

Topic Page: [Marx, Karl \(1818 - 1883\)](#)

Definition: **Marx** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

1818--83, German-born founder of Marxism; with Friedrich Engels produced much of the theory of modern socialism and communism, outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). *Das Kapital* (1867; 1885; 1895) contains his theory of class struggle and the economics of capitalism.



Image from: [Karl Marx \(1818-1883\) and Friedrich Engels \(1820-1895\), German philosophers and economists in Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

Summary Article: **Marx, Karl**

From *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*

Karl Marx (1818–83) has been a notable figure in modern political thought in three distinct ways. From the 1880s to the 1980s, he was the eponymous icon of Marxism, a collection of political and philosophical doctrines derived from some of his works by commentators and politicians. These ideas were characteristically expressed in dogmatic terms such as scientific socialism, materialist conception of history, dialectical materialism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In modern political thought, Marxism was initially and mainly treated as constitutive of wide-ranging and transformative political struggles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as anticapitalist party politics and conspiratorial activity in the West, the Russian and Chinese revolutions in the East, and national liberation movements and Cold War conflicts worldwide.

In the course of the 1950s and 1960s, however, an alternative “humanist” Marx was constructed by philosophers. This was done largely from manuscripts first published in the 1930s in German, and not widely circulated and translated till the post–World War II period. This was Marx before Marxism, or at any rate a Marx in considerable tension with the deterministic science and philosophical materialism on which Marxism had been based. The humanist Marx was said to espouse a “praxis” philosophy arguing a unity of theory and practice, a theory of alienation of the worker from his [sic] productive capacities and his “species-being,” or human essence, a view of the proletarian or working-class person as the universal human subject, and a vision of a revolution that would transform human social and economic relationships. Within this context, there were notable academic debates on human nature, justice, morality, rights, democracy, gender or “the woman question,” and the human self in relation to property and labor. These are all core concepts in modern political thought to which Marx was made to speak, so in that way he became a political thinker in the current canon.

There is also another, “analytical” Marx, constructed in the 1970s and 1980s almost entirely from a short work (Preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”) that was little known until the twentieth century. The terms of this text—modes, means, forces, and relations of production; property relations; economic structure; real foundation; superstructure; social consciousness; social existence; social formation; as well as development, conflict, “fettering,” and transformation—were meticulously examined and reconstructed in accordance with logical and empirical notions of clarity and rigor current at the time. This Marx was adopted into, but ultimately expelled from, a positivist version of philosophy

and social science.

There are thus three versions of Marx of relevance to modern political thought. One is the man who gave his name (perhaps inadvertently, and certainly posthumously) to the major transformative movement in twentieth-century global politics. Another is the man whose early writings inspired commentaries that are now reference points in political philosophy. And the third is the analytical social theorist who linked politics to economics, and economics to technology, albeit unsuccessfully. Ironically the basic concepts that Marx himself noted as his special contribution to critical thinking about human society all derive from a single concept, *class*. However, he never defined this term precisely, and it has been absorbed into modern social thought most centrally in sociology. Overall, Marx's contribution to modern political thought has been to change the terms through which any credible discussion of politics must take place.

Early Life, Times, and Politics

The facts and narrative constituting Marx's biography have emerged in relation to the contrasting receptions of his work that have taken place over time. With the increase in Marx's fame and notoriety since his death, the amount of biographical material has gradually increased. Marx's works, published and unpublished, were almost all obscure in his lifetime, soon out of print, and not easily available. The first widely circulated work to establish a Marx tradition, by producing and publicizing a political and biographical narrative, was the 1872 second edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. A contextualized rather than traditional account of Marx's life, times, and politics reveals that he and his works are problematic today in challenging ways. Marx was born into a Jewish family in Trier in the German Rhineland, an area where constitutional rule and religious toleration were introduced during the Napoleonic occupation of 1806–13. During the conservative reaction that followed, the locality was absorbed into the Kingdom of Prussia, and in 1824, Marx's father converted to Lutheranism in a Catholic area to preserve his living as a lawyer. Karl grew up in a family circle and “alternative” intellectual culture in which the free-thinking values of the Enlightenment were cultivated. This atmosphere involved the use of philosophy and science to establish universal truths relevant to society and politics, and an immediately skeptical attitude toward the commonplace certainties of doctrinal Christianity and political authoritarianism. In the German monarchies and principalities of the day, church and state, Christianity and morality, were decidedly unseparated. From the point of view of the authorities, radical and foreign (i.e., French, English, and American) views linking the legitimacy of the state to the will of the people were suspect to the point of sedition.

