

## Marx on Religion

From *Sociological Theory: Classical Statements*, by Orenstein & Ashley, and *The Discovery of Society*, by Randall Collins, and other sources. Not for Quotation. Not Properly Referenced.

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Marx (1818-1883) was the son of a Jewish lawyer who had converted to Protestantism. The social and political environment in the Europe of Marx's time was extremely oppressive by today's standards. Capitalism had made workers' lives poor and hard-working. In response to these conditions, socialism became popular, and class politics gradually became institutionalized in Europe. The 1848 revolutions had frightened the ruling class of Europe, and they reacted conservatively. Opposition to socialist movements became increasingly entrenched. The Second International was founded in 1889, lasting until the outbreak of W.W.I. The war broke the international unity of workers, as nationalism proved a stronger source of loyalty than class consciousness and solidarity.

Marx's intellectual roots were in Hegelian philosophy. As a student, he joined the Young Hegelians, a group of students that interpreted Hegel in a radical fashion. They argued that religion is humanity's attempt to understand itself. This humanistic conception of God and morality provoked a conservative reaction. Conservatives feared that Hegelianism would undermine Christian morality. Marx agreed with their ideas, but broke with them because he believed they were all talk and no action. Marx wanted philosophy to have practical consequences.

Hegel had tried to make religion into a kind of science. He proposed that God is not a distant supernatural being, but instead God is *reason*. Human beings suffer, and they try to understand the source and nature of their suffering in order to be spiritually healed. The religious term for the elimination of suffering is *salvation*. According to Hegel, the evolution of rationality is essentially the history of concepts of salvation. Concepts of salvation are put into action, politically, too. Society is given shape by religious ideas. Religious ideas evolve because human knowledge of the self continues to grow. As history progresses, reason as *self-consciousness* becomes gradually more perfect.

The goal of history is *Absolute Reason*. Since reason frees humankind from the conditions of its own existence, absolute reason implies *Absolute Freedom*. Hegel argued that religions have gradually progressed toward this concept, and that he, himself, the secular philosopher, had formulated a philosophical system based on this insight. He believed that history is the progress of consciousness of freedom, as reflected in systems of ideas and their corresponding social structures. Society is a reflection of human consciousness. Since human consciousness evolves in history, so does human society evolve. However, the process is not peaceful. People become committed to ideas and social structure. Therefore, social conflict is the means by which truth-in-action evolves.

The sole purpose of human consciousness is this pursuit of freedom. The history of religion has been the history of consciousness as well as the history of society. Hegel, the philosopher, discovered this essence, and took over the role of theologian, secularizing the idea of salvation.

Hegel believed that the State is the appropriate means by which the divine is realized in this world. God is a human creation rep-

resenting the deepest yearnings of the human soul. Because different images of salvation imply different forms of social order, and because people become committed to forms of order, the process of social evolution entails violent conflict.

Freedom advances through war and revolution, the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, as humankind's concept of freedom keeps changing. The wars and revolutions of history are caused by religious differences between people. History can not be peaceful. We must accept the process in order to appreciate it.

Kant and Hegel had grasped the ideas of the French revolution concerning freedom and self-determination in an intellectual manner, but couldn't bring themselves to criticize the social and political systems of Europe. Marx appreciated Hegel's interest in emancipation, but rejected the idea that matter is the embodiment of spirit. He also rejected the idea that knowledge and consciousness are determined by purely material conditions. Instead, he argued that consciousness is shaped by human practical intentions and activities.

Marx assimilated Hegel's ideas, but set about to reverse their meaning, to "set Hegel on his head," so to speak. Marx created a materialistic version of Hegel's idealistic philosophy. Instead of glorifying religion and God as reason, Marx wrote that humans invented supernatural explanations out of fear and ignorance. Religion, he argued, is a tool for manipulating people. Originally, magicians and sorcerers exploited the idea of supernatural power for their own benefit. Gradually, they became an exclusive class that used its power for its own advantage a ruling class that lived off the labor of others. The subordinate classes permitted their own exploitation because they "believed" in the superiority and importance of the Priests.

