

Erkin Özalp

He was born in Istanbul in 1968. After graduating from Boğaziçi University, Department of Industrial Engineering, he received his master's degree in Economic Theory from Marmara University. His articles have been published in Marxist journals since 1991. He co-authored many books and translated many works of Marx and Engels into Turkish. His books published by Yordam Kitap are as follows: *Teorisyeniniz Devrimciydi: 21. Yüzyılda Marksizm ve Sosyalizm* (Your Theorist Was a Revolutionary: Marxism and Socialism in the 21st Century) (2012; second edition in 2021), *Gençlerle Baş Başa: Yapay Zekâ* (Conversations with Young People: Artificial Intelligence) (2020; second printing in 2023), *Devrim Nasıl Yapılır? Dünyada Strateji Arayışları* (How to Make a Revolution? Socialist Strategies in Different Countries) (2023; second printing in 2024). The English translation of his last book was published in 2025.

He was among the editors and translators of the Turkish translation of the three volumes of Karl Marx's *Capital* from German, which were published by Yordam Kitap in 2011-2015. His other translations into Turkish (mainly from German, a few from English), listed according to their year of first publication, are as follows: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1998), Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850* (2009), Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (2009), Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (2016), Karl Marx, *The French Trilogy* (2016), Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *On the Gotha and Erfurt Programs* (edited and translated by the author, 2017), Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (2018), Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (2019), Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit* (2019), Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question* (2020), Friedrich Engels, *The Role of Force in History* (2020), Friedrich Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany* (2022), Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (2024).



YOUR THEORIST WAS A REVOLUTIONARY

Marxism and Socialism in the 21st Century

Erkin Özalp

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A FEW NOTES ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

This is a translation of the text of the second edition of my book, which was published in Turkish in 2021 (its first Turkish edition was published in 2012). I have not made any significant revisions.

The title of this book is a paraphrase of Nâzım Hikmet's verse, "Your lover is a communist," in which the poet refers to himself.

As I discuss in my book, *How to Make a Revolution? Socialist Strategies in Different Countries* (Yordam Kitap, 2025, pp. 160-166), I make a distinction between "populism" and "peopleism" (*halkçılık*, in Turkish). Therefore, I also use the word "peopleist," which will not sound familiar to the reader.

Instead of the term "welfare state," I prefer to use the term "social state" (*sosyal devlet*, in Turkish), because it emphasizes the "social" aspect.

In the original text, the quotations from Marx and Engels are my translations into Turkish. Here, I have used the English translations in the *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (MECW). The braces ({ }) in the translations are mine.

INTRODUCTION



We are living in a time when capitalism is once again being questioned. In 2011 alone, in many capitalist countries, including the imperialist ones, rallies against social injustice were organized, with hundreds of thousands of people participating. Even in the US, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, which targeted the big companies and used the slogan “world revolution,” emerged, and countless demonstrations have taken place, involving hundreds of thousands of people in total. Because the capitalist system is once again facing a serious economic crisis.

From the point of view of the dollar billionaires, who number in the thousands, the crises inevitably generated by capitalist relations of production threaten to reduce their wealth somewhat. They continue to live in great luxury as before. For billions of people, on the other hand, crises mean a further spread of unemployment, poverty, and hunger.

Of course, the current crisis is not only leading to a re-questioning of capitalism. In times of widespread despair and fear about the future, those who attribute all evils to current developments and advocate a return to some allegedly “ideal” periods in the past also gain strength.

Yet, the opportunities offered by humanity’s scientific and technological knowledge, on the one hand, and the recent internet-driven changes in how people interact with each other and with humanity’s accumulated knowledge, on the other, are enabling the emergence of movements that herald a new age of enlightenment.

For example, co-production activities based on sharing and volunteerism show that the mode of production based on the competition between individuals is not without alternatives. Those who seek to monopolize a significant part of humanity's knowledge are being confronted by those who are fighting to make all kinds of knowledge accessible to everyone. New means of struggle against capitalism and new forms of organization are being developed.

In such a period, it is natural that Marx, the most important critic of capitalism, is remembered again and that those who say, even if for completely different reasons, "Marx was right," attract attention. More importantly, the success of movements that question capitalism will also depend on their relations with Marxism.

The movements questioning capitalism have things to learn from Marxism, and Marxism has things to learn from them.

But in the meantime, when it comes to Marxism, there is a need for some "cleaning up." Like all theories that gain some popularity, Marxism has been greatly distorted, both by its enemies and by its friends who value this or that aspect of it above all else. Most importantly, many have forgotten that Marx was first and foremost a revolutionary.

Yet one of the things that those who want to fight capitalism need most is the revolutionary Marx.



