

The Best Hated Man

A life with Karl Marx

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Marx had never set foot in my house. His name appeared in the *World Book Encyclopedia* shelved in the family room but nowhere else among the few books my parents owned. I knew only one person who had read Marx: my uncle. Gentle, spectacled, and fiercely devout, he came of age in tear gas; in that truth-telling fog he perceived that the Oakland Police Department represented the American mega-machine and its imperialist war in Southeast Asia. My uncle gave me my first lesson in political economy. At the kitchen table in my grandmother's kitchen he held up a banana. Its price, he said, contains the labor added to it in cultivation and harvesting, but the poor people who perform that labor receive a pitiful wage, nothing near what they require to lead a decent life. In capitalism, the laborer is paid only enough to survive; the rest of what he earns goes to the capitalists. This is the valorization of labor. The people would not have their energy sucked out of them for much longer, and looking right at me he said, "There's going to be a revolution, and everything is going to change."

I was fascinated, but *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* had just come on, and I excused myself to watch Marlin Perkins shoot sleeping darts into lions for no reason whatsoever. Exposing the unseemly innards of capitalism disturbed me more than I could say, because I could not imagine things any other way. Capitalism functioned as the operating system of American society. Take it away, and, I was sure, we would be eating grass clippings and roasting neighborhood pets. Worse, we would be communists. Never mind the Constitution—growing up during the Cold War taught me that the free market defined Americans. Unregulated business enterprise, vigorous shopping—that's how we expressed our liberty. Ronald Reagan could so easily demonize Marx as the evil genesis of the Evil Empire because no one in public life drew a coherent distinction between the regime and the philosopher it claimed as its own. Marx

became unmentionable in polite company, which only made him more curious to me.

Soon after I turned thirteen, I came home from school to find *The Revolutionary Worker* in the mailbox with my name on it, a bar mitzvah gift from my uncle. The *Worker* is the publication of the Revolutionary Communist Party, a Maoist organization dedicated to overthrowing the capitalist government of the United States. At the time, my uncle lived in the Salinas Valley of California, where he picked lettuce and endeavored to organize Mexican farm workers into a revolutionary force. My parents were bewildered by the publication, though they did not prevent me from reading it.

I huddled with it in my room. The cover had a man bent low in some wet and steamy street, teeth gritting, picking up a red flag. The red flag, the militant commemoration of May Day, the giddy scenarios for a brush-fire uprising, in which (to take one example) economic depression would send an army of the dispossessed against the Capitol—all of this terrified and amazed me.

Ronald Reagan confronted me on one side, Warren Beatty on the other. *Reds*, Beatty's 1981 epic of the Russian Revolution, presented the birth of the Soviet Union with erotic energy. It featured John Reed, Louise Bryant, and Emma Goldman; it included a sympathetic portrayal of Grigory Zinoviev, who stood with Stalin against Trotsky, turned against Stalin after Lenin's death, and was murdered by Stalin in 1936. I knew nothing of leftists, and the only political extremists I knew of were the conservative firebrands who yelled and threw chairs late at night on public-access television. All I knew was that Marx made people passionate about injustice and starting the world anew, providing a language for how to imagine some other condition of society.

I sat down with the Communist Manifesto in a used-book store, a haggard, low-slung place with cement floors and sagging shelves. In the quiet of the stacks I chose an edition published in the 1930s and opened it:

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”

History had meaning; it tended toward a culmination; it had a driving force. Capitalism prepared the way for the communist revolution, and Marx genuinely marveled at it: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” The struggle took place around capital—not just money but a certain use of money, represented by the value created by the banana workers. Once that value was accumulated, their employers used it to buy more land, plant more trees, and hire more workers. Marx's solution for ending the struggle was to wipe out everything I had been taught to respect and admire, including private property. I remember his furious anger rising like heat off the brittle pages, and I remember the sense of inevitability it carried. I experienced the book as an elaborate threat, shaded with the possibility of violence. Squinting into the daylight after the gloom, I put my hands in my pockets and walked down Long Beach Boulevard. The situation turned out to be far worse than I had imagined. If I took Marx seriously, I had to pick a side: the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, my uncle or my mother, fighting the power or going to law school. Philosophy had never before made me want to throw up.

