

Dark Shades of Marxism

Oppressing people to end oppression

By any measure, 1848 was a year of high drama in Europe. That year the Treaty of Westphalia was signed bringing an end to the Thirty Years War that killed eight million people. The treaty established livable boundaries among the three leading religions jostling for power: Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. Historians also cite the Treaty as the beginning of the modern era of nation states. Beneath such claims radical new ideas for changing the world were stirring in universities, beer halls and coffee houses all over Europe.

The world was definitely not peaceful in 1848, despite the great Treaty. Decades of war, famines and a devastating potato blight gave the 1840s another moniker, the “Hungry Forties.” Peasants and many urban workers were poor and hungry. Havoc was pretty much everywhere, marking 1848 also as the “Springtime of Peoples,” referring to a wave of short-lived revolutions that sprang up in fifty countries across Europe that year.¹ Their loose-knit goal was to replace reactionary monarchies and entrenched religious autocrats with democratic governments. Every one of the uprisings failed, burying again for a time widespread frustrations over the governing status quo.

Enter Karl Marx

It's hardly surprising that after centuries of wars and trauma, angry voices would rise up blaming every authority deemed responsible for peoples' suffering. One voice in particular stood out, Karl Marx. He made a mark, also in 1848, by publishing his seminal treatise (with Friedrich Engels), the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx gave voice to the deplorable conditions of peasants, workers and radical forces percolating throughout Europe. Today, the whole world knows about Karl Marx and his dream of revolutionary global communism.

Marx was born in Germany in 1818, the third of nine children whose paternal and maternal grandfathers were Jewish rabbis. His own father, a lawyer and pragmatist who tutored Karl as a child, converted to Lutheranism because Prussian law otherwise barred Jews from participating in higher society.

At age 17, Marx matriculated at the University of Bonn intent upon studying philosophy and literature rather than law as his father had hoped. Soon Marx joined a drinking club where his best friend and drinking buddy was a professor of Protestant “Theology” named Bruno Bauer. Bauer had a deep yearning to “preach atheism publicly” and he recognized a fellow thinker in the impressionable young Marx, whom Bauer mentored. The professor viewed Judaism as a historical dead end and Christianity as a step in the direction of freeing humanity from the “false

¹ China too went through extraordinary upheaval during these years. Population growth overwhelmed the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty, and the British East India company introduced opium, leading to two Opium Wars as China tried to prevent its spread. Ensuing social unrest led to the 15-year Taiping Rebellion against the Qing in 1850 that killed 20 million people.

illusion” of belief in God.² Bauer’s intellectual atheism and pragmatic antisemitism became a prominent part of Marx’s lifelong outlook — despite Marx’s own Jewish heritage.

Young Karl, the Poet

Young Karl underwent a literary romantic phase while in Bonn and took to quoting and writing poetry, a passion that continued after his father forced him to attend the more serious University of Berlin. Robert Payne, a respected British academic, has written that Marx: “could no more think of living without poetry than living without his vision of a Communist world.”³ Payne notes that Marx “could recite long passages from Goethe’s *Faust* with gusto, with a special preference for the speeches of Mephistopheles,” the demon who tries to win Faust’s soul. In Greek, *Mephistopheles* means “not loving light.”

Marx was especially fond of Mephistopheles’s line: **“Everything that exists deserves to perish.”** Nihilism was more than a poetic fantasy for Marx. It would later manifest in his philosophical and political writings. In his private letters he called for “the ruthless criticism of all that exists.” The *Manifesto* asserts communism involves **“the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.”**⁴

Soon after arriving in Berlin in 1836, the 18-year old Marx wrote a youthful but prescient poem called “Feelings.” The stanzas reflect his restless and ambitious spirit impressed deeply by the futility of the world where empires rise and fall:

Never can I do in peace that with which my Soul’s obsessed.... I cannot conform to Life...yet another Empire’s born... So it rolls from year to year...**endless Rise and endless Fall. ...Therefore let us risk our all, never resting, never tiring....**⁵

Another poem from the same period entitled “Invocation Of One In Despair” speaks of great defiance of faith in God:

So a god has snatched from me my all in the curse and rack of Destiny.... **Nothing but revenge is left to me!** ...I shall build my throne high overhead, cold, tremendous shall its summit be.... **If he bring my walls and towers down, Eternity shall raise them up, defiant.**

Yet another poem, *The Pale Maiden*, written a year later, signals his awareness of his own dark destiny: **“Thus Heaven I’ve forfeited, I know it full well, my soul, once true to God, is chosen for Hell.”**

Psychologists might see this poem as an expression of a deeply traumatized young man, imbued with overtones of self-contradictory Jewish antisemitism Marx viewed as snatching away his “all.” Communists celebrate it as a ruthless critique, the essence of rebellion needed to propel radical rupture from the past. Paul Kengor sees it as a prophetic metaphor for what would become communism’s militant and nihilistic atheism.

