

**Classical Sociology Theory**  
**Professor. R. Santhosh**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture No. 16**  
**Karl Marx- The Life**

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## Karl Marx- The Life

Prof. R. Santhosh  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
IIT MADRAS

Welcome to this session. In this class, we will spend some time trying to have a very broad overview of the life of Karl Marx. We will not be going into any of the specific discussions or any specific contributions of Marxian theory. But I thought I will spend some time trying to provide you a very broad description and overview of the man, the political activist, the philosopher, the revolutionary and the one of the most profound intellectuals of modern times and I hope you would agree with me that teaching Karl Marx through a couple of lectures is almost an impossible task.

It is an extremely difficult exercise to introduce a thinker like Karl Marx in a short span of time given the breadth of his analysis, the amount of writings, and the amount of commentaries that have been made on Marxian analysis or Marxian theories. There are divergent views on Marx and the enormous impact the Marxian thinking and theories had on the later development of political and social theory. But anyway we would spend some time to understand the man and his the nature of his intellectual work.

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Here are few pictures, of Marx. The first one is the picture of the young Marx and the last one is a more familiar picture. In the middle, we have Karl Marx with his wife, Jenny.

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Here are some of the documentaries that are easily available on YouTube. 'Who was Karl Marx'- DW Documentary that provides a broad overview of Marxian contribution. Then, 'Masters of money', the BBC documentary which mostly focuses on Marxian interpretation of capitalism and that is a very popular and important documentary. Then you have the 'Marxist thought: Past and present', a documentary that looks at the relevance of Marxian theory in the contemporary times.

I would also suggest you to have a detailed look at marxist.org, a website repository of whole lot of important Marxian literature. You will find Marx's original writings and quite a lot of literature on Marx. So, along with these materials, there are quite a lot of interesting commentaries and writings and criticisms and other elaborations on Karl Marx. So, finding materials to understand the contribution of Marx is not difficult at all.

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- Karl Marx, the theorist and revolutionary, was born to Heinrich and Henrietta Marx on May 5, 1818, in the city of Trier.
- During his lifetime he was exiled from Germany, France, and Belgium, eventually settling in London in 1849, where he lived until his death in 1883.
- He studied philosophy, history, and law at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, receiving his doctorate in 1841 and eventually becoming fluent in eight languages.
- His friendship with Friedrich Engels (1820-95), who would be his lifelong colleague and benefactor.
- Encountered a very difficult personal life, survived death of his four children.



Here are just a couple of slides on his personal life. Karl Marx was born in Germany, he was a theorist and a revolutionary. He was a Jew, as many of you must might know. He was born to Heinrich and Henrietta Marx on May fifth, 1818 in the city of Trier in Germany. During his lifetime, he was exiled from Germany, France and Belgium, eventually settled in London 1849, where he lived until his death in 1883.

Anybody with a cursory understanding of Karl Marx's life would know that he was a political activist, he was a revolutionary who believed that the social revolution is only a matter of time. And who believed that, as a scholar, it is his fundamental obligation, not only to think and thoeize about the society, but to change it as well. So, in that sense, he was a political activist, he spent most of his time in writing political propaganda and in actively organizing workers.

That was exactly the reason why he is expelled from his own motherland, Germany, from France and Belgium. Eventually, he had to settle down in London, where he ultimately died. He studied philosophy, history and law at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, received his doctorate in 1841 and eventually became fluent in 8 languages and this is something telling about his towering intellectual life. A person who had extremely wide reading habit,

extremely wide scholarship on a wide variety of topics on philosophy and history and in law, and he became fluent in 8 languages.

Another very interesting thing that shaped his intellectual and political life was his friendship with Friedrich Engels, who became his lifelong colleague and his benefactor. We all know that this famous work, 'The Communist Manifesto' was written by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx together. And Friedrich played a very important role both in his intellectual as well as his personal life. Especially towards the end of his life, the economic condition of Marx was in a very bad shape and he mostly survived on the contribution of money that was sent by Friedrich Engels and their friendship is very unique and special.

