

Starting the Real Human Journey

A five-minute introduction to Marx's Communism

In these interesting times, as the old certainties crumble, it is worth taking at least a quick peek at Karl Marx's views on the prospects for a future classless, communist society. Such a society would be based on mutual regard, making possible the full development of the individual. If nothing else, this short piece will give you a better idea of what you disagree with.

The first thing to note is that Marx would not have been surprised at how the revolutions went sour in Russia, China and elsewhere. He would have considered these countries too backward. He saw communism as requiring conditions created by fully developed capitalist societies. These conditions did not exist in those places.

Marx believed that capitalism has to wrench us out of social and economic backwardness before communism is possible. This mission has been accomplished in the developed countries where about 20 per cent of us live. However, capitalism still requires a generation or two to make this more of a reality on the global scale.

Capitalism has been crucial to the emergence of modern society. This society eliminates or undermines much of the backward culture of pre-capitalist conditions. This is characterized by the supremacy of the

elder-dominated extended family, the tribe and other groups to the detriment of the individual and social progress; the subordination of women; the acceptance of autocracy and groveling to superiors. A classless, communist society could not possibly emerge directly from such conditions. Emerging from capital-ism will be challenging enough.

At the same time, by developing modern industry and technology, capitalism makes itself obsolete by removing the need for the profit motive. It eliminates arduous and routine labor and so work can be transformed into an activity that people want to do for its own sake and the benefit it brings. And it makes possible affluence for everybody, and so output no longer needs to be fought over. We can happily share a growing prosperity. "Limits-to-growth" proponents claim that this is impossible. However, technological progress will prove them wrong.

Marx also believed that by relegating most of us to the status of proletarians or employees, capitalism creates its own grave diggers. This is because we have no vested interest in the capitalist system of ownership - concentrated largely in the hands of the 0.1 percent - and everything to gain from a society where we jointly own the means of production.

An important part of Marx's thinking is that a period of revolutionary transition is required to get us from capitalism to communism. Overthrowing the old order,

in which the capitalists own the means of production and dominate political life, is only the necessary first step. We then have to create a totally new society. This will require quite a change in ourselves and how we do things.

At the beginning, we will have to contend with the fact that we are not used to running the show and those opposing us will be well practiced schemers desperate to restore their place in the sun. Success will depend on the emergence of a strong bottom-up revolutionary mass movement that is committed to the task of making the world anew. Without this, we end up with an empty shell - no more than state ownership with phonies in charge and a populace still only equipped for capitalism. China and Cuba are present examples.

Marx recognized that for a period there will still have to be some link between share of output and work performed. It will take time to sufficiently transform how we work together, and so make work into something we would want to do without reward. We will need to break down a lot of the entrenched separation of deciding and doing that was appropriate when work was coerced - in other words, a lot less bossing and more of people deciding for themselves how to do their own job. Then there is helping rather than hindering our workmates. Developing ourselves as people is the key to these changes - the confidence to take on challenges, the courage to deal with problem

people, and the cognitive and social skills to work better together. A positive attitude to work will also be re-inforced by the fact that we will all find ourselves part of a society that is working for our benefit. The result will be the performance of work in a far more efficient and innovative fashion than under capitalism, and the emergence of more fully developed human beings.

Just as the individual will achieve full development at work, so in life at large. You could not have one without the other. And each new generation will thrive from day one because they are being raised by fully developed and functioning individuals.

Our relations with others will be guided by mutual regard. We will endeavor to do the right thing, knowing that others are doing the same. And we will understand that we can truly thrive only when others thrive. We will have arrived at the beginning of the real human journey.

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