

# Marx and Marxism

Revised edition

Peter Worsley



Key Sociologists

## MARX and Marxism

Karl Marx probably had more influence on the political course of the last century than any other social thinker. There are many different kinds of Marxism, and the twentieth century saw two huge Marxist states in total opposition to one another. In the West, Marxism has never presented a revolutionary threat to the established order, though it has taken root as the major theoretical critique of capitalist society in intellectual circles, and new interpretations of Marx's thought appear each year.

Peter Worsley discusses all these major varieties of Marxism, distinguishing between those ideas which remain valid, those which are contestable, and those which should now be discarded. Rather than treating Marxism purely as a philosophy in the abstract, he concentrates upon the uses to which Marxism has been put and emphasizes the connections between the theoretical debates and political struggles in the real world.

**Peter Worsley** was formerly Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester.

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**PETER WORSLEY**

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# Foreword

There are good reasons why the choice of a subject like Marx and Marxism for a series on *Key Sociologists* is not quite as obvious as it might appear at first sight. Karl Marx himself would certainly have said that he was not a 'sociologist', probably admitting only grudgingly to the title of 'political economist' or perhaps even 'historical materialist'. After all, he discouraged his followers from calling him a 'marxist'. Certain things he said have led many Marxists to regard sociology as no more than a 'bourgeois ideology' designed to divert intellectuals and others away from treating society as something which can be transformed through the political action of the proletariat. Yet if we choose to regard sociology as a social science whose main aims are to enlarge our understanding of the societies, organizations and groups within which he lives – and that such knowledge also permits us if he so wishes to liberate ourselves from the worst effects of his social arrangements – then the impact of Marx's ideas on the subject will be seen to have been crucial. Indeed it would be impossible to understand the history of sociology without taking account of the strategic role of Marxian ideas in its formation and growth. Marx stands, symbolically, alongside Max Weber and Emile Durkheim (both of whom figure as subjects for the *Key Sociologists* series) at the intellectual crossroads which saw sociology emerge from being a vague collection of social philosophies to become a rigorous social science.

Marx developed (with some help from his colleague and friend Engels) what can best be described as a socioeconomic theory of the operation of



capitalistic societies, the historical factors which led to their emergence, and their likely future. It was his life's work and was intended to be the 'scientific basis' on which the working class would build the revolution which would destroy capitalism. Put very simply, the theory can be seen to have three main interlocking parts, each of them in effect *models* of how crucial elements of the capitalist system operated. One model was concerned with the 'economy' itself, conceived of as the creation and circulation of capital. A second model dealt with the social organization of that economy, and with how it controlled the exploitation of one class by another. The third model set out the operation of the 'ideological apparatus' which is woven around the society and economy. Both the theory as a whole and the three models which it contains have moulded much of sociological thought in their original formulations as well as in the wide variety of subsequent interpretations which later Marxist thinkers have developed.

It is relatively easy to pinpoint how Marxian ideas have penetrated sociology – to identify influential books and writers, and intellectual movements like the *Frankfurt School*, for example. However, sociology has not been affected by ideas alone. The impact of Marxism as a political movement in communist parties and socialist states has likewise to be taken into account. Indeed both Max Weber and Emile Durkheim could be said to have developed their own distinctive approaches at least partly in response to Marxist political movements in Germany and France, although both were well aware of Marx's 'technical' work as well. In fact it would be all but impossible to locate an element of sociological thought or research which has not been affected in some way by Marxian ideas or the hard 'social facts' of societies built on Marxist principles. Yet, despite this apparently overwhelming dependence on Marxism – either as source of concepts or theories, or as subject matter – there is in fact no single and unitary body of Marxian ideas from which sociology (or even Marxism, for that matter) can be said to draw. Rather, there exists a plethora of Marxisms each of which has contributed to the patchwork quilt of modern sociology.

Peter Worsley's *Marx and Marxism* takes this 'multiple' and open character of Marxism as its base. There can be little point in trying to present a 'pure' Marx unsullied by either later interpretations or by the varying uses to which his ideas have been put. In this way Peter Worsley is able to show both the reasons why Marx's ideas have had such a powerful effect on sociology, and the historical changes which the ideas have generated in the real world. Without grasping the multi-faceted nature of Marxism, it is impossible to understand why Marx is at the same time a key figure for sociology *and* a thinker whose ideas escape the boundaries of any single discipline.

# Preface and Acknowledgments

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*To Deborah and Julia,  
and their generation*

*Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto  
– salvo socialismo*

# Introduction

*De Omnibus Dubitandum* (We ought to question everything) – Karl Marx's favourite motto.

Karl Marx has probably affected the course of twentieth-century history more than any other single thinker. Because of this, his ideas have generated a vast output of writings, ranging from texts written by revolutionaries aimed at telling people how to do revolution – how to carry on Marx's work of demolishing capitalism and creating a new socialist society – to the many hundreds of volumes dedicated to proving that Marx was wrong about practically everything. As I write, in the last few months in Britain alone, for instance, Marx's theory of class and his analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism have been declared to be seriously in error.

