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KARL MARX

The Revolutionary and the Cowboy

Marx was born in Germany in 1818, five years before Jefferson died, and he died in 1883, 19 years after Weber was born and 25 years after Durkheim was born. Marx was the earliest of these critical social theorists and the most horrified by capitalism. He began developing his radical ideas while still a student in Germany, and after his doctorate he could not teach in Germany because of these ideas. He went to Paris for two years where he befriended Friedrich Engels who became his supporter and collaborator. He was expelled from Paris in 1845, from Brussels in 1848, and from Germany in 1849 after being acquitted in a trial for sedition.

He lived the rest of his life in London where he researched and wrote, but did not finish, his major work, *Capital*. He was supported by Engels during these years, and he lived and died in poverty, holding few jobs. Engels was a capitalist with a successful textile business, but he shared Marx's contempt for capitalism and the hope for a communist future. Industrialization was most advanced in the London where Marx lived, so the workers in London were most exposed to the early brutalities of the owners. Marx studied capitalism in theory and practice with insights from his capitalist friend, and he produced a critique of capitalism that shaped the twentieth century and remains influential today. At the time of his death Marx characterized himself as 'the most hated and calumniated man of his time'.

Marx and market class structure

Capitalism for Marx is the market structure of private property and this market structure unleashes the power of industry. Marx was impressed by industrial production, but he also saw private property as generating

a new class structure and new class oppression. In this new structure the class that owns all productive property is only concerned with private self-interests, not with traditional obligations. This means that the class of owners – the bourgeoisie – can exploit the class of workers – the proletariat – with no traditional constraints. As a result, Marx argues, a market in private property not only creates industry; it also creates the most oppressive class structure in history.

When property is private, the owners do not have to think of their workers as people, not even as inferior people as the feudal aristocrats thought of the peasants. Owners only think of their workers as labor, and they only buy that labor to maximize their own self-interests. They do not need to protect or care for their workers, as they would with traditional duties, so workers simply become commodities to be bought and sold in the market. When owners do not need their workers, or can pay other workers less, those particular workers – those human beings – have no social protections. They can only hope to sell their labor to someone else. This gives owners, for Marx, unprecedented class power, and they use that power to create unprecedented wealth as well as unprecedented misery.

Not only are workers denied traditional rights and protections, they are also denied direct access to productive property. Under feudalism, peasants were an exploited class, but they lived on the land they worked and they had traditional, if limited, rights to their land. They had their own homes and communities, they made their own clothes, and they grew food for themselves as well as their lords. Peasants, that is, had a traditional right of access to work productive property (land), while workers in the market have no such right of access to work productive property. Workers can only feed, clothe, and shelter themselves if they can get a job, and they have no traditional right to have a job. Workers, therefore, are only able to survive if they can sell their labor to an owner, that is, if their labor serves the interest of an owner. As a result, owners have far more power over workers than aristocrats had over peasants, and the owners can use that power far more oppressively.

Capitalism, for Marx, is even more oppressive to workers than slavery was to slaves. He sees workers as ‘wage slaves’, commodities to be bought and sold but only for their labor. Slaves were important as *people*, not simply as labor, because they were essentially owned as people and could not be easily replaced. Workers, however, can be simply discarded and forgotten when they get sick or hurt because owners only buy their labor. Slaves were human investments, investments in particular people, so they had to be protected and tended as people as long as they could work. Slaves and peasants were oppressed as people but were also valuable as people. Workers, however, are more oppressed as people because they are only valuable as labor.

Private property makes capitalism uniquely oppressive, but it also makes it uniquely productive. Owners can maximize their wealth with no

traditional constraints and no investment in slaves. This means they can take more risks, be more innovative, invent new machines, buy and sell property. The pure self-interest of the owners encourages innovation and industry, and thus great productivity. But this is only possible if workers have no protections and are treated as market commodities.

Marx and the modern market

For Marx capitalism was brutally, excessively oppressive, with owners having unprecedented class power over their workers. But Marx analyzed capitalism in the middle of the nineteenth century, and capitalism generally seems far less brutal today. In the nineteenth century, as the industrial market developed, workers lost the feudal protections of tradition without yet gaining the modern protections of government. The brutal conditions Marx observed, however, led to greater government protections for workers in the twentieth century, making workers far less vulnerable to owners. To do this, however, government had to become more active, in defiance of *laissez-faire*. In the nineteenth century government was generally more passive, in accordance with market theory, so workers were more exposed and Marx was horrified. Prior to the nineteenth century European peasants were driven off the feudal estates and into the growing cities. Over the last two centuries the owners of the land (the aristocrats) had fenced off their estates (the enclosures) in order to grow livestock and compete in the market. In effect, feudal aristocrats were becoming capitalist owners. The owners of the land began to abandon peasant agriculture and all feudal traditions in order to trade in the market and maximize private profit.

A new class of workers was arising, and they were desperate to get a job. They no longer lived on the land where they could feed and clothe themselves. They needed work to live, but jobs were hard to find, working conditions were terrible, wages were very low, and everyone could easily be replaced. This was the capitalism Marx saw. Owners had enormous power over their workers, and neither government nor tradition offered much help.

Marx analyzed this new class structure and found it to be brutally oppressive. He thought it could not last long and he predicted a workers' revolution. What happened, rather, in the United States, was that government became more active to restrict the power of the owners and provide protection for the workers. As capitalism became industrial, and particularly after the frontier was gone, various laws were passed to protect children, limit working hours, monitor working conditions, assure a minimum wage, provide welfare, legalize unions, support education, and so forth. Because of these government protections capitalism began to seem far less oppressive. Owners today do not have the enormous, arbitrary

power they had in early capitalism, the capitalism Marx observed. Marx thought owners would only get richer while workers would only get more miserable, but government acted to redistribute some of the wealth. As a result, we now tend to see capitalism as far more stable and tolerable than Marx did originally.

