

Karl

MARX

**GREAT THINKERS**

**WILLIAM D. DENNISON**

Foreword by Carl R. Trueman

“The appearance in this series of William Dennison’s volume on Karl Marx, both the man and his thought, is a timely reminder that Marxism remains a vibrant ideological influence in the world. Unshackled from his twentieth-century exploiters and the stark disparities that misshaped popular imagination for most of that century, Marx’s ideas are now receiving fresh, rejuvenating attention. In this brief introduction, Dennison usefully distinguishes Marx from Marxism, sketches Marx’s turbulent biography, and then traces the contours of his ideas from the vantage point of his post-Hegelian materialistic philosophy of history. The philosophy-of-history approach is well conceived and effectively sets the stage for Dennison’s distinct contribution: an extended presuppositional critique of Marx’s naturalistic humanism, demonstrating that Cornelius Van Til’s ideas are at least as vibrant as Marx’s, and the gospel far more compelling.”

—**Bruce P. Baugus**, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“Marx remains a key figure in the politics, economics, and history of the past two centuries. Christians might see him as dangerous or insightful—or both—but in any case we ignore him to our own detriment. Bill Dennison presents both the man and his legacy in a way that introduces the basics and gives readers the tools to pursue a fuller view, including a Reformed perspective as a framework for understanding. Readers will benefit from Dennison’s clarity and guidance.”

—**Kevin R. den Dulk**, Paul B. Henry Chair in Political Science, Calvin College

“Christians wanting to know how to think about Karl Marx would do well to read this volume. Directly examining the texts of Marx, Dennison carefully guides his readers through the great thinker’s philosophy of history. But this guidance is neither a superficial hatchet job nor a mindless embrace. Instead, scholars

and neophytes alike will benefit from Dennison's strategy of critical appreciation: appreciation for Marx's real insights—such as his analysis of capitalism—but also a critique rooted in the revelation of God in history. What readers will find is an evaluation of Marx as an eschatological thinker done from the perspective of the eschatology revealed in Scripture.”

—**Andrew Kaufmann**, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Northwest University

“There are few good, concise books on Karl Marx, his philosophy, and his worldview. There are still fewer written from a biblical, Reformed perspective. This solid treatment by Bill Dennison fills an important niche. I highly recommend it to anyone looking for a scholar whom they can trust to offer a terse summation of Marx and how Marx's ideas should be viewed in the light of a Christian Reformed worldview. Here we see Marx examined, at last, from the vantage of innocence, sin, grace, and God's plan versus Marx's plan. Alas, this should be how Marx is *always* viewed. But it has taken Bill Dennison to finally do the job. For that, we owe him a debt of gratitude.”

—**Paul G. Kengor**, Professor of Political Science and Executive Director, Center for Vision & Values, Grove City College

“Karl Marx is a difficult and complex thinker, giving rise to numerous controversies and schools of thought about what he actually meant. In this fine book, William Dennison displays a command of both Marx's own writings and the various disputes among Marxist schools of thought. Dennison uses Marx's philosophy of history both as a useful entry point to his thought and as a locus for an illuminating contrast with a Reformed philosophy of events that proclaims God's providential activity in history.”

—**Daniel Edward Young**, Professor of Political Science, Northwestern College

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they will have on the next generation of philosophers and theologians.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Karl  
**MARX**

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**MARX**

William D. Dennison

  
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To Cale Horne  
Former excellent student,  
presently a tremendous colleague and friend



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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon  
Seoul, Korea

## FOREWORD

As I was growing up in Britain in the decades before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marxism loomed over my childhood like a very real possible future. Ignorant of the full extent of the economic disaster on which the Eastern Bloc was built, I pondered whether Communism might well carry the day and prove to be the meaning of history. Yet in 1989, all that changed. Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika had unleashed social and cultural forces that the old guard was ultimately unable to contain or control, and first the various Soviet satellites and then the Soviet Union itself collapsed. For a while, it looked as though the end of history had truly come, that Western liberal capitalism had triumphed.

Of course, such a view looks hopelessly naive today. The rise of militant Islam and the resurgence of the old, powerful gods of nationalism and ethnic chauvinism have proved deadly foes to the West's pitifully little gods of consumerism and sexual hedonism. To quote conservative journalist Rod Dreher, you cannot fight something with nothing. And the West has found that its emphases on relativism and multiculturalism do indeed



tend to amount to nothing in the ongoing struggles within the culture.

Amid all this flux, there has been a renewed interest in the life and thought of Karl Marx. In the last few years, two major scholarly biographies have appeared in English, both setting him carefully in his nineteenth-century context. His works continue to sell well in English. Marxist thinkers such as Terry Eagleton produce works that engage the various pathologies of the modern West from an avowedly Marxist perspective. Marx's popularity is clearly rising with a young, post-1989 generation for whom Marxism as a term does not summon up images of food shortages, gulags, and ghastly East German architecture, but rather the ideals of freedom, equality, and social justice.

