

Karl Marx: gravedigger of the capitalist class

Terrell Carver

Karl Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, Germany (then part of Prussia) to Jewish parents who later converted to Lutheranism. He studied at Bonn, Berlin and Jena, where he gained his doctorate, and then embarked on a career of radical journalism and political writing, often in collaboration with Friedrich Engels. He eventually settled in London where he wrote *Das Kapital*, and this and the *Communist Manifesto* are now among the most widely published, translated and distributed works the world has ever known. He died in London in 1883.

Marx's lifetime coincided with those decades of the nineteenth century in which the new technology of modern industry reshaped the physical and social world in Europe and North America, and made inroads elsewhere. In his work Marx drew on the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the socialism just developing in France and England. His political outlook was revolutionary, as befitted a radical of the 1840s and participant in the stirring events of 1848. Twentieth-century politics bears the unmistakable imprint of Marx's critical scorn for capitalist society and his advocacy of a communist alternative.

Karl Marx was the political theorist of capitalism. His dedication to this subject over the forty years 1843–1883 was truly astonishing. No one has come remotely near Marx's achievements: a general theory of society and social change, and a special theory of capitalist society. An examination of those theories does not lead us away from politics towards economics, but to a new conception of the economy as highly political and of politics as crucially structured by economic activity. Marx was as unmoved by the tradition of academic territoriality in studying man and society as he was by the political territoriality of the nation-state when he took part in the international workers' movement.

For Marx, what happens in the workplace is quintessentially political for the individual and, in 'hitherto existing society', for his rulers. For the individual and society alike the very business

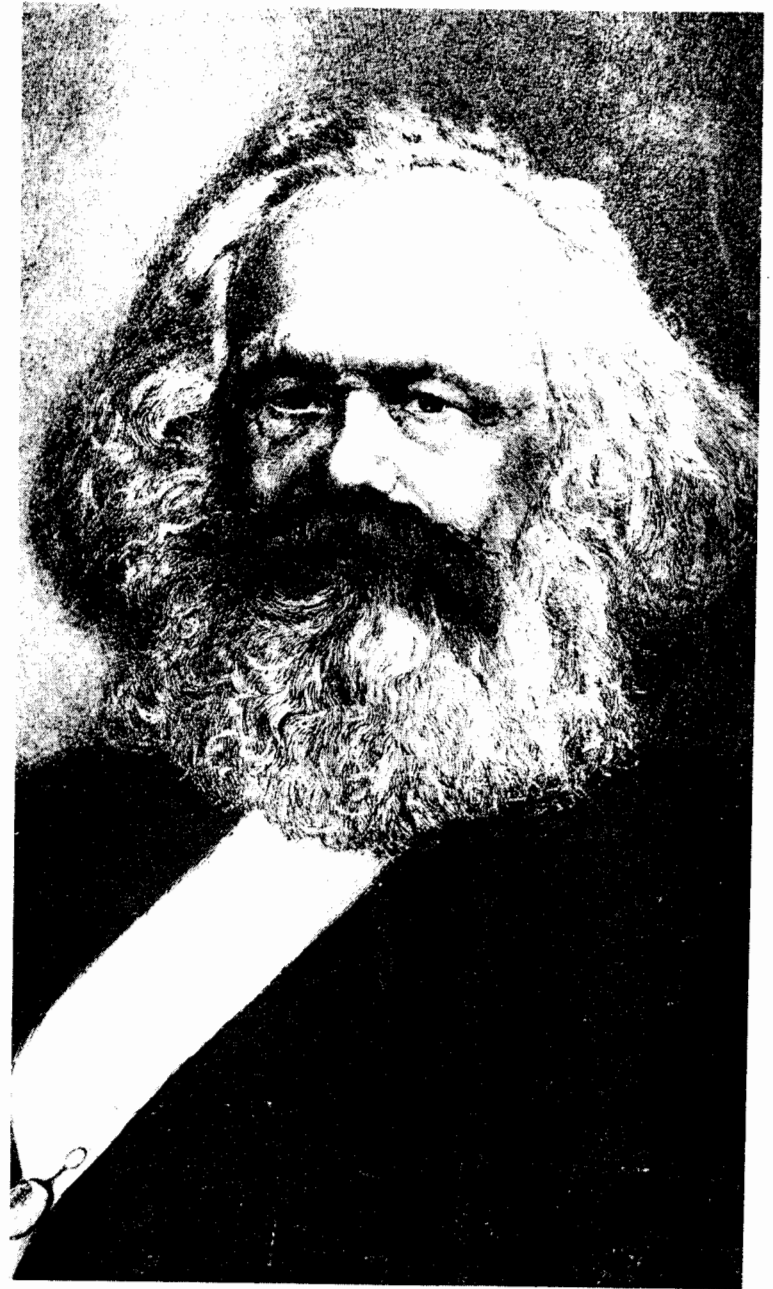
of getting a living – production, consumption, exchange and distribution – is the structure within which personal and national politics are played out, and the way in which these economic activities are organised is itself political, malleable and contentious.

