventures.

Many other smaller classes existed, but they were generally irrelevant to the unfolding conflict. In addition, Marx had a few problems with the manner in which he included certain groups within the class system. For example, he was always unclear as to exactly where the peasantry fit within his system. He often included the peasantry in a group loosely known as the *petite bourgeoisie* because they were landowners. At other times he split his definition of the peasantry into a variety of groups ranging from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, but he was never clear exactly where to place the group of peasantry who owned their land and worked it themselves. This problem of classification has plagued Marxist theorists ever since. No one is ever quite certain where to place the peasant. In addition to the peasantry, Marx also added at the bottom of his classification scheme another class called the *lumpenproletariat*, which was composed of the dregs of society, primarily thieves, bums, and the like. Marx never clarified whether it would be possible to include this group within the proletariat itself, but one would assume from his writings that he thought that at some point after the revolution it would be possible to incorporate the lumpenproletariat into the proletariat in the same way the bourgeoisie was to be incorporated.<sup>9</sup> For Marx in the nineteenth century, however, the most important classes were the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

## Revolution

The class struggle would ultimately produce a revolution, and Marx worked for that revolution, arguing that we must move beyond simply understanding society to changing it. Marx was a revolutionary because he believed a revolution was both necessary and inevitable. The revolution was to develop as a result of a series of crises capitalism was to experience. These failed to appear as regularly or as seriously as Marx had expected, and thus the revolution did not

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<sup>9</sup>For discussion of these problems, see John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx* (London: Longmans Green, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 293–300, and David Mitrany, *Marx Against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism* (New York: Collier Books, 1961).

develop. Some contemporary Marxists prefer to say it has not yet developed as anticipated.

In a small book entitled *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), Lenin attempted to show why these crises failed to occur as predicted. He argued that by colonizing and exploiting underdeveloped countries, the capitalists were temporarily able to stave off the crises. Colonial exploitation made it possible to pay workers slightly better by providing capitalists with:

1. Cheap raw materials;
2. Cheap labor; and
3. Markets for manufactured goods and excess capital.

Lenin believed imperialism merely postponed the revolution; it did not put it off permanently. It lulled the proletariat into believing revolution will not be necessary.<sup>10</sup>

This position is of particular relevance today, and some Marxists argue that Lenin's analysis was correct with the results only now developing. Cheap raw materials were provided for Western factories and higher wages were paid in the West by exporting exploitation to the colonies where very low wages were paid. Today, Third World countries are beginning to control their own resources and are insisting on high prices, in part because of past exploitation. Some contemporary Marxists argue that capitalism will now experience the crises that Marx had predicted and that Lenin argued had been put off temporarily through imperialism. According to this argument the capitalist system will collapse and the revolution will come. So far this has not happened, and in 1986 the price of raw materials dropped dramatically. Marxists argue that this is only temporary and caused by the capitalists, who still control the markets for the raw materials. Many interpret the Gulf War in this light, seeing it as a fight over the control of oil supplies. The popular slogan "No Blood for Oil" reflects this view, as does the commonly expressed feeling that without the oil there would have been no war and Kuwait would now be an integral part of Iraq.

In discussing the Marxian approach to revolution, it is instructive to distinguish between two different types of revolution—the political and the social. The political revolution takes place when political power is seized by the proletariat. The social revolution takes place later, first through changes made in the property relations of society and second as the superstructure adjusts to these changes.

Marx thought the political revolution would be violent, although he did allow for the possibility of peaceful change. The revolution would probably be violent for two reasons. First, Marx argued that achieving the synthesis would always be sudden; thus the gradualness implicit in peaceful change was ruled out by the dialectic. Second, the bourgeoisie would never agree

<sup>10</sup> Alfred G. Meyer provides an excellent analysis of Lenin's theory of imperialism and its implications. See Alfred G. Meyer, *Leninism* (New York: Praeger, 1962), chaps. xi and xii. See also the discussion of neocolonialism in chapter 10 of this book.

to its disappearance as a class and would force the proletariat into a violent revolution.

**Lenin.** Marx was a revolutionary. He believed revolution was necessary and good, and throughout his life he was involved in groups that tried to bring about revolutions in various countries. He was expelled from a number of countries for his activities. But it was his followers, particularly Lenin and Mao, who developed the tactics for and led successful communist revolutions.

