

## A Marxist Glossary Thomas J. Brommage, Jr.

Understanding Marx can be difficult. In addition to overcoming the spurious stereotypes by which Americans often characterize Marx's thought and his very non-linear dialectical method, Marx uses a set of inter-defined terms which may be unfamiliar to the reader. This brief glossary is intended to overcome the last of these difficulties. Below are some terms commonly used by Marx and later Marxists, including brief explanations of each. The terms which appear underlined are defined elsewhere in this glossary. Where necessary, I have tried to include textual references (if possible) to where major discussion of each term occurs.

**alienation:** (*Entfremdung*, also “externalization” or “estrangement”) The four-fold process of leveling the worker undergoes, which results from the loss of the created object in the process of wage labor. It is *not* to be understood as a *psychological process* (such as despair or depression), but rather is an existential condition of the laborer—similar, for example, to Heidegger's use of the term *Angst*). Its modes are 1) alienation from object, 2) alienation from the act of labor, 3) alienation from *species-being* (man *qua* man), and 4) alienation from others (man from man). The first two are aspects of “individual alienation,” the second two “social alienation.” The doctrine of alienation is contained in Marx's early works (specifically, the “Alienated Labor” section of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*) although some interpreters find a similar doctrine in his later analysis of commodity fetishism (Part I, section 4 in *Capital Vol. 1*).

**bourgeoisie:** A sort-of buffer class in society, characterized by partial control (although not ownership) of the means of production. Later Marxists analyze the bourgeoisie as maintaining a “false consciousness” (although Marx himself never used the term) whereby their awareness of their place in capitalism is distorted. Like the capitalists, they maintain the system of wage labor; and like the proletariat they are not directly the beneficiaries of their labor. In more contemporary economic terms, they are “the middle class.”

**capital:** A collective noun which includes investment funds and also the means of production. Capitalism is defined by the fact that their use is directed at creating more money (in the process of production, mediated through the creation of commodities). Capital is privately owned under Capitalism, and is one of the major factors in the development leading to Communism. It is related to the creation of surplus value in the process of wage labor. Capital stands in inverse proportion to wage labor, whereby a decrease in wages leads to an increase in profit (and hence, capital).

**Capitalism:** An economic system characterized by private ownership of the means of production, in which wage labor is necessary for production. Marx analyzes the inequity of the capitalist system throughout his writings, and interprets capitalism as one stage in the historical development of mankind, dialectically resulting from the stage of feudalism and prior to the stage of socialism, which Marx believes will lead inevitably to communism.

**capitalists:** The highest class in capitalist society. They are characterized as being the private owners of the means of production. Capitalists, unlike the proletariat and bourgeois classes, are the direct beneficiaries of the process of wage labor through the creation and appropriation of surplus value—which is often used against the worker in the form of capital.

**class:** A subset of society defined in terms of its economic role. In capitalism, three classes exist: the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. Marx analyzes the necessity of eliminating class through the proletarian revolution, leading to a classless society under communism. Famously, in the manuscript volume which became part of *Capital Vol. 3* (edited and published posthumously by Engels), Marx sets out to define of class—but the manuscript breaks off mid-stream, inconclusively.

**class consciousness:** Collective awareness of a class by which one overcomes the ideology of a given mode of production, and can view clearly one's place in the economic process. It is a necessary (but not sufficient) characteristic of the proletarian revolution, leading eventually to communism. Analogies hold between other forms of critical social theory, including “race consciousness” and “gender consciousness.”

**class struggle:** The major contradiction that has been gradually resolving itself throughout the history of human development. In this sense, one can view class struggle as the “engine” which drives history. Through the process of historical development, there have always been an “upper” and a “lower” class, and through the economic process the upper class(es) benefit directly from the exploitation of the lower class(es). In capitalism, class struggle reaches its peak between the capitalist and the proletarian classes, leading to revolution and eventually to communism, which is defined by the absence of class.

**commodity:** Very simply, a product which is created solely for the purpose of sale on the market. The commodity has two distinct aspects: use-value and exchange-value. Marx's fullest analysis of the commodity and its aspects is contained in the first part of *Capital, Vol. 1* (entitled “Commodities and Money”).

**Communism:** The final stage of economic development, culminating in a society without class. It is the dialectical overcoming of the contradictions inherent in capitalism mediated through socialism. It is characterized by collective ownership of the means of production, leading to a society where workers are more directly beneficiaries of the process of labor.

**division of labor:** The process of assigning specific portions of the process of production to certain people. The earliest instantiation is the gendered division of labor, and grows through successive modes of production leading to its greatest height in capitalism. Through the process of economic development, labor becomes increasingly specialized. Its highest form exists in capitalism, under the industrial model of the “assembly line” where the division extends to mere pieces of commodities. Some of its most pernicious consequences in this form include the monotony of the act of labor (leading to alienation) and also failure of the worker to develop skills outside of his or her specific function.

