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# Why Conservatives Get Karl Marx Very, Very Wrong

BY

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Conservative pundits are more likely to caricature Karl Marx's writings and beliefs than offer serious rebuttals to his many ideas. Why? Because Marx's trenchant insights expose deep inconsistencies in cherished right-wing doctrines.

If you want to anger a stock conservative intellectual, just try arguing that Karl Marx might have something worth saying. Or worse, suggest that a man who wrote numerous volumes on everything from German philosophy to the standard assumptions of classical political economy might have a more nuanced theory than "rich people bad, poor people good."

Yet several decades after the Cold War, plenty of right-wing pundits still can't be bothered to offer rebuttals to Marx that go beyond glib denunciations. Jordan Peterson has described Marxism as an evil theory and made his name bashing "postmodern neo-Marxism," despite admitting during one debate that he hasn't read much more than the *Communist Manifesto* in the past few decades.

In his latest opus, *Don't Burn This Book*, Dave Rubin lumps in socialism with Nazism and fascism by claiming Benito Mussolini was "raised on Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*" — ignoring Il Duce's later efforts to imprison and silence Marxists and other "enemies of the nation." And most recently, Ben Shapiro's *How To Destroy America in Three Easy Steps* recycles old tropes about the "nonsense" of Marx's labor theory of value, while ignoring the irony of praising John Locke for "correctly point[ing] out that ownership of property is merely an extension of the idea of ownership of your labor; when we remove something from the state of nature and mix our labor with it and join something of our own to it, we thereby make that property our own."

This tendency to criticize Marx without actually engaging his ideas is especially rich considering Peterson, Rubin, and Shapiro endlessly parrot clichés about the importance of hard work and spirited debate. An easy way to dismiss them would be to just insist they live up to those lofty standards in between appearances on PragerU.

But I am going to take a somewhat different tack. I am going to suggest that conservatives avoid

seriously dealing with Marx's work not just because he was critical of capitalism, wrote some polemical things about religion, or was suspicious of class hierarchy. It is because Marx's writings reveal deep inconsistencies in cherished conservative doctrines.

Two of the most glaring examples: the conservative penchant for praising capitalism while bemoaning the decline of tradition; and the tendency to invoke an unchanging "human nature" to lambast critics of capitalism while insisting that individuals should be understood in relation to the traditions and communities around them.

## Marx on the Upending of the World

Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells . . .

— Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*

Early defenders of liberal capitalism like John Locke often wrote in ahistorical terms. They asserted that the kinds of individuals and market relations then emerging with the advent of modernity had always been present, reflecting timeless truths about the world and human nature. It was only with Kant and later Hegel that theorists began to think critically about the radical novelty of liberal capitalist societies.

For many of these thinkers, this novelty was cause for celebration. Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?", published in 1784, described humanity as waking up from its "self-incurred immaturity" and finally facing the world as free and rational beings. Hegel was more critical, arguing that the revolutionary individualism taking off in the eighteenth century needed to be tempered by strong institutions and meaningful social relations (something right-Hegelians like Roger Scruton would later pick up on and lend a conservative gloss).

Marx shared in both the euphoria and anxiety about liberal-capitalist modernity. From his Young Hegelian days onward, he praised the nascent liberal capitalist order as an enormous improvement over its overtly authoritarian predecessors, even if he thought it was destined to be replaced by an even higher form of society. But Marx also insisted we appreciate what a radical break with the past liberal capitalism was.

Writing in the middle of the Industrial Revolution and the age of European imperialism, Marx noted how old rural communities were being gutted as people moved to the cities, describing capitalism as a "constantly expanding market" pushing the bourgeoisie "over the entire surface of the globe." He criticized the new culture of "commodity fetishism" that was replacing the religious fidelity of yore, gleefully inverting the language of faith to highlight society's new reverence for Mammon.

While Marx always held that these developments were emancipatory in many respects, he insisted that these changes were also calamitous, breaking down "fixed, fast frozen relations" — violently, if need be — to remake the world in the image of capital. Capitalism was a revolutionary mode of production, constantly transforming every aspect of society in unexpected and sometimes frightening ways. It was the enemy of tradition.