Government essentially began to restrict some market freedom to protect some equal opportunity, and according to social contract theory, this is what government is created to do. From this perspective government should always remain neutral and maintain market stability by balancing freedom and equality. Marx, however, argued that government under capitalism would not be neutral and independent. It would always serve the class of owners just as feudal government had served the aristocrats. The owners would control all productive wealth and therefore all political power. As a result, government would always support the market freedom of the owners to maximize their wealth. It would not provide protection for the workers.

From our modern market perspective, however, where workers have many protections, this analysis of Marx may seem to be mistaken. Government has, in fact, acted in many ways to protect the workers by restricting some of the market freedoms of the owners. Apparently, then, government has acted much less like a puppet of the owners, and more in support of equality than Marx predicted. Because of many government efforts, particularly support for unions, workers have not become as miserable as Marx predicted and therefore not as concerned with class oppression and not as revolutionary.

Marx, however, would probably disagree, as many modern Marxists have. From his perspective government under capitalism only serves the interests of the owners. Even if government has seemed to help the workers, it has really been helping the owners. The owners are a ruling class, and the interests of this class are to maximize private wealth while preventing social disruption. The owners, therefore, share a class interest in maintaining market stability. They will allow their market government to provide some help for the workers in order to mitigate dangerous inequality.

Government would still be a puppet of the owners, but it would be able to help the workers as long as profits remain high. The owners, as a class, would have an interest in stability, but they would never let their profits decline in order to support stability. This is what it means to be a ruling class: you protect your power and privilege absolutely. If government could protect the workers by reducing the profits of the owners, the owners would not be a ruling class and government would have dominant power. But this is not possible, according to Marx, in a market structure of private property. The owners will have dominant power because they control the wealth, so the government will serve their interests. As a result, government will only help the workers as long as that help does not hurt the owners.

From the perspective of Marx, owners will never sacrifice their profits and wealth to keep their workers happy. Rather, they will protect their profits by oppressing their workers, and they will rely on government force – the police, the army – to control angry workers and maintain social stability. Government under capitalism will never be neutral and fair. It will maintain stability by helping the workers as long as profits remain high. But when profits begin to decline because of that help, government will abandon the workers and help the owners, with the police and the army if necessary. Government will always claim to be perfectly neutral and fair in accordance with the legitimating theory. But this can only be a strategy – an ideological strategy – to seduce and confuse the workers. Government will pretend to help the workers and may in fact really help the workers. But it will only help the workers as long as that also helps the owners. If owners have to maintain profits by making workers miserable – lowering wages, breaking unions, reducing welfare, increasing layoffs – government will always support the owners against the angry workers.

From this perspective, government in the twentieth century was able to help the workers because that also, indirectly, helped the owners and profits were not hurt. Some individual owners may have lost some profits as they lost some market freedom, but owners *as a class* maintained their wealth and power as government helped the workers. Government can only provide protections by taxing people with money and redistributing the wealth. So during the twentieth century, from this Marxist perspective, the profits of the owners, as a class, must have stayed so high that they were willing to sacrifice some wealth, through taxes, for the sake of market stability.

However, another argument made by Marx is that capitalist profits will tend to decline because of market competition. Owners will tend to lower the prices of the products they sell in order to compete successfully, and this will lower their profits. They will then try to lower production costs in order to maintain profits, and in particular they will lower the wages of workers. In addition to lowering wages, owners will also try to maintain profits by replacing workers with machines and this will increase unemployment. Further, the more owners use machines, the more they tend to overproduce. The logic of market competition, then, according to Marx, will tend to make workers poorer, and it will also lead to recession and depression and thus more unemployment. Capitalism will always experience a *declining rate of profit*, and workers will gradually become more oppressed and miserable. Finally, their anger will lead to a class revolution. Capitalism will be overthrown, and private property will be replaced with socialized property, where everyone can truly be equal.

From the perspective of Marx, this analysis leads to an obvious question in terms of the twentieth century. If the owners always have a declining rate of profit and government is only a puppet of the owners, then how could government in the twentieth century provide so much help for

workers? If government can only help workers when profits are not threatened, then profits must have remained quite high during much of the twentieth century. But how could profits have remained so high when government was taxing owners to help the workers and capitalism has a declining rate of profit?

In twentieth-century America government did not do much to help the workers until the market failure of the 1930s – the Great Depression. During the Depression, government tried to mitigate inequality and maintain market legitimacy by offering welfare and creating jobs. This was a special, heroic use of government at a time when all market stability was threatened, even the wealth of the owners. The Depression was finally ended by World War II when government put everyone to work. This was another exceptional use of government, and it stabilized market relations. Both the Depression and the war encouraged the use of government, and in the decades after the war government greatly increased welfare for the poor and protections for workers. Because of this active government, the market generally remained stable and legitimate, with remarkably long periods of growth and prosperity. Throughout this period, then, for about half a century, the profits of the owners remained quite high and the workers generally remained content despite the market logic, from the perspective of Marx, of a declining rate of profit. The profits of the owners remained high enough that they could share some wealth with the workers, through welfare and legal protections, in order to assure market stability.

But how could these profits have remained this high? According to Marx's analysis, profits can only remain this high if workers are increasingly oppressed and sinking deeper into poverty. But capitalist owners, particularly in America, generally retained high profits while workers in America during this period generally felt comfortable and secure, with very little sense of class anger. The poor and unemployed during this period were given increased access to welfare, education, and health care, and class conflict remained quite minimal despite the predictions of Marx. This meant that either the analysis of Marx was wrong and capitalism could in fact make everyone richer, owners and workers together, or some other workers somewhere in the world were being brutally oppressed and exploited. Either capitalism was far less brutal than Marx foresaw, or its brutality had been successfully exported overseas so owners in industrial countries, and particularly in America, could retain high profits while workers in industrial countries could be successfully pacified.

For much of the twentieth century, according to modern Marxists, capitalist owners successfully shifted the worst oppression and poverty to the workers and peasants of the less developed countries, that is, of the Third World. According to this argument, these capitalist owners were able to support government protections and pacify industrial workers because they reaped such enormous profits from colonial and imperial controls of

Third World countries. Colonial controls involve military power and imperial controls involve economic power. Through these controls the owners in the First World exploited the land, labor, and resources in the Third World, where workers and peasants had few protections. The resulting profits could offset the declining rate of profit. As a result, owners could share some of their wealth with workers in the First World (industrial workers) for the sake of market stability. According to this analysis, First World workers were saved from brutal exploitation because Third World peasants and workers were so intensely oppressed – dispossessed, starved, enslaved, and killed. During the twentieth century, class conflict was essentially avoided in countries of the First World because the worst aspects of class oppression were shifted to the Third World.