The priestly caste, in league with the military caste of kings and pharaohs, created huge empires of faithful slaves, justifying slavery as the will of the gods. The State commanded which gods should be worshipped, and the form worship should take. Slavery was justified as the price of freedom and eternal bliss in the next life. Dissidents were persecuted, often put to death.

Philosophy started out as both criticism and justification of religious beliefs in ancient Greece. The word means "love of knowledge." Plato wrote about the superior reality of ideas. Only eternal ideas are real, he taught, especially the idea of *the good*. He believed that human society should be ruled by an elite corps of philosophers, the new priests of his *New Republic*.

Plato's philosophy was accepted and promoted by the ruling classes because it asserted that ideals are objective (hence religion is real), that truth can only be arrived at through divine inspiration, that common people should serve their masters, and that flesh is sinful and the soul is eternal. These ideological characteristics supported the superiority of the educated ruling classes and the subjugation of slaves.

Aristotle was one of Plato's students. His philosophy began a lengthy history of opposition to Platonic idealism. Aristotle argued that social conflicts arise from inequalities in economic and social conditions. The rich promote oligarchy while the poor promote democracy. The senses are the source of truth, not reason. The goal of life is happiness, not union with God. Money, power, and honor make people happy.

Aristotle's ideas were not comfortably assimilated by Western Civilization, in spite of the great importance placed on Greek culture by the Catholic Church during its reign over Europe. The Church adopted Platonic philosophy to undergird the European power structure. Platonic philosophy justified religion and a stratification. Aristotelian concepts were relegated to the background, for the most part. The history of philosophy in the West consists of a long, difficult struggle against theology and the powerful classes that used ideas and force to prevent the erosion of faith.

Marx adopted a more Aristotelian view of human nature and existence. He asserted that we are material organisms, with material needs. These needs are paramount. Therefore, the satisfaction of material needs dominates human invention and society. Every society consists of a system of social relations that gives direction to the production and distribution of wealth in society. In doing this, every society produces its own distinctive culture, a form of consciousness that characterizes and justifies the system of social relations. Since culture is justification, not simply an unbiased representation of the social system, culture only *reflects* the organization of human labor in society. It is *not* the *cause* of those relations, as idealism maintains. Marx argued on these grounds that human societies revolve around economic institutions, not around religion. The ruling classes try to make religion appear to be the foundation, but that's a lie. When the oppressed class accepts the lie as truth, it experiences *false consciousness*.

Marx theorized that the social regulation of labor is the basis of the organization of human experience and social relations. Law, politics, and religion are elements of the *superstructure* of the system that reflect the underlying *infrastructure* of economic organization. The organization of labor is the cause of the form the superstructure takes in every society.

Only humans create the means by which they live in the natural world. We are constrained by, and dependent on, nature. Philosophical Idealism such as Plato's and Hegel's philosophy falsely assumes that consciousness is self-determining. According to Marx, history demonstrates that changes in modes of economic production induce changes in consciousness. Technology increases freedom from nature, but not necessarily freedom from domination by people or the systems the ruling class creates and maintains.

Marx wrote that it is time for philosophers to change the world instead of merely understanding it. The social world must be made humane. Private interests must be made to coincide with the interests of humanity in general instead of the interests only of the ruling classes.

Capitalism, like all other forms of class structure, inhibits the growth of consciousness because it contains class domination and exploitation. Work done for others in slavery, servitude, or in exchange for money is fundamentally alienating because the work is controlled by the masters. In capitalistic societies, profit is theft of what belongs to the workers. Workers have no say in it, only the difficult-to-exercise freedom to quit if they don't like the job.

Class domination is legitimated by ideology. It can't exist without ideological justification. Capitalists portray capitalism as

natural, as freedom itself. However, Marx claims that freedom in capitalistic society is an illusion because the *Bourgeoisie* controls the state, and because in bargaining with labor, capital holds the face cards. Capitalism tends to keep unemployment high, causing workers to need jobs more than capitalists need workers. Also, once workers settle into a their jobs over the years, their homes, friendships, and communities become intertwined with their jobs. Getting a new job often requires moving away from all that is familiar, pulling up stakes and losing one's roots in a community. The rootless existence of modern technical workers, for example, illustrates this problem. As a consequence, employers know that workers become dependent on their jobs. Employers can concentrate more on attracting new workers than on keeping established workers satisfied, because established workers become vulnerable to loss of community connections.

