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Basic Theories of Karl Marx

Life and Work

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Karl Marx was born on 5 May 1818, the son of the lawyer Heinrich Marx and Henriette Pressburg. His father was descended from an old family of Jewish rabbis, but was himself a liberal admirer of the Enlightenment and not religious. He converted to Protestantism a few years before Karl was born to escape restrictions still imposed upon Jews in Prussia. His mother was of Dutch-Jewish origin.

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Karl Marx studied at the *Friedrich-Wilhelm Gymnasium* in Trier, and at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. His doctoral thesis, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikurischen Naturphilosophie*, was accepted at the University of Jena on 15 April 1841. In 1843 he married Jenny von Westphalen, daughter of Baron von Westphalen, a high Prussian government official.

Marx's university studies covered many fields, but centred around philosophy and religion. He frequented the circle of the more radical followers of the great philosopher Hegel, befriended one of their main representatives, Bruno Bauer, and was especially influenced by the publication in 1841 of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Nature of Christianity). He had intended to teach philosophy at the university, but that quickly proved to be unrealistic. He then turned towards journalism, both to propagandise his ideas and to gain a livelihood. He became editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a liberal newspaper of Cologne, in May 1842. His interest turned more and more to political and social questions, which he treated in an increasing radical way. The paper was banned by the Prussian authorities a year later.

Karl Marx then planned to publish a magazine called *Die Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in Paris, in order to escape Prussian censorship and to be more closely linked and identified with the real struggles for political and social emancipation which, at that time, were centred around France. He emigrated to Paris with his wife and met there his lifelong friend Friedrich Engels.

Marx had become critical of Hegel's philosophical political system, a criticism which would lead to his first major work, *Zur Kritik des Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843, A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right). Intensively studying history and political economy during his stay in Paris, he became strongly influenced by socialist and working-class circles in the French capital. With his 'Paris Manuscripts' (*Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*, 1844), he definitely became a communist, i.e. a proponent of collective ownership of the means of production.

He was expelled from France at the beginning of 1845 through pressure from the Prussian embassy and migrated to Brussels. His definite turn towards historical materialism (see below) would occur with his manuscript *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (1845-6) culminating in the eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*, written together with Engels but never published during his lifetime.

This led also to a polemical break with the most influential French socialist of that period, Proudhon, expressed in the only book Marx would write in French, *Misère de la Philosophie* (1846).

Simultaneously he became more and more involved in practical socialist politics, and started to work with the Communist League, which asked Engels and himself to draft their declaration of principle, This is the origin of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*).

As soon as the revolution of 1848 broke out, he was in turn expelled from Belgium and went first to France, then, from April 1848 on, to Cologne. His political activity during the German revolution of 1848 centred around the publication of the daily paper *Die Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, which enjoyed wide popular support. After the victory of the Prussian counter-revolution, the paper was banned in May 1849 and Marx was expelled from Prussia. He never succeeded in recovering his citizenship.

Marx emigrated to London, where he would stay, with short interruptions, till the end of his life. For fifteen years, his time would be mainly taken up with economic studies, which would lead to the publication first of *Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie* (1859) and later of *Das Kapital, Vol. I* (1867). He spent long hours at the British Museum, studying the writings of all the major economists, as well as the government Blue Books, Hansard and many other contemporary sources on social and economic conditions in Britain and the world. His readings also covered technology, ethnology and anthropology, besides political economy and economic history; many notebooks were filled with excerpts from the books he read.

But while the activity was mainly studious, he never completely abandoned practical politics. He first hoped that the Communist League would be kept alive, thanks to a revival of revolution. When this did not occur, he progressively dropped out of emigré politics, but not without writing a scathing indictment of French counter-revolution in *Der 18. Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (1852), which was in a certain sense the balance sheet of his political activity and an analysis of the late 1848-52 cycle of revolution and counter-revolution. He would befriend British trade-union leaders and gradually attempt to draw them towards international working class interests and politics. These efforts culminated in the creation of the International Working Men's Association (1864) - the so-called First International - in which Marx and Engels would play a leading role, politically as well as organisationally.

It was not only his political interest and revolutionary passion that prevented Marx from becoming an economist pure and simple. It was also the pressure of material necessity. Contrary to his hopes, he never succeeded in earning enough money from his scientific writings to sustain himself and his growing family. He had to turn to journalism to make a living. He had initial, be it modest, success in this field, when he became European correspondent of the *New York Daily Tribune* in the summer of 1851. But he never had a regular income from that collaboration, and it ended after ten years.

So the years of his London exile were mainly years of great material deprivation and moral suffering. Marx suffered greatly from the fact that he could not provide a minimum of normal living conditions for his wife and children, whom he loved deeply. Bad lodgings in cholera-stricken Soho, insufficient food and medical care, led to a chronic deterioration of his wife's and his own health and to the death of several of their children; that of his oldest son Edgar in 1855 struck him an especially heavy blow. Of his seven children only three daughters survived, Jenny, Laura and Eleanor (Tussy). All three were very gifted and would play a significant role in the international labour movement, Eleanor in Britain, Jenny and Laura in France (where they married the socialist leaders Longuet and Lafargue).

During this long period of material misery, Marx survived thanks to the financial and moral support of his friend Friedrich Engels, whose devotion to him stands as an exceptional example of friendship in the history of science and politics. Things started to improve when Marx came into his mother's inheritance; when the first independent working-class parties (followers of Lassalle on the one hand, of Marx and Engels on the other) developed in Germany, creating a broader market for his writings; when the IWMA became influential in several European countries, and when Engels' financial conditions improved to the point where he would sustain the Marx family on a more regular basis.

The period 1865- 71 was one in which Marx's concentration on economic studies and on the drafting of *Das Kapital* was interrupted more and more by current political commitments to the IWMA, culminating in his impassioned defence of the Paris Commune (*Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich*, 1871). But the satisfaction of being able to participate

a second time in a real revolution - be it only vicariously - was troubled by the deep divisions inside the IMWA, which led to the split with the anarchists grouped around Michael Bakunin.

Marx did not succeed in finishing a final version of *Das Kapital* vols II and III, which were published posthumously, after extensive editing, by Engels. It remains controversial whether he intended to add two more volumes to these, according to an initial plan. More than 25 years after the death of Marx, Karl Kautsky edited what is often called vol. IV of *Das Kapital*, his extensive critique of other economists: *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (Theories of Surplus Value).

Marx's final years were increasingly marked by bad health, in spite of slightly improved living conditions. Bad health was probably the main reason why the final version of vols II and III of Capital could not be finished. Although he wrote a strong critique of the Programme which was adopted by the unification congress (1878) of German social democracy (*Kritik des Gothaer Programms*), he was heartened by the creation of that united working-class party in his native land, by the spread of socialist organisations throughout Europe, and by the growing influence of his ideas in the socialist movement. His wife fell ill in 1880 and died the next year. This came as a deadly blow to Karl Marx, who did not survive her for long. He himself died in London on 14 March 1883.

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