

Introduction to Marxism

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Preface

In an 1888 preface to the Communist Manifesto, the most influential and most “subversive” political text ever published, Karl Marx’s life-long friend and political collaborator Frederick Engels summed up its “fundamental proposition” in one really long sentence!

That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organisation necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which it is built up, and from that which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; That the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class — the proletariat — cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class — the bourgeoisie — without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles.¹

But if we break up this sentence and put a number to each argument, it becomes a handy outline for an introduction to Marxism:

1. In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organisation necessary for it, form the basis of the political and intellectual history of that epoch.
2. Since the the first breaks from communal tribal society based on communal ownership of land some 5000 years ago, history has been formed by class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes.
3. The exploited and oppressed class under capitalism — the proletariat — cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class — the bourgeoisie or capitalists — without, at the same time

emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles.

This short introduction to Marxism follows this outline but spreads it over four classes or chapters:

1. Understanding society to change it.
2. The origins of class, family, private property and the state.
3. The political economy of capitalism.
4. The revolutionary potential of the working class.

The idea of this pamphlet is to convey and provoke interest in the main ideas of Marxism, but more importantly to encourage the reader to study the method of Marx (and Engels), and to apply it to the world we are struggling to change. ■

About the author

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Class 1: Understanding society to change it

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it. — *Karl Marx*¹

Why should activists campaigning for system change today study the ideas of Karl Marx, a 19th Century German revolutionary?

Put simply, it is because the ideas Marx developed — together with his lifelong collaborator Frederick Engels — can help us understand the dynamics of the social system we are still forced to live under today and want to be liberated from — capitalism.

Marx and Engels lived in a period of revolutionary change. In the first half of the 19th Century, even as the great industrial revolution in England was generating “more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” and disrupting old social relations and ideas, in continental Europe, the old feudal ruling classes were still trying to hang on despite the French Revolution in the late 18th Century.

Marx and Engels participated in the bourgeois revolutions of 1848 and their lead up — Engels actually joining in an armed insurrection and Marx through his radical journalism, agitation and theoretical work.

In the process, they developed an approach to understanding society and its history that underpinned all their future studies and writings. For a summary of their approach read Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

Historical materialism

Marx and Engels taught that reality should be understood not as a “complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes, in which the things apparently stable ... go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away” and that we understand these processes by engaging with reality as well as reflecting on what we perceive.

To understand reality we have to recognise that it is not just the sum of its parts. We need to understand the dynamic relationship between all these parts. We need to see the dialectic or logic of change.

As a student, Marx had studied the writings of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who argued that “contradiction is at the root of all movement and life, and it is only in so far as it contains a contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity”.

Hegel, an admirer of the transforming power of the French Revolution of 1789, saw history as a process of change through unfolding contradictions. However, he thought these contradictions unfolded in the sphere of ideas, which were then transmitted into the real world.

Marx turned Hegel’s dialectical approach on its head. The contradictions in the sphere of ideas that Hegel identified, he argued were actually ideological *reflections* of material processes and material contradictions that drove the development of nature and history

Engels explained in his speech at Marx’s funeral in 1883:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.²

Marx was not over-deterministic in his materialism. Marx acknowledged that these reflections, ideas and debates also impacted back on those same objective processes. Developments in the sphere of ideas do impact powerfully on the material world. However, ultimately, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”³

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Dominant ideology

The dominant ideology in any class society, Marx observed, was the ideology of the ruling class. Every ruling class has insisted that their right to rule is natural or pre-ordained by some deity and that it is unchangeable. Their subjects are told that their laws are sacred and all must accept the place in society that

these laws allocate them. But class conflict generates challenges to the dominant ideology and in a revolutionary crisis the dominant ideology is submitted to a dramatic reality check!

Slaves and serfs were often forbidden to learn to read and write and today we are discouraged from even thinking socially about problems. British Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher's infamous words are a good example:

They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.

And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first.⁴

Today, our capitalist ruling class would have us believe that class struggle is something "introduced" into society by ideologically driven propagandists or agitators. How many times have we been told by politicians and "respectable" opinion-makers that this is the case?

We are expected to believe that class struggle is "ideological" rather than an objective reality — even in the face of the exponential concentration of wealth in the hands of the few.

It was estimated by Oxfam in January 2018 that 82% of the wealth generated in the previous year went to the richest 1% of the global population and just 42 super-rich people own as much wealth as the 3.7 billion people in the poorest half of the world's population own collectively.⁵

Even as our communities are more and more disrupted to suit the enrichment of giant corporations, we are told that radical social change is "unnatural" and impossible. But as we engage with the reality of this class divide and resist our class oppressors, we better understand its reality.

Of course, the idea of class struggle as "an ideology" suits the capitalist ruling class — just as it suited the feudal aristocracy and the slave owners in the slave-based societies of antiquity (such as ancient Greece and Rome). Ruling classes throughout history have seen the very idea of social change as subversive.

A longer view of history

The ruling class version of history presents it as the work of emperors, kings, generals and other "great men". But Marx counters: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."⁶

By presenting history as the work of "great men", the ruling class diverts our

eyes from seeing and understanding the broader social realities that shape the roles of individuals (great and small) and the role of the masses of people, of the oppressed and exploited.

It hides the fact that once “all-powerful” ruling classes have come and gone. The great slave-owning societies in Greece and Rome rose and fell; feudalism rose and fell.

Likewise, capitalism rose and, while it has yet to fall, we can all see strong reasons today why it needs to! Among these reasons are gross and growing inequality, permanent war, social injustices, racism, sexism and the climate change crisis.

The way the ruling class presents history also narrows our scope. If we take a longer view of history, we see that capitalism, as a social system, is only a few hundred years old and class-divided societies have only existed for the last 5000 years — a very small part of human existence.

This renders ridiculous common notions like capitalism is “in our DNA”.

For some 200,000 years (up to 6 million years if we include pre-homo sapien hominids), human societies were classless and institutions such as private property, states, kings, standing armies and police forces did not exist.

For millennia, humans organised in small groups to gather and hunt food, find or build shelter, make tools and develop culture to extend and transmit these skills to subsequent generations. They had to learn to live with nature and to live cooperatively. So if anything could be argued to be “in our DNA” it is communal and sustainable living!

Marx and Engels eagerly read and reflected on what anthropological studies were available in their time and while they may have taken as good coin some mistakes that these early studies made, their understanding of society as a conflict-driven process in the material world gave them a critical insight that more than made up for the limited knowledge they had to work with.

They correctly identified the shift from relying on hunting and gathering to farming with the emergence of class division and class conflict. This Neolithic Revolution began some 10,000-12,000 years ago in the “Fertile Crescent” in the Middle East and a little later elsewhere in other major river basins, like the Indus (in India) and Yellow River (in China).

As these societies switched over from a mix of hunting and gathering and shifting agriculture to more settled agriculture, their populations grew and increased in density. With the production of a regular and storable economic surplus (that is, more than is needed just to sustain the population), new divisions of labour became possible. This included the possibility of freeing some people

from productive work altogether to become priests, kings, administrators and soldiers. And hence the material basis for class division and exploitation was laid.

