

READING QUESTIONS: KARL MARX

- “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” (1844): the “young Marx”
 1. What does Marx mean by saying that the worker becomes the most wretched of commodities?
 2. How does Marx define “alienation,” or “estrangement?” What are the four aspects of alienated labor? (Read carefully!) (62-64)
 3. Would better pay solve alienation? Why or why not?

- “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848): a pamphlet-length history of capitalist society and a vision of its end
 1. What does it mean that the “history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (158)? What are classes? Who, or what, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat?
 2. Why does Marx describe the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class (161)? Are you surprised to hear him saying such flattering (and by no means ironic) things about their achievements?
 3. What is happening to the various classes in capitalist society?
 4. What will lead to the end of capitalist society, in the account he gives here? (Hint: it’s more than one thing.)
 5. Marx claims that under capitalism “no other nexus between man and man [is left but]...callous cash payment” and that “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” (161-162). What does he mean? Are these good or bad things?

- The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): Marx as the historian of a failed revolution which seems to result in history moving backwards, not forwards
 1. In what sense is history a nightmare?
 2. Why does the bourgeoisie “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past?” How does this compare with his image of the bourgeoisie in the “Manifesto?”

- Capital*, vol. 1 (1867): Marx’s economics, the “scientific” basis of his work
 1. What is a commodity? Why is it mysterious? What is its secret? (220ff.)
 2. Why is wage labor a form of exploitation? What is surplus-value (282, but see the analysis that leads up to it)? Think back to Adam Smith’s occasional statements that in some “original state of things...the whole produce of labor belongs to the laborer” (*WN*, Book I, Ch. VIII, p. 82).
 3. What is the “secret of primitive accumulation” (294ff.)? What is primitive accumulation, anyway? Why is this important? What is the story he tells about the “prehistory” of capitalism? Notice that he briefly mentions Smith.
 4. How does Marx describe the process that will destroy capitalism (297-300)?

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•“Critique of the Gotha Program” (1875): some of Marx’s few comments on society after the socialist revolution

1. What are the two phases of society after the revolution? How do they differ?
2. What is the motto of the higher, “communist” phase (321)?
3. What is the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat (328)? Why does he call it a dictatorship?