My four years at Berkeley coincided with Ronald Reagan's second term, and the street performers and itinerant radicals in Sproul Plaza owed their livings to him. It wasn't until later that I learned he had said this before a packed convention of real estate agents in 1987: “How do you tell a Communist? Well, it's someone who reads Marx and Lenin. And how do you tell an anti-Communist? It's someone who understands Marx and Lenin.” What a relief to know that nothing of any importance or value lay in the intellectual foundation of the opposition. Reagan made it safe for people to

become passive ideologues. In the mean time, my professors made a communist out of me by assigning the forbidden texts, and I became an enemy of the state by discussing the Manifesto under coastal live oaks with my comrades who also had papers they needed to write that evening. I also studied the Russian Revolution in detail, including the motives and thinking of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

In fact, almost no one among my classmates spoke in favor of revolution. The ideology of the Bolsheviks looked like secular religion, a creed vaguely Christian in its faith that the first shall be last and that heaven could be created on earth. Though students sitting under the same trees not long before had come to a different conclusion (students including my uncle), the book in my hands did not provide me with an operable philosophy. I could leave the question aside, however, because my interests had settled on American history, especially the formation of cities, the settling of the West, and the cultural landscape of ordinary places. Marx didn't have much to say on these subjects (or so I assumed), and I was more than happy to get away from him.

When he showed up again I hardly recognized him. I read *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the summer after I graduated from Berkeley. I had gone to wait tables, walk in the mountains, and read in isolation. I ended up enrolling in a great-books program. The *Manuscripts* changed how I looked at Marx. He was twenty-six years old when he began to work through political economy, recording his first thoughts in a notebook. It depicts Marx struggling with his greatest inspiration, the most important intellectual force in his life, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Marx had never known Hegel, but he became a leading light among the Young Hegelians who read and debated the Master after his death in 1831. Marx owed his idealist conception to Hegel but began to sketch out his own materialist view. Hegel's world-historical process stressed the movement of Spirit—the transcendent rationality of the universe that acted through humans. Marx substituted

Hegel's philosophical terms with economic ones and the Master's ethereal sense of "becoming" with a hard-grained class struggle. But that's not what grabbed me at the age of twenty-two. The in-your-face critique of society, especially money and a life dominated by earning it, thrilled me. In it, I saw alternatives for myself.

What should be our life's activity? Marx saw people dehumanized by their work. "The worker becomes a slave to his object.... The terminus of this slavery is that he can only maintain himself as a physical subject so far as he is a worker, and only as a physical subject is he a worker." He called money the only "true need produced by the modern economic system." I did not want to begin the world anew, but I did want to begin myself. Marx skewered capitalist self-discipline with the argument that a life dedicated to making money caused estrangement from the things that make life worth living: "The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life." I feared being a slave to a salary in a job that left me empty.

Marx's partner, Friedrich Engels, offered another insight: "The struggle of capital against capital, of labor against labor, of land against land, drives production to a fever pitch at which production turns all natural and rational relations upside down." I had witnessed rapid change in the landscape of my childhood as it disappeared into the familiar suburban pattern, but I lacked the language to think of it as anything other than progress, even if ironically. I never understood that the destruction of one landscape and its replacement with another represented a logic embedded in capitalism. In other words, progress is not an absolute value or a force of nature. It is an idea about the course of events.

