

Life and Times

Inscribed upon the tomb of Karl Marx in London's Highgate Cemetery are the words: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' Writing over many years with his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, their lifelong association resulted in the development and dissemination of Marxism, whose influence on modern intellectual, economic and political history and theory is difficult to overstate. Indeed, it cannot be refuted that the pair succeeded in this endeavour to make a lasting impact.

Karl Marx: Radical Rebel

Karl Marx was born on 5 May 1818 to an upper-middle-class Prussian family. After an academic yet liberal education, Marx studied at the universities of Bonn, Berlin and Jena, falling in with a vibrant community of political radicals and thinkers, including the leftist intellectual group the Young Hegelians, who set him on the path towards socialism. An active participant of the rowdy Trier Tavern Club, he also became known for his reckless carousing, troublemaking and disdain for the conservative establishment.

After attaining his doctorate in 1841, Marx turned to journalism. While working for the anti-government newspaper *Die Rheinische Zeitung*, he continued to develop and expound his views on socialism and economics, writing on issues such as

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poor housing conditions and press freedoms. It was here that he crossed paths with Engels for the first time, though they would not become firm friends until 1844.

Marx married his fiancée of seven years Jenny von Westphalen in 1843, and when *Die Rheinische Zeitung* was finally banned they moved to Paris, where Marx became co-editor of another radical left-wing newspaper, deepening his acquaintance with Engels and their shared socialist ideology, and embarking on a collaboration that would last a lifetime.

Life and Work in Exile

Hounded out of Paris for his political activities, Marx moved to the more liberal Brussels in 1845, where he and Engels would spend three years working on the pamphlet that would become *The Communist Manifesto*. As revolution spread throughout Europe in 1848 in a series of workers' uprisings, Marx continued to publish his political writings, eventually forcing him to seek exile in London. While there, he founded his own newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, and, alongside Engels, developed and disseminated his social, political and economic theory – Marxism – which, above all, was concerned with the struggle between the labouring classes and the bourgeoisie. It was during this time that he wrote the critique of capitalism that would become his magnum opus – *Das Kapital*.

Despite his prolific output, Marx was destitute for much of his adult life. He and his wife Jenny had seven children, though only three survived, in part due to their poor living conditions in London. He relied on the financial support of Engels, recalling in a letter to his friend a statement his mother had once made:

‘If only Karl made capital instead of just writing about it.’ He was a heavy drinker, and also suffered from poor health which worsened significantly in his final years. He died in London in 1883.

Friedrich Engels: Political Industrialist

Friedrich Engels was born on 28 November 1820 into the heart of the European industrial revolution: his family owned large cotton mills in Prussia and Salford, and his bourgeois beginnings exposed Engels to the human cost of industrialisation, providing an outlook that would shape his life’s work. Like Marx, he fell in with the Young Hegelians at the University of Berlin, writing inflammatory articles critiquing labour exploitation that were published in none other than Marx’s *Rheinische Zeitung* – anonymously, to avoid the ire of his family.

In 1842, Engels was sent to work in the family mill in Salford in the hope he would reconsider his revolutionary principles, but instead he fell in love with Mary Burns, an Irish factory worker, who showed him the darker side of Manchester’s slums. Confronted by the child labour, squalor and extreme poverty he found there, Engels was drawn ever more to socialism, and in 1845 he published his masterpiece, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In it he described ‘the grim future of capitalism and the industrial age’, writing of ‘women made unfit for child-bearing, children deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted with disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie.’

Engels returned to Germany to take part in the 1848 revolutions, writing and editing revolutionary articles for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* and volunteering in an armed uprising in

southern Germany. Upon his unit's defeat, he escaped via Switzerland as a refugee back to England.

Double Life

Engels was forced to return to his family's cotton mills in order to provide Marx with financial support, but he led something of a double life, continuing his involvement with socialist politics and journalism, associating with the English Labour and Chartist movements, even enduring police scrutiny and surveillance for his radical activity. After Marx's death in 1883, Engels destroyed some 1,500 of their letters, to conceal the details of their secretive lifestyle.

Though both were opposed to the institution of marriage, Engels' relationship with Mary Burns continued until her death in 1863. Engels continued to live in London until his death in 1895, with much of his remaining years dedicated to editing and publishing Marx's major works, and expanding Marx's theories into new areas such as private property, family and the state. In his biography of Engels, Vladimir Lenin wrote that, after Marx, 'Engels was the finest scholar and teacher of the modern proletariat in the whole civilised world.'

The Communist Manifesto

From 1845 to 1848, amid the political unrest spreading throughout Europe, Marx and Engels sought refuge in Brussels. Commissioned by the Communist League – an underground movement promoting socialist values and an egalitarian society – to write

a pamphlet setting forth the movement's principles and goals, the pair began work on what would eventually become *The Communist Manifesto*.

The *Manifesto* advocated for the abolition of bourgeois property and the establishment of a classless, communist society with collective ownership over the means of production. It emphasised the role of class struggle in historical development, making the claim that capitalism would necessarily collapse and lead to communism. Its stirring closing words read: 'Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!'

First published on 21 February 1848, the initial reaction to the *Manifesto* was mixed. It gained attention among socialists, but faced strong opposition from government and the bourgeoisie. But with the advent of the uprisings of 1848, it increased ever more in significance, and it had established the basis for Marxist ideology, whose effects would ripple into the twentieth century and beyond.

A Collaborative Approach

Although Engels described himself as 'second fiddle' to Marx's political and economic prowess ('Marx was a genius; we others were at best talented'), his contribution was no less crucial. While Marx may have developed the complex theory that bears his name, it was Engels' endeavours that shaped it into an accessible philosophy. He provided not only the funding that allowed Marx to continue his work, but also real-world insights from the textile trade, as well as valuable publicity in the form of clear,

accessible interpretations and practical applications that popularised many of his colleague's insights. Thanks to Engels' contribution, Marxism was able to reach mainstream audiences and gain supporters across the world.

A Remarkable Legacy

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels left an intellectual and political legacy as extensive as it is enduring. *The Communist Manifesto* and Marxism exerted major influence on socialist thought, providing a catalyst for twentieth-century revolutionary movements across the world, and the pair's combined output is still integral to economic and political discourse and ideology today. Their work continues to be of utmost relevance to any critique of capitalism and economic inequality, and their collaboration has been lauded as one of the most influential in modern history.