

Justin P. Holt

The Social Thought of **Karl Marx**



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Justin P. Holt
New York University



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FOR INFORMATION:

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Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

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1 Oliver's Yard
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SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
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#10-04 Samsung Hub
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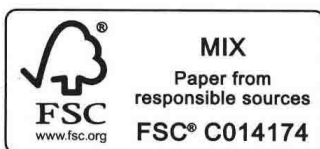
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The Social Thought of **Karl Marx**

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Series Editor's Foreword

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank A. Javier Treviño, the Social Thinkers series editor and the author of the volume on C. Wright Mills. If Javier had not contacted me about writing an introductory book on Marx, I would have never attempted it. But, thankfully, he provided me with the opportunity, and I'm glad he did. His comments and criticisms were always helpful and made this book much better than the initial drafts. I'm quite happy with the outcome, and I hope he is too. The six readers of a draft—Benjamin F. Hadis, Fatmir Haskaj, Alexa Trumpy, Daniel Egan, Kristopher Kohler, and Ernesto Castañeda—devoted a considerable amount of time in providing insightful commentary, which made this book clearer and more accessible. I thank them for their commitment and candor. Finally, my beautiful and talented girlfriend, Alise Wallis, has helped me in countless ways over the years. If it wasn't for her intelligence, compassion, and insight, this book would never have been completed.

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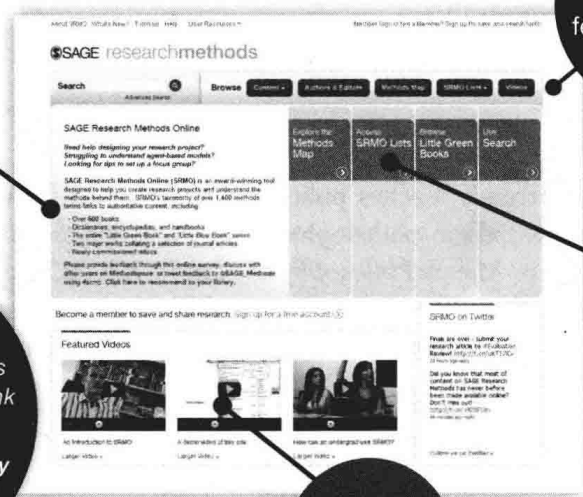
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Introduction

Karl Marx's influence on the social sciences and philosophy has been one of emulation, disgust, horror, and praise. Many students are taught about Marx in an introductory sociology, political science, philosophy, or economics course, but usually they do not learn the complexity of his work. His ideas appear as an influence in many contemporary theories, either as a supporting or detracting basis. In addition, Marx occupies a notable place in the popular imagination as a social analyst and feared revolutionary. As of late (this book was finalized in 2013), Marx has received some renewed interest due to people suffering from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This coverage indicates that people are buying Marx's books again. Shocked by the economic downturn, people are seeking to understand why and how capitalism can fail to grow and maintain employment. In this media coverage of Marx and his ideas, little attention is given to those scholars that attempt to analyze our economic shortcomings with the achievements of Marx and those who have further developed his theories. All this influence, hysteria, and notoriety does not inform us of the actual work that Marx did.

This book is about Marx's work including his philosophy, sociology, economics, and politics. My intention in writing this book is to explain what Marx said and to examine if it still makes any sense. I think that Marx's work has a cogency that can be presented clearly and systematically. What specifically is Marx's work about? Marx's work was an attempt to understand the social processes of capitalism. Capitalism is discussed at greater length in the first chapter. For now, we can simply describe capitalism as a social system with the following features: people are free to sell their labor, they are able to accumulate property as their own, and market transactions are commonplace. Marx became interested in capitalism because he found that these features resulted in misery for the majority of people who live in capitalist societies and societies affected by capitalism. Marx also found this outcome

of mass misery to be profoundly irrational. Thus, he wanted to understand how such an irrational system of social organization could exist when its members have the power of reason. In simple terms, Marx's social scientific project is an attempt to answer the question: "How can capitalism exist when it produces results that are detrimental for the majority of humanity?" Marx answered this question via the use of various categories of analysis he developed. Chapters 3 through 9 of this book explain the various categories of analysis utilized by Marx and his theoretical and empirical results.

In review, this book is about the *work* of Karl Marx. Marx's work was an attempt to understand the social processes of capitalism. He was interested in understanding capitalism because he found the social outcomes common within capitalism to be detrimental for the majority of humanity. This book will discuss Marx's examination of capitalism by explaining the various categories he used in his work.

Outline of the Book

This book is composed of two introductory chapters, six chapters on Marx's categories of social analysis, one chapter devoted to applying Marx's work to environmental problems, and a final chapter on suggested readings.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the topics and influences of Marx's work and a presentation of the general themes of this work. This chapter begins with an introduction to capitalism, which provides a historical and an analytical presentation of capitalism. Included in this introduction is a consideration of some of the social problems of capitalism including inequality, poverty, and unemployment. The second section builds on the presentation of capitalism to consider why Marx's ideas can still be regarded as important. The third section gives a detailed presentation of the general themes of the work of Karl Marx: the influence of technological development and industrialization on human social organization; the influence of social organization and technological development on human behavior; and the potential for human civilization to produce nonantagonistic social relationships. The remainder of the first chapter considers the intellectual climate and influences on Marx's life and gives a brief biography of his life.