Lenin's contribution was the development of the revolutionary party, which was an organizational weapon in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. Lenin argued that such a party was necessary because the proletariat was incapable of recognizing its role as the revolutionary class, whereas the party provided this necessary consciousness. As one scholar stated, "The party is conceived as the organization, incarnation, or institutionalization of class consciousness."<sup>11</sup> The party would be made up of those who had achieved this consciousness and had also become professional revolutionists. In the popular phrase, the party was to be the "vanguard of the proletariat"; it would point the way and lead the proletariat to its goal. The party would bring together the divided masses of workers and would express what they were truly feeling but were unable to express. It would mold them and unify them into a force for change.

Proletarians as individual members of a class would be unlikely to recognize their historic role. In the first place, they would be much too busy attempting to stay alive to be concerned with class questions. Second, very few would ever identify themselves as class members. Thus it would be left up to the few who became aware, the party members, to prepare for the great role the proletariat would play.

The importance of Lenin's party is found in the idea of the professional revolutionary and in the organizational principle of *democratic centralism*. Although the party would be composed of a small conspiratorial group of professional revolutionists, Lenin believed it should develop contacts throughout the society as a whole, since no revolution could be successful without the support of, or at least little direct opposition from, the largest part of the population of the country. This meant that the party members would have to have a variety of organizational skills. They would have to be experts at agitation and propaganda. Since they had to be able to establish and maintain a vast network of "front" organizations throughout the country, they would have to be expert administrators. Ideally, prior to the revolution, the majority of the population should be organized into a variety of these groups that would also provide the basis for organization once the revolution succeeded. In addition, the party members would have to prepare constantly for the revolution, since it would come only when the masses suddenly revolted against their oppressors.

The party might light the spark that set the masses afire, but the spark might come anywhere, anytime, and the party had to be ready to ride the revolution into power. The theory of the spark was important to Lenin. One of his news-

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<sup>11</sup>Meyer, pp. 31-33.



Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924, born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) was a follower of Karl Marx. He is remembered primarily as the leader of the successful Bolshevik section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and as the first leader of the USSR, which he headed from the time of the Russian revolution in 1917 to his death. He was a major theorist of revolution as well as one of its successful practitioners. His books *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904) presented the case for a highly disciplined body of revolutionists as the only approach to a successful revolution. His *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) and *State and Revolution* (1918) were his major contributions to Marxist theory. (*Library of Congress*)

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papers was called *The Spark (Iskra)*, and he often referred to the necessity of some incident igniting the masses. In fact, the 1991 coup in the then Soviet Union fits Lenin's analysis. Lenin believed it was possible for the party to produce the necessary conditions for a revolution, but he believed it was impossible to be absolutely sure when the revolution would come. Hence the party had to always be prepared for the revolution to come at an unexpected time, perhaps even at a time that was not favorable to the party.

The principle of organization making all this possible is democratic centralism. This principle combines freedom of discussion with centralized control and responsibility. Before any decision is made by the party, there should be complete freedom to dissent; after the decision is made, it must be accepted unanimously. Lenin believed this principle could work because all party members started from a position of agreement regarding goals. In practice, freedom of discussion was often forgotten. Democratic centralism would also serve as the principle of organization in the period immediately following the revolution, which will be discussed more completely later.

As a technique of revolutionary organization, democratic centralism has important characteristics. In planning a revolution, care must be taken to organize in order to act at a moment's notice. Everyone must also be able to act in a completely concerted manner without disagreements or squabbles over what is to be done now and what is to be done later, or arguments about the correct

techniques of taking over the government or who is to do this or that at a particular moment. It is essential there be complete agreement among the revolutionists over the techniques of the revolution and the organization of society immediately after the successful revolution. Democratic centralism provides this by giving the leaders complete control over the actions of the revolutionists and at the same time allowing all members of the party to participate freely and openly in the process of reaching the appropriate decisions. Again, democratic centralism has usually been used in ways that stressed centralism.

**Mao Zedong.** Other Marxist theorists have also contributed to the tactics of revolution. For example, Mao Zedong's (1893–1976) theory of guerrilla warfare is also an organizational weapon. Mao's theory can be divided into two parts, the strictly military principles and some political principles derived from one of the military principles. Militarily, Mao developed what are now the commonly recognized principles of guerrilla warfare. These stress a hit-and-run approach, fighting only when fairly certain of victory, and keeping constant pressure on the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mao, this style of fighting requires a territorial base where the guerrillas will be virtually free from attack so they will be able to rest, train, and so on. In order to achieve this, they must have the positive support of the people in that area. This support is gained by: (1) establishing a peasant government; (2) allowing the peasants to redistribute the land; and (3) helping the peasants in whatever rebuilding activities they undertake. The territorial base will provide food, manpower, and, perhaps most important, experience in organization. The network of tunnels used by the Vietcong during the Vietnam War provided a similar resting place. Thus Mao's theory of guerrilla warfare fulfills the same function as Lenin's theory of the revolutionary party. Mao's tactics are designed with the same purposes in mind as Lenin's strategies.