Furthermore, if Marxism seemed in its death throes in 1989, today it is arguable that, to use Michael Hanby's arresting phrase, "Marx has won" in the sense that everything is now political. The later Marx of *Capital* may now be obsolete, but the Marx of the early manuscripts, the Marx who offered the foundation of a comprehensive view of reality and history in political terms, sets the terms of debate on campuses and in the media, for whom everything has to be seen in terms of political power and political struggle.

For these reasons, knowledge of Marx's life and thought is vital for any Christian who wants to understand why the Western world of today thinks the way it does. Marx is one of those elite philosophers, along with Plato, Montaigne, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, and Camus, who have a distinct literary bent. This makes him delightful to read, especially in works such as *The Communist Manifesto* and *The German Ideology*. But as with these other thinkers, his limpid prose can hide the fact that his thought is still subtle and requires both contextualization and some pointers for interpretation. Also, his vast literary output is

daunting. The new reader needs guidance on how to tackle such a vast array of written work.

That is why it is a pleasure to recommend this little guide by Bill Dennison. Bill and I may not agree on every aspect of interpretation and critique of Marx, but this volume is a helpful and reliable entry point into his thought. Offering both clear exposition and trenchant Christian critique, Bill makes Marx accessible to the neophyte. This is a short, yet informative book on an important thinker whose specter continues to haunt the West. Read it, then read Marx, and think on these things.

Carl R. Trueman  
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Princeton University;  
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## PREFACE

During my doctoral studies at Michigan State University in the mid-1980s, I seriously considered doing my dissertation on Karl Marx after studying his thought under the direction of my philosophy advisor, Richard Peterson, an expert in nineteenth-century social and political philosophy. As I engaged the journey of Marx's family from Judaism to Protestant Christianity, I became fascinated with drawing parallels between Lutheran theology and his secular analysis of social and political thought. Although Professor Peterson was genuinely intrigued with the subject, he convinced me not to pursue this task since at that time there were a vast number of dissertations being written on Marx. In such an environment, he thought it would be extremely difficult to distinguish my work from others, so he encouraged me to continue with my original plan to work on Rudolf Bultmann—which I did.

There remained, however, another subject that caught my attention during my study of Marx, namely, his view of history. I wrote a few papers on the subject for Professor Peterson. As one who works in the field of intellectual history, I decided to return

to that topic for this brief volume; it is definitely worthy of our attention. In constructing his version of history, Marx regarded the events recorded in the Bible as religious “superstition.” But for the Christian, the historical factuality of God’s activity as recorded in biblical revelation is fundamental. Often missed is the fact that Cornelius Van Til, in developing his views of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, and ethics, strongly emphasized the self-attesting Christ of Scripture who is revealed on every page and in every recorded event. A Reformed engagement of, and challenge to, Marx’s historiography should focus on exactly this point: is biblical religion superstition or the supernatural lifeblood of human history? This question will orient much of our transcendental analysis of Marx’s position.

Obviously, there are a number of individuals who deserve special thanks. I am deeply honored that Nathan Shannon asked me to participate in this series for P&R Publishing. Much appreciation must be expressed to my colleagues at Covenant College. I am especially thankful to James Baird for his many hours of research assistance and his encouragement, and to Associate Professor Cale Horne for permitting me to listen to his fine lectures on Marx in his political science class. I am extremely grateful to Professor Paul Morton, dean of academic programs, who intervened and secured my sabbatical for the fall semester of 2015, and I am also thankful to Associate Professor Alicia Jackson, chair of the Faculty Status Committee, for the sabbatical. Thanks to Jeff Hall, vice president for academic affairs, for supplying financial assistance for the project, and especially to Miriam Mindeman, who offered helpful editorial advice.

# 1

## MARXISM AND THE MARXIAN TRADITION

### **The Confusion Surrounding Marx**

It is common to hear people say that Karl Marx founded socialism. However, that statement conveys the ignorance that many have about Marx. Even evangelical Christians can get caught up in such an erroneous observation. For many believers, any suggestion of Marx's views on political theory and economics, like the mention of Darwin in discussions about origins, leads to offense. They may reject, without further thought, any statement made by a political figure or party that has any Marxist overtones. Nevertheless, while evangelical Christians must exercise biblical discernment in assessing any system of thought, they are also responsible for fairness and accuracy in their assessment. Investigation shows that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels viewed neither themselves as the founders of modern socialism, nor socialism as the goal of history. Engels referred to what he and Marx advocated as "scientific socialism"; they declared themselves to be beneficiaries of those whom they

referred to as the “utopian socialists”: Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), and Robert Owen (1771–1858). For Marx, socialism was a means to the end, but not the end itself. In his view of the movement of history, democratic capitalism is replaced by democratic socialism, which is replaced in the end by communism (a classless society).