Marx's mid-nineteenth-century world was in the first throes of the technological development and social change so vividly described in the classic *Communist Manifesto* (published in 1848):

Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?

Marx was pre-eminently the political theorist of capitalist development: the introduction of new technologies, new forms of social organisation, and new values and expectations into societies all around the world that were quite unprepared for the shock. The stress of economic and social change in these societies was enormous, as it still is in comparable societies today. When national economies are restructured, so political strain increases; leaders and led appeal for guidance. It is no accident that Marx is most influential in countries where modern technology in production and western patterns of consumption have been recently introduced, or are still developing, because it was this process of rapid economic expansion and social re-organisation that interested him and absorbed his intellectual energies.

Marx openly identified himself with the cause of industrial workers in the new industries and with the oppressed in society generally, yet his own work, so he said, was to be scrupulously scientific; interesting to academic specialists, employing their standards of rigour and surpassing them in political awareness. Marx's social science developed from his political orientation, and he himself popularised his analysis of capitalism for working-class audiences in the lectures *Wage Labour and Capital* (published in 1849) and *Value, Price, and Profit* (written in 1865). This combination of political commitment and scientific analysis lacks the detachment and neutrality that we have, since Marx's time, come to associate with scientific work; scientists, whether social or natural, are properly concerned, in the modern



Karl Marx (1818–1883)

view, with the facts, not values. For Marx, a value-free consideration of society or of any of its aspects would be no consideration at all, as values are themselves intrinsic to the subject matter and to the scientist. At the very least his work has the merit of leaving us in no doubt why he undertook it and what precisely it was for. Even for a reader who does not share his political sentiments, Marx's work on society, social change and capitalism can be illuminating precisely because his commitment led him deeper and deeper into the mechanics, even (as he claimed) the fundamental logic of our society. Marx's scientific work, on his own terms, was never intended to stifle further inquiry.

Practically nothing in Marx's background and early life would presage for us his career and achievements. He was born in 1818 in Trier in the German Rhineland. While his family was Jewish, his father converted to Lutheranism in order to preserve his career as a lawyer. The Rhineland and Marx's family were both politically liberal by the standards of the time, and Karl had formal academic training leading to university as well as informal education in literature, philosophy and politics from, among others, his future father-in-law, who lived close by.

It is worth remembering, however, that adolescent liberalism does not lead inevitably to the radicalism and communism that Marx espoused by the time he was twenty-five; many liberals become conservative as they grow older and take a self-interested view of their prospects and careers. Conversely, revolutionaries and communists have sprung just as readily from strictly conservative backgrounds; Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), Marx's friend and occasional co-author, is a prime example.

During Marx's university years, 1835–1841, he became associated with liberal intellectuals dissatisfied with the conservatism of the Prussian monarchy. To the hierarchy, censorship, Christianity, and inherited wealth stressed by the regime, they opposed the egalitarian doctrines of the rights of man and the citizen, representative and responsible government, toleration of religious practice and scepticism, and freedom of the press. This was a revolutionary programme in conservative eyes, and steps were taken by the state to make sure that academic careers were closed to such free-thinking radicals and that the universities were purged of their teachings. The liberals themselves drew a philosophical validation for their views from an imaginative reading of G W F Hegel (1770–1831), whose abstruse and highly ambiguous philosophy, originally published from 1807

and then collected in a major edition begun in the 1830s, had come to dominate German intellectual life. Hegel dedicated himself to revealing how rationality manifests itself in every aspect of the world, including politics. Those who saw in Hegel's work an implicit criticism of the existing order and a critical method that transcended his conservative views were known as Young Hegelians, and Marx's formative intellectual experience took place in this political context.

