

Marx on Leadership: Necessity Abhors a Vacuum

David L. Cawthon

Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.—Karl Marx

As we approach the end of the nineteenth century in our quest for a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of leadership, we find democracy continuing to flourish. Concepts of *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity* had become entrenched throughout Europe. Even in Germany where the anti-democratic Hegelian dialectic had inspired a new stream of philosophical inquiry, reaction against the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes amidst the poverty and squalor of the masses continued to mount. To paraphrase Rousseau, no longer was the starving multitude willing to suffer the bare necessities of life while the privileged few gorged themselves with superfluities.

Indeed, democratic egalitarianism was about to emerge as a dominant force in Western culture. Yet, it would not be rooted in the Hegelian *Absolute*. It would not be couched in terms of *natural law* and *social contracts*. Instead, it would be advanced from a perspective of purely natural forces. It would develop from the proposition that without economic freedom, there can be no political freedom. It would propose that unless a man controls the means of production in society, he is little more than a slave to those who do.

At the forefront of this movement in the mid-nineteenth century was Karl Marx. Along with his close friend and colleague Friedrich Engels, he became the driving force of a political philosophy that would serve to inspire revolutions throughout the world. Before examining the impact his thought might have had concerning the leadership dyad, however, it is necessary to consider the philosophical framework from which he derived his theories.

Although he was anything but an idealist, Marx was heavily influenced by the dialectic of Hegel. History, he agreed, is the underlying force of reality. For Marx, however, the historical dialectic was not the *Absolute* unfolding and revealing itself as Hegel had proposed. Marx shunned the concept of an *Absolute*, a *Zeitgeist*. There were no *a priori* ideas. Instead, he supplanted the transcendental with the material. He replaced Hegel's discernible, ultimate, and universal principles of the universe with the relativity of sensual experience. Accordingly, he believed that man's values, his religion, his culture, and his social order had all been determined by the continuous grind of a dialectic consisting only of natural forces and economic realities. Will Durant describes the relationship between Marx and Hegel as follows:

Cawthon

In place of the Absolute as determining history through the *Zeitgeist*, Marx offered mass movements and economic forces as the basic causes of every fundamental change, whether in the world of things or in the life of thought. Hegel, the imperial professor, had hatched the socialistic eggs.

Yet, Marx's dialectical materialism did not reveal itself in conflict between and among nations. Instead, it found its expression in the historic struggle between social classes.

First, Marx proposed, humans lived in a mostly classless society as they evolved through the processes of natural selection. Gradually, however, some gained dominance over others. Kingdoms emerged. And from the struggle between the king (thesis) and his slaves (antithesis), a feudal system (synthesis) unfolded. Subsequently, from the conflict between the feudal lords (thesis) and the serfs (antithesis), capitalism (synthesis) evolved. Then, from the opposition inherent within capitalism, i.e., employers (thesis) and employees (antithesis), Marx believed socialism (synthesis) would flower, and in socialism, the dialectic would find its fulfillment. In a classless society there would be no need for further struggle. Man would have attained perfect freedom. Thus, Marx argued, it is through the struggle between classes, not nations, that dialectical materialism unfolds.

As a determinist, Marx held that the evolution of classes within society is independent of man's will. It is determined through natural and economic forces. Man does not choose the class to which he belongs. Classes are determined by the economic systems in place at any given moment of history. Accordingly, one's social existence determines his consciousness. The *essence* of man, Marx argues in *The German Ideology*, lies not in his spirit but in the historical context in which he finds himself:

It shows that history does not end by being resolved into "self-consciousness" as "spirit of the spirit," but that in it at each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the other hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.