The *Bourgeoisie* was the revolutionary class in the 18th century, displacing the landed aristocracy. By the end of the 19th century, the *Bourgeoisie* became the anti-revolutionary, dominant class against workers. The ideology of the *Bourgeoisie*, emphasizing individualism, competition, and freedom, does not express the needs and interests of workers who work and live under the thumb of entrepreneurs.

Sometimes, factory owners would erect entire towns, with churches, stores, parks, transportation systems, and so on, employing even private police forces. People living in these factory towns were extraordinarily dependent on their bosses for every facet of their lives.

Because capitalistic ideology is the accepted moral framework for interpreting action in a capitalistic society, workers have a relatively hard time understanding their true class interests. Discourse on social and political matters tends to be framed by the *Bourgeoisie's* ethos that portrays the individual as the basic unit of action in society. Workers need to realize that the real unit of action is class, not the individual. The capitalists are an organized class. That is the secret of their power. The *Proletariat* is disorganized. Workers blindly believe in the ethic of individualism. They need, instead, to adopt an ethic of class unity. Workers need to unite to gain parity with the owners, but the owners oppose efforts of workers to organize, and the cultural environment defines labor organizations as inappropriate and dangerous. Schools, newspapers, sermons, and politicians preach at people in ways inimical to a proletarian consciousness. Ideology and religion are used by the ruling class to legitimate the domination of workers by owners.

*False consciousness* is a product of an exploitive economic structure that maintains control over the production of ideas as well as the economy and polity. Religion offers an illusory happiness, mainly in the afterlife. Society is the real source of suffering. Without the promise of God's reward, poverty would be difficult to foist on workers. Religion is, according to Marx and Engels, *the opiate of the masses*. The consolations of religion deflect workers' attention away from their unjust domination, promising much greater rewards for accepting their station on earth. If workers would only wake up, Marx thought, they would rise up and seize what is rightfully theirs. This is why communism has been atheistic and hostile to religion, in spite of the religious qualities of communism itself.

Communism is defined an association of free individuals with property held in common. Ideally, society and individuals would

have essentially the same interests because communistic society is classless. When all have the same stake in society, the struggle for control over the state should disappear, or so Marx and Engels fervently believed.

Marx argued that society is responsible for human suffering and unhappiness. However, only society can free people from suffering, because only society can create the conditions for self-development. It is part of human nature to seek unity with others. Market relations of capitalism give people the dream of self-determination but not the reality, because we lose control over our personal destinies. The market system is oblivious to human subjective needs unless the needs can be expressed and satisfied through commodity exchange. The needs of other people are not important except as expressed in economic demand in the marketplace. Commodities are not produced to satisfy human needs, but instead to make money. Capitalism destroys personal relations, replacing personal interdependence with mutual indifference, encouraging people to see each other solely as means to satisfy the market, not to care about each other as whole persons.

The purpose of knowledge is not only technical know-how, but also to eliminate illusion and self-contradiction, to enhance freedom. Marx believed in the holistic study of humankind to reveal the interrelations between society and consciousness. The human *will* triggers attempts to overcome barriers to self-understanding that humans have erected against themselves the reification of social relations. Throughout history, the reification of relations has stood in the way of insight into the nature of society. Only when relations are understood has human creations can humanity remake its relationship with the systems it creates.

A communist society is portrayed as a happy community of equals. However, a communist society is more like a huge company than a happy community. Every authoritatively coordinated system is a stratified system, in that some have power over others, and power is always a source of conflict, of political division. Wealth is not the only source of conflict, and private ownership is not the only way of obtaining access to wealth. The ruling party members of communist societies are still a ruling class with interests divergent from ordinary people, even if only the interest to keep power. Typically, the party elite in communist societies maintain a separate distribution system, providing themselves with fancier apartments, better food and clothing, chauffeured cars, and so forth. They lived well above the means of ordinary people. Privileges have always been associated with authority, even in socialist and communist societies.

