

Marx and modern social and economic thought

Karl Marx (1818-1883) comes from an old family of rabbis. His father converted to Christianity (Lutheranism) out of necessity, to maintain his job in an anti-Semitic society, which the German-speaking lands were at the time. His children were baptized at a young age, but not right away, to avoid insulting their rabbi grandparents, and so Marx had extensive background in the Christian tradition as well. One can assume that he also absorbed some basic traditional Jewish values from his family relations.

Marx's Jewish background

As for Marx's Jewish background, one needs to recall the basic ideas from the Leviticus presented at the beginning of this class: the land and everything on it belongs to God; humans are "visitors" and "strangers" in this world, with no individual claim to the things of this world; for this reason, no one should be superior to others or oppress their neighbors. The laws on property ownership, lending, and jubilee years in the Leviticus are aimed at distributive justice, equality among members of the community, eliminating impoverishment of the community and oppression and economic exploitation of community members.

Marx's Christian background

Although Marx embraced the anti-religious atheistic position during his college years, it is known that he knew Christian theology well, wrote an essay on it during his time at a gymnasium, used quotations from the Latin Vulgate in his works, and later in life praised the early Christian community described in The Acts as a precursor of communist communes:

The Acts, Chapter 4

³²And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of *them* that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. <...> ³⁴Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, ³⁵And laid *them* down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. ³⁶And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation), a Levite, *and* of the country of Cyprus, ³⁷having land, sold *it*, and brought the money, and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

Franciscan commentary on the idea of common property

Alexander of Hales discusses the issue of common property, as well as freedom, in *Summa*, Book 3, Part 2, Inquiry 2, Question 4, Section 3, Chapter 2 ("According to natural law, do all people possess everything in common?") and Chapter 3 ("According to natural law, do all people enjoy the same freedom?"). Alexander quotes Augustine, who comments on the Gospel of John. Augustine asks: by what law do people possess their property? And he states: "Because by divine law the earth and its fullness is the Lord's (Psalms 23:1). God made the poor and the rich from one and the same slime, and one and the same earth supports both rich and poor alike."

Duns Scotus in his *Parisian Lectures*, Book 4, dist. 15 (linked to this class on the website) also discusses the origin of private property:

According to Scotus:

(n. 51) "... natural law does not stipulate individual property ownership... in the state of innocence there was no such division of property ownership over temporal things, but all had everything in common. Nor [is individual property ownership] stipulated by divine law, because ... the time of innocence knew no divisions of property ownership due to divine law ... and consequently at that time humans lived according to the laws of nature and God: no one assumed individual ownership [over things] but people commonly owned everything. ... This was done for two reasons: in order to maintain a peaceful way of life and in order to supply each person with the necessities of life...."

(n. 52) "However, after the fall individual property ownership is introduced, so that this property might be called mine and that property yours. This (i.e., that not everything be held in common [among people]) became necessary after the fall for the same two reasons. First, in order to maintain a peaceful way of life among people. Indeed, humans in their sinful state usurp things for themselves not only out of necessity and in order to sustain their lives, but also in order to satisfy their greed.... As a result, [if individual property ownership were not introduced,] poor people, not being able to resist the [rich and powerful] due to their lack of power, would lack basic sustenance. This [was also done] for the second reason, namely, in order to supply the necessary things of life for everybody. Because things held in common are not well cared for or guarded, but only individual property...." (The last sentence also contains a common objection to the socialist way of relating to property!)

Scotus further states the two sources of authority in human society, which is, among other things, responsible for assigning property rights: first, family relations (parents naturally have authority over their children and can distribute property among them); second, democratic elections of leadership, which can then distribute property or protect people's property rights.

The Franciscan position on socio-economic issues vs. socialism or capitalism

The account is based on J.P. Chinnici, "Framing Engagement with Society," in Nairn, *The Franciscan Moral Vision*, pp. 235, 238-39, 243.

God owns everything, and it is only the "positive" human law that separates things into individual possessions. Peace comes from the understanding that all things belong to God, and all people are neighbors and can use these things. Our task, as Francis said, is to "give back what is God's," keeping in mind that everything is a gift, which implies that we should keep returning this gift and circulating things between fellow recipients (cf. Todeschini's view of Franciscan economy). We must take a non-proprietary stance towards things: since everything is a gift, in justice it must be given back. The proper response to the reality of the gift is to live "without anything of one's own" and to "give back what is God's" (Francis). The stance typical of a "gift economy" privileges honor, disinterestedness, generosity, reciprocity, personal relationships, corporate solidarity, hospitality. This stance rejects servile subjection, fear, slavery, exploitation, emotional manipulation, coercive power. On p. 239 Chinnici directly engages the question: is this Franciscan vision socialist or capitalist? Socialist features of the Franciscan vision: sharing,

communitarianism. Capitalist features: individual initiative, responsibility, creativity, productivity. Chinnici does not think the Franciscan vision is either purely socialist or purely capitalist, but combines features of both socio-economic systems. (Of course we are free to make our own conclusions!)