If this analysis is right, the capitalist strategy of shifting exploitation could not be continued indefinitely. It would only characterize a limited period of industrial development. In particular, this capitalist strategy would not be very compatible with today's global economy. When companies can easily move around the planet to maximize their profits, the First World–Third World distinction begins to evaporate. Industrial workers in the First World have enjoyed good jobs – high wages, unions, government protections. But these workers are now beginning to compete for jobs with workers in the Third World, workers with low pay, no unions, and few protections. As companies become globally competitive, Marx's logic of a declining rate of profit will begin to apply. Prices will be forced down and profits will decline, so wages will come down and protections will be removed, even for industrial workers. In recent years, workers in America, for example, have become more threatened. Unions have been weakened and many have been broken. Welfare, health care, and education have been reduced, layoffs have increased, and many companies have moved overseas. A global economy can recreate many of the original conditions of competitive capitalism. These are the conditions of *laissez-faire*, the conditions Marx analyzed, where government is limited and workers are exposed. As John Lewis Gaddis has written:

When corporations can base themselves anywhere ... governments have little choice but to live with invisible hands. A *laissez-faire* economic system is emerging at the global level a century after the invention of the welfare state limited *laissez-faire* economics at the national level. The social and political compromises that saved capitalism through an expansion of state authority early in the twentieth century no longer constrain it. (1999: 67)

In this context, Marx's original analysis may seem more convincing. In a global, competitive economy, profits may be threatened, government may retreat, exploitation may increase, and class anger may intensify. Government has been able to help for a while, but Marx's bitter predictions may have only been delayed.

Labor, alienation, and ideology

Marx's analysis of capitalism focuses on the issue of production. He assumes, like Rousseau, that humans are inherently social, not inherently autonomous. This means, for him, that people can only be fully human when they work together in social groups. Humans are never isolated and detached, never completely self-interested. We are born into social groups, and we depend on social groups to survive. In particular, we are *productive* in social groups – hunting, growing, fishing, building. We can only produce what we need to live and to reproduce successfully through social organization.

Production is a *social* activity for Marx, and it defines our human identity, our human essence. Other animals can only *find* what they need to live. But humans, uniquely, are able to *produce* what they need to live. Humans must organize production, and the way production is organized shapes all social relations. If production is organized equally, so all individuals share equally in productive wealth, then social relations are just – they are not distorted. But if production is organized unequally, as it is in a structure of class, then social relations are distorted. Indeed, the people in the exploited class are separated – alienated – from all their productive efforts and thus from their human essence.

All forms of class structure are unjust for Marx, but the structure of private property is the most oppressive and unjust, the most alienating. Humans are 'naturally', essentially productive according to Marx. Humans produce what they need to live, and individuals can only be fully human when they are not structurally separated from the products they make. Society can only be just and individuals truly fulfilled when they all have a sense of ownership and control over the products they make. Any structure of class control, therefore, distorts this human essence since the privileged class owns and controls what the working class produces. In all class structures before capitalism, however, the lower class lived on the land and thus had some degree of direct control over what they produced. As a result, they could build their own homes, grow their own food, cut wood for heat, and make their own clothes. But private property inevitably creates industry, and in an industrial structure of private property, workers are completely separated, completely *alienated*, from the products they make. Unlike feudal peasants, industrial workers have no traditional rights, no minimal control, over their own products. They are fully alienated from these products; therefore, for Marx, they are also alienated from their labor, from their own human essence, from all other humans, from all social relations. This is the structure of *alienation* for Marx, the structure of capitalist oppression, and it arises from the structure of private property.

Private property is uniquely oppressive because workers are separated from all productive property – the means of production – and owners can

only be self-interested, with no traditional, moral constraints. This means workers become commodities to be bought and sold, and this is another way of saying they are alienated. In another version of this same analysis, Marx argues that private property is a form of theft where owners are stealing from the workers. The idea of alienation is Marx's *social* critique of the market, and this idea of theft is his *economic* critique of the market.

His economic critique follows from the *labor theory of value* as stated by Adam Smith. According to this theory, only labor creates productive value, which means only workers create value, not owners. If the value of a product is the price it sells for, then the owners, not the workers, get that money. Owners take a profit from the money they make, a profit from the value produced. But workers produce all the value, so owners are stealing from the workers. Owners create no productive value, but they get rich off that value, while workers who create all that value are generally poor and oppressed. Owners return some of that value to the workers as wages, but the workers deserve all of that value according to the labor theory of value. Profit, therefore, is a form of theft, and when owners reduce wages to increase profits, they are simply maximizing the theft.

This economic version of Marx's argument reveals an interesting issue, an issue about the lost frontier. Marx adopts the labor theory of value from early individualists including Adam Smith. But he uses it to condemn the market while they used it to endorse the market. Both Marx and the individualists value freedom and equality but they have quite different perspectives, and the difference between these perspectives is the issue of industrial production with its structure of owners and workers. Smith assumed the structural equality of independent agrarians on an open frontier. In this context, as in Locke, the labor theory of value applied to owner-workers and supported the idea of private property. If only labor adds value, then aristocrats had no right to the land. The individuals who worked the land had a right to claim and own the land as private property, and thus to sell and profit from the products they made and grew. This theoretical argument legitimated private property, but it assumed an open frontier – no class monopolies, no structure of owners and workers. In the market class context of industry, Marx used exactly this argument to attack private property as a structural form of theft.

