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Key Ideas of Karl Marx

Stages of History

Marx believed that history moved in stages: from feudalism to capitalism, socialism, and ultimately communism.

Materialism

Each stage was mainly shaped by the economic system. The key to understanding the systems was to focus on the "mode of production." (For example, most production under feudalism was agricultural, while most production under capitalism was industrial.) It also was necessary to focus on who owned the "means of production." (Under capitalism a small class—the bourgeoisie—owned the factories. Under socialism, the factories would be owned by the workers.)

Class Struggle

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Each system, up to and including capitalism, was characterized by the exploitation of one class by another.

The Dialectic

Marx argued that great historical changes followed a three-step pattern called thesis-antithesis-synthesis (he adopted this idea and terminology from an earlier German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel). Any idea or condition (thesis) brings into being its opposite (antithesis). The two opposites then conflict until they produced a new, higher stage (synthesis). For example, in the Marxist dialectic, the existence of the ruling bourgeoisie under capitalism made necessary the existence of its opposite, the proletariat, and the synthesis of their struggle would be a utopian classless society.

Internal Contradictions

Each class system therefore contained the seeds of its own destruction, which Marx sometimes called "internal contradictions." Capitalism, he believed, was plagued by such contradictions, which would get worse and worse until they destroyed it.

Capitalism

Marx saw capitalism as the cruelest, most efficient system yet evolved for the exploitation of the working majority by a small class of owners. It was the nature of capitalism, Marx believed, for wealth and ownership to be concentrated in an ever-shrinking mega-rich class. This was one of many internal contradictions of capitalism that would inevitably destroy it.

Working Class Misery

It was the nature of capitalist production methods to become more and more technologically efficient, requiring fewer and fewer workers to produce more and more goods. Therefore capitalism would be plagued by bouts of high unemployment. As machines made workers' skills less important, wages would be pushed ever downward. As each worker became simply an appendage of a machine, his job would be less satisfying, and he would become more alienated.

Class Consciousness

Such total exploitation of so many by so few could not last forever. The workers would inevitably develop "class consciousness," that is, an awareness of their predicament. When that occurred, it would be fairly simple for them to take over the factories and the state.

The End of History

Since class conflict was the engine that drove history, and since under communism there would be no class distinctions, history would come to its final resting place in a system free of exploitation.