When the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union soon after, I wondered if Marx had gone the way of the French Physiocrats or

Ptolemy—superseded by other findings, no longer considered relevant or even factually correct. I did not accept the absurdity of an end to history and the final triumph of liberal capitalism, but it did seem that Marx's philosophy had failed. Marxist history only confirmed his irrelevance. With a few notable exceptions, the programmatic way these historians sought to verify Marx—like physicists verifying Einstein—made for narrowly argumentative, deterministic writing. But around the same time, during my first years in graduate school, I began to read environmental history, which appealed to me for the way it confirmed the centrality of materialism. By materialism I mean the way that production and consumption, buying and selling, and the flow of matter through human hands influences the way we see the world. The nineteenth century felt like a heavy weight to carry around in my head. The enormity of the changes taking place in North America demanded a synthesis of some kind, and I went looking for someone alive at the time who put it all together: bison near extinction, passenger pigeons decimated, rivers polluted with human and industrial waste, forests cut over throughout the Northeast and the Midwest, farmers rebelling on the Great Plains, railroads crossing the deserts, a financial panic and depression in 1893.

Who formulated all of this into a materialist portrait of the times? I expected to find it in political economy.

Political economy is not economics. It considers how a society organizes labor and resources, how it uses land and collects revenue from trade and taxes, the role of government policy in the creation of wealth. If anyone should have taken notice of scarcity and the destruction of natural capital, it should have been the political economists. But that is not what I found. Instead, they inhabited a happy fantasyland of their own creation, in which nature always met human needs. Some writers openly referred to Providence—the God-given sufficiency enjoyed by a virtuous people. Others assumed that since civil society required inexhaustible resources, those resources

must exist. Without infinite plenty to feed expansion and stave off a crisis of confidence, the story of progress told by most political economists makes no sense. When I looked for someone writing at the time who looked critically on this sunshiny world, there he was again.

I had arrived at the first volume of *Capital*, the book Marx completed in 1867, combining all his previous economic thought. To my amazement, he had read everything published in any language on political economy over the previous century. He encompassed the study, placing him in a stunning position to interpret it, and he hated almost all of it. His own voice sounds unlike any other at the time—rigorously lucid, unstintingly materialist. No Providence here, and no utopia. Instead, Marx developed a description and analysis of capitalism so arresting in its scope and depth that I felt as though I had discovered the Rosetta Stone of some lost language. I opened the book thinking that it would be as dense as Hegel; I found a writer determined to be understood by regular people. *Capital* reads like a nineteenth-century version of *Political Economy for Dummies*.

It begins with the commodity. People use things, and use gives things value. Think of your favorite pen or garden tool as having use value. But when people offer things for sale, they create exchange value. A commodity is anything with a use value that also has an exchange value. Marx asks this question: What kind of society is built around exchange value? What happens when the commodity becomes the generalized form of all products? Commodities circulate, and in circulating they get exchanged for the universal means of exchange: money. Marx defines capital—the center of his entire argument and the basis for the system that depends on it—as a specific kind of circulation, described in this way in Part 2, Chapter 4:

The simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C—M—C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities; or selling in order to buy. But alongside of this form we find another specifically different form:

M—C—M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital.

In the first formulation, both Cs are identical. A cobbler sells his shoes, uses the money to buy more leather, and goes home to make more shoes. Leather is leather. But in the second formulation, the two Ms do not equal each other. The second M contains the added surplus value of the transaction—the profit. The money generated by the sale of commodities is surplus value, and it remains surplus value until or unless it is used to generate more surplus value. Investment turns surplus value into capital. To paraphrase Forrest Gump, capital is as capital does. Passages like this one have the power of knocking the sleep from our eyes because they demystify.

Marx made capital visible and defined its unsettling imperatives. The holders of capital want it to earn as much surplus value as possible. They seek out fresh resources, more powerful machines, and new populations of workers and consumers. The pasture land near where I grew up produced more money in the form of new homes than it did by raising milk cows. Thus the building boom in southern California followed logically from the uses of capital. This simple calculation carried with it all sorts of implications—more roads, cars, and smog, along with a sprawling, homogenized landscape that required federal and local taxes to keep it viable. Marx made it possible to isolate capitalist thinking, to evaluate its claims and identify those who benefit and suffer. This is critical political economy—all the more relevant in a time when neoconservative economists dominate public discussion about markets and trade. They have become adept at relegating Marx to obscurity. If they can shut down the critique, they're one step closer to eliminating all reasoned opposition to their project. They brand Marx a utopian at the same time that they put forward what is perhaps the most radical plan for restructuring national sovereignty, human geography, and

economic institutions ever imagined.