Unlike the industrial market theorists, Marx did not reinterpret Smith to justify the industrial market. Rather, he used Smith's original market arguments – arguments that assumed independent agrarians – to condemn that industrial market. Smith had made a similar point about 'merchants and manufacturers' with their 'wretched spirit of monopoly', and Jefferson also feared these merchants and manufacturers. As Smith was reinterpreted for industry, his labor theory of value was discredited, at least from the market perspective. Defenders of the market began to argue that owners do in fact create value by investing money, organizing production, taking risks, etc. They agree that labor adds value but not that *only* labor adds value. If both owners and workers add value, then

owners deserve their profit, workers deserve their wages, and the structure of private property is validated. But if *only* labor adds value, then the owners are essentially parasites, sucking wealth from the workers while contributing nothing themselves.

The owners, for Marx, exploit and oppress the workers, but they also depend on the workers because the workers produce all their wealth. The workers greatly outnumber the owners and they tend to become angry, so the owners have to worry about what the workers think and what they understand. If the workers accept that private property is theft, as Marx argues, they are likely to organize as a class and become disruptive, even perhaps revolutionary. The owners must use their enormous class power to maintain class control, and this means, among other things, they must control what the workers think and what they believe. They must put forward an *ideology* that justifies their class position. An ideology is a set of beliefs and values that supports the existing order and serves the existing authorities. Christianity, for example, was part of the ideology of feudalism since it justified aristocratic privilege in the name of God. All religion, for Marx, is an effort at ideology, an effort to assert class privilege as sacred. So if individuals are ever to be free and equal, all religion must be rejected.

Members of the upper class clearly enjoy their own ideology because it validates their social superiority. Primarily, however, ideology serves to confuse and pacify the lower classes. They will accept their misery and remain docile if they are convinced the class structure is just and proper. In an industrial market structure of owners and workers, the idea of equal opportunity, for Marx, is a version of class ideology. If the workers believe in equal opportunity, then they can only blame themselves for their poverty and dependence; they cannot blame the owners. Similarly, according to Marx, other market ideas serve as ideological controls: the idea that government is neutral, that democracy serves the people, that private property means freedom, that owners deserve their profits. The owners use their power to control all sources of ideas – politics, law, media, education, religion, philosophy, and culture (film, television, news, art, music). The market is validated by a vision of civil society, a vision of freedom and equality, and this vision, for Marx, is cynically offered by the owners to pacify the suffering workers.

History and communism

Based on this analysis of capitalism, Marx envisions an inevitable class revolution, a revolution by the workers against the owners. The owners will use their dominant class power, like all ruling classes, to maintain their wealth and privilege. They will use their control of productive property, their control of ideology, and their control of physical force (the law,

the police, the prisons, the military). Finally, however, according to Marx, their efforts to maintain power will not succeed. The declining rate of profit, which means lower wages, will finally make workers too poor and miserable. The workers will finally reject capitalist ideology and recognize their class oppression. They will achieve class consciousness and organize against the owners, creating a communist revolution. Capitalism will make them poor and confused, but Marx will help them become conscious, conscious of their class oppression. Marx's social theory will explain the logic of History, the logic of class struggles, and the workers can finally be free by following his ideas.

As workers become more miserable, they will begin to seek the truth, and Marx has discovered the truths they need, the truths of class and History. Marx understands History (with a capital H) as having a purpose and moving toward a goal. He has understood the true laws of History and those laws lead toward a final classless society, a social utopia – communism. The social laws of History, from Marx's perspective, are similar in their rational necessity to the physical laws of Nature. If people follow the laws of History they will move toward a good society – the End of History, communism. People who do not follow these laws – capitalists, workers who oppose communism, people who disagree with Marx – have failed to understand History and must be seen as social threats. History reveals its truths gradually as societies change, so some people, like Marx himself, understand the necessary laws of History sooner than many others. Marx is the first to understand History, so his social theory can lead the workers to a successful communist revolution. After the revolution, industrial production will make everyone prosperous, socialized property will do away with class, and History will come to an End.

History, for Marx, is a succession of class structures and class conflicts. The laws of History are the laws governing class struggles and class revolutions. One kind of class structure works for a while, but it finally becomes unstable due to class conflict. It breaks down, a revolution occurs, and a new kind of class structure emerges, a structure that is more oppressive and more productive. History moves toward greater productivity and greater oppression until the most productive and most oppressive class structure is created – capitalism. Capitalism is the penultimate stage in History. Only after capitalism can a classless society be created. Capitalism generates industry, and industry creates enough wealth for everyone to be equally prosperous. Capitalism will have to be overthrown for its industrial wealth to be shared, but it finally makes communism possible – the end of class structure and thus the End of History.

Marx sees History moving from early tribal societies, hunting and gathering societies, into class-divided agricultural societies. One kind of agricultural class society was slavery and another was feudalism. Feudalism eventually led to capitalism and industry, and capitalism will finally generate, through a revolution, industrial communism. Tribal societies were poor but communal, an early form of communism. All members of the

society shared the limited food and resources more or less equally. Agriculture led to a productive surplus – extra food and wealth could be produced and stored. This made class structure possible, where some people, the privileged class, could live well off the work of others. Agriculture was far more productive than hunting and gathering, but it could not be productive enough for everyone to be equal and prosperous. Only with industrial production could a classless, prosperous society be imagined. Capitalism, for Marx, is brutally oppressive, but it is necessary for the generation of industry and thus the possibility of communism. Capitalism (private property) must be overthrown industry retained. Then everyone can live well and freely as equals – communism. History began with poor communal societies, and it goes through various productive stages to reach a rich communal society, the End of History.

Communism, for Marx, can only emerge from fully developed capitalism, that is, from a revolution by *industrial* workers. The various communist countries in the twentieth century, then, including China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, were never truly communist in Marx's sense. In each of these cases a communist social order emerged from an agricultural society, a society still dominated by feudal relations. In strict Marxist terms, no communist revolution of workers has yet occurred, only revolutions of farmers and peasants. However, these revolutions in agricultural countries – Russia, China, Cuba, etc. – established communist governments, and these communist governments were explicitly based on the communist vision of Marx.