Our communal past

Modern anthropological studies confirm the egalitarian and communal nature of hunter gatherer societies but have also clarified that life in these societies was, for the most part, *not* a desperate struggle to survive, as Marx and Engels believed on the basis of the anthropological studies available to them.

Indeed these hunter-gatherer societies enjoyed a form of affluence and an enviable work-life balance and possibly a more varied and healthier diet than many people have in modern capitalist society!

“Reports on hunters and gatherers of the ethnological present — specifically on those in marginal environments suggest a mean of three to five hours per adult worker per day in food production. Hunters keep banker’s hours, notably less than modern industrial workers (unionised), who would surely settle for a 21-35 hour week,” writes the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.⁷

They had plenty of time for story-telling, singing and dancing.

There was no pressure to produce children as the optimum size of a hunter-gatherer group was small to remain mobile to where food resources were plentiful in various seasons (though groups had extensive interconnections at times spanning vast areas).

Relations between women and men were much more equal than they are today, even if the main division of labour was gender-based.⁸

Modern anthropology also tells us that hunter gatherer societies developed complex cultures and were deeply acquainted with their natural environment. They worked with the environment, and practiced forms of farming (including controlled burning, some planting, etc) alongside hunting and gathering. They were certainly aware of the food potential of various seeds and grains and developed bread-making.

The hunter-gatherer **mode of production** had a stability not matched by any subsequent mode of production. So what could have brought on its replacement?

Various theories have been put forward. Most likely the process of shifting to a more settled agricultural mode of production was pushed along by climate change.

About 20,000 years ago, the last glaciation of the Ice Age began to ebb and the environment that the hunter gatherers lived with altered significantly. Great

grassy plains in the north gave way to dense forests. In Central and Western Asia, large areas turned into deserts and life retreated towards wetter uplands, river valleys and oases. Hunter gatherer societies had to adapt in a way that would prove to be revolutionary. As Marxist anthropologist Neil Faulkner explains in his book *A Marxist History of the World*:⁹

Hunters had long existed in a symbiotic relationship with their prey. They created clearings, channelled movement, provided food, warded off predators, and spared the young. For maintaining plentiful game close by was in their interests. The transition from hunting to pastoralism (the rearing of domesticated animals on pasture) could be gradual and seamless.

That plants grow from seeds is a matter of observation. That people should sow seeds in order to harvest plants was therefore not a giant leap. But it involved a choice — and not necessarily a welcome one. Farming is hard work: it involves long, repetitive, back-breaking toil — clearing land, breaking up the soil, hoeing the ground, scattering seed, weeding, warding off vermin, irrigating or draining the fields, harvesting the crop; and doing so with the ever-present danger of drought, flood, or blight. Then the same again, year after year after year. Farming is rarely an ideal option. Hunting and fishing, gathering and scavenging are much easier ... They were driven to the hard labour of cultivation and animal husbandry by necessity in an increasingly desiccated landscape depleted of natural food supplies ...

This switch is an example of an important feature of change. It proceeds unevenly: periods of gradual development are broken by sudden leaps. So while the discovery of basic agricultural techniques may have developed over a long period of time in hunter-gatherer societies, a qualitative change took place once a switch to dependence on agriculture was made.

Agricultural revolution

As Faulkner goes on to explain:

Farming may always have been a reluctant choice, but once begun there was no going back. Because farming exploited the landscape more intensively, it could support much larger populations than hunting-gathering. This meant that if farmers were to abandon their work, their community would starve, for there were now too many people simply to live off the wilderness.

Humanity was trapped in toil by its own success.

Most people now had to work longer and harder. There was pressure to reproduce faster to provide more labour. The shift to agriculture narrowed the diversity of foods available, resulting in a downturn in human nutrition.

George Armelagos, an anthropologist famous for his study of the evolution of human diets, wrote:

Empirically, agricultural populations experienced significant instances of nutritional deficiencies although they were able to produce surpluses that drove cultural development. The reduction of the dietary breadth was a product of the Neolithic revolution when there was often reliance on a limited number of domesticated plants, with plant blights and droughts interrupting the flow of food. Agriculturalist showed evidence of retarded and interrupted growth that had an impact on life expectancy ...¹⁰

Technology had to change as every agricultural “success” brought on new problems to solve, such as land depletion, pests and diseases, droughts and floods, and competition for land and other resources.

Human inventiveness sought to respond to this challenge. And so we have a succession of developments from wooden, bone or flint tools to metal tools, digging sticks to hand ploughs, hand ploughs to animal-driven ploughs, and simple to more complex irrigation systems.

But it also pitted these societies more completely into a struggle *against* nature. By comparison, hunter-gatherer societies worked more symbiotically with nature.

The social structures of these agricultural communities were still what Marx and Engels described as “primitive communism”, but all that was to change. ■

Class 1: Discussion points

1. "Contradiction is at the root of all movement and life, and it is only in so far as it contains a contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity." (Hegel) What are some examples of this we can see today?
2. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx) Discuss the role of the individual in history.
3. "Marx was not over-deterministic in his materialism." (Boyle) Discuss what this means.
4. What does Marx mean by a "mode of production"?
5. Is the concept of "primitive communism" a racist, imperialist perspective?
6. Does anthropological evidence disproving that hunter gatherer societies were generally living on the edge of survival disprove Marx's general perspective on historical development?
7. "Relations between women and men [in hunter-gatherer societies] were much more equal than they are today, even if the main division of labour was gender-based". (Boyle) Why was this the case?
8. What are some of the contradictions that drove Neolithic agricultural societies to a revolutionary crisis point?

Class 2. Private property, class, women's subjugation & the state

If it is hard for us to today imagine a time when society was not class-divided and marked by gender oppression, it is equally a challenge to imagine a time when there was no war, no organised mass killing of humans by humans. But that time did exist and did so for millennia.

In the last chapter, we saw how all human society lived in a communal hunting and gathering mode of production for millennia and that it was only about 12,500 years ago that societies in some parts of the world moved towards more settled forms of agriculture, under pressure of environmental changes.

As humans invented new technologies to solve the new challenges thrown up by a shift to agriculture, there was pressure to develop new **social divisions of labour** both to carry out new specialist jobs but also to wage war and carry out some trade.

Early agriculture was wasteful: land was cleared, cultivated, exhausted and then abandoned. Fallowing and manuring were not yet common practice. And as the population expanded, accessible and workable land began to run out. These contradictions eventually exploded into warfare.

The archeological record of ancient mass graves backs this up. There is shocking evidence of war: mass graves with skeletal remains with the marks of violent, human-inflicted death.

There had been some small clashes between groups of hunter-gatherers as they spread across the globe but nothing on the scale of what we see after the shift to settled agriculture. Now there were larger scale wars between groups beginning settled agriculture and those still trying to forage and practice shifting agriculture, as well as between different groups practicing settled agriculture.