Marx did not foresee regulation of the economy by the state, or the power of unions legitimated by state laws. He predicted radicalization of workers and the violent overthrow of capitalism. Competition would eventually doom capitalism, leading to socialism as a short transitional stage into communism. Marx expected advanced societies would be the first to revolt. Later he saw this issue differently. In trying to explain how capitalistic societies avoided revolution, Marx realized that economic imperialism was the explanation. Capitalism could forestall revolution by shifting class oppression from western, advanced societies to other countries. Foreign workers are paid much less than workers in capitalist societies. Capitalism continues to oppress and extract immoral profits by moving exploitation off-shore, granting the *Proletariat* of their own societies greater wealth to prevent their radicalization. Eventually, revolution will become

necessary. However, Marx also believed that a peaceful transition to communism was possible where parliamentary democracy existed, such as in Britain, Holland, and the U.S., although that possibility might not become actuality.

When he died, Marxists split into violent and peaceful factions. The violent faction embraced the ruthless, dictatorial approach of Lenin to gain control over the state. Leninist style communist revolutions occurred in peasant societies on the fringe of the industrial world order. Marx thought communism would replace private profit with the public usefulness of surplus labor among the industrialized nations, emphasizing public health, education, housing, etc. In fact, most industrialized societies *have* drifted toward these goals as welfare state models of capitalism were developed as solutions to the problems of uncontrolled capitalism.

The utopian ideal of communism means shrinkage of coercive labor. Marx believed that organized labor would be reduced to a small proportion of the totality of work in a communist society. Most work would be non-alienating (i.e., hobbies). Social organization would become an expression of the will to justice. The state would wither away into a coordinating body. Individuals would control their own existence. Communism is essentially a vision of the enlightenment dream of salvation through rational knowledge applied to society, with emphasis on the importance of the individual.

Communists quickly realized that for this to happen, communism would have to be worldwide in scope. Nationalism and economic competition between nations prevent reducing organized labor to a minimal level. Coercive labor is necessary to support national sovereignty, the protection of the ruling class from foreign intervention and domination. For these reasons, communism has long had the character of an international movement supportive of revolutionary movements in various nations.

For Marx, history is the story of class struggle, driven by internal contradictions caused by exploitive social relations. Marx believed that all great truths and idea systems are ideological, i.e., made congruent with current modes of economic production. Economics is the infrastructure of society. Ideas (philosophy, art, religion, etc.) are the superstructure. Workers have false consciousness because the dominant class controls production and communication of ideas, and workers lack the education and other resources for creative thought. The role of the intellectual, for Marx, was that of prophet, to awaken workers to their true, material interests in society. Once awakened, the workers will revolt to secure justice and equality. Marx is therefore a kind of savior figure in communist ideology.

Marx defined politics as the effort to control the state. He saw the state as organized, legitimated violence aimed at controlling others, a prop for the economy that affirms the current property structure. The main political issue is the economic system, the opportunity to earn money, principally through exploitation of others. Revolutions are inevitable. Force is the primary source of social order, and of social change.

Marx's concept of alienation is derived from idealist philosophy. Since Kant, philosophers have understood that our experience of the world and our self-understanding are partly a function of our beliefs. Hegel added that humans create society through imagina-

tive cognition, and that history is the story of stages in ideas that create society and create the perception of society. Since societies are expressions of ideas, they are human creations.

Over time, we lose sight of the origins of social organization. We create myths to explain social organization as coming from the supernatural, and become alienated from it, dominated by our own collective creations.

Hegel argued that humans eventually realized that they were the agents of something else, which Hegel called the spirit of reason. To Hegel, alienation is the relation of humans to their creations when they do not recognize reality for what it is. They do not recognize the human source of institutions, mistaking them for something objectively real. Marx recast alienation as the servitude of humans to institutions serving dominant class interests. Alienation grows in history until the final revolution brings down capitalism.

Marx's idealistic theory can be contrasted with social realism. Social realism argues that society is a natural phenomenon with laws of its own, and that we must study society to see how it works. In a sense, the mystification of society is what makes it "real." If people understood society as humanly constructed, it would not operate "upon" them. We would all be free agents, unmoved by the mythology and unimpressed with the religious theater of social structure.

