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THE ORIGINAL “FIGHT CLUB”: Understanding the Philosophy of Karl Marx

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“Thus, the history of nations teaches us the necessity of the Union with Christ.” —Karl Marx, age 17¹

“The leaden world holds us fast And we are chained, shattered, empty, frightened, Eternally chained to this marble block of Being, ... and we—We are the apes of a cold God.” —Karl Marx, age 19²

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was born in the city of Trier in Rhineland Prussia into a middle-class family that claimed a few generations of Jewish rabbis in its lineage. While yet in his early years, his merchant father decided to accept membership into the Lutheran church, on behalf of the family, in order to find favor with local businessmen. The young Marx, a Christian, viewed this transaction as a compromise of true worship for profit’s sake and never forgave his father for it.

At seventeen, upon graduation from the Trier gymnasium, Marx began the study of law at the University of Bonn, but after just a short year of lackluster performance was urged to transfer to the University of Berlin. Here, at age nineteen, he came under the influence of the philosophy of the great G. W. F. Hegel and converted to militant atheism.

In 1843, Marx married Jenny von Westphalen, his childhood sweetheart, and they moved to Paris. Here his mature philosophy began to take shape, and he both began to co-edit a radical magazine and take to heart the philosophical principles of communism. Branded a radical, Marx was expelled in 1845 from Paris, and, after the French Revolution of 1848 (known as the February Revolution) failed, he again sought exile in London, where he and his family lived in poverty for the remainder of their lives. Three of his children died because they were not able to afford medical care, and Marx would often write his manuscripts in the British Museum because it was heated. At his death Marx was practically unknown.

MARX AND PROJECT MAYHEM

“We make your bed. We guard you while you’re asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history.” —Tyler Durden³

One need look no further for a superlative example of the twenty-first century infiltration of the mature ideology of Marx than Chuck Palahniuk’s debut novel, *Fight Club*. Having swept America by storm in 1996, it was reviewed as a gloriously original work exposing what is at the heart of our modern hate and discontent and pitched as one man’s search for misplaced masculinity in a white-collar world.⁴

If you have read the graphic novel or watched its film adaptation⁵ by director David Fincher, just what this utterly original work reveals beneath the surface may have eluded you; that is, if you weren’t familiar with the philosophy of Marx.

Fight Club is laden with Marxist rhetoric, spewed from the mouth of the nameless narrator’s alter ego, the antagonist and ticking-time-bomb *par excellence*, Tyler Durden. Durden, an insomniac and seller of soap he makes himself from the stolen collagen of upper-crust liposuction patients, frustratingly channels primal male aggression into a shocking new form of therapy. He takes jobs to harass rich members of society (Marx’s “bourgeois” class). He consistently reminds the members of Fight Club (who will eventually become the world revolutionary space monkeys of Project Mayhem) that they are not their possessions and should not be identified by them: “‘Sticking feathers up your butt,’ he says, ‘does not make you a chicken.’”⁶ Finally, in the most defining Marxist aspect of all, The Paper Street Soap Company Durden starts is essentially a physical manifestation of Marxist ideals.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx declares that “[Communists] declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.”⁷ The similarities between Marx’s call for a communist revolution and Durden’s call for mayhem are striking:

*“Imagine,” Tyler said, “stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you’ll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life and you’ll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower.”...This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right away destruction of civilization.*⁸

Like Marx, Tyler believes that his project will save the world. The objective of Project Mayhem is to destroy civilization as it is currently known; and civilization as it is currently known is a capitalist civilization.

MARXISM’S GRAND NARRATIVE

Today, frighteningly enough, it is safe to think of Marxism as a “theory for all seasons.” It can be and often is appropriated by anyone at any time to comment on anything and

everything. Marxism analyzes all phenomena in terms of its theory of “dialectical materialism” and a particular historical vision accompanies this theory. The immediate source of Marx’s dialectical materialism is found in the idealist philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel enriched the philosophical understanding of critical theory with the crucial term “alienation,” which explains the interrelation of logic to history.

In logic, it specifies the contradiction latent in all thinking, meaning that one idea will inevitably provoke its opposite.

Hegel’s aim was to resolve this in and by consciousness itself. For example, a person might offer a proof for God’s existence (*thesis*), which would then give rise to a disproof (*anti-thesis*). A resolution of these two proofs would then lead to a *synthesis* of opposing ideas. According to Hegel, consciousness proceeds in this way historically to a higher synthesis, in a continuous upward spiral of self-realization.

Alienation in this scheme is dialectical; that is, the inadequacy of one form of consciousness turns into another, again and again, until a “proper science” is achieved. Alienation is a process by which mind—as the consciousness of a subject (*thesis*)—becomes an object of thought for itself (*anti-thesis*). And thereby, the human mind constantly progresses to the next higher stage of *synthesis* and self-consciousness. To the question—“What is the object of history?”—Hegel’s reply is “the realization of absolute knowledge.”

