

# **Karl Marx: Not Infallible**

Thom Holterman

2014

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Many well respected leftist intellectuals urge us to look to the philosophy of Karl Marx for revolutionary inspiration and critiques of capital. This is true even of many who hold unorthodox interpretations of Marxism and reject some aspects of his theories, such as the contemporary French philosopher, Etienne Balibar.

Balibar's 2014 collection of essays, *The Philosophy of Marx*, introduces fundamental Marxist concepts and principles and asserts that they are more important than ever. However, why should we consider Marxist theory of historical process to be so important or accurate when they failed to anticipate so much of what happened even during his lifetime?

## Criticism of Anarchists

Marx habitually criticized anarchists, who he perhaps correctly saw as his main political opponents, for instance, denigrating the individualist anarchist Max Stirner (1806-1856) as "Saint Max," and expending enormous amounts of intellectual energy in fostering the hegemony of his theories.

Although Marx treated the French anarchist Pierre Proudhon (1809-1865) with incredible contempt, Proudhon, in *The System of Economic Contradictions, or The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846), first developed most of the concepts for critically analyzing the capitalist system, such as the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, the cyclical crisis, the role of technology, division of labor, competition, monopoly, and the concentration of capital. Yet, Marx characterized Proudhon as a petit bourgeois and derided his book as "The Poverty of Philosophy." But later, he adopted all of these proudhonian concepts and developed them in *Capital*.

Over the years Marx expressed equal contempt for Bakunin. In 1842, Bakunin published *The Reaction in Germany*, which he ended with the familiar statement that, "The passion for destruction is also a creative passion." In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx expresses a similar perspective, asserting that existing society must not only be destroyed, it will be important to create an alternative.

Today, we refer to this idea as prefiguration. But anarchists and Marxists differ about what prefiguration actually means. Anarchists think in terms of creating new social structures here and now, while Marxists feel it is necessary to wait until after the predicted collapse and the establishment of socialism to change social relations. This results in differences over whether to challenge the status quo with new ways of doing things right now or simply work for small achievable reforms while awaiting the revolution.

## The Marxian Promise of Deliverance

Marx asserted that his concept of dialectical materialism, how history progressed towards socialism, was a scientific theory which enabled one to discern the many contradictions within capitalism which would bring about its collapse. He predicted that the newly emerged proletarian class, central to capital for production and exploitation, would also become its ultimate contradiction, bringing about the coming revolution resulting in a radical democracy and communism.

But, Marx wasn't really able to predict very much with his supposedly scientific theory. In the 1848 European popular upheavals, his prediction that the proletariat would dominate the

revolutions did not come to pass. Therefore, Marx had to rethink (and rewrite) his theses to fit what actually did happen. His book *Capital* was the result.

In Vol. I of *Capital* (1867), Marx claimed to reveal the underlying mechanisms of capitalism. Based on his analysis, he predicted that capitalism was on the way to dying in industrialized countries, especially in England. He reasoned that where capitalism had reached its greatest maturity, it was ready to implode and give way to a proletarian revolution, after which communism would prevail.

However, in 1871, a revolution emerged in a less industrialized country, France, where agriculture dominated the economy. Contrary to Marx's predictions about revolutions in countries with predominantly agrarian economies, it resulted in the Paris Commune, a project that had positive anarchist tendencies and influences.

So, a new doctrine had to be devised, the dictatorship of the proletariat, to explain what was needed to create proletarian revolutions in less industrialized countries. Marx did not live to witness the effects of this innovation. But it was inherited by later Marxists, including Lenin, Stalin, Mao and others, butchers who shaped its results, and used it to justify the destruction of many millions of lives.

## Is Marx's philosophy of value to us today?

Much of what Marx predicted would be the inevitable and necessary course of socio-economic development, based on the scientific method he claimed to have discovered, didn't come to pass. There is no shame in guessing wrong, but his epigones shouldn't claim that he developed a scientific method for understanding the capitalist system and infallibly predicting the future.

We need to ask ourselves whether Marx's philosophy is of value to us today, as Marxist critical thinkers like Balibar contend? Or, is it time to reconsider Marx's negative judgment of Proudhon's ideas? Maybe the title of Marx's anti-Proudhon text, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, is more appropriately applied to his own theory.

For example, consider the following.

By May of 1846 Proudhon was already worried about Marx's attempts to develop the dialectic as a predictive tool, and wrote to Marx, urging him, "let us not set ourselves up as apostles of a new religion. . ."

At the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war in July 1870, Marx apparently (at least temporarily) forgot that he had called on proletarians of all countries to unite in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*. On July 20, he wrote to his collaborator, Frederick Engels, welcoming the victory of the German forces over the French state. After all, as a result, he explained, the center of attention for socialism would move from France to Germany and the German proletariat would become more influential compared to their French counterpart. This would also increase the influence of their theory compared to that of Proudhon. Marx was willing to abandon internationalism in order to gain more influence for his ideas.

While the dialectic led Marxists to expect a revolution in Britain, a country with a highly developed industrial economy, it failed to predict that a revolution would break out in 1917 in Russia, a country with an agrarian economy. And, it certainly did not foresee that the Bolshevik takeover would lead to the grossest kind of political repression and economic exploitation.

Events in Germany offer another example of the failure of the dialectic to help people anticipate anything. Marx had great hopes for the German social democrats (as he noted in his letter to Engels mentioned above). However, the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1848-1919) didn't rely on the dialectic and was able to analyze the politics of the German social democrats and the situation in Germany differently. In 1897, he wrote, *Socialism In Danger*. His criticism of the German social democrats anticipated their role from 1919 through the 1930s as servants of established power and their suppression of revolutionary upsurges following World War I.

The point is not to blame Marx for all of this. Everyone who was involved in these specific situations bears responsibility for their actions. But, Marx and the Marxists to follow asserted that his dialectic was a scientific theory that enabled revolutionaries to understand why and how historical processes develop. However, Marxist theory wasn't able to anticipate how things worked out in the revolutions that occurred during his lifetime. So, he had to revise his theory to try to make it a better tool for anticipating what would happen in later social upheavals. However, even after the various revisions, Marx's supposedly scientific theory repeatedly predicted that conditions were ripe for the end of capitalism, while that system still continues to exist. So, it's time for his dialectical theory to be recognized as irrelevant for understanding social-political processes in the world. Whatever Marxist intellectuals like Balibar claim, Marx's philosophy does not have any lasting value.

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