

Karl Marx

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by Steve Bloom

I.

There are different ways that people study historical figures. Most often we get biographical studies (that is, a discussion of who they were) or ideological studies (what they thought). Both of these are perfectly valid. But I want to approach Marx a bit differently today. You already have a short biography. And I will talk about essential ideological contributions. But mostly I want to focus on Marx in still a third kind of way: philosophically or methodologically.

Good, nobody got up and walked out of the room. You don't need to get nervous. I won't use words that nobody (including me) can understand. All I mean by this is that we are going to talk about *how* Marx thought, rather than simply *what* he thought or *who* he was.

Also, before we begin, I want to stop for a moment to acknowledge the essential role of another figure whose name is usually coupled with Marx's: Friedrich Engels. Engels was Marx's friend, sponsor, and cothinker, jointly responsible for the development of Marxist ideas. When Marx died, his most important work, *Capital*, remained unfinished. Engels took the unfinished notes and turned out the manuscript to be published. And he continued to be the most authoritative spokesperson for Marxist ideas until his own death in 1895. So whatever we say about Marx today is also true of Engels. His contribution was key.

II.

What was Karl Marx's revolution in philosophy and methodology? This is often talked about. I think most of you have probably heard the name "Scientific Socialism" before. I will argue, however, that this concept has been little understood.

Socialist ideas had been around for a long time before Marx came along. But they were simply treated as a set of good ideas, with no thought to what social forces would be able to actually make socialism happen. In other words: why would anyone who *could* introduce socialism actually do so?

Marx was interested in that question: How can socialism emerge from the present economic/social/political reality which exists in the world? And he determined that there was an actor on the historical stage, the working class, which had both an interest in introducing socialism and the socio-economic power to do so. But it would take a social revolution to achieve such a transformation.

The general study of this problem: the relationship of the working class to other social classes, the relationship of the socialist revolution to previous social revolutions, and the ways individuals and organizations can act to either advance or retard the development of the socialist revolution, all these things came to be wrapped up together in the concept of "scientific socialism."

But because of how badly this notion has been misunderstood we need to talk a bit more about what the term actually means, *and what it does not mean!* First, what we do not mean: We do not mean that social forces, and the outcomes of their interactions, can be predicted and controlled the way a chemist might predict and control a chemical reaction in a laboratory, or the way a physicist can predict what will happen when subatomic particles interact (even if only as probable outcomes of specific events), or the way we can predict eclipses of the sun and moon.

Perhaps this seems laughable. But it is actually the approach to “scientific socialism” asserted by the Stalinist school of “Marxism-Leninism.” This has opened Marxism up to ridicule from those who would like to discredit any idea of “scientific socialism,” but it is the furthest thing in the world from what Marx and Engels actually meant when they used the term. (Marx and Engels never explicitly developed this concept in the way I am about to describe, but subsequent Marxists did—including theoreticians of the Second International and others.)

In reality there are many kinds of scientific endeavors, not all experimental, and many extremely imprecise. We could talk a lot about this, but to keep it short just think about the single best scientific analogue with Marxism: medicine.

Is there a scientific basis to the practice of medicine? Of course. Can a doctor therefore precisely diagnose and treat every patient without uncertainty as to the causes of symptoms or ambiguity about what particular treatments will do to the body? Of course not. Medicine is not a “science” like the prediction of eclipses. And doctors make plenty of mistakes.

The measure of a good doctor is that she or he learns from mistakes, tries to correct them in time, and is better prepared the next time they see a similar condition. Likewise with the practice of scientific socialism by revolutionaries. We need to accumulate knowledge with every revolution, every social struggle we are involved in. We need to plan, and take action confidently based on previous experience. But we also have to realize that mistakes are inevitable. So we will need to correct and learn from them.

This is the method that Marx and Engels actually practiced. It represented a genuine revolution in social philosophy and methodology. Marx and Engels did not develop a scientific theory of revolution that was a set of iron laws. Rather, scientific socialism constitutes a broad set of guidelines to help us recognize the similarities in diverse situations so we can deal with them more effectively. It also involves understanding that each situation is different and has to be approached as a unique experience. The key is being able to combine these two perspectives. Again it is like the problems faced by physicians. Each case, no matter how similar to previous cases is also different, and the *art* of medicine, like the *art* of revolution (the part that cannot be quantified in a “scientific” way) involves sorting through what is similar and what is different, making creative judgments about how to address each aspect, and being prepared to adjust and change as the reality changes, and as our experiences reveal new aspects of reality to us.

