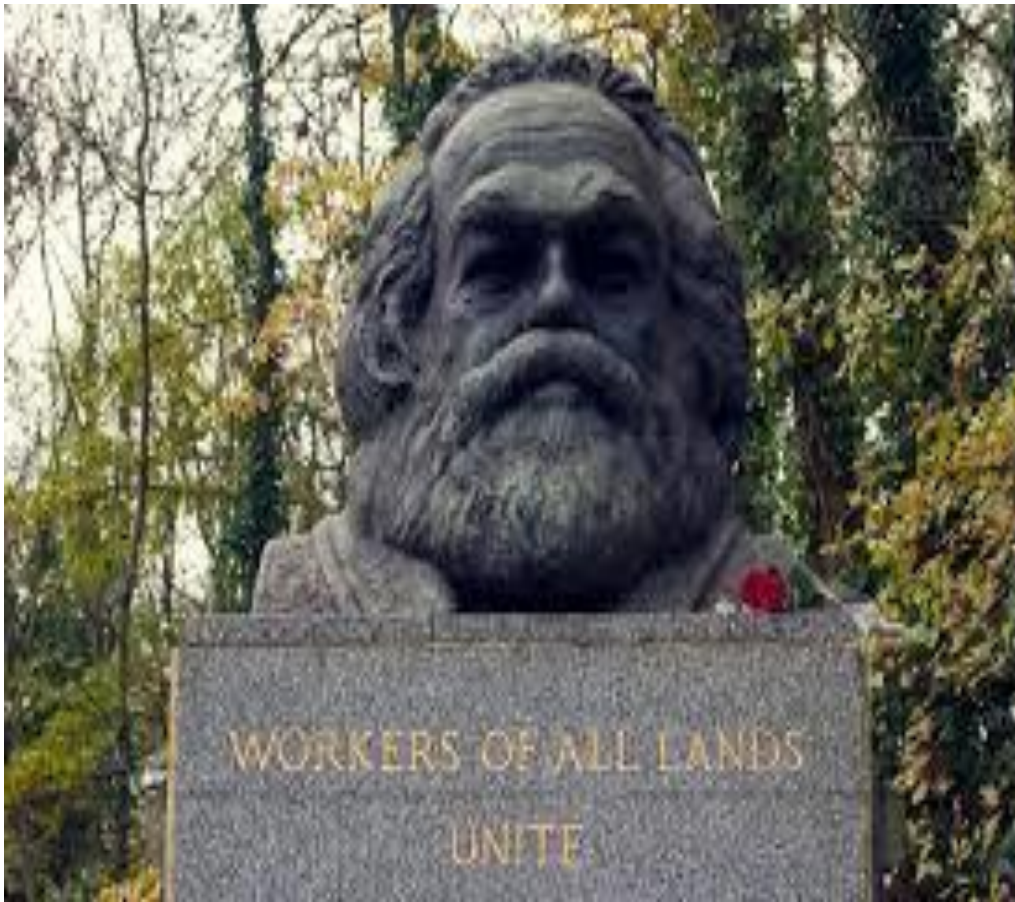


Karl Marx (1818-1883)



Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist and revolutionary socialist. Marx's theory of capitalism was based on the idea that human beings are naturally productive: in order to survive people have to work. He believed that people have two relationships to the means of production: you either own the means of production or you work for someone who does. He is considered to be the "father" of **Social Conflict Theory**.

Social conflict theory views society as structured to benefit the few at the expense of the majority. Factors such as class, gender, race and age are all linked to social inequality.

Marx lived in the early stages of industrial capitalism in Europe and believed that the owners of these industries were **capitalists**: those who own and operate business for profit. He believed that the capitalist system turns most people into **proletariats**: those who sell their labour for wages. Marx believed

this system led to an inequality in society where the result is a class conflict between capitalists and proletariats.

Marx also believed that capitalism would lead to feelings of **alienation** (feelings of isolation and powerlessness) for the workers because labour is *external* to the worker,... “it does not belong to his essential being...It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it...as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. The external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.” (Marx, *Estranged Labour*)

Marx believed that the capitalist mode of production was fatal for the worker because in order to maximise his/her profits the capitalist will keep the worker on a very low wage. He believed that under capitalism the worker has been dehumanised and alienated: he is a commodity to be used for a capitalist’s profit. The worker does not produce for himself but for another’s profit and this dehumanises the worker thus he becomes a commodity to be used and exploited for another’s financial gain. The capitalist mode of production is fatal for the worker because the capitalist, in order to maximise his profits will pay only what wages is necessary, thus keeping the worker at an impoverished level of existence:

“When it is profitable to cut back the work force, the capitalist will do so without regard for the worker. “The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men, as of every other commodity. Should supply greatly exceed demand, a section of the workers sinks into beggary or starvation. The worker’s existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity. The worker has become a commodity, and it is a bit of luck for him if he can find a buyer.” (Marx, *Wages of Labour*)

For Marx, this inequality was unacceptable and most of his work focused on the plight of the working class and he believed that the class structure must be changed. He believed that the social class was the deciding principle of social life: the land, resources and factories were owned by the upper classes and the working class had no choice but to work according to the terms dictated by the ruling classes. Marx felt this system only led to the rich becoming richer

and the poor, exploited by the wealthier class, becoming poorer. The only way to balance the inequality between the classes was for capitalism to be ended and replaced by a socialist system that would make all equal and have all people's needs met. In the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels called for:

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax
3. Abolition of all rights of inheritance
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with state capital and an exclusive monopoly
6. Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the state; the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal obligation of all to work. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
9. Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of child factory labour in the present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc. *(Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 1848)*

Marx's ideas were perceived as threats to leaders of governments but inspirational for revolutionists. Marx's viewpoint and writings were so radical to governments that he spent most of his life expelled from Germany and then France. It was in France, however, that Marx met Friedrich Engels and together they would write, "*The Communist Manifesto*", published in 1848 as the platform of the Communist League. "**The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles**" begins the manifesto and eloquently outlining the reasons why, in order to create a fair and equitable society there must be revolution: "They [Communists] openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the

ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries unite!" (*Marx, Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 1848.*)



For Marx, the only way to have a just, equitable society and to cease what he saw as the exploitation of the working class, the capitalistic system must be destroyed. However, he also acknowledged that the working class had first to develop what is known as "**class consciousness**": an awareness of common vested interests and the need for collective political action. In other words, the workers would have to see themselves as a singular unified unit not as individuals. However, Marx underestimated the ability of the working class to unify as one. Instead of viewing themselves as a "unit" (We/Us), they saw themselves as individuals (I/Me) being oppressed. This viewpoint of "I" rather than "Us" is called **false consciousness** and it undermined the working class revolution so hoped for by Marx to end the social inequality and oppression by the wealthy, ruling classes.

Marx is one of the most important Socialist thinkers whose viewpoint about social inequality and class has influenced and continues to influence many political theorists, sociologists, trade unions and Socialist parties worldwide.