Social realism takes mystification as a fact of life, a natural phenomenon. Marx and Hegel regarded mystification as something that would or should be eliminated. Social Realism states that we can not create social institutions whimsically, in ignorance of how they "really" work. The positivistic tradition claims that we need a science of society to control society successfully. Marx's "scientific socialism" is not science at all, in the sense that positivists defined science. It is social criticism and just perhaps, a genuine religion, albeit not a supernatural religion.

Marx's philosophy of history is millenarian. It is strikingly similar to other millenarian systems, such as the temporal struggle found in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Consider these similarities. Primitive communism is an idyllic state of existence. People share and share alike. They are all the same, having the same relations with each other. They lack modern conveniences and the accouterments of cultural refinement, but they are happy. They do not have coercive labor. They live off of what nature provides. People do not dominate each other, and they accept life as it is. All of this ends with the idea of property. With property comes class divisions, and the historical process driven by class conflict. The historical process ends with the final abolition of private property, returning us to natural, harmonious relations with each other. Coercive labor will end. We will cease pursuit of materialistic things. Our lives will be in harmony with our true nature as creative beings. All individuals will control their work, choose what they wish to accomplish.

In the Bible, before the Fall of Man, Adam and Eve are contented with life. They accept their lives. They do not work. They live off what nature provides. They do not judge their lives, because they know nothing of good and evil. They are like children. God is like the father who knows what is good for children, and forbids them to decide for themselves what is good and evil. However, they rebel against God's decree not to eat the fruit

of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their punishment is banishment from Eden, where life becomes a struggle. A Cherub guards Eden with a flaming sword. They can never go back to Eden.

*... cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.<sup>1</sup>*

This passage illustrates the radical separation between the sacred and the profane that ensued after *the Fall*. An ideal existence is sealed off from human participation. Adam and Eve are forced to leave their dream-like existence to struggle with the earth to live. They and their descendants must now work to live. Work is not itself a curse, but it becomes toil after *the Fall*.

In the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament, human history is portrayed as a lengthy struggle between good and evil. St. John the Divine has a revelation, a vision of the future in which the Eschaton, the final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, occurs at Armageddon. His revelation indicates that when evil is finally defeated, there will be a thousand year period of peace between humans. A worldwide social order ruled by Christ and his apostles, and the resurrection of the dead will result.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."<sup>2</sup>*

In Marx's philosophy of history, the elimination of private property, by means of the final class revolution, will usher in communism. Modern communism will be similar to primitive communism. People will share in the material benefits of production. However, modern science and technology will provide additional benefits. Life will not be a ceaseless struggle against nature, as it is in primitive societies. And life will not be a ceaseless struggle between classes, as it is throughout the history of the class struggle. Communism and the Book of Revelation are both dreams that revolve around a diagnosis of human suffering. The dreams differ in their particulars, but not in their overall structure. Both read mythical, eschatological significance into historical events.

Philosophical systems that portray history as a great struggle ending in glorious victory and an end to suffering are often called millenarian ideologies. The term *millenarian* comes from the figure of one thousand years that appears in the Revelation of St. John the Divine. Such systems of ideas are profoundly moving to those who believe in them. All manner of irresponsibility and violence can be justified in the name of some absolute good be-

lied to be just around the corner. The idea that evil and the suffering it causes can be eliminated from the real world has influenced human history profoundly. If such ideas are true, who in good conscious could oppose the end of evil? If they are not true, how can we justify the violence and tragedy caused by our vain imaginings? Our ideals make our relations with reality antagonistic. Durkheim wrote that ideas are not apart from reality, that they are an aspect of reality, that social conditions require them. He occasionally made brief reference to extreme idealism, but he did not warn us sufficiently concerning how extreme idealism can be as much a problem as a lack of ideals.

