

# Marxist Theory and the Proletariat

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"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it".

(Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach)

Twenty years ago, Marx laid his towering head to rest. And although we only experienced a couple of years ago what in the language of German professors is called 'the crisis of Marxism', it suffices to throw a glance at the masses that today follow socialism alone in Germany and at socialism's importance in all so-called civilised countries, in order to grasp the immensity of the work of Marx's thoughts.

If it mattered to express in few words what Marx did for the contemporary working class, then one could say: Marx has uncovered the modern working class as historical category, that is, as a class with particular historical conditions of existence and laws of motion. A mass of wage-workers, who were led to solidarity by the similarity of their social existence in bourgeois society and looked for a way out of their condition and partly for a bridge to the promised land of socialism, arguably existed in capitalist countries before Marx. Marx was the first who elevated workers to the working *class* by linking them through the specific historical task of conquering political power in the socialist revolution.

*Class struggle for conquering political power* was the bridge that Marx built between socialism and the proletarian movement that elementarily rises up from the ground of contemporary society.

The bourgeoisie has always shown sure instinct when it followed the proletariat's *political* aspirations with hatred and fear. Already in November 1831, when reporting on the working class' initial impulses on the continent to the French Chamber of Deputies, Casimir Périer<sup>[1]</sup> said: "Gentlemen, we can be relieved! *Nothing* politically has emerged from Lyon's labour movement". The

dominant classes namely considered every political impulse of the proletariat as an early sign of the coming emancipation of the workers from the bourgeoisie's paternalism.

It was only Marx who succeeded in putting working class-politics on the foundation of conscious class struggle and to thereby forge it into a deadly weapon directed against existing society's order. The *materialist conception of history* in general and the Marxian *theory of capitalist development* in particular form the foundation of contemporary social democratic labour politics. Only someone to whom the essence of social democratic politics and the essence of Marxism are equally a mystery can think of class conscious labour politics outside of Marxian theory.

In his *Feuerbach*, Engels ([1886](#)) formulated the essence of philosophy as the eternal question about the relationship between thought and being, the question of human consciousness in the objective, material world. If we transfer the concepts of *being* and *thought* from the abstract world of nature and individual speculation, whereto professional philosophers stick with iron determination, to the realm of societal life, then the same can in a particular sense be said about *socialism*. Socialism has always been the feeling for and the search for means and ways to bring being into accord with thought, namely to bring the historical forms of existence into accord with societal consciousness.

It was left to Marx and his friend Engels to find the solution to a centuries-old painstaking task. Marx has revealed history's most important driving force by discovering that the history of all hitherto-existing societies is *in the last instance* the history of its relations of production and exchange, whose development manifests itself under the rule of private property in the political and social institutions as class struggle. Thereby we gained an explanation of the necessary disparity between consciousness and being in all hitherto-existing forms of society, between human will and social action, and between intentions and results.

Humanity first uncovered the secret behind its own societal process thanks to Marxian ideas. Furthermore, the discovery of the laws of capitalist development also expounded the way that society took from its natural, unconscious stage, during which history was made in the manner that bees construct their honeycombs, to the stage of conscious, deliberate, true *human* history, wherein for the first time society's will and action come into accord with each other so that the social human will for the first time in millennia do *that* what (s)he *wants* to do.

To speak with Engels ([1886, 270](#)), this final "leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom" that only the socialist revolution will realise for society as a whole, already takes place *within the existing order* — in *social-democratic politics*.<sup>[2]</sup> With the Ariadne thread of Marx's theory in its hand, the workers' party is

today the only party that *knows* from the historical point of view *what it does* and therefore does *what it desires*. This is the whole secret of social democracy's power.

The bourgeois world has long been puzzled by social democracy's astonishing resilience and steady progress. From time to time there are single senile silly-billies who, blinded by special moral successes of our politics, advise the bourgeoisie to learn a lesson from 'our example' and from social democracy's secret wisdom and idealism. They do not understand that what is a source of life and fountain of youth and energy for the aspiring working class-politics is deadly poison for the bourgeois parties.