After a classical education (including considerable compulsory study of the Bible and Christian dogma), the young Marx was sent off in 1835 at the age of 17 to the University of Bonn to study law and follow his father into the professional classes. At the time, the universities represented an area of limited state toleration for critical views, excluding the twin extremes of atheism and liberalism, both of which were associated with the violence of the French Revolution (1789–99). At Bonn, Marx was little interested in legal training, involving himself instead in student scrapes. He was transferred by his father to the University of Berlin in 1836 to complete his degree. At both universities, the younger Marx fell in with student radicals, who—under the guise of philosophical debate—were subjecting the authoritarian political structures and quasi-medieval economic arrangements of the German states to scornful skepticism.

In the mid-1830s and early 1840s, Christianity itself, and by implication the legitimacy of the state, had

come under scandalous attack in scholarly works on the question of the historical Jesus and the nature of religion. Although the works themselves were not openly atheistic, they alarmed the authorities, who suspected that radicals would draw treasonous conclusions. Even though Marx was not the author of such works, nor yet persecuted for his political opinions and religious skepticism, and although he submitted a dissertation (on Greek philosophy) to the University of Jena by post and so obtained a PhD in 1841, he concluded that he would not be in line for an academic appointment. In any case, he had probably become more interested in involving himself in the politics of thorough-going liberal, but legal, reform.

In a short-lived concession to liberal opinion, the Prussian monarchy tolerated—for a brief time between 1842 and 1843—the publication of newspapers that could report critically on local issues. One of these was the *Rhenish Gazette* in the German city of Cologne. Marx attached himself to it as a writer, and he was eventually—briefly—its last editor. The paper was supported by business interests favoring the modernization of the medieval property system, reform of the laws of contract and incorporation, and liberalization of entry into the professions and trades. Traditional restrictive practices would be dismantled in favor of the free-market relations that these businessmen admired in Britain and France. Moreover they also proposed, albeit timidly, the modernization of the political structures that allocated power to hereditary and other elites, including religious hierarchies. In opposition to this political establishment, they advocated more representation and participation in government by middle-class people like themselves. Marx took up this liberalizing line with enthusiasm. However, he overtly sympathized with workers who were on the laboring side of modern commercial relations, taking his cue from personal contacts with communist radicals and the socialist literature of the day, which was predominantly French.

The Prussian government made the position of the *Rhenish Gazette* untenable in 1843 (the Tsar of Russia had complained to the King about its dangerous liberalism), so Marx withdrew to his study (as he put it later himself) to consider “the social question,” as it was known at the time. The most notable German authority on the subject was the iconic philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), whose *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) was a widely read compendium of modern wisdom on the individual, the family, ethics, politics, economic activities, authority relations, and governmental structures. Although Hegel was deliberately ambiguous and oblique in his writing, the very activity of making philosophy engage at the highest level with these historical and contemporary topics was itself controversial. Also controversial was his refusal to reproduce Christian teachings and moral truths verbatim, and his developmental view that progress comes with an unfolding of the human potential, not from God's will as such.

Marx took Hegel's ambiguous conservatism for granted, but like other Young Hegelians, he focused instead on the great philosopher's subversive potential in opening up contemporary government, the economy, and politics more generally to independent analysis. In particular, Hegel had imported French and Scottish work on civil society and political economy into his scheme, and Marx undertook a critical examination of Hegel's account in relation to Marx's own communist views on the centrality of social class in human experience. Only a small fraction of these early manuscript works found their way into print at the time, and as with virtually all Marx's works throughout his life, they achieved for the most part only the limited readership of German-language radical groups.