What are the echoes of Judaism and Christianity in Marxism?

Passionate striving to transform life

Categorical rejection of evil and suffering in the world

Attempt to create the Kingdom of God here and now, on earth: this world can become as harmonious as paradise

The proletariat, the lowest class, from “last will become first”

“Brotherly love” is exemplified in collectivism and class solidarity

Proletarian internationalism follows St. Paul’s principles:

Galatians 3:28: There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:11: Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Marx and the Christian-Franciscan vision

The Communist Manifesto, Chapter 1

Marx starts with his analysis of the socio-economic history of humanity, which is marked by the struggle between upper and lower socio-economic classes for the control and appropriation of the products of the efforts of the working classes. The socio-economic class structure of the human society traditionally consisted of the upper classes that did not work but had control of the distribution and appropriation of products, and the lower classes that worked but had no control over appropriation. The constant class struggle gradually moves the society towards the elimination of the upper classes and the turning over of the control over appropriation to the lower classes, which therefore move up the socio-economic ladder.

Marx’s analysis of the socio-economic structure of the human society

The means or instruments of production: labor force and tools (machinery in the capitalist society)

Relations of production (vary from society to society) that mainly affect how the products of labor are appropriated (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc.)

The political superstructure: the governing structures that support the class in power; for example during capitalism “modern political rule of the state is nothing more than the committee that runs the business of the whole bourgeois class.”

The cultural framework: philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts support the upper class’s claim to power.

The peculiarities of capitalism

Viewing work or labor as a marketable object, instead of a revered art or skill of the past (cf. Bernardino's analysis of early capitalist economy): "It changed doctors and lawyers, ministers and poets, men of learning as well, into paid laborers." People are no longer admired for their talent and skill but are simply evaluated based on their "market value" and how much money they can make for the company: "In the same degree to which the bourgeoisie, that is, capital, developed, to that degree did the proletariat, the class of modern laborers, develop itself. They lived no longer than by the work they found, they found work no longer than capital supplied them labor. These workers were forced to sell themselves, one by one. They were a commodity as was any other thing on sale, and consequently in similar fashion subject to all the bargaining of commerce and all the ups and downs of the markets." Wage laborers only get paid enough to get by.

In addition, capitalism converts all social relations into market relations: "It tore away the veil of sentiment behind which sat the family, broke down its relations, and returned it to a pure matter of money and possessions." "Where it took over power, the bourgeoisie put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, and idyllic conditions. It mercilessly shredded the checkered feudal accords between a God-sanctioned nobility and the people, as it let rise between men relations reached by naked interest and hard cash. It drowned the blessings of prayers answered and the enthusiasms of knighthood and the sentimental celebrations of art in the icy waters of selfish calculation. The worth of good men faded into its market value, the liberty that had been won in hard struggle and sanctioned by law became the freedom to leave conscience aside and get the best price possible. In sum, the bourgeois let drift away the exploitation well covered by religious and political accord for an open and shameless exploitation, dry and direct."

Given our discussion of the "Franciscan version" of market economy, or "good capitalism" (outlined by Bernardino), Marx seems to be describing the "bad" version of capitalism, or predatory and greedy capitalism: the one whose sole goal is profit, the one that rips people off and destroys friendly and cooperative relations in the community.

Marx's critique of capitalism

Critique no.1. Capitalism concentrates property in the hands of the few, that is, practices unfair distribution. This is a negative feature not only according to Marx, but also according to Olivi, Bernardino, and other Franciscan theologians (hoarding, immobilized property, lack of circulation of wealth between community members). The lack of distributive justice is also against Jewish laws.

Critique no. 2. Capitalism is a very inefficient and even disastrous way of building and managing economy. There is an inherent contradiction in the capitalist system. Its principle is to generate maximum profit, not to help the community. Therefore it creates enormous and efficient productive forces to accomplish that, which incidentally helps the community. But once the market situation stops generating maximum profit, the system stalls and stops the production. Thus instead of benefitting the community, the process turns detrimental to the community. The capitalist system, therefore, is not stable or constant enough in its support of the community.

Capitalism “created more massive and more colossal productive forces in hardly a hundred years of its rule than all previous generations together.” Marx compares this massive explosion of productive forces to “magic.” However, it is the magic that the “sorcerer” can no longer control due to the way relations of production and the system of appropriation function under capitalism. There is a historical pattern to this. For example, the feudal system of relations of production no longer matched the productive forces of the budding capitalist system (“the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacture, ...the feudal mode of holding property, no longer matched the forces of production” that had become capitalist). “Such ownership was restraining rather than promoting production. It had tied itself up in all sorts of ways. It had to shed its feudal entanglements and it did so,” for example, during the French revolution. “In its place came open competition, along with its appropriate social and political laws, under the economic and political rule of the bourgeois class.”