Because what is it that in fact gives us the inner moral strength to endure and shake off the biggest repression, such as a dozen years of the law against socialists,[\[3\]](#) with such laughing courage? Is it for instance the disinherited's keenness to pursue small improvements of their condition? The modern proletariat is unlike the philistine and the petty bourgeois not willing to become a hero for the sake of everyday comforts. The plain, sober bigotry of the world of English trade unions shows how little the pure prospect of small material gains for the working class is capable of creating a moral flight of fancy.

Is it the ascetic stoicism of a sect that as among the original Christians flickers up all the more brightly the more persecution there is? The modern proletarian is, as heir and pupil of bourgeois society, far too much a born materialist and a healthy sensual human of flesh and blood to alone draw love and strength for his ideas from torture in accordance with slave morality.

Is it, finally, the 'justice' of our cause that makes us so impregnable? The causes of the Chartists, the followers of Weitling,[\[4\]](#) and the utopian socialist schools were no less 'just' than our cause, but nonetheless they all soon succumbed to modern society's resilience.

If the contemporary labour movement victoriously shakes the manes, defying all the acts of violence of the enemy world, then this is especially due to its calm understanding of the lawfulness of the objective historical development, the understanding of the fact that "capitalist production" begets "with the inexorability of a natural process [...] its own negation" ([Marx 1867, 929](#)) — namely the expropriation of the expropriators, the socialist revolution. It is this insight, from which the labour movement draws the firm guarantee of its final victory, not just impetuosity, but also the patience, the power to action and the courage to endure.

The first condition of successful politics of struggle is understanding the movements of the opponent. But what is the key to understanding bourgeois politics down to its smallest ramifications and the labyrinths of daily politics so that we are equally

protected from surprises and illusions? The key is nothing more than the insight that one must explain all forms of societal consciousness in their inner turmoil from the interests of classes and groups, from the antagonisms of material life and in the last instance from "the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production" ([Marx 1859, 263](#)).

And what gives us the capability to adapt our politics to new appearances of political life, such as for example world politics, and especially to assess it, also without special talent and profundity, with the depth of judgement that gets to the core of the appearance itself, while the most talented bourgeois critics only scratch on its surface or get caught up in hopeless antagonisms at every glance into the depth? Again, nothing else than the overview of historical development based on the law that the "mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life" ([Marx 1859, 263](#)).

What is it that provides us above all with a measure for avoiding in the selection of struggles' ways and means aimless experiments and utopian escapades that are a waste of energy? Once the direction of the economic and political process of contemporary society has been understood, this understanding can act as a measure not just of the overall direction of our campaign plan, but also of every detail of our political efforts. Thanks to this guideline the working class has managed for the first time to transform the idea of socialism as the ultimate aim into daily politics' divisional coins and to elevate the everyday political detail work to the big idea's executive tool. There was bourgeois politics led by workers and there was revolutionary socialism before Marx. But only since Marx and through Marx has a *socialist working class-politics* existed that is at the same time and in the fullest meaning of both words *revolutionary Realpolitik*.

If we understand by Realpolitik a politics that only sets itself achievable goals that it pursues to obtain by the most effective means in the shortest time, then the difference between proletarian class-politics that stands in the Marxian spirit and bourgeois politics is that bourgeois politics is real from the standpoint of *material daily politics*, whereas socialist politics is real from the standpoint of the historical *tendency of development*. Exactly the same difference can be found between a vulgar economic theory of value that conceives of value as a thing in appearance from the standpoint of the market stall and Marxian theory that conceives of value as a societal relation in a particular historical epoch.

But proletarian Realpolitik is also revolutionary in that it goes in all the parts of its endeavours beyond the bounds of the existing order in which it operates, by consciously regarding itself only as the preliminary stage of the act that turns proletarian Realpolitik into the politics of the ruling, revolutionary proletariat.

In this manner, Marx's theory penetrates and enlightens everything — the moral power, by which we overcome perils; our tactics of struggle, even its last details; our critique of opponents; our everyday agitation, by which we win the masses; our entire work down to the tips of the fingers. And if we here and there indulge in the illusion that our politics is today with all its inner power independent from Marx's theory, then this only shows that our praxis speaks in Marx's terms although we do not know it, just like Molière's bourgeois spoke in prose.

