



WHO IS KARL MARX? PAUL KENGOR

Ideas have consequences. Sometimes good. Sometimes bad. And sometimes catastrophic – like the ideas of Karl Marx.

Born in Trier, Germany in 1818, Marx didn't invent communism. But it was on his ideas that Lenin and Stalin built the Soviet Union, Mao built communist China, and innumerable other tyrants, from the Kims in North Korea to the Castros in Cuba, built their communist regimes. Ultimately, those regimes and movements calling themselves “Marxist” murdered about 100 million people and enslaved more than a billion.

Marx believed that workers, specifically those who did manual labor, were exploited by capitalists – the people who owned, as Marx put it, “the means of production” (specifically, factories) – but who did very little physical labor themselves. Only a workers' revolution, Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, could correct this injustice.

What would that revolution look like?

Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, spelled it out point-by-point in *The Communist Manifesto*. It included the “abolition of property and inheritance” and the “centralization of credit, communication, and transport in the hands of the state.” And a lot more along the same lines.

In other words, the state owns and controls pretty much everything.

This notion was widely discussed and debated in European intellectual circles during Marx's lifetime, but nothing much came of it until Vladimir Lenin took power in Russia in 1917.

This changed everything. Despite its repeated economic failures, Lenin's Russia, which became known as the Soviet Union, became the model for dictators around the world. Wherever Marx's ideas were practiced, life got worse – not by a little; but by a lot. There is not a single exception to this rule. Not the Soviet Union, not Eastern Europe, not China, not North Korea, not Vietnam, not Cuba, not Venezuela, not Bolivia, not Zimbabwe. Wherever Marxism goes, economic collapse, terror and famine follow.

So, if cataclysmic failure – meaning terrible human suffering – is the inevitable legacy of Marxism, why do so many people – and now, especially, young people – defend it?

The most common answer Marxism's advocates offer is that “they” – whoever “they” are: Lenin, Stalin, Chavez – never really practiced Marxism. They all somehow got it wrong. Marxism,

we are told, is, at its essence, about sharing what we have: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” as Marx put it.

Maybe that sounds good to you. But what does it mean? Who determines ability? Who determines need?

The answer is The State. The ruling elite. Under Marxism, that’s who has all of the power. That’s why the truth is this: Marxist dictators like Lenin, Mao and Pol Pot really *did* get Marxism right. They wanted absolute power, and Marxism gave them the way to get it.

Karl Marx never had to face the consequences of his theories. He lived most of his adult life breathing the free air of London, England, living off the generosity of his collaborator and patron Engels, who, as it happens, inherited his money from his wealthy merchant father.

Marx spent his days in the Reading Room of the British Museum, researching and writing. Although he was obsessed with the term “scientific,” he was never able to marshal data to prove his theories. There’s a good reason for this: There was no data to prove his theories.

For all of his time in the library, Marx couldn’t find any evidence to suggest that capitalism – the free exchange of goods and services through privately-owned business – was a passing phase. Throughout the industrial age, working conditions constantly improved and wealth expanded. Marx had to rely on outdated reports to make his case. And even then, he had to manipulate the data to get it to conform to his predetermined theories.

But Marx really had no interest in proving his theories. He knew that they could be put into practice only by brute force. He said so himself. “Of course, in the beginning, [communism] cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads,” he wrote. His ends could “be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”

All existing social conditions. That’s religion, family, personal possessions, freedom, and democracy. They all had to go in order to achieve Marx’s vision of an earthly paradise. But since few people give up their liberties and property voluntarily, creating a Marxist state has always required guns, prisons, and summary executions. Marx’s many disciples, from Lenin on, never considered this a problem. Some, like revolutionary poster-boy Che Guevara, considered it a bonus.

“I don’t need proof to execute a man,” Che is said to have boasted. “I only need proof that it’s necessary to execute him!”

If you’re still a fan of Marxism after all the death, suffering, and destruction it’s caused, that’s your right. But own up to it. Don’t hide behind the “it’s never really been tried” line. It has.

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