**exchange-value:** The value of a commodity on the open market. The measure of exchange-value is how much one is willing to exchange for the commodity, either by bartering with other commodities, or through sale by exchange of currency. It is related to use-value and surplus value, insofar as the exchange-value of a commodity minus its use-value equals the measure of surplus value. The exchange-value is a qualitative measure of a commodity and is not fixed, but rather fluctuates based on market relations such as supply and demand.

**feudalism:** A largely agrarian mode of production which is immediately prior historically to capitalism. It is characterized by ownership of the means of production by the aristocratic feudal lords and kings, whereby serfs tend the land. The underclass in feudalism owes a tribute to the lord for the privilege of working their land.

**homo faber:** The only essential characteristic of humankind, according to Marx. It is the nature of man to be a creative being, to make things through one's labor from natural materials which in turn satisfy needs—be they individual or social. Insofar as wage labor is objectified in the commodity through the process of labor, the worker is essentially alienated under capitalism from this essential characteristic. The contradiction between the essence of humankind as creator and the existence as worker under the capitalist mode of production will tend to resolve itself, leading to later stages of economic development culminating in communism.

**ideology:** The entirety of our collective spirit (*Geist*) relative to a given mode of production. Marx analyzes ideology as an outgrowth of the mode of production, where the economic conditions form the “base” upon which rests the ideological “superstructure.” Ideology includes not only philosophy and religion, but also our politics, law and ethics. Our current ideological form is thus only temporary, and a change in the mode of production will be attended by an accompanying change in ideology. It serves a pernicious function insofar as it satiates the worker—blinding one from the economic conditions of exploitation in capitalism and preventing the development of class consciousness.

**labor:** The creative process under which mankind mediates the relation between nature and social needs. Labor, when added to the total cost of materials in the process of production, equals the use-value of a given commodity. Under capitalism, labor is manifested specifically as wage labor—however not all labor is wage labor. Marx, like most classical economic theorists, adopts a labor theory of value which specifies that labor is the most important factor in the value of a given commodity.

**means of production:** That which is incorporated in the production process, used to create commodities. The means of production includes not only things such as machinery and technology used in the process of labor, but also more generally anything which is incorporated in the process of creation including the raw materials themselves. Under capitalism, the means of production are privately owned. Marx thinks that the proletariat class will take control of the means of production in the revolution, leading eventually to a system where workers can fully become the beneficiaries of their labor.

**mode of production:** A given stage of production in the historical development of society. Marx counts at least seven distinct modes of production, of which feudalism, capitalism, socialism and communism are the final stages.

**proletariat:** The under-class of society, who are characterized by little to no control over the means of production. The proletariat must instead sell their labor to the owner of the means of production (see wage labor). The proletariat is the revolutionary element of society, which Marx believes will overtake control of the means of production leading eventually to communism.

**revolution:** The process by which the proletariat takes control of the means of production, leading eventually to communism. Marx is ambiguous about the qualitative aspects of this revolution, sometimes sounding as if he advocates violent overthrow of the capitalist system, other times by more gradual and peaceful means—perhaps, even, by workers gaining control through the democratic process.

**socialism:** An intermediate mode of production between capitalism and communism. It is often referred to in contemporary economics as “mixed economy,” a mix of capitalism and social programs which allows workers to more directly benefit from the process of labor. Contemporary models of functioning socialism exist, for example in many European countries (especially in Scandinavian countries) and, to a much lesser degree, perhaps even the United States following the New Deal—although the socialist elements in the US have been progressively decreasing since the 1980's.

**surplus value:** Simply, profit. Surplus-value is created by wage labor, and is manifested negatively against the worker in the form of capital. It is the difference between a worker's wage and the value of his or her labor as manifested in the exchange-value of a commodity.

**use-value:** The value of the commodity in terms of its consumption or use. Use-value is an objective characteristic, and is defined by the sum of labor and raw materials used to create the commodity. Related to exchange-value and surplus value.

**wage labor:** The primary form of labor in the capitalist mode of production. In the process of capitalism, the worker must sell his or her labor as a commodity—and as such, labor is affected by the relation between supply and demand just as any other commodity. Wage labor is defined by hourly or piece rates by which the worker is “compensated” for one's labor. It is important to note here that the object of labor is never owned by the worker, but rather ownership of the commodity is retained by the owner of the means of production (simply, the “boss”), leading to alienation on the part of the worker. Since the owner sells the commodity that the worker produces, the worker is not directly the beneficiary of one's labor, which Marx believes to be exploitative. Although the worker is compensated for one's labor, the value of the commodities produced in the labor process must, by necessity, be greater than the rate of compensation to allow for surplus value. It stands in inverse relation to capital, since the greater the wage an employer must pay, the less profit; and conversely, a decrease in wage leads to an increase in profit.