In his own autobiographical sketch (published in 1859 in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) Marx introduced the reader to his life and work with only a passing reference to his university career (and none to the Young Hegelian milieu) by giving pride of place to his first important job: the editorship of the liberal newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung* published in Cologne. That the twenty-four-year-old Marx was made editor is in itself an indication of the troubles the paper endured in promoting the cautious liberalism favoured by its commercial backers but steering clear of the conservative censorship imposed by provincial authorities. During the six months before the paper finally closed (in March 1843), Marx experienced for the first time the 'embarrassment' of having to take part in discussions on 'so-called material interests' – issues related to the reorganisation of German society along modern capitalist lines and the policy of the state in promoting this for the good of some at the expense of others. He planned to resolve this embarrassment by making himself as knowledgeable as possible about modern economic activities in theory and in practice, making sure that any spurious justification of the effects of capitalism on individuals and classes was thoroughly unmasked, and any Utopianism in socialist and communist alternatives to capitalism similarly exposed.

He began this project straightaway in 1844 with the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in Paris but unpublished in his lifetime. Over the next few years Young Hegelians were castigated by Marx in works such as *The Holy Family* (published in 1845), *The German Ideology* (written between 1845 and 1847) and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (published in 1847). He attacked them for their ignorance of the facts of contemporary economic life and for merely interpreting the world, when 'the point', as he stated in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (written in 1845), was 'to change it'.

Marx's lifelong project, the critique of political economy, was the sort of political work that would, in his view, get to the root of

the evils for which capitalism was undoubtedly responsible and thus highlight the unworkable character of the system as a whole. No piecemeal reform, he argued, could ever eradicate from the capitalist system a tendency to worsening cyclical depressions and increasing mass unemployment. Only part of this massive study of the capitalist economy was completed in Marx's lifetime; this appeared as *Capital*, volume one, in 1867, in German; and an English translation, to which he particularly looked forward, was published in 1887, four years after his death.

The communist alternative to capitalism, where 'society [will] inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!', was recommended in principle by Marx (as in this quotation from his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written in 1875), but the institutions of the new society were never drafted in detail. This was in keeping with his distaste for Utopian schemes and his respect for the exigencies of national and international politics as the 'workers of the world' came, one way or another, to 'unite' (the slogan of the *Communist Manifesto*) for the replacement of capitalism with a planned system of production and (in time) a moneyless system of distribution.

Although Marx argued that those who did well out of capitalism would not surrender their power and property without a fight, he did not advocate violence as a good in itself, nor did he pronounce on the political role of a communist party within the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' that he occasionally mentioned. In *The Civil War in France* (published in 1871) he commented on the recently defeated Paris Commune, in which revolutionaries had seized control of the city. This article contains an endorsement of representative democracy, organised from the village or workplace through successive delegation of representatives to regional and national assemblies. These representatives were to have no more privileges than the other working people in society, to be strictly mandated by their constituents' instructions, and to be revocable from their offices when their constituents determined that their wishes had not been carried out. Marx expressed few doubts about the desirability and practicality of a communist system of production and distribution, a democratic, representative and responsible organisation of society, and the superiority of economic planning over the capitalist market in the means of production, in goods for individual consumption and in labour itself.

Moreover, his vision of the world's workers uniting in an

international opposition to capitalism was based on an optimistic view that the evident irrationalities of national competition and the absurdities of cyclical depression would lead workers (and open-minded intellectuals) pretty directly to the conclusions he had reached in his critique.

Marx's own experience of revolution in the events of 1848-1849 sustained his inspiration. As liberal insurrection swept across Europe, he edited the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* from Cologne and wrote scores of articles advocating liberalism and outlining the interests of the newly emergent working-class where it existed. But as liberals were crushed or compromised, political reaction set in and Marx spent his life from 1849 onwards in exile in England, on the merest periphery of German and continental politics.

During the hard years of the 1850s he scraped a living as best he could by writing political journalism while attending, as much as possible, to his critique of political economy (unpaid). Though he was among the founders of the International Working Men's Association in 1864, he was not much involved in politics in the trade unions or in the mass socialist party as it began to emerge in Germany. Yet his own work on political economy, because it was theoretical, abstract and general in its presumed validity, was for Marx of the utmost political relevance wherever capitalism had been generated or introduced, in Europe or elsewhere.

In his general theory of society he argued that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general', contrary to views that our ideas alone, whether religious, philosophical, traditional or merely political, set the basic structure within which we must live our lives and make critical decisions. Technological change and the reorganisation of production are thus for Marx the most important structural features of modern society limiting the ways in which the law, political institutions, religion, and even aesthetics and philosophy are altered: 'With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.'

