

Session 11 Marx & Engels: exiting capitalism

Slide 2: Introduction:

Welcome back future thinkers. Please read this overview, and then we'll move on.

On the screen:

Outline of Marx and Engels' revolutionary approach to philosophy:

Turning Hegel upside down: uniting the dialectic with materialism

The development of capitalism – the basis for Marx's concepts

Philosophy as a tool for analysing social reality: the concepts of alienation and labour

Marx and Engels brought theory together with practice

SLIDE 3: Global influence

Karl Marx's influence has been likened to that of Jesus Christ and the prophet Muhammed, in shaping the thought of humanity. He was voted thinker of the last 1,000 years in a 1999 BBC News poll. In 2005, listeners again voted for Marx as the greatest ever philosopher, with more than double the votes of the nearest contender, David Hume.

Peter Singer, the renowned moral philosopher and animal liberationist, believes that Marx's ideas have become so widespread that we are, he says, "all Marxists now". Rightly, in my view, he sees Marx as first and foremost concerned with human freedom. **An emancipatory impulse is the live current which underlies all of Marx's wide-ranging contributions, not only to philosophy but human culture generally.**

SLIDE 4: Comrades and Family

Marx had a life-long political partnership with Friedrich Engels. Marx's wife, Jenny von Westphalen and their three daughters, were also vital in supporting and publicising his work. He collaborated, and sparred, with thinkers and activists, from the Young Hegelians in the 1840s, to the English Chartists and then the International Workingmen's Association.

But that is getting ahead of ourselves.

SLIDE 5: The Young Marx

The persecution of poor wood gatherers in his native Germany inspired the 24-year-old Marx to denounce the use of the law by the property-owning classes. He became the editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, a radical newspaper. The threat of arrest drove Marx to Paris, only to be expelled from France in 1845. He found brief respite in Brussels, and it was here that he composed his famous theses on Feuerbach. (more on that shortly)

In 1847, a group of workers in London asked Marx and Engels to draw up a Manifesto for the League of Communists. This turned into the Communist Manifesto, which was a clarion call for revolutionary transition from capitalism.

Early in 1848, revolutions broke out in Austria, Switzerland, Germany and elsewhere. Marx returned to Germany, only to be banished in May 1849. He sought refuge in London, where he lived in abject poverty, supported only by his work as a journalist and cash sent by Engels.

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The ferocious new world of industrial capitalism plunged Marx and Engels into the economic whirl and huge social misery that was England at this time. They immediately wrote about.

SLIDE 6: Turning Hegel Upside Down

From admiring the Greek and Roman materialist philosophers, Epicurus and Lucretius, Marx went on to become a Young or Left Hegelian. He adopted Hegel's dialectical concepts in the realm of philosophy, history, human society, and consciousness. But Marx and Engels were also Hegel's most profound critics. They turned him upside down, or rather, right side up – onto his materialist feet.

They examined the principles which Hegel had formulated in an idealist way, and showed how these were an inverted mirror of the truth. They did not throw out Hegel's method. Instead, they jettisoned the circular, mystical and sometimes even nonsensical framework in which Hegel operated. Thus, in doing so, they united Hegel's dialectic with a materialist approach.

Marx proposed that it was the material living conditions and social relations that defined the specific nature of capitalist society. He drew from Hegel the concept of alienation (or estrangement). For Hegel, this was the mental alienation of the Idea (or Geist). But for Marx mental representations – Ideals and concepts – arose from the real relations of living people and social classes. He linked them with private property and the way in which the capitalist expropriates human labour.

Marx showed the power, together with the flaws, of Hegel's approach. For Hegel, wealth, state power and so on were understood only as "thought entities" – not as real human existence. Marx explained that even though Hegel's foundation is pure mind, his concept of alienation is actually a critique of human social existence.

SLIDE 7: The Three Component Parts of Marxism

Marx and Engels united three major achievements in human thought: German philosophy, English political economy, and French socialism. They took from the French communists and anarchists like Gracchus Babeuf and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon the proposal to annul private property by revolutionising social relations. Turning Hegel's alienated "spirit" on its materialist feet, communism would overcome the alienation of human beings from their own real nature, our "species being". "Communism" Marx wrote, "is the riddle of history solved".

