

**COMMUNISM
IS THE RIDDLE OF
HISTORY
SOLVED**

KARL MARX (1818–1883)



IN CONTEXT

IDEOLOGY
Communism

FOCUS
Alienation of labour

BEFORE
380 BCE Plato argues that the ideal society has strong limitations on private property.

1807 Georg Hegel puts forward a philosophy of history that inspires Marx's theories.

1819 French writer Henri de Saint-Simon advocates a form of socialism.

AFTER
1917 Vladimir Lenin leads the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, inspired by Marx's ideas.

1940s Communism spreads across the world and the Cold War begins.

1991 The Soviet Union breaks up, and nations in Eastern Europe adopt capitalist economic systems.

Over the middle decades of the 19th century, Karl Marx – philosopher, historian, and iconic revolutionary – made one of the most ambitious analyses of capitalism ever attempted. He sought to uncover laws governing the transition of societies between different economic systems, as part of his investigations into the changing nature of work and its implications for human fulfilment. Marx's work addressed central concerns of the time: how the rise of industrial capitalism affected living conditions and society's moral health, and whether better economic and political arrangements might be worked out and put into practice.

Marx was active in a period that saw new revolutionary ideas emerging in Europe that led to the uprisings of 1848. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, he sketched out important elements of his economic thought, considering how capitalist organization blights the lives of workers. He argued that communism solves a problem that bedevils capitalism – the

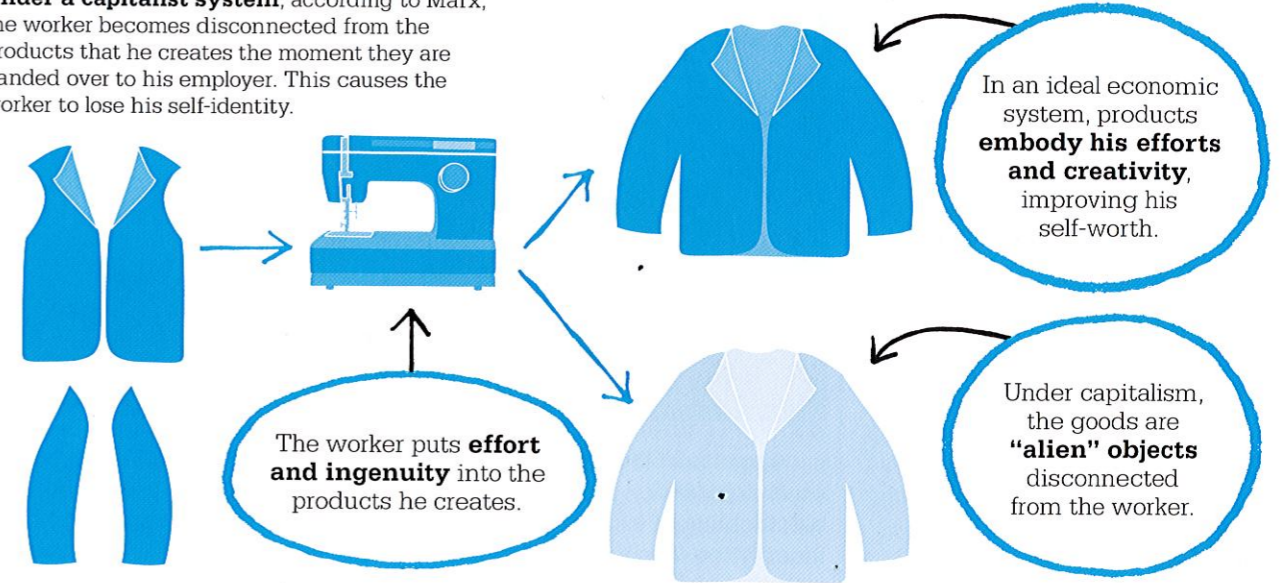
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Private property is thus the product... of alienated labour.
Karl Marx

organization of work. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx developed the notion of “alienated labour”, the separation of human beings from their true nature and potential for fulfilment. Marx saw various kinds of alienation as inevitable in capitalist labour markets.

The fulfilment of work
Marx believed that work has the potential to be one of the most fulfilling of all human activities. The worker puts his effort and ingenuity into the transformation of the objects of nature into products. The goods that he creates then

See also: Francisco de Vitoria 86–87 ■ Georg Hegel 156–59 ■ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 183 ■ Vladimir Lenin 226–33 ■ Rosa Luxemburg 234–35 ■ Joseph Stalin 240–41 ■ Jomo Kenyatta 258

Under a capitalist system, according to Marx, the worker becomes disconnected from the products that he creates the moment they are handed over to his employer. This causes the worker to lose his self-identity.



embody his effort and creativity. Under capitalism, the existence of private property separates society into capitalists – who own productive resources, such as factories and machines – and workers – who possess nothing except for their labour. Labour becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, and workers are hired by capitalists to produce goods that are then sold for profit. Marx argued that this removes the fulfilling quality of work, leading to alienation and dissatisfaction.