Marx referred to these insights (recorded in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) as the guiding thread or principle for his studies, most notably of capitalist society, where his theories of the commodity, money and capital delineated the fundamental laws that determine the functioning of capitalism. Thus, in what appears to be an abstruse work on political economy we find the kernel of Marx's

political theory: from the dynamics of capitalist economic relationships emerge modern social classes – pre-eminently workers (or ‘proletarians’) and capitalists (or ‘the bourgeoisie’) – and with the class structure arises the whole web of conflicting interests within which modern political life takes place. No account of political phenomena, in Marx’s view, could pretend to accuracy unless a thorough explication of the economic interests of the participants were included.

We can see Marx’s insight at work in his own studies of contemporary politics: *The Class Struggles in France* (published in 1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (published in 1852). The first was an account of the revolutionary events of 1848–1849 and the latter a sequel covering the period 1850–1851, when the Second Republic succumbed to a *coup d’état*, military dictatorship, and (eventually) to the Second Empire of Napoleon III. In these lively works Marx analysed the startling events of contemporary French politics by exploring the complicated interaction between individual and class interests within the drama of violent revolution, political intrigue, party manoeuvre and personal caprice. Marx himself commented in a Preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that he had demonstrated ‘how the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part’. In the opening passages of the work itself he announced more generally: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.’ Thus his approach to politics was not determinist in the sense that every event could only have been as it was; rather, Marx led the reader from individuals and parties to the economic interests according to which they were bound to trim their courses.

The work was, in any case, as much about the future as the past. Marx’s intention in exposing Louis Bonaparte and the contradictions inherent in his policies and political position was to rally support for the recently defeated liberals and proletarians, to convince them that the regime could not last, and to demonstrate that Bonaparte’s ‘confused groping’ would ‘humiliate first one class and then another’, making ‘some tolerant of revolution, others desirous of revolution’.

Marx’s research on non-capitalist societies was undertaken in support of his view that capitalism was in its very definition quite different from previous forms of society in the west and else-

where, whether extinct or continuing into the present: ‘In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society’ (1859 Preface). More specifically he was interested in the Roman empire, the transition to feudalism, a further transition to capitalism, the Russian commune and the Indian village community. Much of his work on non-capitalist society was undertaken with scrupulous regard for deficiencies in his sources, so there is no wholly coherent theory in Marx of non-capitalist societies in general or in specific instances, nor is there a completely developed theoretical account of the origins of capitalism itself.

Just as capitalism was essentially different from other types of society that had already developed, so was it different, according to Marx, from the communist society that would succeed it. In his view, capitalism drew its strength from the way that it, for a time, fostered technological change and economic growth. But that era, so he predicted, would pass as ever-worsening economic crises inhibit the use of the new technologies that human ingenuity produces. Only a classless society would make the best use of modern technology, and ensure its further development.

In Marx’s view, capitalist society was bound to collapse because profits must decline as a proportion of total capital invested in industry. He deduced this ‘law of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline’ as a consequence of his theory that it is human labour alone that creates the value in commodities which we exchange on the market. As industry makes increasing use of machinery to raise the productivity of labour, so the number of workers tends to fall in relation to the capital invested in industrial plants. Marx argued that new investment would be increasingly difficult to finance because it would be ever more expensive compared with the profit that a decreasing labour force could generate. Thus production for profit brings about its own demise as investment dwindles, unemployment rises and crises of confidence shake the system. Marx’s ‘rational’ organisation of production in accordance with a plan was the socialist alternative he proposed, arguing that its advantages were clear compared with the self-contradictory, self-destructive and egregiously wasteful character of the capitalism portrayed in his analysis.

The socialism Marx so confidently expected to arise from capitalism was to be built on its technological achievements.

Capitalists, who were for Marx the owners of the means of production, would have their assets expropriated by the socialist community, which would itself control the means of production. How and why contemporary workers and their sympathisers were to achieve this change was a problem on which Marx made few pronouncements beyond editorial encouragement. Theories of political consciousness, action and organisation are barely sketched in his work.

Marx's political theory is not of the conventional kind – a theory of human requirements or human nature, a theory of the state and citizenship, a theory of justice, the law and rights. His was rather a theory of the structure within which political ideas, behaviour and institutions themselves arise, a structure which, as he said, 'conditions' these phenomena and to which they 'correspond' (1859 Preface). In a letter of 5 March 1852 he summed up his own achievements:

What I did that was new was to prove:

- 1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production;
- 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat;
- 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.