The Communist Manifesto brought the dialectical approach to bear on the revolutionary practice of changing the world. Now, Marx analysed the defeat of the revolutionary wave of 1848 in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. He saw the root of the problem in the political inexperience of the consciousness of the working class and its leaders. Over the next decade, Marx analysed the nature of capitalism to give a firm theoretical foundation for future struggles.

Slide 8: Alienation

Marx theorised the alienation, or estrangement, of human beings from their own nature as the "negative driving force" in history. Thus, he incorporated Hegel's "**dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle**" into his critique.

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The young Marx began to examine classical political economy. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, published in 1844 – but only available in English in 1960 – he dealt with alienation or estrangement of labour

A dictionary definition of alienation includes the transfer of property into the ownership of another and the right of an owner to dispose of his or her property. This apparent legal definition was considered in a socio-economic context by Marx. He showed that alienation was actually rooted in human labour and the material world.

For Marx, the main aspect of alienation is the separation of work or labour from the worker, and separation of the products of labour from the worker. Both end up being taken by employers and controlled by them, dominating the worker.

In this way, the social connection with other people is turned into a social relation between things. As he wrote: “Our connection with other human beings now appears as something alien to us, as a thing, as an object with a price on it.”

Under capitalism, human labour becomes a commodity – something to be bought and sold. The worker produces commodities. Out of these commodities capital is created, and capital comes to dominate the worker.

The contradiction is that work – the ability to create something useful in a deliberate way – is what makes us human, and yet because we do not control the process as a whole, it dehumanises us. We thus become separated from our true nature.

As neoliberal globalisation took hold, the sense of powerlessness grew – both in the workplace and outside in wider society. The impact on mental and physical health is all too apparent. In 2018-19, it was reported that over 600,000 workers in the UK were suffering from work-related stress, anxiety or depression. The figure was significantly up on 2010.

Other aspects of deepening alienation could be said to include the huge increase in substance abuse and the fact that 1 in 6 adults have experienced mental health issues – before the pandemic took its toll. A 2021 survey found that almost one in five children aged 6-16 had a probable mental health issue.

Marx proposed that human alienation could be overcome by the producers taking ownership and control of the means of production, thereby making work into a physically and mentally fulfilling activity, benefitting individuals, society, and the planet as a whole.

SLIDE 9: The materialist base

Marx explained that understanding life from the standpoint of the human mind, or consciousness, is to view things upside down. Our consciousness depends on our being, “this consciousness,” he noted, “must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production”.

By social productive forces, Marx meant all that production requires – the workers and the instruments or tools needed as well as the materials involved. By relations, he meant the ownership of the means of production. These forces are locked within the social, in other words, the division of society into capital and labour.

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Marx revealed the hidden forces that determine everyone's lives. Thus, the ultimate driving and conditioning forces in history are not the actions or thoughts of great white men, but the way that human beings "produce life". Here are his own words:

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.

Karl Marx: The preface to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)

He noted this 163 years ago! So what is it holding back society from unchaining ourselves from ownership and control by a tiny minority? Is it connected with a missing revolutionary consciousness?

SLIDE 10: Unity of theory and practice

Here are the final 4 of Marx's 11 theses on Feuerbach, emphasising the poverty of a passive materialist approach. Stop for a moment to read them.

He concluded:

*"Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in many ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."*

Marx emphasised the crucial role of practice. He took the existing materialist outlook to task for ignoring the role of human activity. In other words, Feuerbach's was a materialism that observed the world, but saw it as a static object, without development or movement, separated from our practice.

In doing so, Marx did NOT downplay the decisive importance of theory. On the contrary, he critiqued the passive approach of the French materialists and English reformers, such as Jeremy Bentham and the utopian Socialist Robert Owen. Instead, Marx understood the material world as well as social class forces, as moving and changing agents of change.

As American critic Louis Menand writes, "Marx was not saying that philosophy is irrelevant; he was saying that philosophical problems arise out of real-life conditions, and they can be solved only by changing those conditions—by remaking the world."

This was the entire basis of Marx's approach which has the most powerful resonance for us today.