Marx encountered a very difficult personal life. He survived the death of his four children and many times, was in very acute poverty. Some of his writings on their condition is very emotional, reading which, you will feel extremely bad about the kind of situation that Marx had to endure for leading a very active political life. The kind of sacrifices that he had to make. So, I am not going into details of his personal life because that's available in the public domain, those who are interested to know about Marx's life, there are several biographies that is written on Marx and these are easily available in the internet or in other libraries. I am not going into the details.

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- A philosopher and a political activist who believed in changing the world  
"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it"
- An economist, historian, political theorist, sociologist...
- Inspiration for the emergence of Marxian and critical theory
- Theorist of capitalist system account for its origins, historical stability, and its eventual demise.
- A towering intellectual..



Now, let us come to the nature of Karl Marx as an intellectual. How do we place him? How do we describe him? How do we make sense of the man? How do we make sense of his intellectual life and contribution? Again, it is not an easy task because he was an extremely complicated person and intellectual. Even now, even after these many years, the kind of

debates and discussions and controversies about Marxian thought have not completely settled down.

Marx was primarily a philosopher and a political activist who believed in changing the world. This is one of the most important thing that distinguishes Karl Marx from the rest of the social theorists whom we have discussed so far or whom we are going to discuss about, hereafter. In a way, Karl Marx is incomparable with his peers in social sciences or in economics because he was primarily somebody, a scholar who was equally a political activist. One of his famous quotations says “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

It is an extremely important point because he is not discounting the role of philosophers. of Being a philosopher himself, he is not discounting the role of philosophy or the need to reflect or theorize the kind of situation. But more importantly, what he argued is that you need to understand, interpret the world but never leave it there. You need to change it. He never believed that the role of an academic intellectual is to be an arm chair theorist. He never believed that.

He always believed that a theorist must work among the people and Marx has a particular vision about what should be the nature of this work, what should be the nature of a political activism and what should be the ultimate destiny of mankind, what should be the kind of changes in which every human society must undergo. Of course you can criticize, you can disagree with that kind of understanding about the world.

But personally, he committed his entire life for the kind of an activism for which he had to pay huge price. As we just mentioned, he was expelled from various countries and his financial condition was very bad never had kind of a settled life. He never had a proper job in that sense of the world. He worked as a freelance writer, as a journalist. In that sense, he was somebody who really practiced what he always preached.

He was an economist, a historian, a political theorist, a sociologist, and again, this is something quite unusual. You will not find many other scholars whom we can describe in this particular manner. Whether it is Durkheim or Weber or the people whom we discussed in the previous classes including Herbert Spencer or August Comte or Machevallie. Those were all people whom we can easily categorize as a philosopher or as a sociologist or as an economist. But the intellectual interest and magnitude of Marx’s intellectual endeavours, the breadth of

his knowledge, really surpassed disciplinary boundaries into from philosophy to history to political science to sociology and host of other disciplines.

It is also extremely important to note that the relevance of Marxian theories or his contributions were relevant not only during his particular time. They became extremely influential and powerful even after his death and we have very powerful theoretical orientations known as Marxian theory and critical theory that were heavily inspired and influenced by the Marxian thinking.

In that sense, the relevance of Karl Marx, as we will discuss in the coming classes, did not end with the writing of Marx, rather, it resulted in a proliferation of other ideas theories, as there were many theorists who were extremely influenced and enchanted by Marx. I would even use the word enchanted by Marxian thinking and they improved upon Marx, revised Marxian theory. Most of those endeavours resulted in the emergence of Marxian critical theory as very decidable theoretical orientations in the later decades.

Marx was primarily a theorist of a capitalist system and studied the account for its origin, its historical stability and its eventual demise, a prophecy which did not come true, a prophecy in which Marx very miserably failed. But we will see that in the coming class, how and why that he understood the capitalist system. He placed the capitalist system at the centre of his analysis and how incisive that was, how powerful was his critical analysis of capitalism

Marx's entire intellectual preoccupation was with capitalist system as a defining feature of the modern society. He was a towering intellectual, and I do not know how to elaborate it further, given the kind of enormous influence that Karl Marx had on all these disciplines and in the academic field in almost virtually, every country in the world for past several generations.