The shift from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture forced small communal groups to combine into larger social formations and started to break

down the equal status of the old gender-based division of labour that developed in the hunter-gatherer mode of production.

From kinship to family

In many, if not most, of these societies, men lived with their female mate's groups (matrifocal residence) and descent was traced through the female line (matrilineal descent). There certainly was no patriarchal family (with the father at the head), as we have come to know it. Kinship rules spread roles such as parenting over a broader section of the community.¹

Even with the limited anthropological evidence available in their day, Marx and Engels focussed in on the major change that took place in the family structure at the dawn of class society. This is clear in Engels' book *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) which draws significantly on Marx's unpublished ethnological notes.

The emergence of private property posed a new question: how should it be passed onto the next generation? Here too there is a rebellion against the predominantly matrilineal traditions and culture inherited from millennia of "primitive communism".

Drawing on the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan who made extensive studies of the kinship structures of North American Iroquois and Seneca First Nations, Marx and Engels identified a shift from "mother right" to "father right" associated with the shift from communal to private property.

"As to how and when the herds passed out of the common possession of the tribe or the gens into the ownership of individual heads of families, we know nothing at present. But in the main it must have occurred during this stage", Engels wrote, before going on in an even more speculative vein:

With the herds and the other new riches, a revolution came over the family. To procure the necessities of life had always been the business of the man; he produced and owned the means of doing so. The herds were the new means of producing these necessities; the taming of the animals in the first instance and their later tending were the man's work. To him, therefore, belonged the cattle, and to him the commodities and the slaves received in exchange for cattle. All the surplus which the acquisition of the necessities of life now yielded fell to the man; the woman shared in its enjoyment, but had no part in its ownership. The "savage" warrior and hunter had been content to take second place in the house, after the woman; the "gentler" shepherd, in the arrogance of his wealth, pushed himself forward into the first place and the woman down into the second.²

Origins of women's subjugation

Marxist feminists have since critically evaluated this explanation of the origins of women's subjugation in the light of more recent archeological studies. (See Pat Brewer, *On the Origins of Women's Oppression*.³)

They have pointed out that the anthropological evidence available to Marx and Engels was probably distorted because Morgan (and other anthropologists of that time) had observed surviving hunter-gatherer societies through gender-distorted and ethnocentric lenses.

More recent studies also debunk the idea that procuring the necessities of life "had always been the business of the man" or even that only men did the hunting while the women did the gathering. There is variation in the roles that men and women played in different hunting-gathering societies.

In some of these societies, it was women who hunted and/or gathered the lion's share of food for the group on most days. Men might not have a successful hunt for days. Women also played a central role in both the development of horticulture and the domestication of animals.

But, despite these errors, Marx and Engels correctly recognised that there was relative gender equality before the rise of private property and class divisions, showing that there was nothing natural or biologically determined about women's systematic subjugation.

The emergence of private property

Early settled agriculture was labour-intensive. Hunter-gatherer societies had discovered farming techniques but for a long time chosen not to shift to settled agriculture precisely because it was such hard work. But once societies were forced into making the shift, there was increasing pressure on the group to find more labour.

This put more pressure on women to bear more children, changing significantly the roles they played in the group.

This need for more labour also made the capture of slaves during wars with other groups attractive. Captives from the defeated group could be forced to work and female captives could also bear more children for the victorious group.

Such early forms of slavery may well have been one of the first forms of "property" along with land, produce, tools and weapons seized from the defeated groups. Initially such war booty became the communal property of the victorious group. Only some 5000 years after the beginning of the shift to settled agriculture do we see evidence of collective property evolving into private property.

Private property first developed through a gradual privatisation of communal

property by an elite that used religion and war as cover and justification. In the process, women, like slaves, land and livestock, become their private property.

There is growing archeological evidence that this process is intertwined with the development of religion and the war-making apparatus. Priests emerged to use religion to justify and unite people to go to war against neighbours and, in the process, established themselves as a social elite.

The 5000-year-old archeological remnants of ancient Sumer (in Mesopotamia) reveal the first fully formed class society that we know of and some of the first evidence of private property.

This society had drained swamps and irrigated the sandbanks between them creating fields of exceptional fertility. These priests amassed private wealth from their own estates and collective control over the wealth of temple estates nominally “owned” by various deities.

As the Marxist anthropologist Neil Faulkner explains in *A Marxist History of the World*:

From the ranks of the priests came city governors (later styled kings). At Lagash, the city governor was both high priest of the chief god and commander-in-chief of the citizen army. He enjoyed the use of 246 ha of [the god] Bail’s estate. The city governor of Lagash was one of many rulers, for Sumer was divided into separate city-states. These were often at war ...

Each polity lived in fear of its neighbours. Each had land, flocks, granaries, treasure, and a workforce to protect. Military power was imperative for defence. But military power, once acquired, could be used proactively. Pre-emptive aggression might be the best guarantee of future security. Predatory aggression might enhance the wealth and power of a ruler.

Military power also had an internal function. The state — the ruler, the priests, a bureaucracy of officials and clerks, and the armed bodies of men they commanded — was a mechanism for maintaining the new social order of the city. Bureaucracy was itself an instrument of class power. The complexity of urban society demanded writing for record-keeping, standardised weights and measures for trade, and geometry and arithmetic for land measurement. In an increasingly complex and class-dominated society, who owed what to whom needed to be measured, written down, and enforced.

... The religious and military specialists of prehistoric Sumer had been granted control over the surplus so that they could carry out their functions on behalf of society as a whole. At first, their position had depended on

public sanction. But control over surplus made them powerful, and as they consolidated their authority, they found that they could use it to enrich themselves further and maintain their position without public sanction. In this way, the high priests, war chiefs, city governors, and petty kings of urban Sumer evolved into an exploitative ruling class accumulating and consuming surplus in its own interest: a power over society, no longer a power of society.⁴

Similar structures of class oppression emerged independently in the agricultural societies that developed in other river basins around the world, such as the Yellow River valley in China and the Indus River valley in Pakistan.

The state as enforcer of class oppression

Today we take the huge and powerful institution of the state for granted. We've never lived without somehow being impacted and directed by a public power that appears to sit above society itself. Even people who try to "get off the grid" find it hard to completely avoid that institution that commands the police, army and tax office.

But Marxism saw the state as a "product of society at a particular stage of development" — the stage of developments where a society was divided into irreconcilably antagonistic classes. The development of an exploiter class requires the society to produce a significant **social surplus** — it has to be able to produce more than what is needed on an ongoing basis to sustain all members of that society.

This allows a smaller, privileged layer to live off the surplus in the society. But a certain proportion of the surplus also has to be spent on maintaining this unequal share of such a society's production.

In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels explained that so that these "classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state."

The ancient state [Engels continued] was, above all, the state of the slave-owners for holding down the slaves, just as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is the instrument for exploiting wage-labor by capital.