It is always important to remember, in this context, that Marx was primarily a critic of capitalism, not a theorist of communism. He did not make much effort to analyze how communism would work. He vaguely envisioned communism as an industrial utopia of equal individuals, the end of class division. Communism would inevitably replace capitalism because of the laws of history, and communism would not be oppressive. So Marx saw his primary task as analyzing the relations of capitalism, not the relations of communism. His analysis and criticism of capitalism, however, depends on his idea of communism, the idea of socialized property. So Marx's meager vision of communism was always important to his theory, and when communist government began to be established, they rested on this meager vision. For practical communist governments, Marx's brief but enthusiastic comments had to be expanded and institutionalized by subsequent communist leaders such as Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, and through these communist governments Marx's utopian vision influenced much of the twentieth century.

Communism, for Marx, means that all individuals own all productive resources in common. All productive property is socialized, so all property contributes communally to the general social good, not simply to private individual wealth. In a context of socialized property, private individuals (owners) cannot get rich while other individuals (workers) stay poor and do all the work. Everyone will always have a job, everyone

will work for similar rewards (pay, benefits, etc.), and the wealth that is produced – the productive value – will benefit everyone equally. People will do different jobs – janitor, manager, engineer, truck driver – but all jobs will be recognized as necessary and important, and everyone will have equal social prestige and equal living conditions.

Everyone, in effect, will be an owner-worker. Everyone will own productive property in common, and everyone will work that property. No one will be able to exploit the labor of others to accumulate private wealth. No one will be alienated because everyone has a claim of ownership in everything that is produced. In Marx's vision, communism eliminates private property and creates an equal society of owner-workers, a society of freedom and justice. He seeks the same kind of structural equality as the early individualists, a structure of owner-workers, but he wants this structure with industrial production, unlike the early individualists. The individualists did not think that structural equality could be compatible with industry, because industry would create class monopolies in a context of private property. They could only envision structural equality on an agrarian frontier, but Marx understood this was fantasy. So he envisioned structural equality together with industry by eliminating private property. Communism, in effect, would guarantee structural equality without an open frontier.

Marx accepted the individualist goals of freedom and equality, at least in general. He agreed that freedom and equality meant no sacred duties and no class privilege. The individualists, however, could only imagine freedom and equality in terms of private property. Freedom, in their view, meant freedom from arbitrary (traditional) social constraints, the freedom to maximize private property. And equality, in their view, meant equal legal access to owning private property – no traditional barriers. They accepted inequality of wealth as long as everyone had equal opportunity. And freedom included the freedom to profit from the work of others. For Marx, these ideas of freedom and equality only meant class oppression. He wanted communism to embody freedom and equality, so he had to define these values in terms of socialized property, not private property.

He defined equality as equal wealth, not as equal opportunity. And he defined freedom as the freedom to live a good life, the freedom to fulfill your human essence. Production, for Marx, defines the human essence, since humans produce the things that keep them alive – food, clothing, shelter. Whatever an individual produces, then – wheat, tables, steel – becomes part of that individual's essence. If individuals do not own what they make – if they are alienated from the products they produce – they are alienated from their own human essence and they cannot be truly free. People can only be truly free, for Marx, when they own what they work to produce, that is, when everyone is an owner-worker.

This is very similar to what the individualists envisioned. They also assumed that a society could only be free and equal, just and decent, if everyone is an owner-worker – structural equality. If everyone is an

owner-worker, all individuals work for themselves, so freedom can never mean the freedom of owners to exploit workers who have no chance to be owners. Marx and the individualists agreed on this vision, a vision of freedom and equality, and they also agreed that private property with industrial production would result in class oppression. The individualists defined freedom and equality in terms of private property, so they feared industrial production and assumed an agrarian frontier. Marx embraced industrial production, so he defined freedom and equality in terms of productive activity, not in terms of private property.

Freedom means owning and having pride in what you produce (not working for the private benefit of others), and equality means sharing all productive wealth equally. All individuals must own everything in common – socialized property, communism. Freedom, then, means everything is owned communally. There can be no private ownership because private ownership, with its version of freedom, destroys the possibility of true freedom. Humans are ‘naturally’ social and productive, so communal ownership allows equal individuals to fulfill their human essence, that is, to be free.

Marx and the individualists agreed that freedom requires a society of owner-workers. They disagreed over what these owner-workers should own – private property or communal property. They agreed that the individualist idea of freedom – private property – would cause many problems in an urban context of industry, problems of class division and exploitation. Marx tried to solve these problems by defining freedom as socialized property so freedom would be compatible with industry. But his idea of freedom also raised problems, problems the individualists tried to solve by asserting private property. The individualists feared industry because of their idea of freedom, but they also feared a dominant government. Marx redefined freedom to solve the problems of industry, but he then recreated the problems of dominant government.

Freedom and government

For the early individualists, freedom meant limited government. A market in private property with equal owner-workers (endless free land) would regulate itself through supply and demand. The *invisible hand* would operate, the market would be civil, government could be passive, and individuals would be free from excessive controls. This idea of freedom – limited government – assumed an agrarian frontier. The individualists vaguely feared but did not fully anticipate the class inequality and failure of freedom arising with urban manufacturing. Marx, however, had to accept an industrial market, exactly what the individualists feared. So he recommended socialized property to achieve industrial equality.

Individuals could be free, in his terms, as communal owner-workers, but they could not be free in terms of limited government, because communism has no *invisible hand*.

If all property is socialized, market relations cannot exist, the relations of supply and demand. Marx wanted to end the market, which he saw as deeply oppressive. But the market, at least in theory, can be self-regulating – *laissez-faire*. If rational individuals pursue their self-interests in a context of private property, social order will emerge from supply and demand and government can be limited. Under communism, no logic of supply and demand organizes productive relations and thus social life. Communism cannot be self-regulating, not even in theory. Individuals do not pursue private interests, so they do not create social benefits – needed products, improved efficiency, higher quality – based on private calculations. Without a market to organize production, government must control the economy. In effect, government must control all social relations, and this is exactly the opposite of the individualist idea of freedom.