In the first chapter of this book, I briefly examine the history of Marx's becoming a revolutionary. According to him, among the conditions for becoming a communist, that is, a working-class revolutionary, was to "cease to be a theorist and philosopher."

Marx argued that the force that would overthrow capitalism was the working class. According to a frequently voiced claim, this was because the workers were much more organized and class-conscious in his time. However, Marxism's emphasis on the work-

ing class is not based on the expectation that this class will fight for revolution in every period, but on the fact that it can lead a revolution at certain historical turning points. In the second chapter, which can be seen as a long parenthesis, I discuss why it is not possible for workers, who constitute the majority of society in most capitalist countries today, to act as a revolutionary class in ordinary times.

By “revolution,” Marx meant the establishment of a new social order through the overthrow of capitalism. He was trying to pave the way for “social revolutions” that would be the work of the masses. But according to him, for social revolutions to take place, first of all, the working class of each country had to take power in its own country, i.e., “political revolutions” had to take place. Throughout his life, he made efforts to strengthen the struggles of the working class for political power. In the third and fourth chapters, I deal with Marx’s initial model of revolution and the changes he made to this model based on the experiences of revolutionary struggles in Europe. My aim in these chapters is not to compile Marx’s assessments of revolutionary struggles, but to emphasize the points that are important for those carrying out revolutionary struggles in the 21st century.

The fifth chapter contains a very brief summary of *Capital*, one of Marx’s most important works, in relation to current developments. In *Capital*, Marx attempted to show why the overthrow of capitalism was necessary and inevitable. Today, as in the past, a significant number of those who seek to address the problems caused by capitalism are looking for solutions that do not require the overthrow of this social order. Instead of ending the private ownership of the means of production, they want to limit the influence of the largest corporations on state administration and ensure that states prioritize social policies. *Capital*, on the other hand, not only described the laws of operation of the capitalist mode of production and their inevitable consequences, but also

made it clear that capitalism cannot be transformed through reforms into a social order compatible with social interests.

Of course, the fact that capitalism is a social order that is contrary to social interests does not prove that a better social order can be established. Defenders of capitalism ultimately argue that capitalism is “bad but without alternatives” by putting forward reasons such as “human nature.” On the other hand, we have the experiences of socialism of the 20th century, primarily the Soviet Union. Does the fact that the socialist countries were defeated by imperialist attacks justify considering these experiences as completely wrong? The sixth chapter discusses how those fighting for revolutions in the 21st century should view the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, it is clear that the revolutions of the 21st century cannot be repetitions of those of the 20th century. Above all, the new possibilities at the disposal of humanity allow setting much more advanced goals than those of the past in terms of organizing production processes in line with social interests and the participation of the people in government. I assess these new possibilities in the seventh chapter using concrete examples.

But how can the possible political revolutions of the 21st century be realized concretely? In the last chapter, in light of past experiences, I focus on how the forces that want to overthrow capitalism can come to power. Undoubtedly, the revolutionaries of each country must first discuss how they can come to power in their own country. For this reason, the last subheading of the book is “The agenda of Turkey’s left.”

To summarize in one sentence, I aim to contribute to the debate on how to pave the way for revolutions in the 21st century that will be the work of the masses and enable people to govern themselves, as Marx envisioned. I believe that concrete and realistic goals of struggle must be at the center of this debate. If this work becomes one of the occasions for identifying more convincing, more advancing goals of struggle that will bring us closer to the revolution more quickly, I will have achieved my goal.



I am truly indebted to my friends who contributed to the preparation of this book with their criticisms, warnings, and suggestions. Without them, I do not know if I would have had the courage to finish it.

Erkin Özalp

December 2011

A FEW NOTES ABOUT THE SECOND EDITION



The PDF file of *Your Theorist Was a Revolutionary*, which I shared on my blog in 2012, has been downloaded more than 2,500 times to date. Additionally, the PDF and EPUB versions of the book can be accessed through numerous websites, torrent files, and other sharing platforms, making it impossible for me to determine the total number of downloads. Of course, I cannot know how many of the downloaded files have been read. However, given that the first edition is sold out, one can probably conclude that some people have read the book.

One of the pieces of feedback that pleased me the most was that some readers who participated in reading groups to learn about Marxism said that *Your Theorist Was a Revolutionary* allowed for fruitful discussions.

Before the second edition, I only made some stylistic corrections to the book and used the new translations from Yordam Kitap for the Marx-Engels quotations. Despite (and even partly in light of) the critical developments in the intervening period, notably the Gezi Resistance, I believe that the main theses of the book remain relevant.