As I say, we could go on for some additional time about this whole question of scientific socialist methodology, but if you keep the analogy with medicine in mind it will serve you pretty well as a guideline.

III.

Now we must deal briefly with another aspect of Marx's revolution in philosophy (again I ask you not to get nervous), a set of principles called "Dialectical Materialism." We could take up a whole class session on this, indeed we could have many classes. But here is the very brief 5-minute version:

A generation before Marx, a German philosopher by the name of Hegel developed a system of logic that was different from the logic developed originally by Aristotle and taught as gospel for centuries. Aristotelian logic is characterized by two statements: First "A equals A" and second "Not A does not equal A." These statements are certainly true in important ways, which is why Aristotelian logic has been such a powerful analytical tool for centuries. But they deal with the world as if it was filled with static and unchanging entities which either are, or are not, a particular thing.

Hegelian logic insists on precisely the opposite relationship between things. The world is filled with things that are constantly changing and becoming transformed into something else. Things both share characteristics and are unique at the same time. (Does this remind us of what we said a moment ago about medical patients and social struggles—they are both like the previous patients and struggles we have seen, but also different?)

Hegelian logic explores the ways in which things change and the complex interrelations between things that are both like each other and different at one and the same time. The attraction of such a logic to a revolutionary (who wants, after all, to change what is) should be obvious. So Marx and Engels became prominent supporters of dialectics as a way of thinking about the world.

But they also had a philosophical difference with Hegel. Hegel believed that his logic was very useful in the real world, but its utility was a result of the fact that the real world itself was only an external expression of the ideas we have in our heads. In other words: the world works the way it does because our minds work the way they do. All we can really talk about, according to this way of thinking, is the interaction between our minds and the world.

Hegel's approach belongs to one great historical philosophical school which is called "idealism." Idealism, in this technical sense, has nothing whatsoever to do with the idealism we all share: an insistence that a better future is possible for humanity. No, philosophical idealism means simply that when we think or speak what we are thinking and speaking about is our own ideas, that the actual connection of these ideas to the real world is unknown, and fundamentally cannot be known.

Marx and Engels, along with subsequent generations of Marxists, have subscribed to the opposite philosophical school, called “materialism.” Again, materialism in this technical sense has nothing to do with the grasping and acquisitive “materialism” that so many exhibit in our capitalist culture. Rather, philosophical materialism means simply a belief that the real material world exists and is the primary cause of both what happens in it and of our thoughts about it. Human beings are a part of this real world, but it exists independently of us, and the measure of our philosophy is the degree to which our ideas correspond in fact to the reality of that material world. We can tell the extent of this correspondence by the degree to which we can predict the consequences of the things we do, or of things that happen independently of us in the material world.

So Marx and Engels adopted Hegel’s logic, but rejected his idealism, and founded the philosophical school which has come to be known as “dialectical materialism.” As with Marxist thought generally, there have been many distortions of dialectical materialism over the years. But these should not be allowed to discredit the validity of the concept as properly applied, any more than the prevalence of incompetent, even criminally negligent, doctors should discredit the practice of medicine.

IV.

Dialectical materialism had a specific application to the study of history, and particularly to the question of social revolution (the concern of “scientific socialism”). And it is this investigation of the dialectics of revolution to which Marx and Engels devoted most of their time, not to the abstract development of philosophy for its own sake. The application of dialectical materialism to the question of history also has a name: “historical materialism.”

The basic thesis of historical materialism is that all history, when it gets down to fundamentals, is the history of class struggle—by which we mean the relations between human beings in the process of producing or otherwise acquiring the necessities and luxuries of life. The goal of acquiring more material goods, or dominance in society which will enable further enrichment of individuals, or clans, or tribes, or social classes, is the root cause of wars and revolutions, of great political transformations and upheavals, of all historical motion generally. Ideological rationalizations (God and country, morality, or whatever) are always raised to justify wars and revolutions and political transformations. But these can, if we look deeply enough, always be understood as simply the ideological form through which the underlying class struggle is expressed—given the systems of thought which are actually available to people in a particular time and place.