In the meantime, I had begun to teach *Capital*. It became impossible for me to think about environmental change or to teach about it without a critical tool in hand. Students wanted more, and they told me so. Rather than keep my reading to myself, I brought it to the seminar table. I taught political economy and environmental history together in order to follow the money, trace the motives, and pick apart the human conventions that lay behind a more neutral voice I had often heard (including from myself) that called capitalism part of “change,” making it seem inevitable, or part of the natural order of things. Some students seemed nervous about the subject, so, taking a phrase from a poster I'd seen in a doctor's office, I made the seminar a “safe space” to talk about capitalism. It worked. I had the most vocal supporters of Adam Smith picking apart the nature of the commodity and the circulation of capital. They wrote their papers in grand style, like the critical political economists they had become. They made me proud.

And yet Marx promoted a global utopia of his own. The terrible truth is that the same ideas I experienced as liberating stand accused of the most horrific tyranny of the twentieth century, including the murders of tens of millions of people: Stalin's purges, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Cambodian genocide of Pol Pot, and Fidel Castro's execution of thousands of his political opponents. Marx's thought can be read as totalizing. His rigorous critique served as a process of elimination, winnowing away all competitors until his own view stood alone. Even the people who most influenced Marx, like Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, eventually fell under the same sword, as he claimed to have superseded them, to have absorbed them into a more comprehensive system.

The totalizing quality of *Capital* and the Manifesto suggests a world unto itself, where Marx's language describes Marx's processes, leading to Marx's outcomes in historical pageants defined by Marx. It's not difficult to see how someone might decide to step inside the categories and view everything with their impeccable internal

logic. It explains the past, present, and future, gives each individual a place in the struggle, defines a way forward graced by inevitability, and applies to every place where those on the bottom confront their taskmasters at the top. The absolutism that seeps from the Manifesto leaves no space for reform or compromise; indeed, Marx rejects politics as fatally infected by the controlling interests of the bourgeoisie. Once in power, Lenin and Stalin shut down free speech, launched a war against all remnants of the old regime, and executed anyone who said a contrary word.

The way out of the utopian hellhole is to split the singularity of the author: There are two Marxes, not one. The distinction is actually rather common in discussions of Marx. Here is the political theorist John Gray on the question: “Marx perceived that capitalism is an economic system that unsettles every aspect of human life.... Far from being utopian, his account of capitalism is a vital corrective to the utopian visions that have distorted politics over the past generation. It is Marx’s vision of the alternative to capitalism that is utopian.” The revolutionary Marx is dead (or should be). The economic Marx lives on. Marx clearly meant his political economy to serve as the rationale for revolution and to inspire people to resist, but Stalin’s purges are no more written in *Capital* than the Crusades are written in the Gospels. We can take what we want and be aware of the contradictions, both in the philosophy we parse and in ourselves.

The subject opens other questions. Did he believe in freedom? Yes. He might have had an authoritarian personality, but I think he would have recoiled at Bolshevik oppression. Peter Singer, author of *Karl Marx: A Brief Introduction*, suggests that Marx would have been among the first of Stalin’s victims. He hated servility and sought to derive an economy in which no one would be subservient to anyone else. In communism, the state was to dissolve, not swell into a party-dominated, KGB-ridden leviathan. One of his most

important accomplishments was to extend a conception of freedom to the economy, arguing that political liberalism does not guarantee freedom from wage slavery.