If all property is socialized, people will not decide what to make and how to make it based on their own private interests. People will not invest their money, start businesses, learn skills, improve efficiency, or try new ideas to maximize their private profit. Rather, resources must be developed, factories must be built, trade must be arranged, and people must be given jobs in accordance with a central plan. All productive activity must be planned, and government must create and implement that economic plan. Government must tell farmers what to grow, factories what to make, shippers what to ship, stores what to sell, individuals what to learn, where to work, and when to work. Government must also set prices, wages, and benefits. It must fund all the science, develop all the technology, support all the artists, and control all the media. Everything must be centrally planned and coordinated. The plan enables communal ownership and thus freedom and equality, in Marx's terms. So individuals should be motivated to support and participate in the plan. Government knows how everything should work and thus what is best for everyone. Communal participation – supporting the plan – serves the interests of all individuals. Government must maintain social order from above, with absolute authority, because no market creates social order from below.

In countries that were communist, such as the Soviet Union, government routinely developed five-year or ten-year plans. These plans controlled productive activities, particularly industrial productive activities, in precise and complex detail. All aspects of society depended on the plan, so government had to have enormous power over all social relations. In particular, a communist government could not tolerate criticism or defiance. All parts of the productive plan were interdependent, so if one part did not work properly (say, not enough trucks for delivery of parts), then all other parts of the plan would fail. If any individuals criticized or disrupted the plan, the entire social order could be threatened. So government control and power could not be questioned. Individuals had to live

and work where government said they were needed, and they could not criticize government officials.

In a market, if one company does not have enough trucks, another company will supply the trucks in order to make a profit. The market can accommodate failures and adjust to change because it runs on private interests, not on a central plan. In a market society, individuals can be critical and even disruptive in the sense of innovation. This is the point of individualism – individual freedom from centralized control – and it requires limited government. But communism requires a strong government, even an absolute government, and it cannot accept criticism. In particular, it cannot accept much innovation. Any productive innovation, for greater efficiency or improved products, will change some aspect of the central plan and threaten all other production. So innovation must be inhibited for a communist economy to work.

This is another consequence of Marx's idea of freedom. Individualist freedom means freedom from government controls, freedom to criticize, to innovate, to pursue private interests. Communist freedom means freedom from class oppression, freedom to produce as a social equal, to pursue communal interests. The problem with individualist freedom (private property) is that it generates industrial production and creates class division. The problem with communist freedom (socialized property) is that it assumes industrial production and creates government control.

Marx essentially sacrificed individualist freedom to achieve industrial equality. Individualist freedom, he understood, would lead to class monopolies, so he endorsed socialized property to end class monopolies. Like the individualists, he thought a good society, a free and equal society, required structural equality. But unlike the individualists, he wanted structural equality together with industrial production. He understood that a strong, unquestioned government would be necessary to organize communist production after the communist revolution. This would be the government of the Communist Party, and the Party would understand the truths of History. The Party would control the government and the economy. In effect, it would control all the people in the name of justice and decency, freedom and equality.

Marx also seemed to understand, however, just like the individualists, that a strong, unquestioned government could be a serious problem, even under communism. In his discussion of communist utopia, he vaguely suggested that the need for communist government would eventually 'wither away'. Centralized government control, he thought, would no longer be necessary after a few generations of communism. All corrupting vestiges of the market would be gone, all private attitudes, and everyone would have learned to think and act communally. He never explained how this would work, that is, how industrial order could be maintained with neither a market nor a plan. He seemed to hope, however, that communism would eventually be self-regulating and communist freedom would eventually mean freedom from government control.

Marx wanted freedom, equality, and industry, and equality was his central concern. He recommended social institutions for equality – socialized property, absolute government – and he only hoped for freedom from government control. His arguments legitimated communist governments through much of the twentieth century, and these communist governments did not ‘wither away’. In general, they maintained absolute control, inhibited innovation, and punished all defiance and criticism. They had to organize productive activities, so they had to protect the central plan. Officials in these governments belonged to the Communist Party, and members of the Party had enormous social power. There were no alternative political parties and no democratic elections. The Party controlled the government and the government controlled the society, and Party members, then, as a consequence, tended to enjoy special privileges; that is, they become corrupt.

Party members generally used their power to serve Party interests, the interests of power and privilege. They enjoyed more wealth, luxury, and freedom than non-Party members, and non-Party members – most of the citizens of communism – did virtually all the productive work. Party members were the officials, the bureaucrats – the people who organized production and collected all productive wealth. The non-Party members were the workers, the people who produced the wealth and depended on the government (the Party) for communal distribution and fairness. Non-Party members, then, tended to live far less pleasant lives, with far more fear and constraint, than members of the Party. Under communism, of course, no private individuals, not even members of the Party, could ‘own’ productive property, not in the sense that capitalists in the market could own productive property. But the Party controlled all the productive property and its members, therefore, benefited from that control very much like capitalist owners. Party members, that is, could enjoy the wealth produced from the labor of non-Party members, while those non-Party members, very much like market workers, enjoyed much less of that wealth. Communism, in effect, created a special, privileged group – the Party – and this privileged group was quite similar to, under a new definition of property, a dominant, privileged class. Communism may have ended class structure in the sense of private ownership, but it recreated class structure in the sense of government control. This communist version of class undermined both freedom and equality, even in Marx’s sense, and it also turned out to be incompatible with industrial production.

In the Soviet Union communism succeeded somewhat in creating industrial production from conditions of feudal agriculture. Enormous brutality and death, however, were involved in this creation of industry, and communist industrial production never worked very well. In general, communist countries became quite unequal and communist governments quite corrupt. Most communist governments collapsed in the late twentieth century, and formerly communist countries have

turned to the market and endorsed private property. These communist governments, however, did not collapse because they were corrupt. Rather, they generally collapsed for economic reasons: they failed at industrial production. Marx envisioned communism as a way to combine equality with industry. But communism generated a form of class inequality – Party privileges – and it could not sustain industry.

Industry depends on science and technology, and science and technology depend on criticism and innovation. The market encouraged industry because the market encouraged new ideas, new strategies, social change for the sake of private profit. Communism discouraged criticism and innovation. Its economy needed to work according to a central plan, so new ideas and social change had to be threatening. Competition did not exist to encourage efficiency, so production was often wasteful and inefficient. In effect, communist industry could not create wealth. That is, products were poorly made, and they often had to be sold for less than they cost to make. Many factories could only be maintained through government subsidies; that is, they could not cover their costs of production through sales of the products they made. As a result, communist industrial production often drained government wealth rather than producing greater wealth. In this sense, communist governments failed at production, and finally they failed as governments.