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- Voluminous writings including academic, journalistic and polemical
- Many writings published after his death, recovered from his notes and manuscripts
- Contradictions, inconsistencies: the tension between a scholar and an activist
- Huge body of academic and political commentaries on the writings of Marx... "I am not a Marxist"
- Became part of official ideology and propaganda of communist states



If look into his amounts of writings, they are voluminous. There is huge body of knowledge that Marx has written. Making it more difficult is the type of writing that he had. He has had proper academic writing, especially as you see in his latter writings like The Three Volumes of Capital. Those are very hard-core economic analysis like any other seasoned academician would do. But he also was a journalist, so you will come across a host of journalistic writing and he was also a political activist and he has written various materials which have very strong polemical political character.

Such writings comprised of arguments or articles which were aimed to criticize other people very ruthlessly, to defend one's own position, to humiliate others, to criticize others, to expose others. So, you will find a combination of all these three extremely different types of writings in Marxian writings. Starting from very argumentative polemical thing and to more journalistic writing to more systematic deeper, theoretical, academic writing. A person combining all these three distinct forms of writings, again is an unusual scenario in the in the overall scenario of academic life.

Many writings of Marx were published after his death, including the second and third volumes of Capital as they were recovered from his notes and transcripts. Karl Marx was very infamous for his very ugly and unreadable handwriting. That in itself proved to be a very major challenge. And many of his writings were in the form of scribbles, small notes which were never elaborated. So, there is lot of lack of clarity regarding what he exactly meant in many of his notes and writings and other things.

Friedrich Engels played a very important role in translating many of this material. So, there is huge amount of controversy, debates and discussions about what exactly he meant and whether he meant one particular argument or not in those directions. As a result, you will find quite a few of contradictions, inconsistencies in his writings and it is bound to happen when a person writes so much, since much younger age and when he even writes at the end of his life. When somebody writes as an academic, when somebody writes as a as a journalist as a polemic, as a political activist, you will find that is it very difficult to maintain a sort of consistency and lack of contradiction.

There are various terms and concepts that are left undefined in his writings. There are lack of clarity, or there are even seeming contradictions in many of his writings. And the tension between Karl Marx as a scholar and Marx as a political activist is very profound. As I told you earlier, these two are entirely different types of engagement. As a scholar, you could be extremely meticulous and you have to be extremely careful. You need to go deeper into a given topic whereas that approach will not suit when you are an activist, where you need to simplify things. You need to make it more conducive for mass appeal, and reshape it for popular consumption.

Marx was not able to come out of this tension as it is very natural. Another factor which complicates the legacy of Marx is the huge body of academic and political commentaries on the writings of Marx. So, it is not only what Marx has written by himself, but as I told you there is a huge body of literature available by his followers, his disciples, other theorists who were influenced by Marxian thought. There is a very famous quote from Marx that after seeing some of the much distorted arguments by his disciples, Marx is supposed to have said that, "I am not a Marxist".

Therefore, you will see that there very different shades of Marxism developed later, some very fundamentalist in its character and very rigid kind of Marxism. I am not going into that, but this is an extremely important aspect as the latter commentaries on Marx really played an important role in making many complications and confusions. Another very important part is that Marxian writing became official ideology and propaganda of communist states, whether it is China or Russia or host of other countries in the left block and we know that the moment a particular academic or particular theoretic work becomes a part of a statist agenda, whether it is communist or capitalist or any other thing, then distortions are bound to happen.



When an academic contribution or a theory is being channelized into propaganda, then it loses quite a lot of its nuanced character. Because you cannot have a propaganda with ambiguity. You cannot have a propaganda with more open ended enquiry. The propaganda has to be much closed and very unidirectional. The kind of an intricate power relation between the communist states and the arguments of Karl Marx played a very important role into a large extent in distorting or giving a unique direction to his writings.

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- The 'young' Marx and the 'matured' Marx- comprises the writings between 1841 and 1848 being the former.
- The Young Marx: *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, The Jewish Question, The Poverty of Philosophy, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, The German Ideology, The Communist Manifesto*
- The matured Marx: *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, and Capital 3 volumes*



Another very widely prevailed intervention to understand Marxian writings is this distinction between this 'young' Marx and 'matured' Marx. A kind of distinction which is widely accepted by scholars, where the young Marx is supposedly the kind of writings by Marx comprising of his writings between 1841 and 1848. And the matured Marx is supposed to be the latter Marx who wrote more rigorous economic analysis of capital. When we talk about young Marx, you will see he was more philosophical because that was the time he was fighting with the young Hegelians and Hegelian idealism.