History is the journey of the “World Spirit” in its progress through a series of stages until it reaches the highest form of self-realization, or “Absolute Spirit.” That form had been attained in Hegel’s view by the Prussian state in which he served as a public official (i.e., as professor of philosophy at the University of Berlin).

Marx gave this idea a materialist foundation; that is, he shifted alienation away from “mind contemplating itself” to the class struggle as the real history of consciousness in progress. Marx would say that our task is to contemplate the process of consciousness from the vantage point that it will attain only at the end of its journey—but not to interfere. Marx believed philosophers such as Hegel have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

The realization of philosophy—literally its end—is for Marx the defeat of bourgeois⁹ capitalism by the industrial working class, and the establishment of a Communist society that finally abolishes the “latent contradiction” of exploiter and exploited. And this is the program that Marx sets out in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹⁰

According to Marx, capitalism had simplified the class antagonisms into two great hostile ones—*bourgeoisie* versus *proletariat*. The struggle is reduced to private ownership

of the means of production versus the workers who sell their labor to this capitalist system of production.

Marx explored to exhaustion the hidden mechanisms of society. He sought an answer to the question, “How does capitalism work?” The real dialectical question for Marx was, “How does it reproduce and maintain itself?” The answer he discovered is by two mechanisms normally camouflaged from view, which it is his aim to expose and bring to revolutionary consciousness.

The first mechanism is consumerism. A worker’s production depends on his or her reproduction. Work, work, and more work equals food, clothing, and shelter for my family. The second mechanism is surplus value, by which capitalist production succeeds in exploiting more labor time than is actually paid for. This is a complex analysis from which we need only retain the essential—the hidden, disguised, or unconscious nature of the system at work.

In addition to these two mechanisms, Marx saw a third hidden element at work in society, a structure that is general and fundamental to all societies, including the capitalist. Society always consists of an economic base, or infrastructure, and a superstructure. The superstructure comprises everything cultural—religion, politics, law, education, the arts—which is determined by a specific economy (slave-based, feudal, mercantile, capitalist, etc.).

Marx believed we should understand the superstructure as ideology—ways of thinking characteristic of class behavior (what we take for granted as natural). What ideology is literally based on is the economic infrastructure—the means by which it produces itself, its wealth, and who owns those means of production.

Once again we notice Marx’s critical insistence on the hidden: religion, politics, law—everything cultural that we “live by”—disguise and render perfectly natural an economic means of production that is unnatural.

CRITICAL THEORIES ABOUND

Today, amidst the ongoing rapid proliferation of critical theories, it is hard to distinguish poststructuralists from postcolonialists or deconstructionists from queer theorists. Unless one is a person of leisure, who devotes a few hours a day keeping up with the endless range of potential worldviews, keeping relevant is a daunting task. However, the follower of Christ confronting any critical theory can always find common ground between the Marxian concept of alienation and their own experience of having once been lost in the world and in their own sin.

Like it or not, a person who rejects Christian doctrine for a critical theory of any variety does so with great conviction, even if that conviction is stubbornly wrong-headed. They are not likely to listen to your explanation of this revolutionary Jesus of Nazareth, unless you are so inclined to lend an ear to the philosophical meanderings of someone like Karl Marx.

For Marx, alienation meant the estrangement of workers from their work, their fellow citizens, and ultimately themselves. Man is no longer *homo sapiens* (“man as the

knower”) but has become *homo faber* (“man as the maker”). This is the direct result of the exploitive nature of capitalism. To create a just and fair society, the entire economic structure must be transformed:

*The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production...then comes the period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.*¹¹

Instead of looking toward the cross of Christ for mercy for both the world’s and his own rebellion, Marx looked for justice in the structure of society and he believed that harmony could only be achieved via a revolution of the masses—something akin to Palahniuk’s Project Mayhem. This revolution, which by the mid 1960s had more than two billion adherents in the form of the power ethics of communism and its dialectical materialism, still finds an audience among millions in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, from a devotional commentary, “On Abiding in Christ,” that was based on the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, August 17, 1835. Online at Civilitas, of God! Uncompromising Catholicity, <http://civilitasofgod.blogspot.com/>.
- 2 For the complete translated text of *Oulanem*, see Robert Payne, *The Unknown Karl Marx* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 81–83.
- 3 Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 166.
- 4 Roger Ebert, “Fight Club,” *Chicago Sun-Times Online*, March 20, 2002, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1999/10/101502.html.
- 5 *Fight Club* (Regency Enterprises, 1999), starring Brad Pitt, Helena Bonham Carter, and Edward Norton.
- 6 Palahniuk, 69.
- 7 Available online: SparkNotes Editors, “SparkNote on The Communist Manifesto,” SparkNotes LLC, <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/communist/> (accessed May 2, 2013), section 4. In book form: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, with an introduction by Eric Hobshawm (London: Verso Publishing, 1998), 37.
- 8 Palahniuk, 165.
- 9 By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor. The proletariat is the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live (Engels).
- 10 *The Communist Manifesto*, 34–35.
- 11 Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (New York: Anchor, 1959), 43–44.