... as against the 365,000 slaves, the 90,000 Athenian citizens constitute

only a privileged class. The people's army of the Athenian democracy confronted the slaves as an aristocratic public force, and kept them in check; but to keep the citizens in check as well, a police-force was needed, as described above. This public force exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men, but also of material appendages, prisons and coercive institutions of all kinds ...

The state apparatus in all class-divided societies allocates different rights to citizens graded on a property basis because it is an organisation for the protection of the possessing class against the non-possessing class.

In the slave-based ancient "Athenian democracy", slaves and women were excluded from public decision-making, but even among the free men, the biggest property owners had more rights. The same was true of the Roman slave-based empire.

Under the feudal mode of production, which eventually replaced slave-based Roman empire in Europe, a different kind of state developed. It forced peasants to stay on the land they "belonged" to and to work for their feudal lords. Each feudal lord in turn had to pledge services and loyalty to their overlords, as they did in turn all the way up to king and emperor.

The state under capitalism

If the state served the ruling class in ancient Greek and Roman slave-based empires and under feudalism, is it also an instrument of class rule in modern, "democratic", capitalist states?

Such "democratic republics" Engels explained, may not officially allocate rights according to property, however, "Wealth here employs its power indirectly, but all the more surely. It does this in two ways: by plain corruption of officials, of which America is the classic example, and by an alliance between the government and the stock exchange, which is effected all the more easily the higher the state debt mounts and the more the joint-stock companies concentrate in their hands not only transport but also production itself, and themselves have their own center in the stock exchange..."

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When Engels was writing, women still did not have the right to vote in the capitalist democracies and there were property conditions to be electors to some houses of parliament. But even with the universal right to vote in our society, it is clear that the capitalists have much more say than the ordinary worker.

First, the real decisions are made in corporate boardrooms and democratic government acts as a rubber stamp. The bought-out politicians in parliament

and in government are relied on to do their best to enable or implement those decisions. Corporate donations oil the wheels and “lobbyists” help make sure that “unacceptable” party leaders are promptly replaced.

Second, corporate media barons like Rupert Murdoch play a major role in deciding elections. In the feudal and slave-based modes of production, the main ideological role was played by official religions whose apparatus was closely tied to the state. Even in the most modern and advanced capitalist democracies today, the ruling class still uses religion to help ideologically control the oppressed.

Third, the permanent state apparatus (police, military, public service) is usually headed by individuals from the ruling class or at least deeply loyal to that class. They are not elected. Systematic effort is made to ideologically control critical parts of this apparatus, such as the police.

Fourth, if an elected government goes too far against the interests of the capitalist class, a way is found to “unelect” it through some form of coup.

No classes, no state?

Because the state has been used through all class-divided societies to keep in place the oppressed and exploited, it has deservedly become a hated institution. But we have to look behind this hated institution to see the ruling class it serves. We also have to recognise that as long as class divisions remain, the state will exist.

The state, therefore, has not existed from all eternity. There have been societies which have managed without it, which had no notion of the state or state power. At a definite stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the cleavage of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this cleavage. We are now rapidly approaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes has not only ceased to be a necessity, but becomes a positive hindrance to production. They will fall as inevitably as they once arose. The state inevitably falls with them. The society which organises production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers will put the whole state machinery where it will then belong — into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe.

This is an important idea to think about. Marxism teaches us that the state is an instrument of class oppression, so a future that is free of class oppression would not require a state. Sounds a bit anarchist? Well, let’s think about it for a bit.

Have a look at Lenin's *State and Revolution*, a short book that anyone interested in Marxism should read. We will come back to this question in the fourth chapter on the revolutionary potential of the working class. ■

Class 2: Discussion points

1. The shift to settled agriculture introduced new contradictions. What are some of these?
2. Marxists argue that the oppression of women is not natural but a social construct that arises along with property and class. What are some counter explanations?
3. Private property goes totally against the grain of the egalitarian communal culture that persisted for a long while after the shift to sedentary agriculture. Force and ideology have to be used to break this down. What form did this force take?
4. Discuss the term "social surplus" and why it is a precondition of the division of society into classes.
5. What is the role of war and religion in the development of class divisions and private property?
6. What is the Marxist understanding of the relationship of the state to class?
7. What are some of the institutions of the state in our society? And what are their specific roles? Can you think of examples of "democratic" governments acting as a rubber stamp for big business? Can think of examples where democratically-elected governments have been effectively dismissed by the capitalist class.
8. Right-wingers accuse socialists of being for a "bigger state" or for "everything to be owned and controlled by the state"? Is this true?

Class 3. The political economy of capitalism

Capitalist economists build their theories around “supply and demand”, in other words they see the surface — buying and selling — as the main thing. This reflects the fact that capitalism is the first economic and social system where **commodity exchange** has become generalised. Almost everything we use in our daily life has been bought and more importantly has been made to be sold.

But the surface appearance of things is often deceptive. Marx sought to reveal the real social relations that lay beneath all this buying and selling. And this is why he begins his famous work *Capital* with a discussion about value.

Use value & exchange value

So what is a universal rule in a system where virtually everything is made to be exchanged? The first is that there is a relationship between the usefulness of a thing and its value as something to be exchanged for something else (or for money). This usefulness has to be general — a thing can't be exchanged just because an individual attached some special value to it.

Say you have a stone that you feel some strange personal attachment too. That stone may not be something other people want to exchange something else or money for. In Marx's terms a commodity must have a general **use value** in order to have an **exchange value**.

But it also cannot be something that is freely available or something that you are not willing or able to exchange. So if you turned to the person next to you and held your hand out and said, “Here is a breath of air, will you give me \$5 for it?”, you are not going to get that fiver.

So while a commodity must have a use value in order to have an exchange value, not everything that has a use value is allocated an exchange value under capitalism. Some examples of this are domestic labour in the family¹ and the environmental costs of resource extraction and pollution².

How do we measure the exchange values of different things? We have to do

this in order to exchange one for the other, whether we are bartering or buying or selling using money.

Marx argued that what determined the relative values of different commodities was the amount of **socially necessary abstract labour** required to produce a commodity.

It is not the actual amount of labour that went into making the product but the average labour that is required to make such a product at any point in time. This changes with the technology used in the making of the product. Better tools, different raw materials, different processes of manufacture (including organisation of collective labour, division of labour, etc) all influence the socially necessary abstract labour required to produce a commodity.

Before commodity exchange was a generalised part of life, before even money was in general use, when barter was more commonly used as the form of occasional exchange, most people made, gathered or farmed most things they used so they would have a good idea of how much labour was needed to produce this or that thing.

If you have had much to do with buying and selling you will know that not everyone is a “winner” in every transaction. There are winners and losers. People sometimes come out of transactions feeling cheated when they are forced (by supply and demand pressure) to either sell something beneath its exchange value or to buy something for more than its exchange value.

So, in any particular transaction supply and demand do influence the actual exchange value (or **price**, which is this value expressed in money terms) of any commodity, however that will vary around the value.