Chapter 2 is an overview of Marx's materialism, a consideration of Marx's conception of the interrelation of individuals and society, and a discussion of Marx's method. Materialism has become so commonplace in today's natural and social sciences people no longer know what it means not to be a materialist. On one hand, materialism is the theory that all natural and social occurrences are explained by material causes as opposed

to supernatural or spiritual causes. An example of the difference between a material explanation and a spiritual explanation is that the Earth orbits the sun due to the forces of gravity and inertia as opposed to God's intervention. On the other hand, materialism is the theory that human societies are shaped by natural and technological causes and not the result of ideas, which are intrinsic to the human mind. Marx accepts both definitions of materialism, but the second one is very important to understand the groundbreaking nature of his work. Marx's method will be presented in light of his materialist theory. Marx attempts to develop explanations of the social world that identify simple causal determinations of social events. Chapter 2 reviews and analyzes Marx's statements on method and considers some examples.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Marx's theory of alienation. Alienation is when an object or a person is detrimental, hostile, or unaccepting of someone. Marx finds that people who have no control over the means of production due to class antagonisms suffer from alienation. People become alienated when they lose control over the means of production because the products of their labor are owned by others, they have little to no control over the labor process, they are unable to develop their abilities, and they are in antagonistic relationships with others. Marx finds that this has to be the case since people who don't own any amount of the means of production themselves have to sell their labor to survive. The people who hire them own what they produce and thereby enjoy the revenue that is generated from selling these goods and services. People who are hired are subject to the authority of their employers in regard to product creation and development. Since workers don't make decisions regarding the use of the means of production at their firm level, at the local level, or at a national level, they can't make decisions that will allow for their abilities to develop. Finally, people are in competition with one another when the means of production are scarce. Since people are in competition with one another for employment and market share, their relations are antagonistic.

Chapter 4 is on Marx's class theory. Class is the social position of a person in respect to other people's social positions. In particular, class is a social position designated by a person's economic relationship to others. For example, a class position can be determined according to income, wealth, profession, training, or education. Many contemporary class theories utilize income to designate class position, but Marx thinks class should be designated by whether one owns the productive resources of a society or not. The first section of Chapter 4 is an analytical reconstruction of Marx's theory of class. This presentation includes a discussion of how the ownership of the productive forces structurally determines class position. Next is a consideration of

what are objective class interests and subjective class consciousness. Then there is a discussion of class alliances and ideology. The second section discusses Marx's analysis of class in *The Communist Manifesto*. Special importance is placed on determining the class position of the middle classes.

Chapter 5 is an overview of Marx's theory of historical materialism. Historical materialism is a theory of the social development of civilization. Marx's theory conjectures that material events as opposed to ideas or supernatural occurrences cause a society to develop. This chapter begins with an examination of the classical statement of historical materialism found in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. This statement is expanded by utilizing Marx and Engels's comments from *The German Ideology*. The materialist dynamics of social development and revolution are elaborated. Special attention is paid to the problem of fettering. Fettering is when a given mode of production is no longer able to effectively develop the forces of production. The various modes of production and their causes of transition are analyzed. Last is a consideration of the possibility of free will and predetermination in Marx's theory of history.

Chapter 6 is on Marx's economics. The chapter begins with a discussion of the difference between exchange value and use value. Why Marx finds that commodities exchange at their labor values is analyzed. Next is a presentation of Marx's theory of surplus value and exploitation. Building on these categories, the chapter finishes with a consideration of Marx's theory of unemployment and his analysis of economic crisis.

Chapter 7 is on Marx's theory of ideology. This chapter begins with a discussion of why Marx's theory of ideology is a materialist theory. There is an exposition of the origin of ideology and the origin of ideologists. Next is a discussion of the kind of ideological notions Marx found to be common in the orthodox social scientific conception of capitalism. The chapter ends with a brief section on how Marx thought ideology could be demystified by social scientific critique and class formation.

Chapter 8 is on Marx's theory of communism. Communism is a society in which a sizable amount of society's productive resources are publicly owned and individuals cannot exploit others economically. This chapter has three parts. The first part is a presentation of what Marx found to be the ills of capitalism. The second part is an overview of the various aspects of Marx's vision of communism. The final part is a discussion of how Marx thought his vision of communism addressed and corrected the ills of capitalism.

Chapter 9 is on Marx's hypothesis that the dynamics of capitalist accumulation are not environmentally sustainable. First, this chapter reviews the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. This review examines how the goal of accumulation is to achieve further accumulation. Next comes a consideration

of some of Marx's explicit environmental statements. Finally, there is a brief consideration of whether communism can be environmentally sustainable.

Finally, Chapter 10 is a short presentation of further readings. The chapter has been divided into sections on the topics of Marx's writings, online sources, and journals devoted to the study of Marx's ideas.

Each chapter ends with some questions for thought. These questions are provided for the reader to further reflect on the topics of the chapter. Many of the questions do not have answers that can be explicitly found in the preceding discussions, but these discussions should help the reader think about how to answer these questions. The questions have also been written to challenge the reader to think about contemporary critiques of Marx's work and contemporary applications of his work.

It is my hope that this work will provide a thorough introduction to the work of one of the great social theorists of the modern period. It has been written with a broad audience in mind, including students, scholars, and interested laypeople. Not all of the themes of Marx's work have been discussed, but the general categories and topics of his social thought have been touched on. These will, I believe, provide groundwork for readers to pursue Marx's ideas in greater depth.