Earlier conservative thinkers were far more sensitive to capitalism's convulsions than their many progeny, decrying the way capitalism upended the world and established a vulgar bourgeois culture focused on consumption and opulence rather than transcendent or heroic virtues. But later authors, like Shapiro, have often ignored these problems, dismissing any criticisms of capitalism as utopian or Marxist while at the same time looking with horror at a world where urbanization, secularization, and conspicuous consumption have become the order of the day.

Had they bothered to read and absorb Marx, perhaps they wouldn't be so surprised. His key point was that you cannot simultaneously decry declining traditionalism and support the economic system that makes "all that is solid melt in air." Blaming cultural elites and academics at Ivy League universities for social change is like condemning smoke for starting a fire.

## Human Nature and History

Another go-to argument of conservative thinkers is to dismiss Marx's "theory of human nature": either Marx was dangerously naive about the human capacity for evil and selfishness — which shows why his ideal classless society turned out to be such a bust in practice — or he believed that there was no human nature, that we are infinitely plastic beings that could be made and remade by a sufficiently rational and powerful state committed to utopian planning.

Both of these claims are nonsensical. From his early ruminations about our "species being" determined by nature, to his later psychological ruminations about how our desire for recognition and status spurs "commodity fetishism," Marx was neither utopian nor naive about our potential for hypocrisy, cruelty, and hedonism. Where Marx was innovative was in showing how the historical and economic conditions around us play a major role in shaping our sense of self and behavior.

This doesn't mean we are purely determined by historical context. But Marx argued that the historical and economic conditions we're born into provide the starting point we all must navigate. As he put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, "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."

Parts of this argument should actually appeal to many conservatives. From Edmund Burke to Roger Scruton, a common right-wing complaint has been that radicals portray humans as ahistorical beings that can be understood purely as atomized individuals. Instead, they stressed, every human is embedded in layers of community, with hallowed traditions and morals shaped through history and institutions, including churches and temples, nations, and even the ever-opaque "Western civilization." These "little brigades" affect how we think of ourselves and what we believe.

Conservatives often insisted that ignoring the importance of these historical communities could only lead to disaster. Marx would certainly agree. But he would add that we are also embedded in a historically distinct economic system that profoundly shapes who we are and what we believe.

It's on this point that many of the same conservative commentators that insist on applying a historical and institutional lens to understand human behavior and communities become pious ahistoricists. They insist that capitalism simply flows from human nature, that it has always been around and therefore always must be, and that any effort to change it can only yield disaster, as surely as demanding fish ride bicycles. The following by Ben Shapiro is representative:

No, Marx wasn't right. But the Left will never let him go, because he offers the only true

alternative to the religious view of human nature — the view of man that says he is not a blank slate, not an angel waiting for redemption, but a flawed creature capable of great things. To achieve those great things is hard work. To change ourselves on an individual level is hard work. To spout about the evils of society — that’s certainly easy enough.

But capitalism is no more or no less natural than any other historically contingent system; including religious systems. What emerged in history can change in history. And as we lumber into another global recession, it is looking like time for some big changes.

# Marx Deserves Better Critics

Marx famously wrote that philosophers have only ever interpreted the world, when the point is to change it. Ironically, interpretations — bad and good — of Marx have, in fact, changed the world, influencing revolutionary movements and tyrants alike. This testifies to the forceful power of his intellectual personality and the analytical sweep of Marxist theory. Getting the basics of Marxism right is important for any robust debate about the future of capitalism and the political antagonisms that shape our present era.

For his opponents, it is also a prerequisite for critiquing him effectively. Many commentators on the political right seem determined to brush past Marx as quickly as possible, ignoring or downplaying nuances and specificities. They also brush past the lessons of Marxism that inconveniently disturb their own sacred tropes.

Marx deserves better critics. And those of us on the Left who care about his complex legacy should hope he gets them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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