On the other hand, I aim to complete a new book on the issues discussed in the last chapter in 2022.*

Erkin Özalp

December 2021

* This book, *Devrim Nasıl Yapılır? Dünyada Strateji Arayışları*, was published by Yordam Kitap in 2023, and its English translation, *How to Make a Revolution? Socialist Strategies in Different Countries*, in 2025.

HOW DID MARX BECOME A REVOLUTIONARY?



At the age of 17, Karl Marx, born in 1818, wrote an essay as a school assignment discussing what to consider when choosing a profession, in which he described two main aims: The welfare of mankind, and one's own perfection.¹ According to the young Marx, these two aims were not necessarily in conflict with each other. On the contrary, God had created human nature in such a way that the only way for man to perfect himself was to contribute to the welfare of humanity. One who worked only for himself could become a famous man of learning, a great sage, an excellent poet, but he could not be a perfect, truly great man. The people whom history considered great were those who ennobled themselves by working for the common good. Again, according to the young Marx, the way not to bow down to the burdens of life was to work for the happiness of all.*

Marx wanted to study philosophy and literature in order to serve “millions,” as he put it. German philosophy was in its heyday. Of the four most important figures of the movement known as “German idealism,” Kant had died in 1804, Fichte in 1814, and Hegel in 1831; Schelling was still alive.

* In 1865, at the age of 47, the same Marx would define happiness as “to fight,” misery as “to submit,” and his most hated vice as “servility” in a “Confession” (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/04/01.htm>).

But there are other factors that play a role in people's choice of profession. Marx was one of those who wanted to study philosophy at university but were forced by their fathers to choose a "more proper profession." He began to study law, first at the University of Bonn and then at the University of Berlin.

Of course, deciding what field the sons will study does not mean determining what subjects they will be interested in at university. Marx, especially in Berlin, was more interested in philosophy than law. His 1841 dissertation was on the differences between the natural philosophies of the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus.

However, even in his early years at university, Marx had become skeptical of the leading German philosophers. In a letter to his father in 1837, for example, he said that the idealism he had learned from Kant and Fichte had led him to seek the idea in reality itself.²

Philosophical idealism, in a very rough summary, is to give priority to ideas in the relations between reality and ideas. According to most idealists, what people do in a given period is determined by their ideas at that time. If people act selfishly, it is because they think selfishly; their selfish thinking is not the product of being forced to act selfishly due to material conditions. The progress of humanity (according to idealists who accept that such a thing exists) is also a product of developments in the field of thought.

German idealism was an advance in its time. It was part of the Enlightenment movement in Europe. It did not reject religious beliefs, but replaced (or supplemented) religious explanations of reality with explanations based on human reason.

At that time, philosophy was the "knowledge of everything." All sorts of fictional ideas (speculations) were intertwined with what today would be considered scientific ideas. Since the philosophers of that time put forward all sorts of ideas on almost every conceivable subject, it is not very difficult to show that the ideas that became important in later periods were first developed by them.

In Germany, more precisely in Prussia in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a specific reason why philosophy became popular among young intellectuals. Prussia was one of the centers of European reaction. The Prussian monarchy, representing feudal interests, prohibited political activities that might strengthen the demands for democracy and a republic, in order to avoid a process similar to the French Revolution of 1789. For this reason, philosophy was almost the only field in which the Enlightenment could be defended.

Although German idealism was part of the Enlightenment movement, its leading representatives were not in irreconcilable opposition to the Prussian regime. On the contrary, Hegel, considered the most advanced representative of German idealism, became rector of the University of Berlin in 1829, and a few months before his death, he was awarded by the king for his services to the Prussian state.

More importantly, from Hegel's analyses of human history, it was possible to conclude that the Prussian state constituted the most advanced and final stage of human history. A group that emerged after Hegel's death, known as the "Young Hegelians" or "Left Hegelians," opposed this interpretation and argued that in order to reach the most advanced stage, the political system in Prussia had to be overcome. According to them, the most important problem was the domination of religion. Therefore, they declared war on religious ideas. One of the names among the Young Hegelians was Ludwig Feuerbach, born in 1804. Agreeing with the Young Hegelians on the need to struggle against the domination of religious beliefs above all else, Feuerbach would reject Hegel's idealism and defend materialism.

Upon entering the University of Berlin, Marx, too, first joined the Young Hegelians and then adopted Feuerbach's views. But these periods were short-lived, and it was from the pen of Marx (and Friedrich Engels, his closest companion from 1844 to the end of his life) that the harshest criticisms of both the Young Hegelians

and Feuerbach, and German philosophy in general, emerged. Their first work, containing their relatively mature thoughts on German philosophy, was *The German Ideology*, written in 1845, which remained in manuscript because they could not find a publisher at the time (and abandoned it to the “gnawing criticism of the mice”); it would be published after their deaths.