After the demise of the *Rhenish Gazette*, the newly married Marx joined other German radicals in 1844 in an emigration to Paris, where they could write and publish more freely, but with a view to clandestine

circulation of these materials in the German states and principalities. Marx was soon expelled by the French authorities as a foreign subversive, and with his associates, he moved to Brussels in Belgium in early 1845. The political strategy was twofold: the socialists and communists (the two terms were not at all distinct at the time) worked with middle-class liberals and commercial interests. These reformers were promoting government that would be more representative of, and more responsible to, the people, meaning only the propertied (male) citizenry. But the radicals also worked against the liberals, promoting the interests of nonpropertied, low-income laborers, particularly the urban poor—among them many German immigrants—who were subject to casual exploitation and frequent unemployment. In keeping with this politics of intellectual emigration and worker migration, Marx and Engels joined an international League of Communists, which linked up disparate groups from various countries. The two secured a commission at their London conference in November–December 1847 to draft a manifesto. The German-language document appeared there in a small printing in early 1848, with plans for immediate shipment to German networks and translations into major languages.

The *Communist Manifesto*

This short, popular work was first published anonymously in 1848 at an expatriate German press in London. Written in conjunction with his lifelong friend (from 1844) and sometime collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–95), the *Communist Manifesto* is still the best introduction to Marx's political thought. The reader should note, however, that the work is organized around the historical existence of classes and class struggle, and the contemporary politics of fighting for a classless society. Marxist concepts such as materialism, dialectic, scientific socialism, ideology, alienation, species-being, mode of production, social formation, and the like do not appear in the *Manifesto*. These concepts, which are the constituents of later exegesis and popularization, have developed importance over time as Marx's work has been received by commentators and politicians. They are often used as framing devices and organizational signposts, but the extent to which they add to or detract from Marx's message in major works, such as the *Communist Manifesto*, is open to debate.

In terms of modern political thought, the *Communist Manifesto* is a remarkable document, offering—in lively and accessible language—a reconceptualization of human history as the history of class struggles, rather than a history of dynasties and empires, or a moralizing and prophetic account of the relationship between God and humans. Here class is defined in relation to the everyday activities of production and consumption common to all societies. Hitherto class had been of little interest to historians, other than as a timeless and largely unremarkable backdrop of rich and poor. The text focuses on the commercial classes or bourgeoisie in Europe, explaining their development from petty traders and urban guildsmen in terms of two factors: an increase in demand caused by wealth derived from conquest or trade in the Americas and Asia, and the use of new technologies in Europe to produce large volumes of goods efficiently in response to this influx. The globalization of trade and market-driven innovation in manufacture, so the authors argue, will transform all nations, cultures, and peoples of the world, and at an ever increasing pace. Traditional ways of life, including political structures, will be relentlessly destroyed, and the replacement will be the modern representative state, like the parliamentary systems in Britain and France. This kind of government is merely a committee, so Marx and Engels say, for administering the common affairs of the bourgeoisie, claims to popular sovereignty notwithstanding.

For Marx and Engels, this vast and ongoing bourgeois revolution has two consequences. Increasing inequalities of wealth and power will simplify class structures down to a diametrically opposed

bourgeoisie and proletariat; and market-driven allocations of productive resources and therefore wages and salaries will become increasingly volatile and crisis-prone, causing bitter class warfare. As the claims of bourgeois liberals are revealed to be hypocritical and impossible to fulfill for the population generally, the proletarian political movement will rise in numbers and thus represent the interests of the vast majority. National struggles and victories will coalesce into an egalitarian international transformation in economic and political life.

After this sweeping prologue, Marx and Engels zero in on their target audience—low-paid urban workers in modernizing economies—by explaining how exactly the current system of property relations establishes and supports capital. Through these relations the bourgeoisie owns the essential means of production, such as factories and raw materials. Workers, by contrast, lack access to employment, except through the wage contract, so they must compete among themselves for jobs. This competition drives wages down and condemns them to misery. The authors dismiss claims that these exchanges between proletarians and capitalists are free and fair, as bourgeois interests profess, and argue instead that the property system itself makes what are in reality *social* resources—factories and raw materials—into *private* ones. Marx and Engels thus condemn the capitalist economic system as exploitative in principle and in practice.

According to the *Communist Manifesto*, communists are merely workers—and sometimes a few intellectuals of bourgeois background—who understand these truths, and who help to form the proletariat into a political class. Their goal is the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the seizure of political power. Proletarian victory will result not in the renewed domination of one class by another but in the abolition of class divisions as such. In such a classless society, political power will no longer be synonymous with the power of one class to oppress another. Rather, society will become an association in which the free development of each underpins the free development of all. In terms of political thought, this vision is clearly a version of the “good society,” calling for the transformation and transcendence of the modern state and property system. However, the text offers few details on how this change would work out in practice.