SLIDE 11: Dialectical Logic in Capital

Lenin emphasised the key operation of Hegel's logic in Marx's *Capital*: "If Marx did not leave us a Logic, he did leave us the logic of Capital, something that should be utilized to the full in the matter at hand".

In other words, Marx did not write an outline or a structure for a "formal philosophy". He developed what we may call "materialist dialectics" as **an approach to understanding, not only the economic system of capitalism, but as an integral part of a theory of knowledge**. The structure of his monumental volumes of *Capital*, the discovery of the laws of capital itself, shows him implementing the cognitive approach of Hegel's dialectical logic.

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It took three decades for Lenin's emphasis on dialectics to be taken seriously and developed in a concrete way. The first person to do so was probably the oppositional Soviet Marxist, Evald Ilyenkov, in his ground-breaking, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital*, written in 1959. The Ukrainian theoretician Roman Rosdolsky's book, *The Making of Marx's Capital*, appeared in 1967. Christopher Arthur (1986/2002), Tony Smith (1990), Enrique Dussel (2001), Igor Narski (1981/2014), and Bertoll Ollman (2003), amongst others, have continued this key research.

Slide 12: From abstract (commodity) to concrete (system as a whole)

In writing the four volumes of *Capital*, which Marx worked on for 23 years and which Engels & Eleanor Marx completed, Marx's approach was both dialectical and historical. He **abstracted** (which means pull away or detach) this central feature of capitalism – the exchange of commodities - and split it into its contradictory parts.

Marx found that commodities have both a use value and an exchange value. A commodity had to be of use and fulfil a human need or it could never be sold. Its exchange value dominated, however, because it contained "definite quantities of congealed labour-time". And the greater the quantity of the socially necessary labour to produce a commodity, the greater its value to the capitalist when exchanged on the market for money.

The contradictory nature of the commodity provided the key to **demonstrating the inner connections between various parts of the system**. And the distinction between "labour" and "labour power" allowed Marx to crack open the secret of the capitalist system in terms of where profit comes from.

In examining and tracing the transformations that a commodity undergoes, Marx took up but also negated, the work of earlier economists. He showed that "value," while one cannot place one's finger on it as a material thing, is both "ideal" and "real". Even though it is "immaterial or ideal", value is also quite real. Otherwise, how could we compare a diamond, say, with an apple?

Marx traced the complex movements or "moments" that make up the entire system as a concrete whole. He showed how the contradictions in the system, such as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, led to periodic and often gigantic crises. He revealed how the owners of capital are constantly driven to overcome these crises and how they seek to place the burden on the producers, the working classes.

Reference: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm>

SLIDE 13: Taking forward the dialectical method

It was Engels who made Marx's complex research available to a wider public. His pamphlet, *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* (1880) explained the difference between the utopian socialism of French and English predecessors while paying generous tribute to the contribution to workers' rights made by Robert Owen in particular.

In his books *Anti-Duhring* and *The Dialectics of Nature*, Engels demonstrated that dialectical logic is not an arbitrary structure or formula imposed on reality, not an external "tool". Rather it is **to be discovered within** natural as well as mental processes. And he projected the possibility of a society in which human beings would no longer be alienated from the fruits of their labour, through the ending of the capitalist system of production.

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Engels' excellence at compressing complex theories into accessible, highly popular pamphlets, and the way that he connected philosophy with science, placed him in the firing line from many quarters. Shocking and repeated attempts have been made to pitch him against Marx and accuse him of all kinds of philosophical sins, including responsibility for the dogmatisation of Marxism. But, given today's planetary emergency and the rise of ecological socialism, Marx and Engels' struggle for materialist dialectics – understanding human beings as an active and conscious part of nature - is being vindicated.

Our concern in this course is to enhance and sharpen the ability to understand changes within society, and the rise of new forms of consciousness amongst masses of people. How do we understand our role in bringing about the badly needed transformations?

That's why we've tried to make dialectical logic the connecting thread towards an advanced theory of knowledge.

This will take centre stage in our final session.

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Productive forces reference:

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095827922>

Slide 5:

The dialectics of capital

Resources: Review of Lektorsky and Epstein.

Nice timeline here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Karl_Marx