What else did Marx get right? Surplus value and the valorization of labor. Walk into any big-box store. Look at the quantity of goods passing over the scanner and then consider the wages paid to the workers. At \$10 an hour, someone working the floor at Wal-Mart makes \$80 a day. A shopper walks in right after the doors open in the morning, takes a DVD player off the shelf, and buys it. In the time it takes to complete that transaction, Wal-Mart earns back the wage it pays to one of its employees in a day. For the rest of the day, all the value the worker earns is surplus value. This is not to say that the company has no other costs, but the worker has produced her wage with seven hours to go before punching out. Marx’s observation holds true for any kind of work and helps us to understand the place of labor in the economy, why paying workers as little as possible is always the goal of capital, and why Wal-Mart is the world’s largest company.

Beyond this, as Engels said over his friend’s grave, Marx discovered “the special law of motion governing the present-day capitalist mode of production.” Marx realized that capital contained the need to constantly perpetuate itself, so that any piece of land purchased with surplus value must earn surplus value, so that the commodities it produces must be sold for surplus value in order to pay wages that both represent and earn surplus value. Capital has an incessant need to expand, to cover more space, new people, and fresh resources. No one thanked the political economist for revealing the inner workings of the system for everyone to see, and Engels referred to him without exaggeration as “the best-hated and most calumniated man of his time.”

What did Marx get wrong? The universe does not exhibit rationality, and there is no discernible historical process. There is historical change, but Marx and Hegel believed that some force—spiritual

or social—actually forced or guided that change in a single, inevitable direction. Worse, Marx rejected two things that I cannot: politics and the market. Marx had little faith that any political system embedded in a capitalist society would ever result in equality or justice. Everyone can point to a travesty that gives us reason to doubt, but there are only lousy options. Democratic process is a compromise, exactly what Marx's utopianism could not tolerate. And while the market has swallowed almost every function, every commodity, and driven the environment to the breaking point, destroying it is not the solution. Markets existed long before capitalism and will exist long after. Markets simply express the human volition to dispose of property through exchange, and people have been doing that for a very long time. If markets define capitalism, then ancient Greeks and medieval Arab merchants would qualify. The creation of capital, and the social relations represented by wage work, land rent, and interest, define capitalism; so does investing in technology to increase scale and productivity.

Marx sought to abolish markets because he wanted to abolish private property, which he took as the ultimate source of capital. The problem is not markets but the overwhelming power we give them to organize human affairs. The market is a good slave but a bad master.

The same might be said of capital itself. Marx could not have known that a century on, the corporation would emerge as the most powerful institution on earth, given the authority to change the legal codes of sovereign states, to hold patents on forms of life, to control the resources of vast regions. Terminator seeds, which produce infertile plants, thus forcing farmers to purchase seeds rather than select them themselves, not only render food genomes private property, they weld farmers to centers of authority and scientific knowledge that farmers never needed before. Capital manipulates the working poor into thinking that they belong to corporate "families," when these workers have really entered experiments in social engineering intended to discourage them from unionizing for higher wages. Workers exchange their loneliness for a sense of belonging that is no

more a family than the moon is a lump of cheese. And yet, Marx also could not have predicted the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or, for that matter, the Ford or Carnegie foundations. He could not have imagined that capital might be employed for human improvement and reform, or that capitalists like George Soros would endeavor to limit the operation of the free market on the grounds that it created vast inequality.

I learned something from Marx that no one else could have taught me: how to look at the material world and see social relationships, not just the phenomena of economic growth or suburban sprawl or a heap of trash in a landfill. I see these things as having political and social meaning, for both the people they serve and those who pay the price. The world does consist of classes. And though class might not be as rigid as Marx believed, many of the world's people are fated to die in the poverty they are born into. I try to see the meaning written in the ways humans make things, use things, and trade things, and I am trying to live without the market wherever possible. And though Marx rejected democratic institutions, what else can we do but work within them? The very ambiguity that he could not tolerate is the one we most need. Not all contradictions can be resolved, in history or in our own lives—something else that Marx, with all he got right, got wrong.