The *Communist Manifesto* offers two theses of immense importance in the history of modern political thought. One is the stated general view that ideas, culture, social institutions, religions, morals, laws, and political systems have always been formed throughout history in a determinate relationship with economic ownership, practices, and technologies. Marx and Engels comment that the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class. The other thesis is the more historically specific claim that crucial changes in the political configuration of medieval societies arise when improvements in the means of production—and the ambitions of the rising class in control of these forces—cannot be contained within feudal forms of property and law. Medieval authoritarianism is thus subject to overthrow by the modern state, as had already happened in France. The process would continue elsewhere in Europe and on a global scale. Similarly the two authors predict that further revolutions in the technologies and efficiencies of capitalist production will inevitably breach the confines of a legal system that makes social resources into private ones. Capitalist property relations guarantee the economic and political power of commercial interests at the expense of the working classes. Hence, the *Communist Manifesto* predicts the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat—or their common ruin.

Later Life, Hard Times, and Exile

The events of the revolutions of 1848 overtook the communists. Their document played no great part

in the liberalizing struggles of the time, although Marx and Engels did, to a limited extent. The two worked on a successor newspaper in Cologne, the *New Rhenish Gazette*, which pursued the twofold political line outlined above. Marx made public speeches, and Engels was briefly involved in an armed retreat of liberal revolutionary forces from the German states into Switzerland. In 1850, he joined the Marx family in another emigration, this time to London, and—as it turned out—for the length of both their lives. Engels worked at the English premises in Manchester of the familial firm of cotton-spinners and merchants, supporting the Marx family through hard times. These included the deaths of two little boys and a girl, and the upbringing of the surviving three daughters. Life in England was safe enough, but Marx and his wife suffered the damaging effects of poverty, dying in their 60s after years of poor health.

As an émigré and disillusioned '48-er, Marx's political activities were limited to his familiar pattern of critical agitation and polemic, pamphleteering and letter-writing. In 1864, he helped to found the International Working Men's Association, later known as the "First International," in London. This was an umbrella organization linking socialist and communist groups, networks, and eventually political parties in Europe and the Americas. Principally, however, Marx was devoting himself to a vast lifetime project—a comprehensive critique of political economy, the economics of his day. To do so, he read widely the standard authors on the subject, such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, tackling many English-language texts and sources. He struggled to resolve commonplace claims that wage contracts between members of the bourgeois and proletarian classes were an exchange between equals in the marketplace, and that profits were fairly and justly derived by capitalists as a result. Marx was convinced that he could show empirically that wages tended toward subsistence and that they were in any case subject to sharp practices that were difficult to control, even when legislation and a factory inspectorate were in place.

However, Marx's more ambitious aim was theoretical. He attempted a resolution of the problem of profit: Out of an exchange in which the laborer received as wages the full value of his labor, how then could a profit for the capitalist arise? Either it would have to be a deduction from the value of the labor performed to make the product, or it would have to be some mysterious increase in value arising in the economic process as a whole. Over the next two decades, Marx worked himself tirelessly to draft this comprehensive critique and to get it published, circulated, and translated. His masterwork was *Capital*, vol. 1, published in 1867, with further posthumous volumes and supplements edited from his voluminous manuscripts.

This study was clearly an expansion of the outlook sketched so brilliantly in the *Communist Manifesto*. *Capital*, however, is more focused on the economic theorizing through which the class positions of bourgeois and proletarian are fundamentally defined and politically practiced. It is less obviously concerned with the global sweep of capitalist development and imperialist politics; a planned volume on the world market never materialized, even in manuscript. Although Marx was pleased with his solution to the problem of profit—known as the theory of surplus value—and with his rigorously defined concept of exploitation, these particular conceptualizations have not figured significantly in modern political thought.

Marx and Modern Political Thought

Within modern political thought, an "analytical" school of the 1970s and 1980s focused attention on Marx's short preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," published in 1859 as a

first installment on *Capital*. These Marx scholars viewed the language of the 1859 preface as unusually concise and rigorous. Their analytical school created a Marx whose work could be tested within the empirical frameworks of mid-twentieth-century social science and historical studies.