### **Dictatorship of the Proletariat**

Marx envisioned a brief transitional period after the revolution, known as the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This stage was to be characterized by the consolidation of the power of the proletariat through the gradual disappearance of the bourgeoisie and the minor classes as they become part of the proletariat.

The bourgeoisie and the other classes would be given jobs that would, over time, change their outlook and make them good members of the proletariat. The dictatorship of the proletariat would be the period in which the superstructure would change to adjust to the socialist mode of production. Loosely, the dictatorship of the proletariat should have the following characteristics:

1. Distribution of income according to labor performed,
2. Gradual disappearance of classes,
3. The state in the hands of the proletariat,

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<sup>12</sup>Mao Zedong, *Selected Works* (Beijing, China: Foreign Language Press, 1961), vol. 4, pp. 161–162.

4. Increasing productivity,
5. Increasing socialist consciousness—people work with few incentives,
6. Increasing equality,
7. A command economy, and
8. The economy managed by the state.

All of these characteristics were expected to change fairly rapidly, and the dictatorship of the proletariat was to be brief. In practice, no country that has followed Marx's ideas has moved beyond the dictatorship of the proletariat, but a number of countries are in what they call the dictatorship of the proletariat. Contrary to Marx, this "transitional" period does not seem to focus on the economic system. One could almost say the dictatorship of the proletariat as practiced is based on the political system with all else as superstructure rather than being based on the economic system.

Marx refused to make specific predictions about the future. He argued that the new social forms of the future would be created by people who had themselves been shaped by new experiences. Those socialized in the old, bad society could have no notion of what the new, better society would look like except in the most general sense; therefore, Marx never described the dictatorship of the proletariat in any detail. In addition, the dictatorship of the proletariat was to be a short period of transition and would be characterized more by change than by stable institutions. Still, it is possible to say something about the society of the dictatorship of the proletariat because Marx gave enough suggestions to allow some elaboration on the eight points listed previously.

During the dictatorship of the proletariat, the state, as always, will be the tool of the dominant class (in this case the proletariat). The state will be used to achieve a number of related goals. First, the economic system will be reorganized; the means of production must be taken from the capitalists and become the property of the state. The state must also establish a new way of administering the means of production so that the economy is kept running and goods produced, distributed, and consumed. As part of this process, the workers will all become employes of the state (public employees) and will be paid by the state on the basis of the quantity and quality of the work they perform, just as they had been by the previous owners. These previous owners and all other members of the bourgeoisie and the other classes will gradually be absorbed into the proletariat. They will be given jobs, and working for a living will resocialize them into the proletariat's way of thought and belief.

Together these show the operation of a command economy managed by a state in the hands of the proletariat, distribution of income on the basis of work performed, and the gradual disappearance of classes. With the gradual disappearance of classes, there should be greater productivity since there will be more workers available, no unproductive bourgeoisie, and no profit. As a result, equality will increase, and people will become more aware of their roles in society and will require fewer incentives to work.

The dictatorship of the proletariat, it can be seen, represents a unified view of a society in a period of transition. All these factors must be thought of as in change. Some things will change quickly; others will change much more slowly. In practice, of course, a command economy was established that was managed by the state, but in no communist country has the state ever been in the hands of the proletariat, and none of the other changes has occurred. No communist country has even come close to the goals of the dictatorship of the proletariat, let alone the next, and final stage—Full Communism.

### Full Communism

The changes in contemporary communism brought about by the fusion of nationalism, the early writings of Marx, and existentialism have given rise to a resurgence of utopian thinking by Marxists. But they have not significantly changed the characteristics of Marx's ideal system, Full or Pure Communism. Full Communism has the following characteristics:

1. Distribution of income according to need, no longer according to labor performed.
2. No classes.
3. The state withers away.
4. Very high productivity, so that there is plenty for all.
5. High socialist consciousness—people work without incentives.
6. More equality but not absolute equality.
7. No money.
8. A command economy.
9. The economy managed by a free and equal association of producers.
10. The differences between occupations disappear, so that there is no social distinction between town and country.
11. Each person does about as much physical as intellectual labor.
12. The system, as Stalin was the first to show, is worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

Full Communism is the goal of the entire system, the utopia or better society toward which all else is aimed. Its general characteristics are not much different from the utopias created by a variety of other socialists throughout the centuries, but some of these characteristics are worth further mention.