Moreover, Marx held that these same economic conditions are the forces that would eventually transfer the means of production from capitalism to socialism. First, Marx believed that the value of a product is equal to the quantity of work that has been put in to it: *The Labor Theory of Value*. As he delineated this proposition, he distinguished between a product's *use value* and its *exchange value*. Air, for example, has high *use value*; yet, in normal circumstances, it has *low exchange value*. We all need air. At the same time, since it is readily available, we are not compelled to exchange much for it. A diamond, on the other hand, has *low use*

Marx

value; yet it has high *exchange value*, primarily because of the labor value added to it through its extraction and refinement. Most of us have little use for a diamond; yet, many are willing to pay a high price for it. Thus, a product's *economic value* is determined by the amount of labor that has been added to it.

Second, Marx argued that the capitalist seeks a surplus over the value or worth of a product. He seeks a profit: *The Theory of Surplus Value*. In order to maximize this profit, managers seek to employ workers at the lowest possible cost; yet, as they sell their products, capitalists do not share their profits with those who have enhanced its value through their labor. Consequently, as employees sell their labor for increasingly lower wages, they sell themselves, and in doing so, they become little more than commodities of the rich. Profits, Marx believed, are extracted from the backs of the worker.

Third, with the demand for ever increasing profits, Marx believed that the capitalist would be in constant conflict with his competition, and in order to be competitive, companies would increase their efforts to acquire inexpensive labor. From his perspective in the late nineteenth century, Marx believed that eventually only the economically strong would survive; the remainder would be eliminated by fierce competition. Monopolies would emerge, and a *concentration of capital* would occur. With economies of scale taking precedence over the value of human labor, workers would become alienated from themselves as well as from their fellow workers. The capitalist would develop a fetish toward his products, i.e., products would be perceived as having greater value than the *humanness* of those who produce them. More important, the number of rich capitalists would decrease as their wealth increased. Conversely, the number of poor workers would increase while the value of their labor decreased.

Finally, as a result of this antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the workers would revolt against the capitalists, and because of their sheer numbers and a strong belief in the justice of their cause, they would be successful. They would take over the means of production, and the wealth of society would become the collective property of all. Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis. With the evolution of these material forces, man's final synthesis would be a classless society. He would finally be free. Through the dialectic of history, he would have escaped his bondage, first from the king, then from the feudal lord, and then from the capitalist. At this final stage of his evolution, he would have reached his perfection. He would have attained his freedom.

Without question, the implications of Marx's political philosophy regarding leadership are immense. For as we pose the question *Who should lead?* we will not find answers that include concepts such as *natural law*, or *divine right*, or *philosopher-kings* or *guardians*, or *freemen*. The same is true as we seek to define *equality* within the leadership dyad. Nowhere will we find justification for slavery or women's servitude. We will not read that *Some have been born to lead, while others have been born to follow*. What we will find, however, is that in a classless society, the notion of a *leadership dyad* loses its relevance.

Cawthon

Nevertheless, Marx did not believe that the ruling classes would peacefully abandon their control over the economic forces of society. He was most aware of the fact that those with control over production would not readily acknowledge what he considered to be their injustices. He knew there would be conflict. He knew that the difficult road from capitalism to socialism would be pitted with pain and struggle. Yet, as Sidney Hook notes in his book, *Marx and the Marxists*, Marx constantly distanced himself from those who would destroy personal liberty in the process. Hook further explains:

Marx's temperament was Promethean; his intellectual tradition was Greek and scientific rather than medieval and literary; his ethical ideal was a society "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Ultimately the test of all institutions was the extent to which they made possible for all persons the full and free enrichment of their personalities. This belief in freedom, equality, and individual personality distinguishes Marx radically from all totalitarians who invoke his name.

Freedom and Equality. These are the blocks upon which he constructed his philosophy. In order to understand these concepts within a Marxist society, however, we must distinguish between what he termed *individual (egoistic)* man and *species-being*, for in his work, *On the Jewish Question*, Marx explains that man's freedom can only be realized when individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen:

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power.

In a manner similar to Rousseau, Marx explained that man must transform himself, who, in isolation, is a complete but solitary whole (*individual man*) into a part of something greater (*species-being*). Through this transformation, man would redefine his being, for man's ultimate freedom lies in the consciousness of his relationship to the whole.