What also may surprise many evangelical Christians is that Marx saw his view of communism as the most rational outworking of the principles of a democratic society advocated by the French Enlightenment. For Marx, the goal of a democratic society was not the constitutional government established in America. In his judgment, communism was the most consistent application of the trinitarian motto of the Enlightenment: liberty, equality, and fraternity. For Marx, a true republic would be established in the final period of history, when all human beings would be genuinely free, equal, and united as one people, and everyone would have everything in common. John Lennon (1940–80) offered a vision of such a world. In his song “Imagine,” he invoked the power and reality of imagination from the Romantic era to envision a world without heaven or hell, countries, religion, possessions, greed, or hunger. Instead, he imagined a life in which people truly live in the moment—a life of peace, oneness, brotherhood, and sharing all things in the world.<sup>1</sup> Lennon’s narrative reflects the Enlightenment’s motto as applied by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*—the abolition of religion, countries/nationalities, private property (possessions), and greed, leading to humanity’s peaceful sharing of lives of fraternal equality.

A question has emerged over the years as to the authentic understanding of Marx’s teaching. Evangelical Christians and the general populace may hastily judge a variety of perspectives

1. See <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnlennon/imagine.html> (accessed September 12, 2016). Lyrics by John Lennon (1971).

as Marxist, but scholars have asked whether anyone is truly a follower of Marx's teachings today. Simply put, is there a true Marxist anymore? This question was raised by a member of the analytical school of Marxism, social historian Jon Elster.<sup>2</sup> He raised the question in the 1970s and 1980s, an era when Marxist scholars were avidly debating Karl Marx's philosophy of history. Elster, in fact, argued that significant intellectual and moral components of Marx's thought were no longer plausible. Moreover, he maintained that Marx's most cherished dogmas had been demolished by argument, by history, or by social systems based upon his political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> On this basis, he pointed out that any well-intentioned Marxist in recent times has had to go through quite a transformation in order to hold on to any semblance of Marx's ideas. Elster included himself in this analysis, noting that it was no longer possible for him to embrace all the beliefs that Marx cherished. At the same time, he admitted that some of his own most important notions could be traced back to Marx, such as "the dialectical method and the theory of alienation, exploitation, and class struggle, in a suitably revised and generalized form."<sup>4</sup> This struggle, embodied in Elster's position, has become the focus of those who wish to retain and apply Marx's ideas. Over more than a century, this area of scholarship has come to be recognized as Marxism or the Marxian tradition.

This scholarly struggle among the self-described sympathizers of Marxist ideas extends beyond them. If Elster is correct that it is impossible to hold fully to Marxist ideas today, how can Christians and the general populace accurately interpret politicians, political parties, academics, and economists who have

2. See Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4; Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), xiv.

3. Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 4.

4. *Ibid.*



some connection with Marxist thought? In order for evangelical Christians to make intelligent assessments and reach fair critical judgments, they must (1) understand what Marx actually said on subjects in the context of his day and (2) understand how his teaching has been retooled over time by those who claim that they stand in his tradition. The first chapter of this brief work will meet those conditions—coming to a basic understanding of Marx’s position and also mapping out how his position has been amended in the Marxist tradition. This foundation will make it possible to think and speak intelligently about how scholars and politicians have transformed the ideas of Marx to serve their own situations and agendas.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Beginning of the Marxian Tradition**

The Marxian tradition can be traced back to the republication of *The Communist Manifesto* in the nineteenth century. When it was originally published in 1848 as *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the names Marx and Engels were absent from it. But when it was reissued in Leipzig in 1872, its introduction bore both of their signatures. Later, when a third edition appeared in 1883, Engels, the sole author of its introduction, claimed that the *Manifesto* was essentially the work of Marx. At the twilight of their lives, Marx and Engels were clearly identified as the originators of the foremost document of nineteenth-century socialism, with Engels giving supremacy to Marx. From that time on, Marx would be the focus of any discussion of socialism and its continuing effects.

5. Because of the brevity of this work, readers will be provided with numerous names in order to advance their own particular work in the field of Marxism and the Marxian tradition. Each individual mentioned has made important contributions that should be investigated in any continuing study of Marxism. For the sake of good scholarship, these names need to be introduced, although the list is not comprehensive.

Also significant was the document's release in pamphlet form in 1872 by the editors of *Der Volksstaat* (The People's State). This allowed wider distribution, especially among the proletariat. One of those editors, Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900), had accompanied Marx and Engels to London in 1849. Unlike them, however, Liebknecht returned to Germany in 1862, where he focused on socialist political activities for workers. Together with August Bebel (1840–1913) and others, he influenced the development of Marxian thought and organized socialist workers' parties on the basis of the *Manifesto's* militant proletarian agenda. In 1890, this culminated in the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) receiving 1,427,300 votes in the German federal election, more than any other party (though winning only a small number of seats in the Reichstag).<sup>6</sup>

Besides the linking of Marx's name to any discussion of socialism, philosophical discourse became an important characteristic of the Marxist tradition, initiated by Marx's dear friend and colleague, Friedrich Engels (1820–95). Although Marx was not an admirer of the discipline of philosophy, Engels maintained that Marx's thought could be viewed within a philosophical framework. Indeed, after Engels died, "Marxism emerged as a comprehensive philosophy and political practice through which many of the twentieth century's most important social and economic transformations were envisioned and pursued."<sup>7</sup> Philosophers began to critically evaluate Marx's view of ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics, as well as open the door

6. See Karl Marx, "Circular Letter to Bebel, Liebknecht, Bracke, and Others: The Manifesto of the Zurich Trio," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1975–2004), 24:268–69. This collection is hereinafter cited as MECW.