Under capitalism, commodity production is generalised and money becomes the general measure of value, so most people have lost sight of what exchange value is really based on.

Marx said we had to resist the **fetishism of money** (because money as the general measure appears to have magical powers) and seek to understand the **real social relations** that lay beneath all this buying and selling.

We also have to resist ignoring the fact that under capitalism, not everything that has a real use value is allocated an exchange value. A good example of this is the systematic undervaluing of nature and domestic services performed overwhelmingly by women within the patriarchal family unit.

Value of labour power

Most of us are not capitalists selling this or that product, whether it's coal, iron, beer or cigarettes or fast food for profit. Most of us have only one commodity to

sell: our own labour.

So what is the **value of labour power**?

Here is another case of having to look beneath the myth of the mutually satisfied buyer and seller.

The exchange value of labour power is determined in the same way that the exchange value of any other commodity is determined: it is the socially necessary labour time needed to produce that labour power.

This in turn is made up of the values of all the goods and services (food, shelter, clothing, care, training) needed to produce and reproduce that labour-power.

Several factors can influence this:

- An increase in the productivity of labour lowers the value of the commodities required for the production and reproduction of labour-power.
- Workers' collective organisation (through trade unions and/or parties,) to gain strength introduces new social needs into the value of labour-power and therefore to an increase in its value.
- A greater degree of (mainly women's) unpaid domestic labour in the family lowers the value of labour power.

Capital, surplus value & profit

So capitalists pay workers for the exchange value of their labor time, buy the machinery and raw materials, and set the workers to work with them, say for a day. The value that a capitalist outlays for all this is **capital**.

In a successful enterprise, the value of labour power of a worker is less than the value that that worker produces during the day. The difference, minus costs of machinery and raw materials, goes to the capitalists.

This is the **surplus value** that can then be realised as **profit** for the capitalist when the products are sold.³

If we look at some of the class systems that preceded capitalism we can see the exploitative relationship more clearly. Under the feudal system, for instance, serfs were generally required to work most of the week on their feudal lord's land. And the feudal lord took all that was produced from that work. Perhaps for one day a week, the serfs were allowed to cultivate their own little plot or the village commons to produce for their own needs.

In that case, the real relations of production, the real social relations were not obscured by the myth that a "free" exchange of labour power for wages has taken place between the capitalist boss and the worker.

How can a capitalist increase surplus value? Marx says there are two ways:

"The surplus-value produced by prolongation of the working day, I call **absolute**

surplus-value. On the other hand, the surplus-value arising from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from the corresponding alteration in the respective lengths of the two components of the working day, I call **relative surplus-value.**”

So now we have to put some of these different insights together. The capitalist operates under a system of generalised commodity exchange, which means that after having extracted surplus value, the capitalist still has to do something else to realise it as profit by selling the products of the business in competition with other capitalists.

So how does one capitalist out-compete another capitalist selling the same product?

Fundamentally, being able to sell a commodity for less than a competitor is the main reliable means (although, capitalists also use all sorts of other “dirtier” ways of dealing with competition).

So how can the capitalist lower their price?

Lower the cost of the business inputs such as raw materials or wages.

The first can only be achieved at the expense of the capitalists supplying the raw materials — and this cannot be counted on all the time because the supplier would sell to someone else.

The capitalist could make the workers work a longer day or could lower their wages but there are physical and political limits to this (though once again, in history workers have been literally worked to death just to be replaced from the ranks of the reserve army of labour — the unemployed).

The capitalist could also force the workers to work faster or harder. This amounts to the same thing as above.

But the more typical way is to introduce new technology that increases the productivity of the workers. This may double, quadruple or even more exponentially increase the amount of products that can be produced in an hour, enabling the first capitalists who introduce the new, more efficient technology to flood the market with cheaper products and destroy their competitors this way.

Organic composition of capital

This permanent drive to bring in new technologies to increase the productivity of labour power has the effect of reducing the proportion of labour power costs in relation to the costs of machinery and raw materials in the value of a product. This changes what Marx called the **organic composition of capital.**

If for every \$100 of capitalist investment at one level of technology, \$50 goes towards wages (wages or **variable capital**, in Marx’s terminology) and \$50

goes towards raw materials and machinery (Marx calls this **constant capital**), with a more productive technology, for every \$100 invested a smaller proportion goes to wages and a bigger proportion goes towards raw materials and machinery.

Those businesses that are above the average in their productivity will capture a part of the surplus value produced in other businesses, while those operating at a lower than average productivity will not realize a part of the surplus value produced in their factories but must surrender it to their more technologically advanced competitors.

Eventually competition either forces all the competing businesses to adopt the most productive technology or be knocked out.

Marx further noted:

... the gradual growth of constant capital in relation to variable capital must necessarily lead to a *gradual fall of the general rate of profit*, so long as the rate of surplus-value, or the intensity of exploitation of labour by capital, remain the same.⁴

Why?

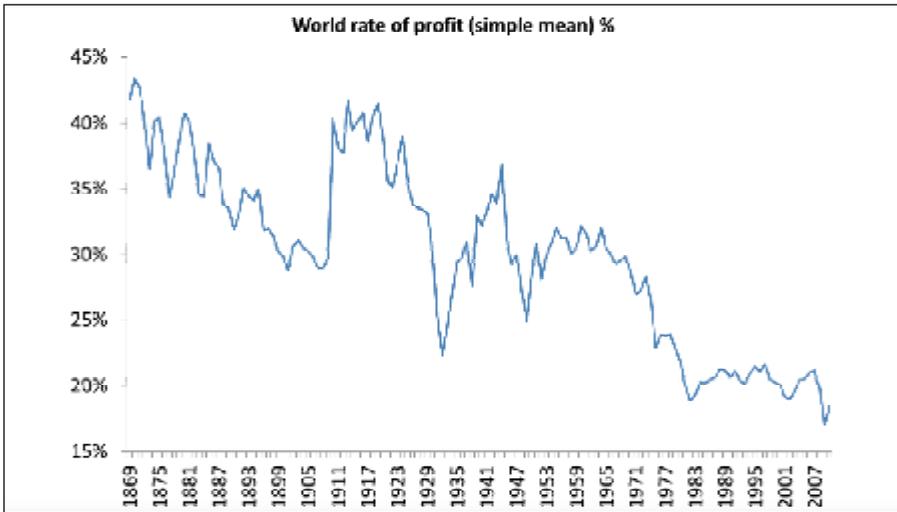
If we follow the logic of competition outlined above we can see that across the whole of the economy there is pressure on capitalists to expend a smaller proportion of the capital they outlay on labour power (variable capital) and a bigger proportion on machines and equipment (constant capital) because each competing capitalist firm sees this as a way of increasing the productivity of its workers and so beat their competition.

But surplus value can only be extracted from variable capital (“living labour”) and not from constant capital (“dead labour”, as Marx describes it). Therefore, there is a tendency for the average rate of profit to fall.