It suffices that we visualise Marx's achievements in order to understand that bourgeois society made him its deadly enemy because of his concept of the working class's socialist revolution. It became evident to the dominant classes that overcoming the modern labour movement meant overcoming Marx. In the twenty years since Marx's death, we have seen a constant series of attempts to destroy Marx's spirit in the labour movement's theory and praxis.

The labour movement has from the start of its history navigated between the two poles of revolutionary-socialist utopianism and bourgeois Realpolitik. Wholly absolutist or semi-absolutist pre-bourgeois society formed the historical soil of the first. The revolutionary-utopian stage of socialism in Western Europe is by and large concluded by the development of bourgeois class rule, although we can observe single relapses into it until today. The other danger — getting lost in bourgeois Realpolitik's patchwork — has only emerged in the course of the labour movement's strengthening on the floor of parliamentarism.

The idea was that bourgeois parliamentarism would provide weapons for *practically* overcoming the proletariat's revolutionary politics and that the democratic union of the classes and social peace brought about by reforms should replace class struggle.

And what has been achieved? The illusion may have here and there lasted for a while, but the unsuitability of Realpolitik's bourgeois methods for the working class became immediately evident. The fiasco of ministerialism in France<sup>[5]</sup>, the betrayal by liberalism in Belgium<sup>[6]</sup>, the breakdown of parliamentarism in Germany<sup>[7]</sup> — the short dream of »quiet development« strike by strike broke to pieces. The Marxian law of the tendency of the sharpening of social contrasts as foundation of class struggle asserted itself. And every day brings new signs and wonders. In the Netherlands, 24 hours of the railway strike like an earthquake overnight opened up a yawning gap in the middle of society, from which class struggle blazed out. Holland is on fire.<sup>[8]</sup>

So in the light of the "march of the worker battalions", the base of bourgeois democracy and bourgeois legislation breaks down like a thin ice sheet and again and

again makes the working class aware that its final goal can *not* be achieved on this base. All of this is the result of the many attempts to 'practically' overcome Marx.

Hundreds of industrious apologists have made the *theoretical* overcoming of Marxism their life-task and the springboard of their careers. What have they achieved? They have managed to create in the circles of the faithful intelligentsia the conviction that Marx's works are 'one-sided' and 'exaggerated'. But even those of the bourgeois ideologues, who can be taken serious, such as Stammerler<sup>[9]</sup>, have understood that nothing can be achieved with "'a bit more or a bit less' half-truths" against "such a deep and profound theory". But what can bourgeois academia oppose to Marxian theory *at a whole*?

Since Marx has emphasised the historical standpoint of the working class in the fields of philosophy, history, and economics, bourgeois research in these fields has lost the thread. The classical philosophy of nature has come to an end. The bourgeois philosophy of history has come to an end. Scientific political economy has come to an end. In historical research, as far as there is not the dominance of an unconscious and inconsequent materialism, an eclecticism shimmering in all colours has taken the place of any unified theory. So there is the relinquishment of the unified explanation of the process of history, i.e. of the philosophy of history as such. Economics oscillates between two schools, the 'historical' one and the 'subjective' one. The one is a protest against the other. And both are a protest against Marx. The first one negates economic theory, i.e. the knowledge in this field, in principle in order to negate Marx, whereas the other one negates the only — objective — research method that first turned political economy into a science.

Certainly the social science book fair every month brings whole mountains of products that result from bourgeois industriousness to the market. And the thickest volumes written by ambitious, modern professors are put out at large-scale capitalist, machine-like speed. But in such diligent monographs either research buries its head like an ostrich into the sand of small, fragmented phenomena so that it does not have to see broader connections and only works for daily needs. Or research only simulates thoughts and "social theories" that are in the last instance just reflexes of Marx's thoughts that are hidden under overloaded tinsel ornaments that appeal to the taste associated with commodities of the 'modern' bazaar. Autonomous flights of thought, a daring glance into the distance or an invigorating deduction are nowhere to be found.

And if social progress has again created a new series of scientific problems, then again only the *Marxian* method offers ways for solving them.