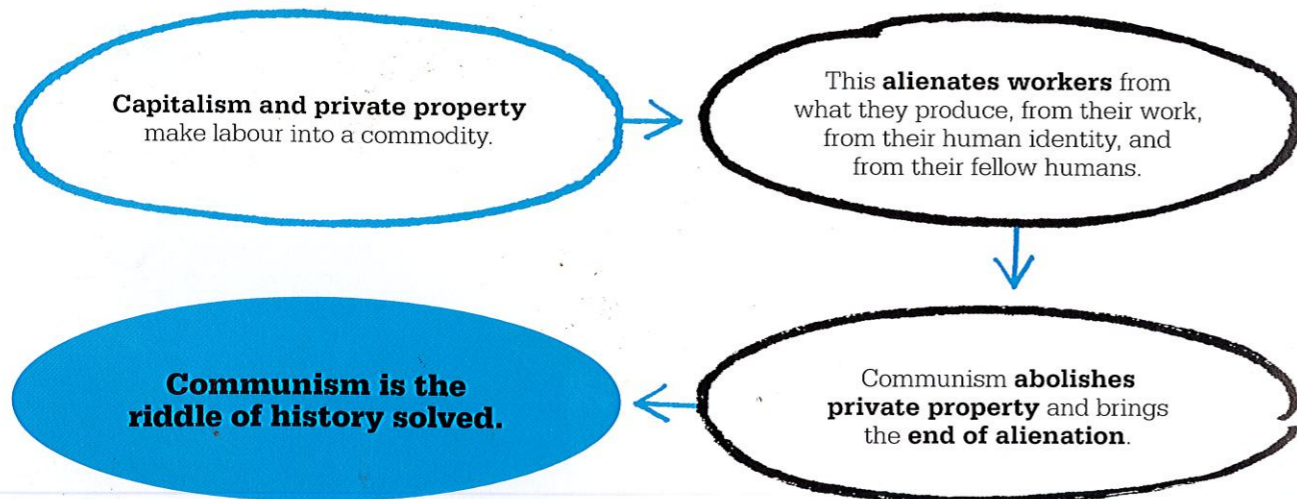
One form of this alienation arises from the fact that goods made by a worker who is employed by a capitalist do not belong to the worker, and cannot be kept by him. A suit cut by a tailor in a clothes factory is the property of the capitalist who owns the factory – the worker makes the suit and then hands it over to his employer. To the worker, the goods that he makes become “alien”

objects with which he has little real connection. As he creates more goods that contribute to a world that he stands outside of, his inner life shrinks and his fulfilment is stunted. The worker may produce beautiful objects for other people to use and enjoy, but he creates only dullness and limitation for himself.

Workers disconnected
Marx said that workers also suffer from alienation through the very act of working. Under capitalism, workers' activity does not arise out of their inherent creativity, but from the practical necessity of working for someone else. The worker does not like work, since it crushes his body and mind and makes him unhappy – it becomes a kind of forced activity that, given the choice, he would not do. Like the goods that he eventually produces, the activity of work becomes something that is external to the

worker and with which he has little real connection: “The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work he feels outside himself.” The worker becomes someone else's subject. His labour is no longer his own and his activity is no longer spontaneous and creative, but directed by another who treats him as a mere tool of production. »

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Communism is the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement.
Karl Marx



Marx predicted a global revolution as workers took control of the means of production. Revolution in Russia was followed by China, where propaganda stressed the values of communism.

The worker's alienation from the fruits of his labour and from the activity of working estranges him from his human identity – what Marx calls his “species-being”. This is because human identity is rooted in people's ability to transform the raw material of nature into objects. Workers in capitalist systems lose the connection with this basic identity – economic necessity makes productive activity a means to an end, rather than the way in which an individual's fundamental identity is embodied and played out. Activity is what makes up life, and once this becomes alien to the worker, the worker loses the sense of his human self.

Private property to blame

These forms of alienation – from the goods produced, from the activity of work, and from human identity – cause people to become increasingly alienated from each other. Since the labour market

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There is no other definition of communism valid for us than that of the abolition of the exploitation of man by man.

Che Guevara

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estranges people from their own essential identity, they become estranged from each other's identity too. The worker is placed into a relationship of confrontation with the capitalist, who owns the fruits of the work and who controls the worker's labour activity for his own enrichment.

Marx believed that private property lay at the root of the alienation of the worker. The division of society into property-owning capitalists and property-less workers is what leads to the alienation of workers. In turn, alienation itself reinforces this division and perpetuates private property. An aspect of the system of private property is exchange and the “division of labour”. Labour becomes specialized: one worker makes the head of the pin, one worker the point, and another assembles the pin. Capitalists specialize in different kinds of goods and trade them with each other. In all of this, the worker becomes a mere cog, a small part of the larger economic machine.