7. Terrell Carver, "Marx and Marxism," in *The History of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Alan D. Schrift, vol. 2, *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy: Revolutionary Responses to the Existing Order*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Daniel Conway (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 35.

to critically assessing his ideas in the context of economic and social conditions.

If Marxism was to be seen as a comprehensive philosophical system, it was imperative in the expansive age of scientific inquiry for Marxist thinkers to develop a rigorous method for explaining what happens in the world. Engels proposed the method known as *the laws of dialectics*, which was revised by Marxists in the 1920s as *dialectical materialism*. In this construct, human beings are said to be able to know only the material world that surrounds them. This injection of scientific positivism does not reject Hegel's influence on Marx.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Marx transformed Hegel's transcendental *Geist* (spirit, mind, consciousness) into a materialistic construct of how society moves dialectically in history. Marx characterized the methods of natural and human production (economic conditions) as the data that formed and transformed society as history progressed, following the dialectical paradigm of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. On the surface, much of Hegel's thought can be placed and analyzed in this triadic pattern; however, nowhere did Hegel use this terminology to describe the dialectical movement of the *Geist*. Rather, Hegel's own depiction of the movement was abstract to concrete, implicit to explicit, in itself to for itself, and potential to actual. Marx's dialectic adapted the same pattern to his materialistic view of the *Geist*. Although Marx affirmed Hegel's criticism of Kant's view of the thing-in-itself (i.e., Hegel held, *contra* Kant, that the thing-in-itself can be known), he maintained that the thing-in-itself is limited to the material world of a politico-economic dialectical movement—in itself to for itself (for us).

8. Scientific positivism was a movement in the mid-nineteenth century that is attributed to the French sociologist and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). It promoted the observation and measurement of empirical facts without a priori presuppositions, in order to be truly objective about its claims. The only authentic knowledge humans possess, it said, is empirical observation. In this approach to

## Orthodox Marxism

Upon Marx's death (1883), as we have seen, Engels took it upon himself to expound and carry on the true teaching of his comrade. Engels has been called the first and greatest representative of "orthodox Marxism,"<sup>9</sup> even though questions have surrounded his interpretation. Others who became identified with this view of Marx's person and work include Karl Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov, and Daniel De Leon—and later, the Bolsheviks Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The movement focused upon the politico-sociological economics of Marx in the context of historical determinism (which posits that events are predetermined by various forces). In the year Marx died, Kautsky (1854–1938) founded and edited *Die Neue Zeit*, which became the chief theoretical interpreter of Marxist dogma throughout the world for nearly five decades. It focused on such subjects as historical determinism and democratic equality. At the same time, the Russian orthodox Marxist Plekhanov (1856–1918) focused his attention on the individual's role and activity in history, especially in the context of revolution. He concluded that the great acts performed by an individual in history must always be viewed in the context of the socioeconomic forces of that person's era.

Interestingly, one of the early controversies within orthodox Marxism can be found in both Kautsky and Plekhanov: the question of whether those who are members of a Marxist party should be the impetus of the socialist revolution, or whether that revolution will be an inevitable, spontaneous event because of the politico-economic conditions of society. Kautsky maintained

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science, there is no room for Christian theism.

9. One of the most important discussions of orthodox Marxism is Georg Lukács, *History of Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 1–26.

that it is not important to instigate something that is inevitable. On this issue, Sidney Hook points out that Kautsky's orthodox Marxist position seems to be invoking Hegel's maxim from Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht" (world history is the court of world judgment).<sup>10</sup> In the context of quoting Schiller's phrase, Hegel makes a controversial comment: "No people ever suffered wrong; what it suffered, it had merited."<sup>11</sup> Hegel was not trying to justify suffering or persecution; rather, his point was that the act of suffering wrong must be viewed meritoriously as working toward the concrete achievement of freedom for humanity. Specifically, for orthodox Marxism, the suffering of the proletariat merits the inevitable movement to a classless society and humanity's true freedom. Yet, a question remained: could those associated with orthodox Marxism be content with the inevitable? In Russia and beyond its borders, two different answers to the question arose in orthodox Marxism.