The economic aspects of Full Communism are outlined above, and the major similarities and differences between it and the dictatorship of the proletariat are illustrated. The command economy still exists, but it is no longer

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<sup>13</sup>Adapted slightly and reprinted by permission of the author and the publishers from P. J. D. Wiles, *The Political Economy of Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, © 1962, by Basic Blackwell & Mott Ltd.), pp. 332–333. See also Howard J. Sherman, "The Economics of Pure Communism," *Soviet Studies* 22 (July 1970); 24–36.

controlled by the state. Marx was primarily concerned with abolishing exploitation, and in Full Communism there are no exploiters, only workers. With the exploiters gone and the people working without incentives, there should be plenty so that all can be rewarded according to need.

The most direct effect of a change to Full Communism would be on the social stratification and mobility systems. Since classes would no longer exist and since no distinction would be made among types of labor, there should be little social stratification. In the classless or single-class society, there would be no basis for any significant distinctions among people. *Significant* for Marx meant economic, and he did not foresee a complete leveling. Individual differences would remain, but they no longer would be detrimental to the individual or the society as they had been under capitalism and all the other socioeconomic systems preceding it. Occupational mobility would be increased greatly, since an individual would be able to move freely among positions.

Marx envisioned other significant changes in the social system. There would, of course, be no religion. There would be education for all. All crime would disappear because there would be no reason for it. With the coming of Full Communism, prostitution and adultery would disappear, and the monogamous family would become a reality. The new family would be based on a love-sex relationship that Marx believed could have only one focus. At the same time, he wanted to free women from housework. A Marxist scholar has suggested that under Full Communism there will be a change from personal housekeeping functions, such as cooking and cleaning, to public or communal services, thus freeing women to choose among occupations in the same way men can.<sup>14</sup>

With the coming of the classless society, the state would no longer be necessary and would disappear. It would be replaced by "the administration of things," which means the economic system would have to be organized and somebody would have to administer it. It would be administered by "a free and equal association of producers" that would have the authority to direct, according to the needs of the people, what should be produced and in what amounts and how it should be distributed. This "free and equal association of producers" could conceivably take a wide variety of forms, depending on the size of the territory and the complexity of the industries within the territory. Most such associations would undoubtedly take some such pattern as follows. A committee would be selected, probably by election, that would collect data on the productive capacity of the region and the needs of the people. It would then establish priorities and goals for the various manufacturing plants, farms, and craft industries. This assumes an economy based on abundance and, thus, would be more concerned with collecting accurate data on needs than with establishing priorities. The process would be continuous, and certainly the composition of the

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<sup>14</sup>E. G. Balagushkin, "The Building of Communism and the Evolution of Family and Marital Relations," *Soviet Sociology* 1 (Winter 1962/1963): 43. Originally published in 1962 in *Voprosy Filosofii*. For

committee would change periodically. The committee would hold no coercive power, still assuming abundance, and would merely administer the economy.

This is the goal of Marxism. Many Communists today believe Full Communism will never come. Others believe it is still possible. But, whichever position one takes, it illustrates some of the appeal communism has had and will continue to have in the future.

### **Alternative Marxist Traditions**

As mentioned earlier, an alternative tradition within Marxism emphasizes decentralist and humanitarian aspects of Marx's thought. The line of authoritarianism that Lenin developed was only successful after an intellectual and political struggle, and even Lenin regularly expressed reservations about the direction he took. But the centralization of authority that took place under Joseph Stalin (original name Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, 1879–1953) became the model for all communist countries and could be justified within the writings of Marx and Lenin. Lenin had rejected Stalin as his successor, but Stalin won the struggle for power after Lenin's death.

Those who lost the early struggle with Lenin, however, remained influential in Western Europe. Revisionists like Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) argued for an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary Marxism. Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919) was a revolutionary Marxist who rejected the antidemocratic activities of Lenin.

Other opponents of the emphasis on centralism emerged in various countries. Two of the most important were Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) of Italy and Anton Pannekoek (1873–1960) of the Netherlands.