*Men's faults do seldom to themselves appear;  
Their own transgressions partially they smother.  
This guilt would seem death-worthy in thy brother.  
O, how are they wrapped in with infamies  
That from their own misdeeds askance their eyes!*<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the Catholic Church was founded, millenarian interpretations of history became the basis of various cults. Many of these cults were Gnostic. *Gnosis* is the Greek word for mystical knowledge of spiritual things. The Gnostic cults claimed possession of special, mystical knowledge of the invisible structure of the cosmos. The ancient Gnostic cults engaged in a wide variety of ceremonial violence and sexual deviance. Their belief in the coming new order released them from ordinary morality and social obligations. The Church banned these movements as heresy. The Eschaton was officially interpreted as the transition between life and the after-life. Nevertheless, Gnostic movements continued to crop up periodically during the middle ages. The millenarian implications of the book of Revelations sparked these movements.

Millenarian gnosticism did not disappear with the rise of secular, industrial societies. New political ideologies emerged that transformed the specific content of gnosticism while retaining its structure. Nazism and Communism are two of more recent examples of modern Gnostic movements.

Gnostic social theory is an unrealistic and impossible foundation for real societies. Good and evil are sacred ideals created through a process of idealization. Idealization consists of forming imaginary descriptions of actions and relationships. The descriptions are idylls. Idylls are symbolic compositions —poems, songs, or stories that are simple and charming. They induce fantasies that impel us to idealistic action. They occupy a central position in culture, but they can have disastrous results if not interpreted carefully.

Primitive religion insists on a radical separation between the sacred and profane. All existence is made real by the sacred. Mingling the sacred and profane is thought to cause all manner of violent, chaotic events. Seen as primitive social theory, The sacred and the profane suggest that ideals and real life must be kept apart. Any attempt to bring ideals and profane reality in contact with each other is destructive of both. Moral absolutism, the insistence on making reality absolutely good, releases destructive aggression against a reality that can never be as simple and charming as the fantasy. Dreams are better left to sleep.

Applied too literally, idylls produce radical dissatisfaction with reality. The reverse also occurs. Reality causes disillusionment, a loss of ideals, and a corresponding loss of psychic energy and

interest in social life. Ideals are part of social reality, but they must be kept in their place. A tension must exist between these two forms of consciousness for ideals to give meaning and structure to social action. This means that we need to develop a realistic sense of how much good is possible, a pragmatic acceptance of a less-than--perfect world. The following quotation affirms this perspective:

*God grant me the serenity to accept  
the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.*<sup>4</sup>

One way to totally eliminate evil is by refusing to idealize social relations. However, this would eliminate good, also. The temptation to imagine a perfectly good world without evil can be irresistible, especially to people whose sense of suffering is great. Another way to totally eliminate evil is to live in a state of denial, asserting that evil is an intrusion, that it can be banished from life. This allows people to believe that good will soon triumph over evil, completely. Living in denial may be comforting, but it is devastatingly irresponsible when the lives and well-being of other people are at stake. The violent excesses of communism or nazism stemmed, in part, from a dream of perfection coming down to earth.

Marx's philosophy of history is a modern variant of historical gnosticism. Marx chose for himself the role of secular prophet. Primitive communism is structurally equivalent to life in the Garden of Eden. History is class struggle, a prolonged period of violent conflict between people who represent the two basic classes. Similarly, in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, history is a struggle between good and evil. History is a prolonged period of violent political conflict between people who represent the forces of good and evil. Both of these systems of historical interpretation assert an eventual end to conflict, a virtual end of time and of the historical processes of political conflict. Harmony will be reinstated among people. Christian eschatology and Marxism, in their broadest outlines, are both millenarian dreams of social salvation brought down to this earth.

The workers' revolution will usher in a new era, the *New Jerusalem* of Marx's vision, a workers' paradise, a just society, a one-class society in which the struggle to control the state will cease to exist. Coerced labor will disappear. The necessary work of society will be shared. People will spend most of their time in hobbies and play. Materialistic consumerism will fade away. Government will become the simple, technical facilitation of necessary work instead of an instrument of oppression. Crime and war will vanish. There will be a happy union between social necessity and individual wills.

Marx's *Epistemology* (theory of the nature of knowledge): Marx argued that objective, scientific knowledge is a myth; that all belief systems are ideological. He portrayed the conventional social sciences as a tool of the capitalists to control society. He called the philosophical justification of these sciences *ideology*. In fact, he called all systems of social thought ideology. His own system, *dialectical materialism*, according to him, is the proper ideology of the *Proletariat* (working class). It is superior, he argued, because it is on the side of history, and because it is morally correct, compared to the ideology of dominant classes that

divides society. Marx claimed that communism is an ideology appropriate to an egalitarian society lacking in a dominant class.