In Russia, the Socialist Democratic Party split into two groups in 1903: the Bolsheviks (majority) and the Mensheviks (minority). Lenin (1870–1924) was a key figure among the Bolsheviks, while Julius Martov (1873–1923) was the founder of the Mensheviks, being assisted by the intellectual professor Plekhanov, who set up the theoretical basis for the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks were intent on seizing political power by revolution, resulting in the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Mensheviks believed that a proletarian revolution should be a gradual outworking of proletarian interests and democratic principles applied and embraced by the entire population of a nation. In 1905, the Mensheviks voiced the position that an

10. See Sidney Hook, *Marx and the Marxists* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1955), 57.

11. Quote found in Peter C. Hodgson, *Shapes of Freedom: Hegel's Philosophy of World History in Theological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 168.

initial revolution should be carried out by a coalition of proletarian and liberal bourgeois forces, replacing the czar with a bourgeois, democratic government. On the other hand, the Bolshevik Lenin believed that while a revolution in Russia had to be democratic in nature, it had to lead immediately to a dictatorship of both the proletariat and the peasants. He believed that a moderate path to socialism and communism through an initial bourgeois revolution would never bear the fruit that an initial proletarian revolution would accomplish, because it would get bogged down in power struggles between the bourgeois and the proletariat. Both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks claimed to be the sole and rightful heir of Marx. And as the twentieth century progressed, the debate took on additional layers. In particular, was there truly a Leninist-Stalinist version of Marxism, or did Lenin and Stalin represent opposing versions of Marxism? We will return shortly to this question.

### Departure from Orthodox Marxism

Meanwhile, other controversies arose. Some thinkers took issue with Engels's formulation of scientific determinism. These Marxists were not convinced that Engels's position, or, for that matter, Marx's own position, did justice to the political and social dynamics of cultural development, especially since his deterministic construct did not seem to match the reality of historical movement (e.g., Eduard Bernstein, Antonio Labriola, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács). By the 1890s, Bernstein (1850–1932) pointed out that the assertion in the *Manifesto* that “the proletariat has no fatherland” was contradicted by the fact that workers at that time had gained political rights and citizenship in Germany. As strong nationalistic pride arose during the nineteenth century, the worker now had equal voting rights, was a fellow owner of the common property of the nation, was

a recipient of education, and identified with the fatherland. In fact, as the SPD rose to prominence, the urgency for the German nation to lose its independence for a common government of the world was lost.<sup>12</sup> By 1875, Marx had witnessed the unification of Germany (1871), and he became convinced that the revolution of the proletariat would occur in an industrial European nation, perhaps Germany. The proletariat revolution might begin in one nation, but he foresaw it spreading to other industrial capitalistic states, so he continued to hold that “the proletariat has no fatherland.” Plainly, historical reality demanded serious adjustments in the explanation of the advancement of cultural Marxism, adjustments exemplified even in Marx himself. Elster is correct: by the turn of century, Marxism provided clear alterations in the content of its dogmas.

In Russia, the Bolsheviks and the less powerful Mensheviks modified Marx’s ideas. First, the Marxist revolution in Russia ran contrary to Marx’s projection, since Russia was not an urbanized and industrialized capitalistic state.<sup>13</sup> Second, the Bolsheviks debated the teachings of Marx and how his thought should be applied within their party. Once the Russian Revolution had taken place in March 1917, conflict arose concerning the rights of nations and their self-determination within the Russian Empire. Lenin believed that each national community (e.g., Finland, Poland, Transcaucasia, and the Ukraine) had the right to separate and form its own sovereign nation-state.<sup>14</sup> But Stalin insisted that a new nation should come into existence only by virtue of the proletariat’s class struggle. Contrary to Lenin,

12. Eduard Bernstein, “The Most Pressing Problems of Social Democracy” (1890), in *German Essays on Socialism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Frank Mecklenburg and Manfred Stassen (New York: Continuum, 1990), 122. This essay comes from Bernstein’s *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*.

13. See Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in MECW, 24:88–89, 94–95.

14. See Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as a Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), 168.

Stalin had no problem with *Soviet* Russia imposing its rule on the smaller nations. Increasingly, this difference between them came to the forefront. Lenin was sympathetic to the construct of a Soviet “federation” of nations in Russia for an interim period for pragmatic reasons, so that the smaller nations would benefit from the larger nation of Russia. However, Lenin still wished that in the long run the smaller nations would become sovereign states, free from Russian authority. On the other hand, Stalin held that Soviet Russia must bring those smaller nations into a permanent “federation” under its control. For Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat had to remain just that. Although he was the leader of the movement and became the general secretary of the Bolshevik’s Central Committee, he steered clear of viewing himself as a dictator; rather, he viewed himself as needing the continual advice and counsel of those surrounding him (e.g., Trotsky and others). By contrast, in Stalin’s rise to power, the Marxist doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat converted into rule by himself as dictator; his brand of Marxism evolved into tyranny, autocracy, and totalitarianism, resulting in fear and submission. Indeed, the personal power of Stalin was a far cry from the tenets of orthodox Marxism.

