

Marx and Engels

The Marxist Theory of the Base and the Superstructure

- A “materialist” theory. Refer to nothing beyond perceptibility—keep your eyes on the earth and the physical practices here. Specifically, be attentive to *what work people do all day, and how, and where, and for whose benefit.*
- BASE: production, exchange, and consumption, including physical labor, machinery of production, networks of communication like railroads and telegraphs, but also the very layout of space (all these together = “forces of production”), and more, social relations, corresponding with ownership (and producing “classes”), phasing in and out of sync with technological developments... all these relations = “relations of production.” ** Marxist theory often suggests that revolutions stem from different rates of change between the forces and the relations of production.
- SUPERSTRUCTURE: 2 tiers: law and politics (which reflect and facilitate existing structures of production and control); ideas—philosophical, religious, moral, artistic; opinions, thoughts,* common sense
- What CAUSES e.g. revolutions is NOT ideas. It’s changes in the modes of production and exchange, together with class conflict (that is, social differences regarding which changes are desirable.)

The “retroactive action” of the superstructure upon the base

- (Ideas etc. do have a role in keeping people obedient and at work, or moving them to revolt).
- The superstructure in general, but particularly the upper tier (philosophy... common sense) are technically referred to as “ideology.” For Marxists, ideology “veils” the base, so that typically people don’t think about it, don’t question it, and hence don’t change it. More specifically, ideology *functions* to make what is actual seem like all that is possible, and the truly possible seem outlandish and fantastic. Common sense thus tends to say: “hey, this is how it is—it has to be this way—there’s no other way—nothing else works—resistance is not only futile, it’s delusional... Only idiots resist.”
- Marx claimed that the superstructure is always dominated by the dominating class, because they control (most of) the means of production, **including the means of the production and distribution of words and images.*

Further key points of Marxist theory

- Capitalism *itself* is unjust. “Capital” itself, which is profit reintroduced into production to yield further profit, stems from exploitation: the difference between what it costs to hire somebody (which = what it costs to “reproduce” them and their family) and what they can produce. All “property is theft” (Proudhon): all profit is stolen.
- Capitalism produces various forms of alienation: from the object one produces, from one’s own activity, from other humans (b/c of division of labor and class divisions), from one’s own free essence
- Under capitalism, human activity *is a commodity* to be bought and sold. (Labor has a price, and the capitalist pays it, and gets what he pays for—which = *you*.)
- In every period there’s class hierarchy, and each period is characterized largely by the conflicts and tensions between classes. In fact Marx goes so far as to say classes are constructed through their mutual antagonism (without the opposing the class, any given class would not effectively exist. Its reality corresponds to its shared interests with regard to its opponent). Consider freemen vs. slaves, patricians vs. plebeians in ancient Rome, lords vs. serfs...

The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat

- The ruling class of Marx's day = the "bourgeoisie": the owners of the means of production, and especially large owners and "capitalist" funders of the enterprises of others.
- The opposite = the "proletariat"; those who do not own the means of production and are thus physically compelled to sell their labor to others
- The proletariat are "wage slaves." For their time at work, their bodies and minds are "owned"—bought, directed and deployed—by their bosses. These slaves are required to seek out their own masters.
- *The bourgeoisie are a new and strange class of rulers, because their rule depends on the perpetual *innovation* of the base, not on its conservative preservation. They want perpetual revolution technologically, economically, and in terms of social relations, with the exception that they are conservative in terms of ownership (*their* class must stay the one that is in control of the capital and hence of the processes of production and the arrangement of everyday life for others).

Capitalism: Endless Expansion, “Development,” Subjugation and Integration

- Seeking resources
- Seeking markets
- Developing new industrial processes and means of communication
- Battering down walls with cheap commodities.
- By this means as well as military means, bringing more and more regions into one economy.

And lastly on Marxism:

- Capitalism is prone to periodic crises, which may be seized and exploited by either the oppressed or the oppressing class.
- (And of course there's the prediction about the future. On the large scale, "class conflict" passes episodically through revolutions, tending toward one final, "communist" revolution.)

Similarities and Differences between Marxists and Anarchists

- Shared: socialism – “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” = a good goal
- Violent revolution—a likely and desirable means to this end
- BUT: The Marxists want large-scale social organization (at the level of the nation or beyond, internationally), *with*, “to begin with,” a state apparatus. The first goal of Marxist revolution is control of the state apparatus, which is then turned against the previously-ruling class.
- The Anarchists want small-scale organization, with no state apparatus at all. Anarchist revolt is therefore typically aimed immediately at the destruction of state and other coercive apparatuses.
- Marxists want centralization and a planned economy; Anarchists NO centralization, and if a planned economy, then a democratically-constructed and non-compulsory one...
- Marxists accept some social hierarchy—especially the leadership of the “revolutionary avant-garde,” who become the controlling party in the course of revolution. Anarchists reject all social hierarchy, all “authority” aside from authority rooted in skill and devoid of institutional backing.

Consider what happened at the base and superstructural levels during the 1800s:

- Changes at the base level: railroads, internal combustion engine, telegraph, telephone, camera, electricity, processed steel, aluminum, the steam turbine, the pneumatic tire, the *machine gun* ... most of which changed working conditions and factories; all of which were directly employed in colonial endeavors (consider 1899: 11,000 Muslims in Sudan machine-gunned by the British; 28 British dead.) BUT ALSO: the revolts themselves, leading to codified organizational changes (e.g. constitutions-- =superstructural)... Also consider Banquets, Barricades and Boulevards here... (spaces conducive to revolt, resistance, and lastly suppression)... and last but not least: the “First International” union which connected working-class revolutionaries across Europe.
- And then at the superstructural level: doctrines of the “white man’s burden,” “manifest destiny,” the “civilizing of backwards peoples,” the “gifts of development...” But also, in philosophy:—Marxist and Anarchist theory.... In art: Classicism, legitimizing empire... Romanticism, lauding both imperial conquest and revolt, and Realism, critiquing social conditions... (The Marxist theory is that all this superstructural stuff *follows from* the base stuff. Ideas reflect and play within material reality; material reality isn’t formed by ideas.)