My favorite illustration of this is the Protestant reformation in Europe during the Middle Ages. There had been many attempts to reform the Catholic church before Martin Luther came along. But all those who had tried previously ended up being burned at the stake. Why did Luther’s “heresy” succeed in founding a new religion?

I would suggest that it was not because of anything special about its doctrine, or about Martin Luther’s personal character. Rather, Martin Luther came along at just the right

historical moment, when a rising bourgeois class in Germany had developed to the point where it had enough social and economic power to effectively attack the economic and political power of the Medieval church. Martin Luther thus gained a strong political ally, and both the new religion and the rising social class benefited from their alliance—the bourgeoisie by gaining an ideological cover for its goal of stripping the church of its lands and economic preeminence in feudal society. Thus, the competing interests of the old feudal ruling class and the new capitalist class was the main variable in the equation. If Martin Luther, with his particular religious doctrine, hadn't come along at just the right moment, it would have been somebody else with a different doctrine.

Historical materialism asserts that the existence of such economic struggles for dominance between groups of people has shaped every aspect of our existence for millennia, including all of our present-day social and cultural institutions. This is not to say that economics determines all social and cultural institutions in some absolute, mechanical, or predetermined sense. Rather, it constrains them, sets parameters which limit their possible paths of development in any society. There is a famous quotation from Marx which sums this up: “Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” [Note 1].

I want to present two key concepts of historical materialism that it will be useful for you to remember (again, keep in mind that this is the quick outline):

The first is something called “modes of production.” This refers to the different systems by which society organizes itself to produce what people want and need. The prominent modes of production (in Western society) have been: Primitive Communism, Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism, and (we project, since we have not yet seen this) Socialism. Keep in mind that in life these different modes of production do not usually exist in some pure and distinct state, but are messy, mixed, and overlapping. Each evolves in turn (or, in the case of socialism, the potential for it evolves) and comes into conflict with the previous mode of production. Revolutions mark the transition points at which an old mode of production, outmoded by the development of new technology but still holding onto power through structures of the state, is replaced by a new mode of production as the dominant social force, through new state institutions.

The second concept it is worth noting here is what we call “relations of production.” This refers to the way people are divided up into social classes, with particular relations to the means of production, and the interactions between these classes which are constrained by those relations. In the beginning there was the primitive collective of equals (more or less), where each individual related to other individuals in particular ways—based on a voluntary sharing of resources. Then there were slaves and slave owners, who related to each other differently from the individuals in the primitive collective, feudal lords and serfs, Capitalists and workers. Again, real life is always marked by messiness and complexity: Slave cultures begin to emerge in bits and pieces, while the primitive collective of equals still remains dominant, for example. Most capitalist societies today also have individual farmers or peasants, and other small

producers who are neither capitalists nor workers. Many nations still have significant remnants of old feudal relations, and in some slavery is practiced, or primitive communist forms of production, even while a global market dominates social relations overall.

Historical Materialism is the study of how all of this developed, shaped the world in which we live, and continues to shape and reshape it today.

V.

It is also important to keep in mind that Marx and Engels were not just theorists and analysts. They were also activists who put forward, in the *Communist Manifesto* and other works (and activities), a political program for the working class. They actively worked to build a mass movement, and organizational expressions of working class struggle.

This activist work of Marx and Engels was centered on a few key political themes:

- a) forming larger, stronger, socially-conscious trade unions;
- b) organizing broad struggles for various reforms to improve the conditions and advance the interests of the working class—including things like a shorter work day, ending child labor, democratic right (extending the right to vote, civil liberties, etc.), women's rights, foreign policy questions (opposing British government support for the slave South during the US Civil War, opposing militarism, etc.);
- c) political independence from the capitalist class by building an independent labor party;
- d) struggling to "win the battle for democracy" through a working-class majority taking control of the state and using the political power which results to bring about the socialist reconstruction of society.