So it is everywhere just theorylessness, epistemological scepticism, that bourgeois social science is able to oppose to Marxian knowledge. Marxian theory is a child of bourgeois science, but the birth of this child has cost the mother her life.

Therefore, the upturn of the working class has knocked the weapons out of bourgeois society's hands that the latter wanted to use on the battlefield against Marxian socialism. And today, 20 years after Marx's death, bourgeois society is all the more powerless against him, but Marx more alive than ever.

Of course, contemporary society has one comfort left. While society struggles in vain to find a means to overcome Marx's theory, it does not notice that the only real means of doing so are hidden in this theory itself. Because it is through and through historical, Marxian theory only claims temporally limited validity. Because it is through and through dialectical, it carries in itself the definite seeds of its own dissolution.

If we abstract from its unchanging part, namely from the historical method of research, then Marxian theory in its most general outlines consists of insights into the historical way that leads from the last 'antagonistic' form of society, i.e. societies that are based on class conflicts, to the communist society that is built on all members' solidarity of interests.

Marxian theory is especially, just like earlier classical theories of political economy, the mental reflex of a particular period of economic and political development, namely the transition from the capitalist to the socialist phase of history. But it is more than just a reflex. The historical transition that Marx identified can namely not take place without Marxian knowledge having become the knowledge of a particular class in society, the modern proletariat. That Marx's theory becomes the working class' form of consciousness and as such an *element* of history is the *precondition* for the realisation of the historical revolution formulated in Marx's theory.

Marx's theory proves to be true continuously with every new proletarian who supports class struggle. So Marx's theory is at the same time part of the historical process and is also itself a process. Social revolution will be *The Communist Manifesto's* final chapter.

Consequently, the part of Marxian theory that is most dangerous to the existing order of society will sooner or later be 'overcome'. But only *together* with the existing order of society.

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## Footnotes

[1] Casimir Pierre Périer (1777-1832) was a French banker and politician, who served as France's ninth Prime Minister (1831-1832). (*Translator's footnote.*)

[2] It should be noted that in 1903, when Luxemburg published this text, no linguistic distinction was drawn between social democracy and communism. Communist parties had not yet been differentiated from social democratic parties. When Luxemburg therefore speaks of social democracy, she means movements and parties that aim at the fundamental transformation of society that brings about the abolition of capitalism. (*Translator's footnote.*)

[3] The Chancellor of the German Empire Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) introduced the »Law against the public danger of Social Democratic endeavours« (better known as Sozialistengesetz — anti-socialist law) in 1878. This law was in effect until 1890 and prohibited meetings, publications, unions and associations guided by socialist principles. (*Translator's footnote.*)

[4] Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) was an early communist writer and activist.

[5] Luxemburg here alludes to the fact that the socialist Alexandre Millerand participated as Minister of Commerce, Industry, Posts and Telegraphs in the bourgeois French government of Prime Minister Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau from 1899 until 1902. (*Translator's footnote.*)

[6] Note [CF]: In April 1902, there were wildcat strikes in Belgium that turned into a general strike for the abolishment of the plural voting system that privileged the rich. Under the impression of these working class protests, the leader of the Belgian Labour Party, Emile Vandervelde, introduced a motion for the introduction of universal suffrage to the Belgian Parliament. The motion was defeated. Introducing universal suffrage required another general strike in 1913 and took until 1919. Representatives of the Liberal Party were, just like the Belgian Labour Party, opposed to the absolute majority rule of the Catholic Party under Prime Minister Paul de Smet de Naezer, but repeatedly opposed electoral reforms. (*Translator's footnote.*)

[7] Before the end of the German Monarchy in the November Revolution 1918 and the founding of the Weimar Republic, the German Reichstag did not have full political power. Political decisions were often taken by the government independent of the Reichstag. (*Translator's footnote.*)

[8] In 1903, Dutch railroad workers organised a general strike in solidarity with other workers for the right to strike and unionise. (*Translator's footnote.*)



[9] Rudolf Stammler (1856-1938) was a legal theorist and the main representative of neo-Kantian legal philosophy in Germany. (*Translator's footnote.*)

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