According to Marx, such freedom could only be achieved through the consciousness of the *species-being* breaking the shackles of capitalism. Driven by dialectical materialism, total freedom would be inevitable as individual freedoms were dissolved into the collective freedom of the *species-being*. It would be determined by the laws of history, by the natural forces of economics. It would be revealed through the dignity of labor. It would become manifest in the unity of working men and women throughout the world. No longer would they be the chattel

Marx

of the bourgeois capitalist. Instead, the proletariat would control the means of production within society. Interacting as one consciousness, *species-being* would control its own destiny. In his essay, *The Marxian Conception of Freedom*, Andrzej Walicki discusses the implications of this awareness:

First, Marx saw “true freedom” as realizable only after the final triumph of Communism. Second, he accepted individual freedom—as an element of “true freedom”—only in so far as it was compatible with his grandiose utopian vision of the full self-actualization of human essence in history. While he thought of “true freedom” as presupposing individual freedom, he persisted in seeing the species as the subject of freedom; in other words, he was concerned not so much with individual freedom as with the “liberation” of the superior capacities inherent, as he thought, in the species nature of man. In his view “true freedom” was the unhampered development of all the faculties of man as a “species being.” Thus it was not “negative” in the sense of being aim-independent. It was a means for the realization of the final end of history: the creation of a new, regenerate, superior man. This man—or rather superman—of the future was to embody Marx’s ideal of a “true man,” as opposed to “real men,” i.e. the undeveloped and degraded human individuals of the pre-socialist epoches of history (and especially of the epoch of capitalism.)

Not only would all men be free under this *grandiose utopian vision of the full self-actualization of human essence in history*, as the collective owners of all property, they would all share in the fruits of their labor. “From each according to his ability,” Marx exclaims, “to each according to his needs!”

When Marx speaks of equality, he speaks of *economic* equality. Yet, he did not suggest that wealth should be distributed equally. Instead, he taught that it should be distributed in a manner proportionate to one’s needs. Political philosopher Joseph Cropsey explains this proposition as follows:

This is a maxim fit to serve as the fundamental law among loyal, wise, and incorruptible friends, devoted to one another with an absolutely unselfish benevolence. Among such friends, not only would no individual seek his advantage at the expense of others, but the thought of doing so would never occur to him. In this sense, duty as duty would be transcended: what the mere sense of duty dictates to a man capable of selfishness would be the most spontaneous desire of a man as a member of the friendly society. His duty would not appear to him as duty. Marxian society would be a society of billions of friends warmly joined in the rarest and most sensitive union of amity.

Within this society of free and equal citizens joined in a sensitive union of amity, Marx believed that some had more to contribute than others. Not all individuals are born with equal ability and talent, and some would need more than

Cawthon

others in order to make their proper contribution to society. Communism, however, would resolve these rights of inequality as it evolved into a system that would generate wealth in abundance. Marx explains this evolution in his work, *Critique of the Gotha Program*:

But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labour. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productivity capacity as natural privileges. *It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right. . . .* Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal.

In a higher phase of Communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!

Yet, as noted above, Marx was more an economic philosopher than he was a political philosopher, and his delineation of economic equality far surpassed his explanation of political equality. Nevertheless, within the brotherhood of man Marx believed that humans, *all* humans, would reach their perfection. Like Rousseau, he believed that the goodness of man would prevail. Joseph Cropsey summarizes his vision as follows:

His vision of life for the generality of mankind is what the ancient thinkers conceived as the highest possibility open to the wisest and the best—the mutual love of a few noble spirits, elevated above every petty desire, free from every trace of envy or worldly ambition, willingly sharing that invariable good which does not pass away from its possessor when he bestows it upon another and which is multiplied when it is divided, that good being wisdom. . . . The perfect society is the society, then, in which philosophy as the rule of life would become indistinguishable from justice, which also is the rule of life. In the perfect society, justice would

Marx

administer itself, and it would therefore be perfectly pure because untainted by the need to coerce, to punish, or to deceive. The disappearance of justice into philosophy might be said to be equivalent to the disappearance of the political in the philosophic.