Marx added that this was only a “tendency”, against which the capitalists could try to take counteracting measures, such as:

- Increasing the rate of exploitation of workers (for instance, by making them work more hours for the same pay).
- Increasing the ranks of the “reserve army of labour” (the unemployed) which can then be forced to work for less than the value of labour.
- Lowering the price of constant capital through technological advances.
- Passing part of the costs of constant capital on to others (shareholders, the state, subcontractors).
- Using foreign trade to reduce the value of labour power (through cheapening consumer goods) and lower the costs of constant capital.

This graph produced by Esteban Maito is probably the best available illustration



of this tendency of the average rate of profit to fall and the capitalists attempts over the course of the history of this system's development to stem it through attacks on working class power (union busting, fascism, etc), through super exploitation of less developed countries or regions, and through destruction of capital (through recession and war), etc.⁵

Crisis of over-production

While Marx did not argue that capitalism would automatically collapse as a result of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, he did explain that regular economic crises were endemic to the capitalist system.

Competition to realise profits and to appropriate the surplus value from less productive competitors leads to permanent revolutionising of the means of production which leads to flooding of markets to destroy competitors, which leads to the regular or cyclical **crises of over-production**.

This is unique to the capitalist system. Previously economic crises resulted in a fall in production (caused by war, climate, pestilence).

The enormous power, inherent in the factory system, of expanding by jumps, and the dependence of that system on the markets of the world, necessarily beget feverish production, followed by over-filling of the markets, whereupon contraction of the markets brings on crippling of production. The life of modern industry becomes a series of periods of moderate activity, prosperity, over-production, crisis and stagnation.

(*Capital*, Vol. 1)

Markets over-filling does not necessarily mean that there is no social need for the products. It just means that there aren't buyers. The unlimited drive to expand production collides with the limited confines of the market economy. Plenty of people want and need things, but do not have the money to buy them.

So every eight to 10 years there is a recession (or at least an economic slow down). In these booms and busts, businesses go bankrupt, workers lose jobs, and capital is destroyed. But eventually the process hits rock bottom and then the cycle starts again.

During these economic upheavals, struggles ensue between workers and capitalists fueling the class struggle.

Modern capitalist governments intervene using public funds and borrowing to try to ensure "soft landings" but the basic cycle takes place to some degree in spite of this.

Competition leads to monopoly

One of the most important consequences of these booms and busts is that a new round of **centralisation and concentration of capital** ensues. As the corporate losers crash some are gobbled up by their competitors, who become bigger and more dominant in the industry. There is a relentless drive towards oligopoly and monopoly.

The result of capitalist competition is the end of real competition through increasing monopolisation. Competition tends to turn into its opposite.

But the size of these giant corporations actually understates the degree of monopolisation. Early in the 20th Century, the Russian revolutionary Lenin argued that capitalism had begun to come up against the limits of private property itself.

Individual companies turned to financial institutions or issued stocks to shareholders to raise the large bulk of the capital they invested. This financialisation of capital gave companies huge reach and they use the armed forces of the richest capitalist countries to carve up the world to further their profits.

That process divided the world into imperialist states and colonial and semi-colonial oppressed nations. A hundred years later, this divide persists (despite the partial recent industrialisation in China and other parts of Asia).

Today, fewer and fewer companies dominate the global car industry, oil and mining industry, pharmaceutical industry, the arms industry, etc.

The incomes of the large multinational companies today far exceeds the entire GDP of many countries.⁶

In every country, a handful of corporations (with substantial inter-industry cross-ownership) dominate each sector.

For example, in Australia:

- Most media outlets are owned by either News Corporation, Time Warner, or Fairfax Media.
- Grocery retailing is dominated by Coles Group and Woolworths and these dictate the prices paid to farmers and what crops they produce.
- Banking is dominated by the “Big Four”: ANZ, Westpac, NAB, and Commonwealth Bank. This would be a Big Two very quickly if not for an official “Four pillars policy” inhibiting more mergers in this sector. These four banks also have significant common shareholders.

The domination of the global economy by finance capital also adds more explosive power to capitalism’s economic crises, as we saw in the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis. This crisis was the biggest since the Great Depression. Governments all around the world spent trillions of dollars bailing out banks that were too big to be allowed to collapse. The cost of this bail out was socialised and working people around the world have paid for it through austerity cuts that continued a decade later, even as warnings of a new global financial crisis were being made.

Main contradictions of capitalism

This centralisation and concentration of capital accentuates all the contradictions endemic to this system:

- Between planned and organised production in a single firm and anarchy in the broader markets.
- Between socialisation of production and private appropriation of output and profit.
- Between a tendency towards unlimited production and. limits on workers’ and social consumption.
- Between the social potential of technological advance and its destructive use through war and environmental vandalism.

As Naomi Klein argued in her book *This Changes Everything*, this incredible concentration of ownership and power is not only unfair but is unsustainable and incompatible with a climate-safe future:

“We see that fossil fuel companies have five times more carbon in their proven reserves than is compatible with life on Earth. Do the math!”

Ending capitalism is not just a moral imperative today, it is an existential question for humanity and many other species living on this planet. And it is not just socialist ideology saying this, it is science. ■

Class 3: Discussion points

1. Discuss the differences and relationships between **use value**, **exchange value** and **price**. How does this relate to capitalism's treatment of nature and the unpaid domestic labour of women?
2. What is **socially necessary abstract labour** and what are the factors that contribute to this at any one point in time?
3. What is the **value of labour power**? How does this relate to the common notion of "a fair day's pay"?
4. Discuss the **organic composition of capital** and its significance.
5. What are the consequences of a capitalist **crisis of over-production**? Can you give some recent examples?
6. Can the capitalist state eliminate the capitalist boom and bust economic cycle by taking certain measures?
7. Discuss the contradiction between the capitalist system's tendency towards unlimited production versus limits on workers' and social consumption.
8. There is an irreconcilable contradiction between capitalist growth and ecological sustainability. What examples can you give of this? Can attempts to reform the impact of capitalist growth on the environment have any success?

Class 4. The revolutionary potential of the working class

The idea that the working class created by the capitalist system has the potential to liberate itself is the core idea of Marxism.

The history of class struggle has developed to a point “where the exploited and oppressed class — the proletariat — cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class — the bourgeoisie — without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles.”¹

Marx and Engels saw the working class (proletariat) rapidly growing in size, organisation and self-consciousness. They anticipated that it would soon be the majority class in all countries, and it would be a class that had both the means to, and the interest in, abolishing capitalism altogether.

The essential conditions for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

Conquest of power

Their analysis of capitalist development convinced Marx and Engels that it was driven by its own logic to socialise economic production on a global scale for the generation of profit for a small number of super-rich capitalists. In doing so,

it created the agents of its destruction, the working class.

Socialism would come through the conquest of political power by the working class in pursuit of its own liberation.

The first step in the revolution by the working class, they wrote in the Manifesto “is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy” and “wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie”.

The working class in power would then have to carry out a social revolution and sweep away, by force, the old conditions of production. This would eliminate the basis of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and replace it with “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.