**Antonio Gramsci.** Gramsci was an advocate of democracy within factories. For example, he proposed that each factory be organized into workshops and each workshop into work crews based on similar skills. Each work crew would elect one of their number as delegate. These delegates would meet and elect an executive committee, and, in a federal structure above the individual factories, elected representatives from the various factories in the area would meet in a variety of groupings. This system is democratic centralism with the emphasis on democracy.

**Anton Pannekoek and Council Communism.** Anton Pannekoek went considerably further than Gramsci. He suggested that what has been called Full Communism be taken seriously and that there be no governing authority. The councils that he proposed would not be able to require obedience from the people. In this Pannekoek was very close to the type of federal communist anarchism described by Pyotr Kropotkin and discussed in the next chapter.

Marxists like Gramsci and Pannekoek provided the basis for the continuation of an alternative Marxist tradition, one that has continued among Western European and American Marxist theoreticians, and, until recently, among Eastern European Marxists.

**The Frankfurt School.** The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923, and, under the leadership of Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), it became the foremost center in the West for Marxist research. The school is most noted for the development of *critical theory*, a general theory that views society from the point of view of the need to change it. Marx saw himself as always being both a social theorist and a revolutionary or someone who believed in the need to transform society. In his famous “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach,” he even emphasized that change was more important than theory: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”<sup>15</sup>

Although there was great variety among the members, the Frankfurt School’s most influential members have been Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) and Jürgen Habermas (1929– ). Marcuse combined the insights of Marx with those of Sigmund Freud to develop a vision of a nonrepressive society in his *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). He greatly influenced the New Left. Habermas has focused on the concept of rationality as the basis of his theory. He has worked to develop a broad-based concept of rationality as a means of criticizing contemporary culture and as the foundation for positive social change.

**Ernst Bloch.** Bloch (1885–1977) was a German Marxist philosopher who emphasized the utopian aspects of Marxism. In his magnum opus *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*) (1959) and other works, Bloch explored the various manifestations of hope in human history. He argued that the desire for betterment must be brought back to the center of Marxist thought as the real engine of social change. With the recent translation of his works into English, Bloch’s writings are beginning to influence contemporary Marxist thought. Earlier Bloch had influenced the development of Liberation Theology.<sup>16</sup>

## CURRENT TRENDS

Communism has disappeared as the official ruling force in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It still exists in China, Cuba, and Vietnam and among numerous parties and groups throughout the world, including dominant parties with new names but the same leaders in parts of Eastern Europe. But, in general, communism as we have known it is coming to an end. Therefore, it seems appropriate to ask, what happened?

The central problem is that the supposedly short-lived dictatorship of the proletariat, during which the various classes of capitalism were to become one

<sup>15</sup>Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 5: 5. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>16</sup>Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1986.)

class, became permanent and became a dictatorship in the name of the proletariat but not actually of the proletariat. As Milovan Djilas (1911–1995) pointed out in *The New Class*,<sup>17</sup> communism simply replaced capitalist bosses with burocratic bosses who ruled in their own interest rather than in the interest of the proletariat. Some have actually called communism *state capitalism* as a result.

Other problems include the fact that it is almost literally impossible to manage all the details of an economy from the center. As a result, many inefficiencies were built into the Soviet economy, gradually developing into the total breakdown we now see. On the other hand, central planning and control worked in the rebuilding of the Soviet Union after World War II and in their space program. We should not forget that it was the Soviet Union that put the first person into space.

The partial demise of communism does not mean the end of Marxism. In the first place, the demise is partial in part because the inability of capitalism to rapidly overcome the failures of communist regimes has led many people in former communist countries to regret the passing of communism and to vote for the former communists, now under new names. Although no informed person expected capitalism to quickly correct communism's legacy, the fact is that many people believed it would, and self-serving anti-communists oversold capitalism. The required restructuring of the economies involved means that many people are significantly worse off than they were under communism: jobs have been lost; pensions have been radically reduced by inflation; and social services and health care that people relied upon have disappeared. Thus it is no surprise that former communists are being elected to office.

Second, Marxism remains a powerful tool for understanding social relations and social change, and many thinkers still find the Marxist critique of capitalism to contain considerable truth. Social classes largely based on economic power remain even though Marxist and other theoreticians have been arguing for some time that this class analysis needs to be complicated by adding such factors as gender and race. In this and other ways, Marxist thinkers are still contributing significantly to our understanding of the world around us.

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