Within his vision of the perfect society lies the conviction that no human would be subservient to another. Accordingly, women, too, would share in this equality. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx details the relationship between men and women. No longer would women be considered the property of men as in the society of the bourgeoisie, for, as Marx states, “The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the *relation of man to woman*.” He continues:

In this *natural* relationship of the sexes man’s relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature—his own *natural* function. This relationship, therefore, is *sensuously manifested*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature has to him become the human essence of man. From this relationship one can therefore judge man’s whole level of development. It follows from the character of this relationship how much *man* as a *species being*, as *man*, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being.

Marx knew, however, that equality and freedom among humans would not come without painful struggle. They would need to break the chains of alienation. They would need to overcome their desires for private property. Man would need to return himself to himself, and the resolution of these aspirations would be found in Communism:

Communism as the *positive* transcendence of *private property*, or *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation of the human essence* by and for man; Communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development. This Communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.

Cawthon

Having reached this utopian consciousness, one might reasonably ask what need there would be for leadership, for with all living harmoniously without exploitation of one another, on what basis would one assume a position of authority over another? If all are free and equal, would the leader-follower dyad lose its meaning? Within Communism's ultimate fulfillment, according to Marx, there would be no state. There would be no leader-follower dyad, for all would live joyfully and peacefully, seeking only good for one another.

Until this fulfillment was attained, however, Marx acknowledged that leadership would be necessary. Leaders would be needed to guide the people. Thus, the Communist Party was born. The *Communist Manifesto* was written. Sydney Hook summarizes the leadership role of the Communist Party as follows:

The working class cannot succeed in its historical task without a leadership to enlighten and guide it. This leadership is supplied by those socialists who have taken to heart Marx's theories. . .

The task set for those who agree with Marx is clearly described. They are to participate in the day-by-day struggles of the working class, encourage organization of trade unions, and conduct militant struggles to improve conditions and standards of life. They are not to rest, however, with mere agitation for immediate reforms and better conditions but must press on to politicalize working-class activities and show that every class struggle is a poetical struggle. They, however, "do not constitute themselves a special party over and against other working-class parties" but strive to unite them in a common front. Further, "they erect no sectarian principles by which to control the proletarian movement." They do not impose a "Party line" but emphasize what is to the interests of the working class as a whole. At the same time they try to draw to the side of the workers discontented elements among other oppressed sections of the population. Finally, they seek to keep working-class parties free of narrow nationalist prejudices and, in an interdependent world with interlocking economies, teach that the fundamental interests of the international working class are of primary concern.

In many ways the leaders of the Communist Party as proposed by Marx would be similar to those of Rousseau. Their role would be to enlighten and guide the masses. Their function would be to assist those *who must have their wills made conformable to the species-being*, and as William and Alan Ebenstein explain, this directive contained in the *Communist Manifesto* is what provided Lenin his justification for totalitarianism:

Lenin's justification of dictatorship rests ultimately, like all other apologies of authoritarianism, on the profound conviction that the majority of the people is incapable of understanding and acting "correctly." Possessing the "correct" knowledge of the laws of history and society, Communists

Marx

have the right—and duty—to lead the masses into a new world, though the corrupting influences of the old world may make forcible leadership necessary. In Rousseauan terms, Lenin asserts that *Communists*, because of their scientific analysis of society, represent the *General Will of the Proletariat*, although the Wills of All in the proletariat may be ignorant or unwilling to admit it, for they can only think of their private, individual interests and advantages. The *General Will of the Proletariat* is therefore, for Lenin, not what the majority of the proletarians actually think, but what they would think if they were familiar with the “correct” Marxian analysis of social and economic development.