Moving in a somewhat different direction, the Frankfurt School (the Institute for Social Research), which emerged in 1924 for the purpose of stimulating Marxist studies in Germany, attacked Engels’s model of materialism (e.g., Carl Grünberg, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm). As new social and philosophical disciplines surfaced in the twentieth century, Marxist scholars were presented with the challenges of interpreting Marx’s thought within their context. Indeed, the Frankfurt School transformed Marxism by integrating it with the social sciences. For example, Fromm (1900–1980) and others applied Freud’s psychoanalysis to the socioeconomic foundation of Marx’s thought. These



Marxists noted that Freud applied psychology to the realm of sociology. As these Frankfurt scholars addressed the institutions of society and the need for institutions to change for the sake of human self-preservation, they studied the process of communal consciousness in order to understand the conditions that would produce societal change. Horkheimer (1895–1973) developed the discipline within philosophy known as critical theory, that is, critical analysis set toward the practical end of liberating and emancipating human beings from conditions of enslavement. Marxist critical theory would express special interest in democratic and egalitarian justice for those who had been oppressed throughout history because of their gender, race, and disability. It also applied a critical analysis to a broad spectrum of disciplines: law, history, sociology, psychology, politics, economics, and aesthetics.

At the same time in France, those in sympathy with Marx reacted critically both to Engels's assessment of Marx and to the character of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. From 1933 to 1939, the Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) lectured on Hegel in Paris, attempting to present the German icon through the lenses of Marx's materialism and Heidegger's ontology (theory of being). For this reason, Kojève has been said to have invented Marxist existentialism. Perhaps not surprisingly, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), as well as his essay on *Existentialism as Humanism* (1946), left the French philosophical world wondering if Marx and existentialism were compatible. In these works, Sartre so strongly stressed the independent, free consciousness of being, that critics were forced to doubt whether Sartre's version of existentialism had room for Marx or any critical social theory. Sartre's reply to his critics appeared in *Search for a Method* (1960). He explained that his project was a response to only one question: "Do we have today the means to constitute a structural, historical

anthropology?”<sup>15</sup> His answer was that Marxism (not Marx), as a comprehensive philosophy, was the sole system of thought that could fit into his view of human existence and answer that question. By revealing the method of the human understanding (*comprendre*) of experience, Sartre offered a synthesis of Marxism (communal life) and existentialism (human activity) as a means to interpret culture and society as he embraced the historical tension (dialectic) of human existence. Specifically, for Sartre, existentialism provided the ideology for people to become free, and Marxism provided the philosophy for people to make themselves into a communal society. It should also be mentioned that the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) and Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) appeared in this environment. In fact, Sartre highly respected Lefebvre’s work on Marx and Marxism. Carver notes, therefore, that “the common thread [between these Frenchmen] was the application of Marxian notions of social production, class structure, and ideological critique to cultural criticism, social science, and historical research.”<sup>16</sup>

A further point related to French Marxism in the 1950s is that many of those who were identified with, or sympathetic to, Marxism welcomed the shocking speech delivered by Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party in February 1956. In that speech, Khrushchev, the Party’s First Secretary in the Soviet Union, denounced many oppressive policies of the Stalinist era, while exalting Lenin as the true follower of Marx. Many of the French Marxists were already disturbed by Stalin’s version of Marxism; in a real sense, Khrushchev’s speech gave credence to their concern. Ironically, the French Marxists’ praise for Khrushchev was soon transformed

15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), xxxiv. This volume was originally published with Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (two volumes in one).

16. Carver, “Marx and Marxism,” 50.

into bitter disappointment as he sent Soviet troops into Hungary on November 4, 1956, to suppress a national democratic uprising. They viewed his action as one that followed Stalin's approach.<sup>17</sup> Scholars like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Fromm, and the Marxist structuralist Louis Althusser (1918–90) strongly attacked what they viewed as a version of Stalinist Marxism. Sartre urged the French communists not to excuse the Soviet intervention in Hungary:

Everything considered, the French Communists should be advised not to shout too loudly that the Soviet intervention could not be avoided. For this pious argument carries the most radical condemnation of everything that has been done in Hungary up to now. Tortures, trumped up confessions, fake trials, work camps: these instances of violence are unpardonable in any situation. . . . The failure of the Stalinists shows in their true light this misery and terror which had no other future than final catastrophe.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Sartre, along with Althusser and others, began to advance what became known as the de-Stalinization of Marxism. In particular, Althusser wondered if the disarray, crimes, and errors of Stalin's "dogmatism" could ever restore the integrity of Marxist philosophy, especially his theory of history.<sup>19</sup>

Next door in Italy arose one of the formative figures of Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century, Antonio

17. Interestingly, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75) had determined to write his "Symphony No. 11: The Year 1905" in 1955 as a commemoration of the czar's Cossack police unjustly opening fire on protestors at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg on January 9, 1905. Shostakovich finished the symphony in 1957. It honored not only the fallen in 1905, but apparently also the Hungarian freedom fighters crushed by the Soviet Army in 1956.

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Ghost of Stalin* (1956), trans. Martha H. Fletcher and John R. Kleinschmidt (New York: George Braziller, 1967), 16–17.

19. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (1965), trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso,

Gramsci (1891–1937). As a young artist and theater critic, he brought qualities of anxiety and inner dialectical tension to the forefront as he combined imagination and realism in his sympathies for socialism. As the founder of the Communist Party in Rome, he was imprisoned in 1926 under Mussolini’s fascist regime and eventually died there. But from within those walls he wrote profusely about his concerns for workers, the peasant class, and industrial capitalism. Although he was sympathetic to Engels’s reading of Marx, he did not maintain, as many others did, that Hegel had influenced Marx. Even so, perhaps his foremost contribution to Marxism, influenced by Antonio Labriola (1843–1904), was his assertion that Marx’s thought needed to be placed in the context of “praxis” (practice). In his *Prison Notebooks*, his conception of the “philosophy of praxis” held a prominent position. He declared that this was a new, independent, and original conception that synthesized German philosophy, classical English economics, and French political theory and practice. It arrived at a ripe moment in global historical development, promoting an independent and original culture (ideas) in the development of social relations (praxis).<sup>20</sup> Gramsci’s view of praxis, along with the postwar work of Pierre Vilar (1906–2003), opened the door to a more precise focus: “Marxism does not view itself primarily as praxis but as praxis informed by scientific theory.”<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas sums this up well:

Within this framework historical materialism can be understood as a theory of society conceived with a practical intent,

2005), 30–31.

20. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 2003), 398–400.

21. Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 145.

which avoids the complementary weaknesses both of traditional politics and of modern social philosophy; it thus unites the claim to a scientific character with a theoretical structure referring to praxis.<sup>22</sup>

## The Impact of MEGA

World War II brought great changes to the world and thus to Marxism. In the new political and economic environment, Marxists were compelled to make creative and fresh philosophical adjustments. Some argued that Engels's construct of dialectical materialism was out of date, while others thought it was time to pay much more attention to Marx's philosophy of history and its connection with Hegel and his later followers. Becoming prominent in the English-speaking world were two figures whose works appeared prior to the war, but had lasting influence beyond the war, Sidney Hook and Isaiah Berlin (1909–97). Back in 1927, when the multivolume *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) began to be published, Hook had been one of the first scholars to use this source to formulate his own understanding of Marx. Marx's early works from 1843 to 1847 caught Hook's attention, compelling him to study Marx in the context of Hegel and the Young Hegelians. According to Hook, these documents not only demonstrated that Marx was "drenched" and "nurtured" in Hegel's philosophical tradition, but also exhibited his critical assessment of the Young Hegelians, such as David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner, and Ludwig Feuerbach.<sup>23</sup> In a somewhat complementary direction, Berlin was one of the formative scholars who thought it best to devote

22. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 3.

23. Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 1.

more focus to Marx in his own historical context than to Marx through Engels's spectacles. According to Carver, Berlin contextualized Marx "in a general historical sense involving all kinds of ideas and moments . . . with a wide popular appeal and an interdisciplinary academic profile."<sup>24</sup>

Later in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Bertell Ollman and Norman Levine argued that Marx's thought comprised a complete sociology that had a clear relationship with Hegel's philosophical thought without the mystification of Hegel's *Geist*. Specifically, said Levine, "Marx appropriated Hegel's method, but he rejected Hegel's system."<sup>25</sup> Although first revealed before World War II in 1932 by MEGA, this connection received heightened stimulus in the postwar era by the arrival in print of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*. Because of these publications, Carver notes, scholars were now faced with new questions about the "continuity, development, and innovation" within Marx's own thought, and thus less attention was given to Marxism *per se*.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the call went forth: back to Marx. After all, scholars were now in possession of newly published primary sources that needed to be assessed critically. According to Carver, a philosophical focus on these manuscripts, by Marxists as well as by non-Marxists, tended to depoliticize Marx and focus on philosophical categories such as alienation and estrangement, which were carefully debated in characterizing a new Marx: Marx the humanist.<sup>27</sup> Other significant figures who studied such key philosophical concepts in Marx were Herbert

24. Terrell Carver, "The Marxian Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. George Klosko (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 408.

25. See Norman Levine, *Marx's Discourse with Hegel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12, 72, 107, 108, 204, 219, 220, 239, 298, 302, 305.

26. Carver, "Marx and Marxism," 52.

27. *Ibid.*, 53.

Marcuse (1898–1979), Raya Dunayevskaya (1910–87), Shlomo Avineri, and David McLellan. A number of scholars, however, were not convinced this was the way to shape a new Marx, such as Leszek Kolakowski (1927–2009) and Norman Geras (1943–2013). Specifically, Kolakowski called attention to two different emphases in the thought of Engels and Marx that remained relevant in the postwar era. Kolakowski writes: “Whereas Engels . . . believed that man could be explained in terms of natural history and the laws of evolution to which he was subject, and which he was capable of knowing in themselves, Marx’s view was that nature as we know it is an extension of man, an organ of practical activity.”<sup>28</sup> Kolakowski adopted and applied the praxis language to his understanding of Marx, noting that, for Marx, “human praxis is the true object of our knowledge, which can never free itself from the practical, situational manner in which it is acquired.”<sup>29</sup> For Kolakowski and others, attention to the relationship between praxis and knowledge rose above the analysis of popular philosophical categories.