Marx and Engels threw themselves into the struggle to help the working class get politically organised, as Engels explained in an 1890 preface to the Manifesto:

“Working men of all countries, unite!” But few voices responded when we proclaimed these words to the world 42 years ago, on the eve of the first Paris Revolution in which the proletariat came out with the demands of its own. On September 28, 1864, however, the proletarians of most of the Western European countries joined hands in the International Working Men’s Association of glorious memory. True, the International itself lived only nine years. But that the eternal union of the proletarians of all countries created by it is still alive and lives stronger than ever, there is no better witness than this day. Because today, as I write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilized for the first time, mobilized as one army, under one flag, for one immediate aim: the standard eight-hour working day to be established by legal enactment, as proclaimed by the Geneva Congress of the International in 1866, and again by the Paris Workers’ Congress of 1889. And today’s spectacle will open the eyes of the capitalists and landlords of all countries to the fact that today the proletarians of all countries are united indeed.

If only Marx were still by my side to see this with his own eyes!²

Marx and Engels were revolutionary optimists but they were not dogmatists. They had great confidence in their historical materialist method of understanding society but they also knew that theirs was a theory of scientific socialism that had to be tested in the real class struggles ahead.

They knew that while class struggle was the unavoidable result of real social contradictions, the outcome of these struggles was by no means totally pre-determined. Their study of history showed that “oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden,

now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

In their lifetime, they were constantly adjusting their ideas in the wake of real experience.

After the defeat of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, Marx and Engels came to the conclusion that the economic concessions granted by the absolutist monarchies in Germany had cleared the way for a prolonged expansion of capitalist production. Up until the middle of 1850 they had believed that a new economic crisis like that of 1847 would come soon, and that the new crisis would spark a new outbreak of revolutionary struggle in Europe.

However, as they deepened their study of economics, they came to the conclusion that this forecast was unjustified.

History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong. It has made it clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at the time was not, by a long way, ripe for the elimination of capitalist production.”³

The Paris Commune

But the famous Paris Commune of 1871, a spectacular if short-lived seizure of power by the workers of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, took them by surprise.

Just before this uprising Marx had warned the Paris workers that any attempt to overthrow the government would be a “desperate folly”. But when, a decisive battle was forced on the workers and the uprising had become a fact, Marx greeted the heroism of the Communards.

Lenin explains in *The State and Revolution*:

Marx, however, was not only enthusiastic about the heroism of the Communards, who, as he expressed it, ‘stormed heaven’. Although the mass revolutionary movement did not achieve its aim, he regarded it as a historic experience of enormous importance, as a certain advance of the world proletarian revolution, as a practical step that was more important than hundreds of programmes and arguments. Marx endeavoured to analyse this experiment, to draw tactical lessons from it and re-examine his theory in the light of it.⁴

Indeed, the one significant amendment to the main propositions in the Manifesto that Marx and Engels felt compelled to make within their common lifetime was on the basis of the experience of the Paris Commune. In their last jointly signed preface, dated June 24, 1872, they wrote:

One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that “the working

class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.⁵

Their reasons for this conclusion can be summarised as follows:

- The capitalist state machinery was too deeply tied to capitalist interests so it had to be dismantled and replaced, as the Paris Commune did.
- The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at any time. The majority of its members were from the working class or representatives of the working class.
- The police, which until then had been the instrument of the government, was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune.
- So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done for a worker's wage.
- The privileges and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves.
- Having once got rid of the standing army and the police, the instruments of physical force of the old government, the Commune proceeded at once to break the instrument of spiritual suppression, the power of the priests.
- The judicial officials were thenceforward to be elective, responsible, and revocable.

“The Commune, therefore, appears to have replaced the smashed state machine ‘only’ by fuller democracy,” Lenin explained in *State and Revolution*. “But as a matter of fact this ‘only’ signifies a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different type. This is exactly a case of ‘quantity being transformed into quality’: democracy, introduced as fully and consistently as is at all conceivable, is transformed from bourgeois into proletarian democracy; from the state (= a special force for the suppression of a particular class) into something which is no longer the state proper.”

Their approach to the Paris Commune shows that Marx and Engels were not putting forward a dogma set in stone. Rather, they were diligent students of society and its transformation, who collectively engaged in the class struggle and developed their revolutionary ideas in the process.

Imperialism & the working class

The development of capitalism into its monopoly capitalist/imperialist stage at the beginning of the 20th Century — after Marx and Engels had died — has

shaped the challenges to the working class rising to its revolutionary potential.

No sooner had capitalism entered its imperialist stage (which Lenin described as capitalism's "final stage" and stage of decay, in the sense that it was coming up against limits to progress generated by its own development), than it exploded into the "war to end all wars" — World War I.

The working-class movement had grown massively in Western Europe, in Germany in particular. They were united in the Socialist International with socialist parties from many other countries including the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (of which Lenin's Bolsheviks were the radical wing).

The German social democratic party had grown massively in the last two decades of the 19th Century and by 1912 it was the biggest party in parliament. As it gained more representatives in parliament, the idea that capitalism could be peacefully reformed or tamed through parliament gained more traction in the party.

The bulk of this labour movement failed the test of history as the inter-imperialist squabble for colonial territory that was WWI broke out. Most social democratic parties ended up siding with their national capitalist class in this war.

The European working class movement was split and only a minority was prepared to turn the imperialist war into a civil war to overthrow their own ruling classes, something the Russian revolutionaries went on to do in 1917.

Under leaders like Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the Russian Revolution broke the weakest link in the imperialist chain (a story captured vividly by the US journalist John Reed in *Ten Days That Shook The World*). But this revolution was not followed up, as anticipated, by revolutions in the more developed imperialist countries — even though WWI did create such revolutionary conditions.

This led to the relative isolation of the Russian Revolution, a bloody and devastating civil war fueled by an alliance of imperialist states, and eventually a bureaucratic counter-revolution led by Joseph Stalin (read Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* for a first-hand account).

Subsequent revolutions have all broken out in the colonial and semi-colonial nations (such as China, Vietnam, Cuba) and all these revolutions have faced similar challenges of imperialist aggression and an underdeveloped economic base.

Material roots of opportunism

The biggest barrier to the working class meeting its revolutionary potential is the powerful hold of opportunistic politics in working class movements, particularly in the rich imperialist countries.

The organised working class is politically dominated and systematically corrupted by conservative parties that in most cases trace back to the split in

the international labour movement over WWI. The pro-war, national chauvinist stance of many of the “social democratic” parties was prefigured by a move to a politics promoting the reform of the capitalist system, rather than its overthrow.

Building on observations Marx made about a conservative trend he had observed in the English working class in the 19th Century, Lenin advanced a theory about the material roots of opportunism in his pamphlet *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*:

... capitalism has now singled out a handful (less than one-tenth of the inhabitants of the globe; less than one-fifth at a most “generous” and liberal calculation) of exceptionally rich and powerful states which plunder the whole world simply by “clipping coupons” ...