Leadership, then, becomes a *right* of those who possess the *correct* understanding of Marxian principles. In Orwellian terms, some are more equal than others. Not only is it their *right*, it is their *duty* to lead those who are unwilling to dissolve their individual liberties into the consciousness of the *species-being*. As a determinist, Marx held that leadership roles emerge through the natural forces of historical inevitability. In his *Letters on Historical Materialism*, Marx’s colleague Friedrich Engels explains that one’s claim to leadership is driven by the forces of economic necessity:

Men make their history themselves, but not as yet with a collective will according to a collective plan or even in a definite, delimited given society. Their aspirations clash, and for that very reason all such societies are governed by necessity, the complement and form of appearance of which is *accident*. The necessity which here asserts itself athwart all accident is again ultimately economic necessity. This is where the so-called great men come in for treatment. That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at a particular time in a particular country is, of course, pure chance. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own warfare, had rendered necessary, was chance; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man was always found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.

Thus, leaders emerge as they are *needed*. If not *this* one, then *that* one. It matters not who the leader might be, for leadership is determined by *chance*, by *fate*, by *destiny*. Necessity abhors a vacuum. When the need develops, a leader will rise to fill the void. Nevertheless, Marx concluded, that in the ultimate classless society, there would be no leaders, for the struggle among men would have ended. *Liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity* would have reached their fulfillment. All humans would have reached the *correct* understanding of social and economic development.

Cawthon

This, then, is a brief summary of the thought of Karl Marx as it relates to leadership. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, however, little attention has been given to the influences he might have had concerning our understanding of this most elusive topic. With Communism having proved itself to be ineffective, leaders and managers currently pay little heed to his political thought. In many parts of the Western world, his teachings are considered to be mostly irrelevant.

Nevertheless, many of his ideas remain an integral part of our managerial practices as we begin the new century. This is especially true if we view his ideas as logical extensions of the teachings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, for Marx pushed the concepts of democratic egalitarianism to their outer limits.

Accordingly, the origins of many of our more humanistic approaches to management so popular within the last few decades can be found in the writings of Karl Marx. Certainly Marx would have agreed with Douglas McGregor's hypotheses regarding Theory X and Theory Y. He would have supported McGregor's contention that managers often view workers as lazy and irresponsible. He would have supported those who insist that it is the opposite that is true. Thus, when we speak of *participative* management, for example, we are sharing Marx's belief that humans are quite capable of leading themselves toward the achievement of organizational goals.

The same is true for managers who recognize the meaningfulness of work, for those who believe in the quality of the work place, for those who have abandoned mechanistic hierarchies in favor of more organic structures that minimize a strict division of labor. They, too, are responding to Marx's charge against the alienation of the worker. *Empowerment. Total Quality Management. Quality Circles.* All have philosophical roots in the writings of Marx.

Similarly, when political leaders enact legislation that limits the concentration of wealth within society, they are acknowledging Marx's criticism of unbridled capitalism. Likewise, when managers implement *profit sharing* for those who have added value to their products, they are responding to the influence of Marx.

The feminine movement, too, is indebted to the teachings of Marx. Even though he acknowledged a natural division of labor among men and women, he was committed to their equality. He recognized the dignity of their humanity. Unlike many philosophers who had preceded him, he viewed women as more than the slaves of men. He rejected the notion that women are the private property and chattel of their masters.

For Marx, economic forces drive the dialectic. Thus, he would find little argument with those industrial leaders who embrace the scientific method as the appropriate means to achieve efficiency. As a naturalist he believed that science could increase the production of wealth. As a humanist he believed that wealth should be distributed in accordance with the needs of all who produced it. As a Communist, he believed that the two would merge into one consciousness, a consciousness that would bring mankind its ultimate freedom.

These are but a few examples of Karl Marx's influence regarding leadership in Western culture. Yet, they are important, for they provide continuity to our

Marx

understanding. They illustrate a connection between the thought of the early Greeks and that of our leaders today. A connection between the past and the present. Between the present and the future. Between a world-view acknowledging an Absolute as the divine force of history and one which contends that God is dead. He stands between human fulfillment and human alienation. More specifically, he stands between Hegel and Nietzsche. Accordingly, Karl Marx stands as a direct link to the philosophical nihilism of the twentieth century. Ω