This is the classic program which forms the basis for understanding many of the debates between—and contributions of—Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky, who we will also be studying during these two classes, along with many other Marxist thinkers of their day and later.

In fact, I would argue that as a practical study in the scientific socialist method we cannot do better than take up the question of the interaction between the development of theory and practical work. Each of these is dependent on the other. Neither is primary, both are essential. Without the practical struggles in which they engaged Marx and Engels could never have developed their theoretical contributions. Without the development of their theories they could not have understood what to do on a practical level.

This subject, like so many others I have touched on, is also worth a class or two in its own right. But due to the limits of time I will have to leave my comment there. Once again you can think about our analogy with medicine: What would medical theory be without medical practice? What would medical practice be without medical theory?

VI.

Now, I would like to say that all of what I have told you so far is, in a certain sense, a prelude to the main point I would like everyone to remember when you leave the room today. It's important stuff in its own right, things we have to understand, of course. But simply understanding these things is not enough. That's because, as I say, we can study the basic concepts of "scientific socialism," or "dialectical materialism," or "historical materialism" at length, or the specific activist themes developed by Marx and Engels, we can even read Marx and Engels until we have every word memorized, *and still get it wrong*. Many do get it wrong, precisely because they approach the study of Marxism as if it were a set of mathematical formulas.

The way to avoid this is to look at something else, in addition to the basic concepts we have just discussed, what I like to call the "revolutionary character" of Marx and Engels, the personal qualities which caused them to approach the world as they did and make these important contributions. This revolutionary character I am going to talk about is not something unique to Marx and Engels. I think that if we look at the other three revolutionaries who are being covered in these two classes, and many others who might be covered, they all exhibit precisely the same set of qualities. And I'm going to boil it down to two fundamental principles. Everything else, I would suggest, flows from these two.

The first is summed up in my favorite passage from the Communist Manifesto, one that I quote constantly:

"[Communists] have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

"They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

Think again of our physician who has no interests separate and apart from those of the patient. This is essential to the proper practice of medicine.

Every great revolutionary has put the struggle, and the needs of the struggle, before any personal consideration. Every truly revolutionary organization asks only: "What is needed to advance the working class, or other oppressed grouping in society, towards its collective goals?" It then seeks to advance itself through the process of advancing this broader struggle, and *only* through that process. As soon as any person or political group begins to think first in terms of promoting themselves and their own position in relationship to others they will inevitably act in a way which is contrary to the broader collective goals. (Do you recognize any sectarian organizations out there which you can fit into this picture?)

This takes us to the second revolutionary "quality" which Marx and Engels also exemplified (a fundamental consequence of materialism): Revolutionaries are interested

in the truth. We have no use for comfortable fictions about ourselves, our organizations, or the reality we are working to change. If you want to establish a scientific view of how the world works in order to change it, only the truth is meaningful.

Marx himself summed this up in two famous phrases: “A ruthless critique of everything existing”[note 2] and “Doubt everything.” He did not mean, of course, that everything believed previously must be wrong, but rather that everything must be tested, and retested, and then tested once again as the world changes and as we break free from the fictions about the world which bourgeois ideology works so hard to instill in us from birth. The test of our ideas (and, as noted, here we go back to the essence of a materialist philosophy) has to be based not on what we would like to be true, what will make us feel comfortable and validate our viewpoint, but what is actually true, what is honest, what is real in the material world.

Attaining this standard of objectivity is hard. I mean it is really, really hard. Subjectivity in response to data about the world is probably a universal reaction. We all tend to see what we want to see. And yet a real revolutionary needs to bend every effort to overcome this, to look squarely at the world as it is and judge their own ideas, and the ideas of others, accordingly.