Leaders of capitalistic societies have been terrified of communism for two reasons:

1. communism would take away the wealth and power of the rich, hence they fear a loss of their privileged position.
2. Lenin gave political shape to communistic movements, creating secret, cell-organized, ruthless revolutionaries who waged guerilla war on established governments, seized power, and instituted totalitarian dictatorships, concentrating all power in the communist party, not permitting democracy.

No doubt, Marx would have been horrified at such a perversion of his doctrines, especially at how the totalitarian dictatorships became entrenched. He did believe a short period of a *dictatorship of the Proletariat* would be necessary as a transitional phase prior to true communism, but he didn't envision the refusal of these dictatorships to give up power, or their ruthless oppression of the *Proletariat*, itself. He naively trusted in human nature. He believed that people are basically good; that class conflict is the basic source of evil in society. Therefore, he never specified a model for government in a communistic society. Government in a one-class society would, he presumed, be benign and non-political, because everyone would be in the same boat, so to speak. If everyone is a "worker," then everyone should have more or less the same values, and should agree on what is best for society.

Communistic governments were created through violent revolutions, as is the case with most governments. That's the way it's done, Marx argued. Power was concentrated in one political party. There were few if any checks on the abuse of power by communist dictators in communist societies. A political party could easily lose control over the leader it selected, living in terror of the dictator, becoming a pawn, itself.

Democratic societies provide checks and balances, constitutional limits on government power, and permit multiple political parties. Democratic societies recognize that different people have different stakes in society, and that human nature is not entirely altruistic. People must be protected from each other and from themselves. Communist societies have not, for the most part, institutionalized these protections. When the Soviet Union attempted to become more democratic, it fell apart. Apparently, communism can not be maintained without force.

A multi-party democratic system is inconsistent with communism because the shift between parties controlling the government would result in a shift between state and private control over basic industries. Such changes are too wrenching and disorganizing. They cannot be imposed on a democratic society as the whim of the party in power.

A voluntary communism would require a durable, powerful consensus on government control over the economy. Such a consensus does not seem likely to last, given the variety of opinion and interests among members of a large-scale, industrialized society. A society can not see-saw back and forth between communism and capitalism. Political conflict between communists and capitalists would be more like civil war than the relatively polite efforts to win elections by parties such as the Democrats and Republicans who don't differ very much concerning the choice of a basic economic model.

In communist societies, it is as if the entire nation is one vast company. If such a society were to become democratic, the unity of the economic organization would be undermined. Once lost, unity is hard to regain. Imagine a large company periodically breaking up and merging together again, voluntarily! Take General Motors, for example. Once the various divisions (Cadillac, Buick, Oldsmobile, and Chevrolet) went their separate ways, what would bring them back together again? It would almost certainly take dictatorial powers to reforge a broken-up General Motors.

In a communist society, there is one authoritative hierarchy in the economy, and the economy and polity are one in the same organization. The heads of the political system are also the heads of the economic system. Branches of the system can't and don't compete with each other. The concepts of competition and profit simply don't apply to segments of a single organization. Instead, the entire system is coordinated from the top. Such an economy is referred to by economists as a "command" or "centralized" economy, whereas a competitive, privately organized economy is called a "demand" or "market" economy.

Marx was a secular prophet, a moral critic of capitalism preaching revolutionary change. However, when Marxists take over the state, Marxist ideology shifts from a prophetic to a priestly mode, protecting the status quo, resisting change. Huge bureaucracies grow up around entrenched interests, a cult of the leader, and a completely centralized economy. Private property and profit are outlawed. Communism becomes the religion of communist societies, albeit a religion lacking in the supernatural element that characterizes most religions.

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## Endnotes

1. Genesis 3: 17-19, *The Oxford Annotated Bible With The Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*, p. 5.
2. Revelation 21: 1-4, *The Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version*, pp. 1509-1510.
3. William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*.
4. A.A. Grapevine, Inc., 1947.