For this discussion, communism should be distinguished from socialism. As I shall use these terms, communism is a more extreme form of socialism, that is, of socialized property. Communism implies a more complete commitment to socialized property than socialism. A country can be called socialist if private property still exists but government controls a significant portion of social wealth, production, and distribution through high taxation and some government ownership of major industries and utilities. Socialism in this sense is compatible with democratic elections and people can call themselves socialists who are opposed to communism. The idea of communism, on the other hand, implies a one-party government and no private property. Government controls the entire economy and this government is not subject to democratic elections or criticism. A socialist government can be elected, and when it loses an election much of the property it socialized – for example, railroads, airlines, coal mines – may then be privatized by a non-socialist government. But communist governments cannot be voted out of power. The government must run the economy – no private property – and the controlling economic plan cannot be disrupted by an election.

Marx envisioned communism as the ultimate rational society – free, equal, just, industrial, prosperous. This vision required that freedom, equality, and industry all be detached from the idea of private property. Without private property, however, Marx could not make communism rational in the sense of legitimating criticism and innovation, that is, in the sense of limited government. He had to eliminate the individualist versions of reason and freedom – private self-interests – in order to eliminate

the market structure of class – class monopolies of private property. He wanted to preserve industry without class monopolies, but industry depended on the individualist versions of reason and freedom, including criticism and innovation.

Marx recognized, two centuries after Locke, that the individualist ideas of reason and freedom would lead to industrial production and thus to class monopolies (no open frontier). He thought, however, that the individualist ideas of reason and freedom were essentially ideological and therefore would not be necessary to sustain industrial production. He thought the individualist idea of freedom – the freedom of private property – was inherently oppressive, and it could easily be abandoned without threatening industry. The individualists, however, thought this idea of freedom was necessary for social decency, and they did not see it, as Marx certainly did, as leading inevitably to industry.

The individualists understood, much better than Marx, that reason and freedom based on private property would support democracy and criticism, that is, limits on government. They worried more about government, and Marx worried more about equality. The individualists assumed an open frontier, so they did not worry about equality. The individualists did not understand that their ideas of reason and freedom – legitimate criticism – would end the open frontier, and Marx did not understand that industrial production depended on legitimate criticism. The individualist idea of private freedom made modern industry possible, but the early individualists only envisioned the structural equality of agrarian owner-workers, the civil frontier of the cowboy myth.

Marx and the cowboy

Marx agrees with the cowboy myth that industrial market conditions – the mythical urban East – will generally be oppressive and corrupt. He seeks a society of owner-workers as the basis for justice and decency, but he has no fantasy of an endless agrarian frontier. On the mythical frontier, individuals own the products they make, so they do not have to sell their labor. In Marx's terms, no one will be alienated because there is no class inequality. Marx, however, knows the market will be industrial and class monopolies will arise. The market will be class divided, not structurally equal, so owners, for Marx, can only be greedy capitalist villains, not decent owner-workers. The myth sees owners from the East as greedy capitalist villains, and Marx generally agrees, only he sees all market society as the corrupt urban East.

There are two types of owners portrayed in the cowboy myth – owners who are also workers and owners who are only capitalists. The former see their property as the basis for community and the latter see their property only as investment. The latter are the villains of the myth, and they are the

only kind of market owners that Marx envisions. These owners live off the work of others and they have no commitment to equality or civility, only to maximizing wealth. They seek to monopolize all the land in the valley, all access to the river, all the right-of-way – that is, all the productive property. They seek the structural privilege of monopoly domination, and they cheat and oppress others in order to achieve that privilege. They want to prevent those others, the good citizens, from owning any property, that is, they try to turn them into workers. These capitalist owners in the myth try to achieve a position of class privilege, just as Marx argues, but they cannot achieve that position because of the open frontier. The frontier of free land prevents class monopolies, so capitalist owners will always appear as villains, and they can always be defeated by strong, honest individualists – the cowboy hero.

In the industrial city, however – the urban East – all owners become capitalist owners, and the frontier structure of owner-workers is lost. The original vision of the market – structural equality – no longer makes sense, so capitalist owners and class monopolies must be accepted as normal if the market is to be legitimate. Capitalist owners must be seen, in contrast to the cowboy myth, as necessary and useful, not as corrupt villains. The industrial market depends on owners and workers, so capitalist owners must be seen as decent and civil if the market is to be seen as civil. Also, workers must be seen as having equal opportunity, even if it is only access to jobs (selling their labor), not access to land (becoming an owner-worker). Capitalist owners and a class of workers must become a normal structure, but Marx could only see this structure as oppressive and unjust. As a result, he continued to see capitalist owners as simply greedy villains, just as the cowboy myth does, and he essentially recommended communism to achieve the structural equality of the mythical open frontier.

Marx also agrees with the cowboy myth that villainous capitalist owners will corrupt the law and government. The owners will use their wealth and power to control government officials – the sheriff, the mayor, the judge in the myth. The law will be twisted to serve the interests of the owners, so the decent citizens, like the cowboy hero, must defy the law to achieve a just society. Further, capitalist owners in the myth, just as in Marx, confuse and mislead the decent citizens with oppressive ideology. The citizens want to believe the law is fair and just, and the owners encourage that belief while cynically manipulating the law. The owners mislead the citizens into thinking that government is neutral, and then they use that government to control and oppress the citizens. A social hero, then – the cowboy in the myth – must defy the corrupt government and fight for justice and decency. Marx agrees with the myth that a social hero is necessary, a hero of structural equality, but he sees this hero as leading a revolution and creating socialized property.