Obviously, out of such enormous superprofits (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their ‘own’ country) it is possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the “advanced” countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.

This stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is the principal prop of the Second International, and in our days, the principal social (not military) prop of the bourgeoisie. For they are the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism. In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie

Unless the economic roots of this phenomenon are understood and its political and social significance is appreciated, not a step can be taken toward the solution of the practical problem of the communist movement and of the impending social revolution.⁶

It has to be said that this is still the biggest problem today and it shows up in the dangerous politics of our era.

The capitalist class knows that a section of the working class are conservatised by their relative privilege (which is even more significant on a global scale — better paid workers in the imperialist countries are in the richest 1% of the world’s population which owns more wealth collectively than the rest of humanity). It also knows that this privileged layer can have a disproportionate influence over broader layers of the working class.

So, today, the capitalist ruling class is actively promoting racist and national

chauvinist prejudices in the working class in the imperialist countries, encouraging them to blame immigrants and refugees from the Third World rather than the ruling class for deepening austerity and increasing job insecurity in the working class.

Organising & uniting the working class

Under capitalism, the prevailing ideology in the working class is capitalist ideology — a set of ideas that presents capitalism as natural, parliamentary democracy as the pinnacle of civilisation, and the system as eternal.

In the process of class struggle, more politically advanced segments challenge and break from the dominant ideology and in a revolutionary upsurge this happens on a mass scale. But we won't get there without struggle and without conscious effort.

Workers are also forced to compete with each other for jobs and for promotion. If they capitulate to the bosses' divide-and-rule tactic of pitting worker against worker, the workers lose. But when they unite in collective struggle for their common interests, they can win. This is why unions were formed.

But the capitalists' systematic attempts to divide and rule extend beyond a single workplace or even an industry. It takes place right across the country and increasingly operates on a global level.

The capitalist class deliberately keeps a significant proportion of workers unemployed — Marx called this the “reserve army of labour” — to keep the pressure on workers to compete for jobs. Moves to break down job permanency and to casualise employment are all aimed at doing the same thing.

The capitalist class uses its ideological domination in society (bolstered by corporate media, religion, etc) to promote divisions in the exploited classes. They use sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of bigotry and prejudice. They systematically pit workers in each country in competition against workers in other countries.

And here lies the need for the conscious development of a revolutionary party that can win the leadership of the working class, and lead it in struggle not just for its immediate interests but for its ultimate interest abolishing capitalism and all class division and exploitation.

Lenin argued that to promote such revolutionary consciousness, a revolutionary party should not stand just for the narrow economic interests of workers but also fight all tyranny and oppressions and engage in the broader political struggle.

The party, Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done*, “leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power, but for the

abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. [It] represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force.”⁷

Flowing from this, a revolutionary party always strives to build the unity and strength of the working class movement (cutting across national, racial and gender boundaries), its class independence (especially from the capitalist class), its awareness and confidence in the power of its mass mobilisation, and its consciousness of its historic revolutionary potential.

Conclusion

Millions of people have devoted their lives to struggles for liberation from capitalism — whether they have recognised it as such or not at the start. And millions will continue to do so as they are forced to face up to the reality of capitalism.

What drives such persistent struggle? Marx and Engels gave this answer: the capitalist system itself and its inescapable trajectory, which they summed up so vividly this way in the Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.

Today, as capitalism continues to widen inequality, condemn the world to permanent war and block humanity’s urgent need to confront the climate change crisis (which is a direct product of a system based on the pursuit of profit), we are being compelled to face up to our real conditions of life and our relations with each other.

The global working class, now numbered in billions, has the power and potential to get rid of capitalism and build a new society based on cooperation and ecological sustainability. But whether it lives up to that potential is a matter that will only be decided in struggle. ■

Class 4: Discussion points

1. "...the exploited and oppressed class — the proletariat — cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class — the bourgeoisie — without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles." (Marx & Engels) Why?
2. "The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable." (Marx & Engels) Is this valid today?
3. As the German Social Democratic party won more seats in parliament in the late 19th Century, the idea that capitalism could be tamed or reformed through parliament gained ground in that party. Should revolutionary socialist participate in parliamentary politics?
4. How does de-industrialisation, casualisation and the shift of jobs to the service sector impact on working class consciousness and organisation? Are self-employed trades people and owner truck drivers part of the proletariat?
5. Discuss the relationship between the struggle for reforms and revolutionary struggle. Discuss the relationship of the Australian Labor Party to the working class. How would you compare the role of the Greens?
6. How does capitalism in its imperialist stage affect the development of class consciousness in the working class? How does it impact mass consciousness in the Third World?
7. What is the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the working class? What forms of political action does it prioritise? Discuss examples of revolutionary parties today and the political action they prioritise.

Notes

Below are some brief reference notes. This publication will be placed online on <http://links.org.au/> with a more comprehensive set of notes.

Preface

1 See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm#preface-1888>

Class 1

1 Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm#018> 2 In many of the quotes from these 19th century texts, gendered terms were commonly used where they wouldn't be used today. 3 See The German Ideology, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#b3> 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes> 5 https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-reward-work-not-wealth-220118-en.pdf 6 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> 7 http://www2.unipr.it/~deyoung/Stone_Age_Economics.html 8 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/may/14/early-men-women-equal-scientists> 9 <https://archive.org/details/pdfy-cwMYZ4g9iO0tln3y> 10 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10408398.2011.635817?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

Class 2

1 http://www.workingwithindigenoustralians.info/content/Culture_5_Family_and_Kinship.html 2 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm> 3 <http://links.org.au/node/159> 4 <https://archive.org/details/pdfy-cwMYZ4g9iO0tln3y/page/n0>

Class 3

1 See What is social reproduction theory? by Tithi Bhattacharya, <https://marxismocritico.com/2017/10/17/what-is-social-reproduction-theory/> 2 See Marx and the Rift in the Universal Metabolism of Nature by John Bellamy Foster, <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/12/01/marx-rift-universal-metabolism-nature/> 3 In reality, the capitalist has to share or pay out a section of this surplus in rents and interest, but in this introductory text I have left out Marx's discussion of rent and credit. 4 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch14.htm> 5 <https://thenextrecession.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/maito-esteban-the-historical-transience-of-capital-the-downward-tren-in-the-rate-of-profit-since-xix-century.pdf> 6 In 2010, the annual revenue of US/global retailer Wal-mart was bigger than the GDP of South Africa and just slightly less than Norway's. The annual revenues of Exxon Mobile was slightly less than that of Greece.

Class 4

1 The Communist Manifesto, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/> 2 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm#preface-1890> 3 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/index.htm> 4 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch03.htm#s1> 5 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm#preface-1872> 6 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch08.htm> 7 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>

The purpose of this pamphlet is to explain and provoke interest in the main ideas of Marxism, but more importantly to encourage the reader to study the method of Marx and Engels, and to apply it to the world we are struggling to change.

Resistance books