Meanwhile, those in the analytical school of Marxist thought (e.g., G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, Robert Brenner, and Erik Olin Wright) were responding negatively to the Hegelian interpretation of Marx on the Continent. They strove for a more rigorous, rational understanding of Marx, one formed from their own unique blend of twentieth-century schools of philosophical thought. They combined logical positivism and the philosophy of science of the 1930s with the Oxford school of the philosophy of language (linguistics) in the 1950s, in order to produce a rational construct of individualism and economics. The stimulating work for these Marxists was H. B. Acton’s *The Illusion of*

28. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: I. The Founders*, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 401.

29. Carver, “Marx and Marxism,” 53.

*the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed* (1955). Acton had argued that Marx's preface to *Das Kapital* presented an untidy and confusing picture of the forces and relations of production, as well as contradictions in the political struggle for class dominance, referring to Marx's theory as "a philosophical farrago."<sup>30</sup> These analytical Marxists especially endeavored to advance Acton's views in areas of Marx's theory of exploitation dealing with production and exchange.<sup>31</sup> Although he does not explicitly acknowledge Acton's influence on his own understanding of exploitation, Elster does interact in a critical, positive manner with the work of Roemer and Cohen, especially in the field of analytical economics (a technical area of quantitative economics). In terms of production and exchange, Marxism views exploitation in a twofold manner. First, exploitation is morally wrong because it tolerates and generates distributive injustice. Second, in light of this injustice, exploitation provides the justification for protest, rebellion, and revolution.<sup>32</sup>

Since ethics has long been a discipline in the domain of philosophy, it would seem logical that the subject would eventually receive attention in Marxian studies. Indeed, that day did arrive in the 1970s and 1980s, when the subject of justice and morality emerged as a major concern. Examining Marx, one confronts at times his flippant philosophical and religious attitude toward morality and justice, whereas at other times one is struck by his contempt for mere moralizing and superficial notions of fairness.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, once Marxists began to concentrate more

30. *Ibid.*, 55.

31. See *ibid.*; H. B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed* (London: Cohen and West, 1955), 271.

32. See Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 165–233; cf. Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 79–102.

33. Terrell Carver, "Karl Marx," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Modern Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 383. Carver's analysis here is based on R. G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality, and*



intently on the subject of ethics in Marx's thought, their debate revolved chiefly around two questions. First, was Marx to be viewed as an ethical contextualist (i.e., someone holding that morality was controlled by the political and economic interests of the dominating classes in history), thus viewing morality as ideological and relative? Second, was Marx's view of morality a relevant theory of justice that exposed the exploitation and destructiveness of capitalism? As one might expect, in this debate there were proponents on both sides, in addition to those who sought to synthesize the two sides. After all, for Marx, it was imperative to pursue, in an ethical manner, a classless society of political, economic, and social justice.

Perhaps this brief introduction to Marxism and the Marxian tradition is best summarized by David Bakhurst. Placing the legacy of Marx's thought in the realm of philosophy, he argues that two approaches seem to recapitulate Marx's *Weltanschauung* (worldview) holistically. First, there are the Marxists who in some manner trace their analysis of Marx's thought through "theoretical discussions of scientific method, of objectivity, of the relation between natural and social scientific modes of explanation, of necessity and prediction, of the nature of 'false consciousness,'" and so forth. Bakhurst describes this approach as "*scientific realism* that accentuate[s] Marx's confidence in the power of science to render objective reality transparent." Second, there are the Marxists who address their analysis from the position that "Marx takes human praxis to have a world-transforming character." More specifically, "by acting upon reality, human beings change its very nature: the world they confront is no longer brutally physical in kind: it is a 'humanized environment.'" Bakhurst refers to this legacy as "*anthropocentrism*," which emphasizes Marx's claim, not only that the human subject is

an active being, but also that the objective world itself must be conceived as 'human sensuous activity, practice.'"<sup>34</sup>

This brief overview of Marxism and the Marxian tradition has aimed to introduce to the reader how Marx's own thought has been further developed and taken in various directions since his death. The multiple threads present a complex picture, requiring careful study in order to distinguish each one clearly and identify its particular characteristics. Elster's assessment seems confirmed: it is doubtful that a true Marxist exists anymore. Anyone who wants to avoid the pitfall of accepting erroneous equivalence between Marx and present-day figures who declare themselves to be in the Marxist tradition must grapple with the scholarly data. Moreover, we must work with primary source material to understand what Marx was saying in his own day and allow Marx to speak for himself, without the presuppositions of others forcing us to reach certain conclusions. Indeed, fair dialogue with Marx begins with the study and comprehension of Marx's own words.

34. David Bakhurst, "Marxism," in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 268–69.