Marx and the individualists agree about structural equality and disagree about private property. Their disagreement, however, is really about

the open frontier – whether the market will be independent agrarians or industrial owners and workers. They seek the same basic goal, a rational society of owner-workers, and they share the same basic legitimating vision, the vision of a detached hero fighting established corruption and creating a just society. Marx's social theory tells a dramatic story, a story of revolution, and this story is very similar to the individualist story, the story of the social contract. They are both stories of an imagined history, a history that justifies the theory. Marx tells a story about a revolutionary hero who fights market oppression to achieve freedom and equality. Individualists tell a story about an individualist hero who fights 'natural' oppression to achieve freedom and equality. The cowboy myth reflects the individualist story with the cowboy as the individualist hero. But it also, to a degree, reflects Marx's story, and the similarities and differences are revealing.

Both the revolutionary hero and the individualist hero are initially detached from the people they want to help. Each has special knowledge and abilities, and this makes them different, outsiders. The individualist hero knows the truths of Nature (the cowboy emerges from the wilderness), and the revolutionary hero knows the truths of History. The cowboy has special wilderness strength, special 'natural' freedom. He is a stranger and initially resisted and feared by the good citizens. Eventually, however, they accept his truths, respect his abilities, and benefit from his efforts. Similarly, the revolutionary hero has special knowledge of capitalist oppression and class revolution, and he is initially resisted and feared. He understands the logic of History long before the oppressed workers, who are confused by ideology. Eventually, he is also accepted and respected, and the workers benefit from his efforts. Both the revolutionary and the individualist (the cowboy) have to be good at violence, since violence is always necessary to end established oppression. Both are fighting for freedom and equality, in somewhat different versions, and both indeed seek a social context of structural equality.

These heroic similarities show that Marx thinks very much like an individualist. He has the same basic vision – freedom and equality – and he tells a similar story. Both he and the individualists tell a story about a rational individual, an individual who understands oppression better than the oppressed. This rational individual is initially rejected, and he must be violent. Finally, however, he defeats the villain, establishes justice, and receives social admiration. This is essentially an individualist story, a cowboy story, and its use by Marx might help to explain why his vision of communist revolution has often been so appealing. Marx used essentially the same heroic imagery to fight capitalist oppression that the early individualists used to fight feudal oppression. It is the imagery of a rational individual, an individual who knows the rational truths of the universe (Nature, History). This rational individual can resist established rules and oppressive morality. Marx asserted the individualist image of resistance against individualist society, against its class structure, and this

made the idea of communism attractive to many people. In particular, it enabled belief in communist heroes, heroes of freedom and equality, heroes like Marx himself as well as Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Che.

Despite these similarities, however, the differences in these stories are crucial. The differences follow from the different references for rationality, Nature and History. If individuals are rational by Nature, they are all 'naturally' rational and thus equally rational, all the time. From this perspective, all individuals always know their own best interests, simply by definition. But if individuals are rational by History, some are rational much sooner than others. This is what Marx envisions: some individuals – the revolutionary heroes – achieve rationality long before most others. Those others remain confused and misled, so they do not understand their own best interests. The rational individuals, the revolutionary heroes, know what is best for everyone, even when most people do not. The revolutionary heroes know the truths of History, so they must form the Communist Party. The Party, then, must have absolute power over everyone else. Most of the people are not yet rational, so their social understanding, their criticism and judgment, cannot be trusted.

The revolutionary hero is rational by History, so he must achieve and maintain social control. Most people are not yet rational, so the revolutionary hero – the Party – must shape and direct their lives for the sake of freedom and equality. The individualist hero, however – the cowboy – is rational by Nature, so he must establish civil equality and surrender social control. From the perspective of Nature, all individuals are equally rational so no hero or Party should have dominant power. All individuals should be equal – legal equality – and government should be limited. Some individuals may be confused, and resist the hero, because they are weak and afraid. But they do not resist the hero because they are not yet rational. The cowboy hero must defeat the villains, just like the revolutionary hero, but he must ride away or settle down to establish freedom and equality. He fights for *laissez-faire*, not for centralized power. He must become a social equal, not a privileged authority, because individuals are rationally equal by Nature, not rationally unequal by History.

This is the difference in the legitimating stories that led communism toward government corruption and industrial failure. Marx thought people under capitalism should and would become rational enough to criticize capitalism. He did not, however, seem to think that people under communism would need to criticize communism. Communism, in his view, would guarantee social fulfillment, complete freedom and equality, so no internal criticism would be necessary. Government would always be just, since no class structure would exist, and indeed it would eventually 'wither away'. The individualists, however, thought government could never be trusted, even if everyone was equal, so they wanted it to be small and weak. They saw individuals as rational all the time, rational by Nature, not by History. So all individuals had a 'natural' right to freedom and criticism, a 'natural' right to resist excessive government. Marx

only legitimated social criticism against capitalism, but the individualists legitimated constant social criticism. Thus they also legitimated innovation, democracy, industry, and constant suspicion of government. The revolutionary hero can be critical of capitalism but he must demand acceptance and obedience under communism. He becomes the hero of an established order, the hero of the central plan. The cowboy, however, is always a hero of defiance and disruption, a hero of social change, a hero of the market.

Illustrative films

Many Westerns show large, villainous ranchers who only want to drive homesteaders away and claim all the land, that is, prevent equality. These ranchers live on their land but they resist law and order and are essentially still in the State of Nature – *Shane*, *The Violent Men*, *The Westerner*, *Silverado*. Many other Westerns, however, show large ranchers and owners simply as capitalists, seeking only greater wealth with no concern for the land or the community. In *Man Without a Star* an owner from the East buys a ranch in order to exploit and exhaust the land, making as much money as possible, and then return East. In *Joe Kidd* an owner from the East comes West with many gunfighters to kill a local farmer who is organizing other farmers and claiming the land. In *The Sheepman* a villainous owner pretends to be part of the community while secretly claiming all the land to sell to the railroad. In *Jesse James* (1939) the railroad oppresses decent western citizens simply for profit. *Heaven's Gate* (1980) is loosely based on the Johnson County War of 1892 in Wyoming, a war that followed from the arrogance of eastern capital investing in western ranches. A blatant image of oppressive eastern capital versus decent western community is in Sergio Leone's US-Italian tribute to American Westerns, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968).