Most of these attacks are written by academics. Politicians generally combat Marxism in other ways than by writing books. The growing body of literature produced by writers who identify politically with Marxism is also principally produced by academics. There is a third category: 'Marxologists', rather than Marxists: people who study Marx as they would any other

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thinker, whether as a case-study in the history of ideas, at times even, in an antiquarian way, without much concern for the social impact of his ideas and often without necessarily identifying themselves with Marx politically. Many Marxologists are even enemies of Marxism; for others, he is just a minor, even quaint, Victorian figure whose work mainly consisted of errors.

If this were so, it would be difficult to explain why his ideas still seem to millions of people to make very good sense of the world they live in, and show them, in Lenin's phrase, 'what is to be done' to improve it. Yet in his own lifetime, Marx's ideas had little impact. Only after his death did the Western explicitly 'Marxist' mass party come into existence, in Germany. Since then, in the advanced capitalist countries, Italy and France apart, Marxism has still not 'gripped the masses' much. Where it has taken root has been in impoverished agrarian countries dominated by the industrialized powers. The Chinese Communist Party, for instance, was established in 1921, only a year after the *Communist Manifesto* was translated into Chinese, and had 57 members. Within five years, it was leading a general strike in Canton, and less than thirty years later, was in power in the country with a quarter of the world's population. The British Communist Party, on the other hand, founded in 1921, numbers around 25,000 members, and the Communist Party in the USA, according to one black joke, probably had a majority of FBI members in the McCarthy era.

Marxism has nevertheless grown as a powerful intellectual current even in the West. Despite its political inability to change capitalism within advanced capitalist countries, institutionalized Marxism – communism – came to constitute the major challenge to capitalism across the globe. Outside the 'West', it took root among the masses; in the capitalist heartlands, it was more often encountered in universities than in trade unions – again Italy and France apart. This has profoundly affected the kinds of Marxism that have flourished in the West and outside it. Mao Tse-Tung, for instance, whatever topic he was writing on, even on philosophical matters like the dialectic, is eminently understandable, for he was always trying to communicate as simply and clearly as possible with peasants and with ordinary Party workers with minimal formal education. By contrast, the debates among theoreticians in the West have been written in formidable jargon because they are not addressed to ordinary people at all, but to small coteries of other highly educated intellectuals.

In this small book, I shall treat both kinds seriously, despite my contempt for the preciosity of the latter and the lack of interest of many of these intellectuals in what they see as the simplistic rather than simple Marxism that flourishes outside the West. Why these and other varieties emerged cannot be treated as if they were purely intellectual happenings. Rather, we have to ask sociological questions about Marxism itself by

placing it in its social and political setting: asking what kinds of people took it up, what they emphasized in it, and how they used it. In the West, where a high proportion of young people go through higher education, it has often been the more esoteric varieties that have been influential. Marx explained long ago why this kind of abstract thinking should appeal so widely. German idealist philosophy, he argued, had developed in an *involutionary* way. Since the German economy was so backward and her political development retarded, human effort was frustrated in the material world of business and politics. Instead, the pent-up energy of creative minds was channelled into pure thought: idealist philosophy.

In the West, Marxism, feeble between the two world wars and under strong repression during the Cold War, experienced a veritable renaissance in 1960s and 1970s. But although a great deal of fine research has been done by Marxists, the dominant characteristic of those who specialize in *theory* – as distinct from using Marxist theory to investigate the world – has been not just its scholasticism, but also a very rapid turnover of fashions in Marxism, including regular attempts to compensate for obvious inadequacies by borrowing from non-Marxist ('bourgeois') thinkers, notably Freud. Most of these hybrids have not been very impressive.

During the long decades when the few Marxists there were were defending not only the tender seedling of Marxist thought, but also the pioneer socialist country, the USSR, Marxists tended to reject any contamination by bourgeois thought. But today, the 'Second' (communist) world has disintegrated, so much so that communist states have even resorted to war against one another. The two leading varieties, indeed, Chinese and Russian, came to officially regard each other as greater enemies than capitalism. This had not been so up till 1949. Until then, Stalin succeeded in keeping the new communist states in Eastern Europe and China under control. But after 1949 Yugoslavia, then China and Albania, broke with Moscow, and Romania became more independent in foreign policy. Still newer, and smaller, communist states like Vietnam and Cuba, badly in need of foreign support, and communist parties in capitalist countries, too, came under particular pressure to choose which of the major communist countries they identified with. Though they tried to resist such pressure and walk the tight-rope between the bigger rival communisms, their material dependence, both military and economic, forced countries like Vietnam and Cuba, in the end, to side with the communist Superpower.

Yet they still retained a fierce desire to maintain the independence which they had wrested from capitalist domination at the cost of much blood, for these were not regimes foisted onto the country by the Red Army, as had been largely the case in Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia and Poland being the main exceptions); during protracted and bloody struggles