Marx's guiding thread or principle has been taken as a deterministic law of human behaviour, and then criticised as false, since there are many instances of individual and collective behaviour running contrary to economic interest. But if Marx's generalisations are taken in a more elastic sense – for instance, that economic interest has only a limiting or conditioning effect on behaviour as a rule or in general – then the propositions, so critics say, are merely vague at best and banal at worst. It is worth noting, however, that Marx described his generalisations as merely a guide, and that in the intellectual context of his day they found genuine targets in those who believed otherwise about the nature of society and social change, or were unclear about exactly what they believed on the subject. Marx's guiding principle, in his hands, had a diagnostic role in analysis, exposing conflicts of interest that lie beneath the smooth surface of temporary political agreement and alerting participants in politics to the likelihood of disagreement or even more violent consequences in future. Thus Marx's political theory was angled towards political action – indeed, interaction between scientist

and subject-matter – since the theorist expected to learn from an examination of events and then to use that knowledge to influence further developments.

Marx's detailed work on the dynamics of capitalist society exposed the logic of the system as he extracted it from the works of contemporary political economists. Whereas it is evident that a considerable part of his analysis has stood the test of time (the material on exploitation, the working day and machinery in modern industry), it is also apparent that some of his most basic definitions and laws (the theories of value, surplus value and rate of profit) are difficult to defend even in the abstract. It is still unclear whether capitalism survives because the ineluctable logic of collapse specified by Marx has not yet worked itself past the countervailing tendencies that he also identified, or whether the Marxian analysis of the system is simply flawed in attributing to it a set of properties that will cause its downfall. In any case, he seems to have undervalued the economic and political factors in capitalist society that draw mass support, and overestimated the revolutionary enthusiasm of workers for an alternative system of a communist character.

Marx's ideas became influential chiefly through the medium of works written by his friend Engels, who began a lifelong association with Marx in 1844 (when Engels was nearly twenty-four). Engels outlived Marx (who died in 1883) by twelve years, and during that time he wrote more than twenty introductions and prefaces to various editions of Marx's works. Engels also compiled the second and third volumes of *Capital* from manuscripts left by Marx. During Marx's lifetime, however, the two worked jointly on only three substantial projects (*The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and the *Communist Manifesto*), and both published their own writings during those years under their own names (with the exception of a few anonymous works and works written by Engels in English and published as Marx's, such as *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany*, published in 1851–1852). The correspondence between Marx and Engels does not support the view that they considered their individual works to be collaborations, though they did, of course, exchange information and material from time to time.

The extent to which Engels's works say exactly the same things as Marx's, whether or not he spoke for Marx on some issues which Marx did not address directly, and the possibility that Marx came to agree late in life with views espoused by Engels that contradict his own writings are now very vexed questions.

From Engels's works and from his view of his relationship with Marx came much of traditional Marxism, and, indeed, the traditional interpretation of Marx's life and works, whether pro-Marxist, anti-Marxist or non-partisan. Blanket assumptions, such as the view that what Engels said may stand in every case for Marx's own words, are quite out of place in any serious consideration of their careers, not least because such an assumption begs the question whether or not Engels's version of things is correct.

In presenting Marx's life and works to the public Engels attributed particular importance to method (arguably much more so than Marx) and an especially important methodological debt to Hegel (again, more so than Marx in his very few comments on the subject). Engels situated Marx's work in a philosophical context, explaining Marx's relation to traditional concepts such as materialism and idealism and to specifically Hegelian ones such as contradiction and dialectic. Moreover, Engels attributed to Marx the 'discovery' that laws of dialectics underlie nature, history and thought, though these laws were nowhere formulated by Marx himself. Engels was thus the originator of an over-all approach to Marx's work, and he became the authority on the 'scientific' system which Marx's writings supposedly supported.

Engels coined the phrases 'materialist conception of history', 'historical materialism' and 'false consciousness'; these and many other phrases and views of Engels are commonly attributed to Marx. Engels's struggle to make Marx systematic and 'scientific' contributed, in turn, to the abiding characterisation of him as doctrinaire and dogmatic. Although he was never diffident about the results of his investigations and never slow to criticise views that he considered erroneous, it is now evident that this authoritarian view of the man and his work is overdrawn. In any event, it gives a poor impression of the tentative, investigative and self-critical character of much of his writing.

Marx's work stands very well on its own without the materialist 'dialectics' of Engels, not to mention the hagiography or demonology supplied by commentators working in the shadows cast by the 'Marxisms' constructed since Marx's own time. Marx himself has profoundly altered our view of political theory and, more importantly, of politics itself.