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The Relevance of Karl Marx

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Karl Marx: Why his ideas are still relevant today

Caitlin Parnell

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Karl Marx: Why his ideas are still relevant today

By Caitlin Parnell, 5th year

Karl Marx was a 19th century German philosopher, with some of the most influential ideas to date. His writings in *The Communist Manifesto* sparked some of the most famous revolutions, and have shaped the ideas and beliefs of many political philosophers today. His work is fascinating to examine, because, even though he lived more than a century and a half ago, his ideas are still relevant today. His arguments mostly revolve around the inequality presented by capitalist society. These arguments are very applicable to our current world as it is fundamentally alike with the time of Marx, in terms of economics.

It is worth mentioning, before examining some of the many issues Marx had with Capitalism, that Marx didn't deny it had its perks. Among other things, Marx says that Capitalism has "created enormous cities" and has witnessed "development of new machinery". There is no denying that this is true. Capitalism has seen a huge development in technological, economic and social aspects of society. However, it is very far from perfect. When in the right hands, all of these advancements could be used to create an equal and sustainable society compared to the one that they currently feed into. This is where Marx's arguments *against* Capitalism come in.

The first argument Marx makes is that there is "no other bond between man and man but naked self-interest". I don't believe this to be true to this era regarding personal relationships, however on an economic level I wholeheartedly agree with this argument. There are countless examples of large corporations putting profit before people. The first example that comes to mind is climate change, a very serious issue that most people (unless they deny its existence) are aware of. Ireland was recently ranked worst in the EU for combating climate change, partly due to our agriculture industry. It's a fact that the beef and dairy industry is a massive contributor to climate change, however we continue to overproduce both products with no change in sight. In fact, there is a plan to *grow* Ireland's national cattle herd by 22% by 2020, even though, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, over 30% of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions are caused by producing meat and dairy. So why hasn't anything been done? Because the

meat and dairy industry is worth €24 billion per year to the economy and provides 10% of employment in Ireland. Clearly, the industry is important to us, but it wouldn't be if it wasn't for the supply and demand system, driven largely by the capitalist system's need for profit. This data can also be used to prove Marx's point that production is the most important of human activities.

The next point that Marx makes is that the class which controls the means of production dominates the other classes. This is completely applicable to our current economic system. Big companies always look for the cheapest labour possible. An example of this, and a huge issue we still face, is the use of sweatshops. When slavery and child labour became less available in Westernised countries, it didn't take long for big companies to move to poorer countries where the labour is extremely cheap (which encouraged other companies to do the same), even if it meant hiring children. These countries continue to suffer as they are not benefiting economically from manufacturing the company's product. Another example of this argument's relevance is the simple fact that, after all this time, money is still equal to power. In the capitalist system, the more money a person has, the more influence over society they have. A lot of the richest people in the world have high-up positions in powerful companies, meaning people in power are more likely to listen to them. It's also not uncommon for people to pay lobbyists to influence political parties, for example, a recent report in The Independent states that gas industry firms spent €104 million on lobbying in 2016, in order to ensure that Europe remains reliant on fossil fuels. The wealthy clearly have a lot of unfair advantages when it comes to having a political voice, in comparison with middle and lower classes. This extreme inequality between rich and poor, upper and lower, bourgeoisie and proletariat, is exactly what Marx says is wrong with capitalist society.

Marx also argues that the proletariat has been 'systematically exploited' by the minority who benefits from Capitalism. This can be explained by returning to the sweatshop example. Companies maximise their profits by producing their goods in sweatshops so they can pay as little as possible, hence, the proletariat suffer. Even in the case of the working class in westernised countries, they tend to be forgotten about by the capitalist system. Marx said that the proletariat are 'turned solely to the advantage of Capitalism'

and are alienated from their ability to develop their skills and talents. This is true right from the beginning of a person's education. There is pressure put on children, teenagers and young adults to follow a career within the STEM sector. Children often feel unintelligent based on their ability, or lack thereof, to do subjects like maths or science. This is a heavy focus of philosopher Paulo Freire, who disagreed with the method of educating children through telling them to memorise and repeat ideas without necessarily understanding the meaning behind them, rather than using the education system to make children well-versed in subjects they genuinely have an interest in, and having students come out the other end of the education system well-rounded and capable of critical thinking. The vast majority of students in developed countries are put through the traditional education system, and have pressure put on them to be good at particular subjects, solely for the benefit of the economy.

The points mentioned above are only some of the ways that Karl Marx's arguments remain relevant today. Whether communism is the answer, I don't know, but I do know that Capitalism is insensitive, unequal, and oppressive to the majority of the population who live under the system. It would take a lot of time, conflict and loss to fully overthrow the system, however, if people continue to protest, march, strike, and petition for a more equal society which benefits everyone, then perhaps we will find the middle ground that we've been waiting for.