**Obianuju Ogbueze**

**HSP3C**

**Ms Rizutti**

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 **Karl Marx**



Karl Marx, born May 5, 1818, is considered one of the founding thinkers of sociology. Though he lived and died before sociology was a discipline in its own right, his writings as a political-economist provided a still deeply important foundation for theorizing the relationship between economy and political power. Karl Marx was born in Trier, Prussia (present-day Germany). While he attended a Lutheran elementary school growing up, he later became an atheist and a materialist. In 1835, Marx enrolled in Bonn University in Germany where he took courses in law, however, he was much more interested in philosophy and literature.

One year later, he enrolled him at the University of Berlin. Marx soon felt at home when he joined a circle of brilliant and extreme thinkers who were challenging existing institutions and ideas, including [religion](http://sociology.about.com/od/R_Index/g/Religion.htm), philosophy, ethics, and politics. Marx graduated with his [doctoral degree](http://gradschool.about.com/od/admissionsadvice/a/masterphd.htm) in 1841.

After school, Marx turned to writing and journalism to support himself. In 1842 he became the editor of the liberal Cologne newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung*, but the Berlin government prohibited it from publication the following year. He then moved to Brussels, Belgium, where he founded the German Workers’ Party and was active in the Communist League.

Marx is typically remembered for giving sociology [a conflict theory of how society operates](http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/Conflict-Theory.htm). He formulated this theory by first turning an important philosophical tenet of the day on its head--the Hegelian Dialectic. Hegel, a leading German philosopher during Marx's early studies, theorized that social life and society grew out of thought. Looking at the world around him, with the growing influence of capitalist industry on all other facets of society, Marx saw things differently. He inverted Hegel's dialectic, and theorized instead that it is the existing forms of economy and production--the material world--and our experiences within these that shape thought and consciousness. Of this, he wrote in Capital, Volume 1, "The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." Core to all of his theory, this perspective became known as "historical materialism."

**Base and Superstructure**

Marx gave sociology some important conceptual tools as he developed his historical materialist theory and method for studying society.

In The German Ideology, written with Friedrich Engels, [Marx explained that society is divided into two realms: the base, and the superstructure](http://sociology.about.com/od/Key-Theoretical-Concepts/fl/Base-and-Superstructure.htm). He defined the base as the material aspects of society: that which allow for production of goods. These include the means of production--factories and material resources--as well as the relations of production, or the relationships between people involved, and the distinct roles they play (like laborers, managers, and factory owners), as required by the system. Per his historical materialist account of history and how society functions, it is the base that determines the superstructure, whereby the superstructure is all other aspects of society, like our culture and ideology (world views, values, beliefs, knowledge, norms and expectations); social institutions like education, religion, and media; the political system; and even the identities we subscribe to.

When looking at society this way, Marx saw that the distribution of power to determine how society functioned was structured in a top-down manner, and was tightly controlled by the wealthy minority who owned and controlled the means of production.

Karl Marx stated that the worker works hard all his life only to make his employers richer.

He believed that the harder the worker works, the more wealth he produces but also the poorer he gets once his production increases in power and range. The worker soon becomes cheaper than the commodity he creates. This simply means that as the value of the world of commodities increases, the devaluation of the word of men decreases in direct proportion. From this theory of Marx, it could be inferred that labour does not produce only commodities but also produces itself as a commodity as well as the worker itself. This often happens in the same proportion at which it produces the commodities.

Marx predicted that the capitalist system will not be able to expand thereby consuming the structures that sustained it. This has had tremendous effect on the working class and the poor as seen in Canada, Jobs are relocated to cheaper oversea labour sources and local manufacturing has gone down.

Industries have now mechanized their workplaces with robots who now take over human labour thereby placing huge debt on families with declining income. Economics has taken over politics in Canada as economic policies are governed by global capitalism. New markets may emerge but no working class to take on apply for credit and move the economy forward. This recently led to a recession in Canada as huge corporations now exercise a monopoly on global markets. They fix prices to maximize profit and lobby Governments to influence trade policies and in the long run would eliminate the free market competition.

*Key Questions*

*If Marx believes the worker becomes a commodity after sometime, how then does the worker move from the poor to the middle class and from middle class to the privileged?*

*According to Marx, Capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction and Communism was the inevitable end to the process of evolution, does the reality of today’s society support this notion formulated hundreds of years ago?*

*Is it fair to argue that socialism is comparable to dictatorship of the proletariat or was Marx totally wrong?*

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