Marx saw the process of the alienation of the worker and the strengthening of private property

as a basic law of capitalism, which sets up a tension in human society as people become estranged from their essential nature. A solution is not to be found in higher wages, because workers would remain enslaved even if they were paid more. Alienated labour goes with private property, so “the downfall of one must therefore involve the downfall of the other”.

Communism the solution

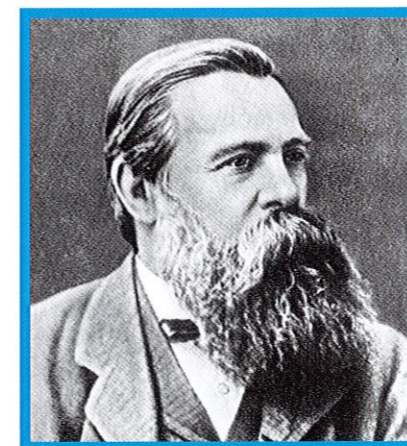
For Marx, communism resolves the tension caused by the alienation of the worker by abolishing private property, and finally solves the riddle thrown up by capitalism. It resolves the conflict between man and nature, and between human beings, and in so doing reconnects man to his fundamental humanity. Alienation made work and interactions between people into means of economic gain rather than ends in themselves. Under communism, these activities are restored to their rightful place as ends, the manifestation of true human values. For example, association between workers now arises out of a feeling of brotherhood rather than as

something that has to be done. Communism brings the return of “man to himself as a social being”.

Underlying the statement that communism solves history's riddle is a view of history that Marx went on to develop more fully in his later work. He believed that historical developments are determined by “material” – or economic – factors. Human beings have material needs and possess the ability to produce goods to satisfy them. Production of these goods can be organized in different ways, each of which gives rise to different kinds of social and political arrangements, which in turn lead to particular beliefs and ideologies. Marx believed that material economic factors were the fundamental determinant, and therefore the motor, of history.

Overturning capitalism

Capitalism – a particular way of organizing production – is a response to the material needs of human beings. Capitalism arose as older feudal forms of production died out. As the forces of production develop



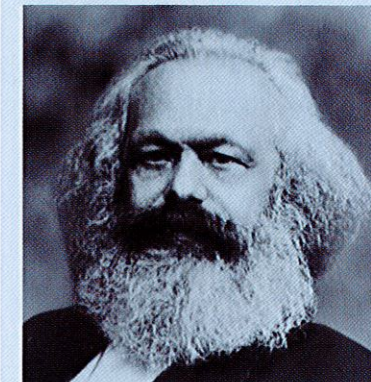
Friedrich Engels was the son of a German industrialist. He met Marx in 1842 and initially disliked him, but the pair went on to formulate one of the most far-reaching manifestos ever seen.

under capitalism, the suffering of workers becomes obvious, and history moves inevitably towards revolution and the ushering in of communism to replace it.

The legacy of Marx

It is hard to overstate Marx's influence. His work led to new schools of thought in the fields of economics, political theory, history, cultural studies, anthropology, and philosophy, to name just a few. The appeal of Marx's ideas comes from their broad interpretation of the world and their message of transformation and liberation. The prediction that he and Friedrich Engels made in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 – that the end of capitalism would be brought about through communist revolution – profoundly influenced 20th-century politics. Communist systems emerged in Europe and in Asia, and communist ideas influenced many governments and revolutionary movements throughout the century.

One challenge in assessing Marx's legacy is separating what he really meant from what was done in his name, particularly since communist ideology was used to justify totalitarianism and oppression in many places and at different times. By the end of the 20th century, communism in Eastern Europe had all but collapsed, and the wealthiest nations were firmly capitalist. So, even if aspects of Marx's analysis of capitalist society still had a ring of truth, many critics see history as having refuted him, particularly in his prediction of the collapse of capitalism. More recently, Marx's ideas echo once more in claims that the global economic crisis of the early 21st century is a sign of deep contradictions that are inherent in the capitalist system. ■



Karl Marx

Marx was born in Prussia to liberal Jewish parents who converted to Protestantism in response to anti-Jewish laws. As a journalist he increasingly turned to radical politics and economics. In 1843 he moved to Paris, where he met Friedrich Engels, with whom he co-wrote the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

After the revolutions of that year, Marx was expelled from Prussia, Belgium, and Paris before ending up in London, where he studied economics and history intensively. This eventually led to his major work, *Capital*. Marx found it hard to support himself and lived in poverty in the slum district of Soho, sustained by the financial support of Engels. He and his wife suffered from poor health, and several of their children died. Marx himself died before the final two volumes of *Capital* could be published.

Key works

1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*
1848 *Communist Manifesto*
1867 *Capital Volume I*
(*Volumes II* and *III* published 1885 and 1894, posthumously)