(One word of caution here. I say that we seek the truth. That search is essential. However, revolutionaries, like others, will get into a lot of trouble if they ever believe that they have actually found “THE TRUTH” in any kind of absolute sense. Too often people who called themselves Marxists have done horrendous things because they believed they knew “THE TRUTH,” and therefore had a right to impose their ideology on society against the collective will, or use the worst kinds of factional methods—up to and including physical violence—against other activists and revolutionaries who did not subscribe to their “truth.” But such methods can never be justified. No scientific endeavor—not even the most rigorous and experimental—ever has “THE TRUTH” in such an absolute sense. Truth is always something we are striving for, without ever being able to achieve it. There are two reasons for this: 1) because there are inherent limits to human knowledge in every sphere of our lives. Our knowledge will always be imperfect. And 2) because as dialecticians we know that real truth is a moving target. It is constantly shifting and changing, staying at least several steps ahead of us even when we are at our most brilliant in analyzing the world.)

Keeping these two fundamental principles in mind we can look at all the other qualities we note in great revolutionaries, or great artists or scientists for that matter, and see that they derive from them directly. When summing up the life of Malcom X, for example, George Breitman in the final paragraph of the introduction to his book: *The Last Year of Malcolm X—Evolution of a Revolutionary*” used two words to describe Malcolm: “uncompromising” and “incorruptible.” I think I might add that he was completely honest about what he thought, both with himself and with others. These three things—an uncompromising spirit, incorruptibility, total honesty about ideas—are essential ingredients for success as a revolutionary leader. Marx and Engels established the model of such behavior for the rest of us to emulate.

If we recognize the fact that we, as revolutionaries, have no interests separate and apart from the broader struggle we are attempting to advance, and if we take our comfort from seeking the truth, no matter where that leads us, we will be incapable of compromising with the oppressive reality of capitalism, or of selling out our principles for personal gain, or of lying to ourselves, to our fellow revolutionaries, or to the masses of people we hope will one day follow our lead. Once we act in accord with these principles it becomes possible for us to live up to the legacy of Marx and Engels, of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Malcolm X, and so many others.

VII.

I will close simply by recommending two key works which every young revolutionary should put on their “must read” list. If you read not simply with the idea of learning specific facts about what Marx and Engels thought, but also with the goal of seeing the historical-materialist method at work, along with the revolutionary qualities I have described, you will get the most out of your reading.

The first text is *The Communist Manifesto* which was coauthored by Marx and Engels. When you read the *Manifesto* keep in mind that, as with any great historical work, there are some aspects which stand the test of time, while others seem hopelessly outdated and even naïve based on what we know now. We cannot sanctify the text as a result of its enduring validity, nor vilify it as a result of its inadequacies. The proper approach is to maintain a commitment to what remains essential, learn from the portions that were mistaken or need revision today, and build on that knowledge. This was the approach which Marx and Engels themselves took in all of their own historical study, and with regard to their own work.

The second booklet I will recommend is by Engels: “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific.” This is not necessarily an easy read—especially if you are not already familiar with some of the historical figures or philosophical questions Engels is discussing. But it is still worth making your way through it. You will get at least a good sense of the kinds of issues Marx and Engels were concerned with, and some of the thinking that distinguished their approach to socialist theory from the utopian models which had come before. And then, as you learn more, this—like all the other Marxist classics—is a text which you can return to. You will get additional insights. I reread it in preparation for giving this talk, and once more found a new appreciation of aspects I had not understood on previous occasions.

Obviously, if you really want to become an educated Marxist there is a lot more. But if you start with these two it will provide a good foundation for further reading.

It may surprise some of you that I do not suggest reading *Capital*. That’s not because a study of Marxist economics does not remain important. Gaining at least a basic knowledge is essential, in fact, if you really want to understand historical materialism. Unfortunately there is no 5-minute version of Marxist economic theory, and so I could not really do justice to this subject in my presentation today. And *Capital* is not

something most people, especially those new to Marxist politics, can sit down and read on their own. It's best to find a good class, with a competent teacher and a group of others who are studying as well.

For self study of Marxist economics I recommend Ernest Mandel's two volumes on *Marxist Economic Theory*. Mandel also has a good small pamphlet called, "An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory."

OK, I'll close there, and turn it over to Dianne to talk about Rosa Luxemburg. We can return to anything and everything during the discussion.

[NOTE 1] *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

[NOTE 2] This is the popular and often cited phrase. The original source is a letter to Arnold Ruge in which Marx wrote: "If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organizing it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries nor from conflict with the powers that be."