In young Marx, you will see a person who is more politically oriented, more philosophical, and more romantic and who writes on a host of issues like alienation and other things. Whereas the matured Marx is more clinical in his approach, more scientific in his approach and he discusses more substantial issues like capitalism and so on. The young Marx's writings includes the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, The Jewish Question, The Poverty of Philosophy. The Poverty of Philosophy is a major rebuttal to one of his one of the young Hegelians. And Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, The German Ideology, The Communist Manifesto were also part of young Marxian writings.

So, all these are the writing which are attributed as the writings of young Marx. Whereas the three volumes of The Capital and Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy are considered to be his substantial work which are attributed to the matured Marx.

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- Marx continues to be relevant even today
- His critique of capitalism
- His foregrounding of material conditions and economy as the primary focus of analysis
- His concern with the questions of class inequality
- Commitment to the ideals of equality, justice and emancipation



We can say even without an iota of doubt that Marx continues to be relevant today. Marx continues to be important today. Of course we know that his prophecy about the demise of capitalism did not come true, capitalism thrived. Capitalism proved to be the most resilient of all the economic systems that human society has witnessed so far. So, in that sense there are a lot of people who believe that Marx no longer has any relevance.

But that is not the case, because his critique of capitalism is extremely important. There is no other economist or scholar who has dissected and understood the inherent logic of capitalism like Karl Marx. There is no better scholar on capitalism than Karl Marx. And capitalism continues to be important and the most dominant form of economic activity, economic frame work, especially with the collapse of the soviet bloc.

At the same time, we know that capitalism is not free from its contradictions. There are quite a lot of scholars who are extremely sceptical about the longevity of capitalism as a particular system because of various reasons. And again, if you look into some of the primary contributions of Karl Marx, his foregrounding of the material conditions and economy as the primary focus of analysis is something extremely important. He was the first scholar or the most profound scholar who vehemently argued to foreground the economic angle, questions of materiality, questions of production, and the questions of material condition into frame of analysis of society.

Therefore the moment you try to understand the contemporary society against a whole set of later academic trends that valorise and foreground culture, ideologies and other things. Marx would repeatedly remind you to focus on the conditions of materiality, conditions of production, conditions of economy, and the way in which different sections of people are entangled in this process of economic production and that is an extremely important and invaluable focus which provided you with quite a lot of insights and understanding about the way in which a society functions.

Marx was a person who was concerned with the questions of class inequality. No other scholar for that matter can come anywhere near to his genuine concern about the questions of class inequality. So, we know that class inequality is not only a situation that different classes are positioned differently, but it has very specific empirical consequences. Inequality generates its own set of consequences in terms of access to certain resources, in terms of access to certain life conditions, life chances and a host of other issues.

One of the fundamental engagements of Karl Marx was this whole question of class inequality. And from there derives his commitments to the ideals of equality, justice and human emancipation. He was personally extremely concerned with the question of equality, with justice and an idea of human emancipation. Maybe it looks very vague to us. Emancipation is very vague and what does one exactly mean by a whole idea of human emancipation?

It looks very vague, but it is a very enchanting idea that you dream of a more egalitarian society. You dream about a society where human beings are treated equally. That is an extremely powerful imagination, that is an extremely powerful dream and in the social science circle, Karl Marx is the one who really came up with the dream, he was the one who was the most fierce advocate of that particular imagination and that particular kind of a dream.

In that sense, Marx was not only a dry academic who could understand and analyse things in a very impassionate manner. He never claimed to be neutral, he never claimed to be impassionate or objective in that particular sense. He, very consciously, deliberately took side. He stood with the people who were less privileged, he stood with the proletariat, he stood with the workers, he stood with the poor and that was his political commitment.

So, Karl Marx appears as a person with unique political commitment, unique intellectual faculties and an extra ordinary intellectual. So, I will end here, we will discuss more specific contributions of Karl Marx in the coming classes. Thank you!