Consisting of a brief account of Marx's life and studies to date, and a compressed summary of the general conclusion that guided him, the 1859 "Preface" asserts that political conflicts are rooted in economic circumstances but fought out in terms of ideologies, including religious, artistic, and philosophical forms of social consciousness. It also specifies Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production as progressive epochs in the development of society. However, class as an analytical category and class struggle as an overt political perspective were omitted, doubtless because that kind of discussion would have attracted attention from the censors. Similarly the tensions between technological developments and legal systems—whether early modern industry with feudal legal systems or highly productive manufacture with capitalist private property—were expressed in abstract, schematic formulations. The resolution of these somewhat veiled antagonisms was said by Marx to mark the close of human prehistory rather than worldwide proletarian revolution as a specific and stated goal.

These few lines in the 1859 "Preface"—linking social relations of production, material productive forces, the economic structure of society, its legal and political superstructure, and social consciousness in specific forms—reproduce to some extent the more provocative, uncensored formulations of the *Communist Manifesto*. However, they are probably self-censored rather than deliberately rigorous. Ultimately the analytical school found Marx's propositions wanting in relation to the methodological and evidential standards they had adopted from social science and a similar positivism in philosophy.

Although the history of Marxism has been one of successive ideological codifications, beginning with Engels's highly influential polemical works of the later 1870s, both Marxists (in manifold variant versions of "the doctrine") and anti-Marxists have shared common presumptions as to what Marxism actually is. Typically this has involved schematic accounts of scientific materialism, Hegelian dialectics, and historically successive modes of production. More recent approaches to Marx within modern political thought, based on more sophisticated textual knowledge and analytical methodologies, take a skeptical view of traditional dogmatics and promote a more open-minded and constructive approach to the full range of his voluminous writings.

Overall Marx has shaped modern political thought decisively by resetting the terms for any inquiry into politics. He does so by laying out large-scale claims concerning the nature of power and authority in human communities, the way in which these structures have changed, the way that history up to his own time had recorded those changes, and the directionality that, so he argued, can be discerned in these developments. In modern political thought, there has been for many years no escape from the view that the interaction between political structures and economic activities—however that interaction is conceived—must occupy a central place in any discussion of politics.

See also Communism, Varieties of; Dictatorship of the Proletariat; Economics and Political Thought; Empire and Political Thought; Engels, Friedrich; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Nineteenth-Century Political Thought

Further Readings

- Avineri, Shlomo. 1970. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, UK.
- Cohen, G. A. 2001. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Clarendon Press Oxford, UK.
- Cowling, Mark, ed. 1998. *The Communist Manifesto: New Interpretations*. Edinburgh University Press Edinburgh, UK.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. 2008. *Main Currents of Marxism. Vol. 1, The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*. Translated by P. S. Falla. Clarendon Press Oxford, UK.
- Leopold, David. 2009. *The Young Karl Marx*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, UK.
- Levin, Michael. 1989. *Marx, Engels and Liberal Democracy*. Macmillan Basingstoke, UK.
- Marx, Karl. 1996. "Manifesto of the Communist Party [Communist Manifesto]." In *Later Political Writings*, edited and translated by Terrell Carver, 1-30. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, UK.
- Marx, Karl. 1996. "Preface" to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." In *Later Political Writings*, edited and Translated by Terrell Carver, 158-62. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, UK.
- McLellan, David. 2006. *Karl Marx: A Biography*. Macmillan London.

Terrell Carver

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Carver, T. (2013). Marx, Karl. In G. Claeys (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of modern political thought*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/marx_karl_1818_1883



Copyright © 2013 CQ Press



Copyright © 2013 CQ Press

APA

Carver, T. (2013). Marx, Karl. In G. Claeys (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of modern political thought*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/marx_karl_1818_1883

Chicago

Carver, Terrell. "Marx, Karl." In *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*, edited by Gregory Claeys. CQ Press, 2013. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/marx_karl_1818_1883

Harvard

Carver, T. (2013). Marx, Karl. In G. Claeys (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of modern political thought*. [Online]. Washington: CQ Press. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/marx_karl_1818_1883 [Accessed 14 October 2019].

MLA

Carver, Terrell. "Marx, Karl." *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*, edited by Gregory Claeys, CQ Press, 1st edition, 2013. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/marx_karl_1818_1883. Accessed 14 Oct. 2019.