² Quoted in Sperber, *Karl Marx: A 19th Century Life*, pp. 128-29. As noted in *The Devil and Karl Marx*, by Paul Kengor, TAN Books, 2020 p. 33. I rely heavily on Kengor’s comprehensive research in this brief.

³ Robert Payne, *The Unknown Karl Marx*, (New York: New York University Press, 1971). p. 57. Quoted in Kengor, op. cit., p. 48.

⁴ *Communist Manifesto*, Marxist Internet Archive, 2010, p. 48.

⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/1836feel.txt> (1 of 2) [23/08/2000 18:12:54]. Another collection of Marx’s poems is found on [wikirouge](http://www.wikirouge.com), a site “for communist revolutionaries.”

“Oulanem”

Oulanem is the title of a short one-act play written by Marx in 1839, at age 21. The title, also the name of the main character, is an inverted anagram for “Manuelo,” aka “Immanuel,” the biblical name that means “God with us.” Oulanem means “God is *not* with us.”

Oulanem ponders a call to destroy the world as he knows it. The play can be seen as a struggle in the writer’s own mind that draws him toward a destiny like that of Oulanem. In scene III, Oulanem, a brooding anti-Christ figure, exclaims:

“Soon I shall clasp Eternity and howl humanity’s giant curse into its ear. **Eternity! It is eternal pain, death inconceivable, immeasurable! An evil artifice contrived to taunt us, who are but clockwork, blind machines wound up to be the calendar-fools of Time....**

Ha, I must twine me on the wheel of flame, and in Eternity’s ring I’ll dance my frenzy! ...**Bound in compulsion’s sway, curse in defiance! ...Bound in eternal fear, splintered and void ...forever bound! ...a curse shall finish what a curse conceived.**

Curses, death immeasurable, frenzied, forever bound in compulsion’s sway, cursing in defiance the eternal curse of death itself! These thoughts move young Marx’s musings.

The Savage Songs

Marx’s brilliant nihilism also found expression in other ballads. One called “The Player” (also translated “The Fiddler”) was published in Berlin in 1841 under the title “Savage Songs.” It describes a violinist who wears a sword and summons powers of darkness with wild strings that tear his bow to shreds:

Look now, my blood-dark sword shall stab/unerringly within thy soul. **The hellish vapors rise and fill the brain/till I go mad and my heart is utterly changed. See the sword—the Prince of Darkness sold it to me.** For he beats the time and gives the signs. **Ever more boldly I play the dance of death.**

The frenzied violinist uses his art in an overwhelming fit of self-destruction as “hellish vapors rise and fill the brain.” In the mind of the poet God is not real, but the devil is, and the Player has made a pact with him to wield a bloody sword. Marx conveys “the terror at the heart of terror.” The fiddler plays to “music that accompanies the end of the world.”⁶

Marx’s family and close friends referred to him as “**governed by a demon**” (his father), “**my dear devil**” (his son), “**monster of ten thousand devils**” (Engels), “**wicked knave**” (his wife). Others used words like “possessed” to describe his demeanor. Author Payne concludes Marx “had the devil’s view of the world, and the devil’s malignity.” Sometimes he seemed to know he was accomplishing “works of evil.”⁷

The Communist Manifesto

Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto* was commissioned by the newly formed Communist League in London who invited them to draft a communist “Confession of Faith.” Engels argued it would be more effective to include some historical analysis and call it a “Manifesto,” to which Marx agreed. Eventually it did become a *de facto* confession of faith—dark faith—as originally envisioned by the Communist League, one of the best-selling books of all time. Some 500 million

⁶ Payne, Ibid, pp 62-63, quoted in Kengor, p 52.