But history repeats itself: the productive forces created under the capitalist system outgrew the capitalist relations of production: “We see a similar movement in our day. Modern bourgeois society, with its practices of production and distribution, with its way of handling property, has conjured up before us a powerful means of seeing to life’s supplies. In that it resembles the sorcerer who has summoned forth from below forces it can no longer control.”

The example of this inability or lack of desire to control the economy is what Marx called the “crises of overproduction,” i.e., periods when growth and development come to an end and a period of severe economic depression follows that leads to the destruction of productive forces and mass suffering of the working population: “Periodically they appear, threatening the existence of the whole bourgeois society. The crises see to the destruction of a major portion, not only of what has been produced but even of the means of their production. With the crises there comes an epidemic of society which would have seemed nonsense to all the epochs that had gone before, the epidemic of excessive production.”

“Suddenly society finds itself thrown back into a condition of passing barbarianism. A famine, a war of general destruction seems to have estranged it from all the means of life. Industry and trade seem destroyed. And how is that? The reason: it is burdened with too much civilization, too much of life’s goods, too much industry and trade. The capacity to produce, which stands at its service, no longer promotes bourgeois civilization and bourgeois property. On the contrary, the capacity has become overwhelming for bourgeois reality. It is held back. As soon as it gets beyond bourgeois restraint, it will bring the whole of bourgeois society to disarray. It threatens the very existence of its proprietary hold on things. The wealth produced by the bourgeoisie’s ways has proven too much for its author and overwhelms its ability to contain it.”

This means that the capitalist relations of production and appropriation no longer match the productive forces; these relations have become reactionary (they hold the economic system back) and they need to be changed to a new type of relations: socialist.

The Communist Manifesto, Chapter 2

Marx's defense of the principles of socialism
(he calls it "communism" from the word "commune" or "community")

The foundations of socialism, according to Marx, are the natural progression of history: "The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes. The abolition of existing property relations is not at all a distinctive feature of communism." For example, "the French Revolution ... abolished feudal property in favor of bourgeois property."

Marx points out that "the distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few." In sum, it is the abolition of private property, not personal property.

The argument goes as follows: no one wants to give up the hard-earned fruits of one's labor. But what property is one talking about? The property of small artisans and peasants have been destroyed by capitalism and absorbed into large corporations. Wage laborers who work for those corporations barely make enough to sustain their life. So really what sort of property are we talking about? "But does wage-labor create any property for the laborer? Not a bit. It creates capital, i.e., that kind of property which exploits wage-labor...."

The following argument of Marx is similar to Bernardino's: capital by nature is social, not individual or private; so the nature of this type of property does not change as a result of a change of the dominant system of social relations. However, what changes is how capital is viewed and how it is used: "Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion. Capital is therefore not only personal; it is a social power. When, therefore, capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not thereby transformed into social property"—because it is already social! "It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class character." This means that private individuals simply lose the ability to use this social property of the entire society as if it were theirs alone, for their private uses, and oppress the working class who creates this property.

The following reasoning is similar to the idea of poor use. The objection is that under socialism, all will have the bare minimum. However, wage laborers under capitalism already have only the bare minimum! So what is different? All Marx wants to eliminate is the oppression of workers under the current system of appropriation (cf. Jewish law): "The average price of wage-labor is the minimum wage, i.e., that quantum of the means of subsistence which is absolutely requisite to keep the laborer in bare existence as a laborer. What, therefore, the wage-laborer appropriates by means of his labor, merely suffices to prolong and reproduce a bare existence. We by no means intend to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labor, an appropriation that

is made for the maintenance and reproduction of human life, and that leaves no surplus wherewith to command the labor of others. All that we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation, under which the laborer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interest of the ruling class requires it. In bourgeois society, living labor is but a means to increase accumulated labor.” “Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labor of others by means of such appropriations.”

On the issue of “freedom” in a capitalist society: “freedom” here means freedom of selling and buying (free market, free trade, etc.); but if there is no longer selling and buying, no such freedom is needed; as for personal freedom, workers hardly have any freedom as they have to work to earn their bare minimum to survive!

On the issue of property (cf. the recent “99%” social movement): “You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society.”

But what about the main constructive critique of the socialist system? The claim is that workers won’t work well without an incentive. However, Marx points out, under the capitalist system many people already work without any other incentive except to survive and earn the bare minimum! “It has been objected that upon the abolition of private property, all work will cease, and universal laziness will overtake us. According to this, bourgeois society ought long ago to have gone to the dogs through sheer idleness; for those of its members who work, acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything do not work.”

Concrete socio-economic socialist measures suggested by Marx:

“These measures will, of course, be different in different countries. Nevertheless, in most advanced countries, the following will be pretty generally applicable.

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all rights of inheritance. <...>
5. Centralization of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal liability of all to work (cf. Francis’s Rule!). Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.”