

KARL MARX AND THE BIRTH OF SOCIALISM

Laissez-faire economics caused the gap between the wealthy and poor to widen. As companies grew, workers became more alienated from their employers and came to resent the fact that their labor was enriching factory owners while they, the workers, struggled to survive. National and local governments of the era provided little or no relief. Often the working classes were viewed with distaste and fear by the governing elite. It is not surprising that the working classes viewed laissez-faire economics with suspicion. The values of individualism preached by the wealthy were of small comfort to those born in poverty.

Karl Marx was among those who proposed a different ideology. Marx was not the first socialist or even the best known of his time, but his ideas became the foundation of communist theory in the decades following his death. In 1847 he worked with Friedrich Engels to write *The Communist Manifesto*. In it Marx stated that man lived in a state of nature that forced him to struggle for survival. To succeed in this struggle, men formed relationships with those who had similar interests, resulting in the formation of classes. Marx felt that control of wealth was the most important aspect of a group's position in society. He saw all of history as the story of struggles between different classes for the control of wealth.

The Industrial Revolution had changed the class structure of society. Marx saw two new classes as the most important in the struggle. Marx described the conflicting groups as the bourgeoisie (factory owners and the middle class) and the proletariat (factory workers). Marx was sympathetic toward the proletariat. Marx saw that the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution had alienated the workers. Rather than having the pride of skilled craftsmen, they performed repetitive, unskilled tasks at their machines. In Marx's opinion, the proletariat were the vibrant, creative class that powered the economy while the bourgeoisie acted as parasites.

Marx believed that conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie would grow and that eventually the proletariat would violently overthrow the bourgeoisie. He wrote, "the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have the world to win. Working men of the world, unite!" After the revolution, he believed that all people would work together toward the common good. All people would contribute their labor, and all would take what they needed. National boundaries would disappear, and different classes would cease to exist because everyone would be equal. These socialist ideas were quite attractive to the working class. Some workers did not accept Marx's ideas of revolution, but they did see the value of banding together to negotiate for better conditions. Others accepted his ideas about a coming revolution and worked toward that goal. Marx became recognized as the philosophical father of communism.

Communist revolutions took place in several countries. Russia, China, Vietnam, and several other nations have had communist governments in the twentieth century, but the world revolution and classless society that Marx envisioned has not occurred. With its failure in Russia, it would appear that communism's days as a viable philosophy have ended.



Karl Marx

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. Why were the working classes dissatisfied with the prevailing economic system?

2. How did individuals in power tend to view the working class during Marx's time?

3. What was the name of the book that Marx wrote with Friedrich Engels?

4. What did Marx believe man's basic struggle throughout history was?

5. What two groups were defined by Marx as the bourgeoisie and proletariat?

6. Which side was Marx sympathetic toward?

7. How did Marx predict that the conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie would end?

8. Name a country that experienced a communist revolution.

9. What did Marx predict would happen to the different classes of people after the revolution?

10. Were Marx's predictions regarding the revolution accurate?