⁷ Payne, Ibid, pp 315, 317, quoted in Kengor, p 18

copies are now in print worldwide, even though communism has morphed well beyond Marx's original vision.⁸

The Preamble to the *Manifesto* begins fittingly enough given Marx's demiurgic writings: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism." A "spectre" is a spirit and a "dangerous occurrence." Marx framed communism at the outset as a revolutionary stratagem portending great danger to Europe. It's an impassioned response to centuries of suffering engendered by the Age of Empires, despotic rulers and presumptuous prelates. The Preamble reads:

Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.

The text goes on to describe history as "the history of class struggles" which Marx and Engels concluded stems from ownership of private property. The main goal of Marx's early communism was abolition of private property. States are seen as the product of political power wielded by elites who control property, wages and wealth. Political power boils down to one class grabbing power to oppress the masses who lack ownership of land, wealth and power.

The final section of the *Manifesto* exhorts communists to support "every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things." Here's the rousing war cry of its closing words calling openly for rebellion and revolution:

Communists...openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. **Working Men of All Countries, Unite!**

Marx and Darwin

Eleven Years after the *Communist Manifesto* was published, Charles Darwin published his famous book, *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), subtitled: *The Survival of the Fittest in the Preservation of Favoured Races*. Shortly afterward, Marx wrote his friend Engels: "This is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view."

Marx's economic masterwork, *Das Kapital*, published in 1867, noted:

Darwin has interested us in the history of Nature's Technology, i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organization, deserve equal attention?

Speaking at Marx's funeral, Engels summarized Darwin's influence this way: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so **Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history.**"⁹ This assertion lent scientific credibility to Marx's theories about class struggle and the need to destroy capitalism, religion and morality. One problem with this view is that in evolution, survival of the fittest is understood as more nuanced than the strong destroying the weak. Evolutionists identify very lengthy processes marked by incremental mutations that

⁸ Mao Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book* ran to over a billion copies after being made required reading throughout China. By comparison, the Bible runs to 5 billion cumulative copies in print since Gutenberg's first mass-produced Bible.

⁹ See <https://www.darwinthenandnow.com/archives/1355/darwin-on-marx/>.

facilitate survival without destroying living organisms altogether. In contrast, Marx promoted nihilistic revolution through and through.

Marx the Moocher

Before moving on I want to highlight one other telling reality from Marx's life, namely, his relentless impoverishment as he brooded, drank and ponderously wrote his many works. He was long dependent on his father for money, and often had to beg relatives and others to cover his debts and expenses. After writing the Manifesto, an infant son died while Karl and his family lived in extreme poverty. This left Marx's wife, Jenny despondent. Biographers note her affection for Marx never recovered.¹⁰

Marx's father Heinrich expressed his personal disappointment with Marx's ideas and his incessant mooching. Heinrich wondered whether Karl's heart was governed by a Faustian demon. He described Marx's wife as "fear laden with foreboding, which does not escape me."

Some years after Heinrich died in 1838, Karl pressured his mother to pay off his debts to his landlady, shopkeepers and a pub Marx frequented. She refused.¹¹ Marx's wife wrote her husband that she was out of money again, and their landlady had auctioned off their belongings.

In 1855, their eight-year-old son died in Karl's arms of tuberculosis "exacerbated by... unhealthy living conditions," according to biographer Jonathan Sperber. Sperber called the boy's death "the greatest tragedy in Marx's life."

Marx himself wrote: "Every day my wife says she wishes she and the children were safely in their graves, and I really cannot blame her...."¹² Two of his daughters would one day die of suicide.

When Engel's beloved paramour Mary Burns died in 1863, he wrote Marx who responded not with condolences but a request that Engels send him some money.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once quipped, "The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money." The same could certainly be said of Karl Marx. Paul Kengor summarizes: "What Karl Marx really longed for was what his socialist progressive descendants in the West would seek to bequeath: a giant collectivist/nanny state where Big Sister could assume the task of taking care of Karl's family for him."¹³

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¹⁰ Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 77. See letters in McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography*, pp. 212-13, 241-47.

¹¹ Jonathon Sperber, *Karl Marx: A 19th Century Life*, p. 256.

¹² Quoted in several Marx biographies. See Kengor, op. cit. p 86, footnotes 181-182.

¹³ Kengor, op. cit., p 86.