When we look at the references of those who want to portray Karl Marx primarily as a “philosopher,” we see that they give considerable weight to the works before 1845. However, the works of 1842–1844, so beloved by those who analyze “Marx the philosopher,” are not “Marxist” works, even though they provide a lot of data on the details of the formation process of Marxism. It was only toward the end of 1843 that Marx adopted the communist thought, i.e., working-class revolutionism. It should be obvious that he could not have developed a complete theory of working-class revolutionism immediately.

An important aspect of the period from 1842 to 1844 was that it was during this period that Marx entered the political struggle. After graduating in 1841 with a dissertation, Marx began writing for a newspaper published by the liberal bourgeoisie of the Rhineland in 1842. He was still just a defender of democracy. But writing for a newspaper meant that he went beyond the realm of philosophical debate and began to oppose the Prussian government in a more concrete way. He did not wait long for his reward. In March 1843, he was forced to resign from the editorial board of the newspaper due to repressive interference. In October of the same year, he moved to Paris with the aim of publishing another journal in which the Prussian government would not be able to interfere. Here he met French socialists and workers’ leaders.

In other words, beyond wanting “the good of all,” Marx sought to do something concrete about it. Philosophical discussions alone did not seem sufficient to him. The pressure he faced when he went beyond these discussions, and perhaps more importantly, the decision of the liberal bourgeoisie to retreat in the face of this pres-

sure, must have played a role in his turning to other pursuits. As a result, in 1844, Marx began to believe that the only force capable of changing the world in a way that would ensure “the good of the majority” was the working class, and that the path to achieve this change would be through a working-class revolution.

It is not possible to say, “In Marx’s time, the working class was very strong, industrial workers constituted a large majority, therefore he assigned a revolutionary task to the working class,” because at the time when Marx adopted working-class revolutionism, the working class was still a very weak social force even in Europe. At the beginning of 1848, when the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was published, Marx and Engels expected the revolution not from the working class but from the bourgeoisie. In other words, Marx’s choice of working-class revolutionism was the product of his foresight, not of being influenced by a social force that had already shown what it could do.

Marx’s background before 1844 brought him to the point of choosing working-class revolutionism. The choice of working-class revolutionism played a decisive role in Marx’s development after 1844.

Once he had made this choice, for Marx, any activity was meaningful to the extent that it contributed to the struggle for the working-class revolution. He was no longer a lawyer, philosopher, economist, or historian, but a working-class revolutionary, both in his political activities, which many ignore, and in his theoretical production.

Marx said the following about philosophy in *The German Ideology*:

“Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love.”³

A longer explanation is also given in the same text:

“Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activ-

ity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty phrases about consciousness end, and real knowledge has to take their place. When the reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy [*die selbständige Philosophie* {the independent philosophy}] loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of men. These abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever.”⁴

Moreover, according to Marx, it is not enough to grasp the facts of real life. What is important, as emphasized again in *The German Ideology*, is their overthrow:

“Feuerbach’s whole deduction with regard to the relation of men to one another is only aimed at proving that men need and *always have needed* each other. He wants to establish consciousness of this fact, that is to say, like the other theorists, he merely wants to produce a correct consciousness about an *existing* fact; whereas for the real Communist it is a question of overthrowing the existing state of things. We fully appreciate, however, that Feuerbach, in endeavouring to produce consciousness of just *this* fact, is going as far as a theorist possibly can, without ceasing to be a theorist and philosopher.”⁵

As can be seen, according to Marx, among the things that needed to be done was to “cease to be a theorist and philosopher.” The 11th Thesis, the most famous of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, said the same:

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”⁶

Marx was not a philosopher who tried to put forward extraordinary or shocking theses in the world of thought, but a revolutionary who fought for change in the real world.

Of course, I do not claim that Marxism has nothing to do with philosophy. German philosophy, French socialism, and English

political economy form the historical roots of Marxism, and Marxism has borrowed from each.

However, Marxism is not a new philosophy, a new French socialism, or a new political economy, but the theory of the working-class revolution.

The strength and the shortcomings, the actuality and the historical limitations of this theory stem from the fact that it is the theory of the working-class revolution.

Marxism is not a “theory of everything,” as some philosophers try to produce. Therefore, it is “incomplete.” Nor does Marxism claim to be the theory of eternal truths. From a historical point of view, it is the theory of a limited period.

Marxism could not have emerged before the working class emerged. When the working class achieves the world revolution and manages to abolish classes and, by the way, itself, Marxism as an independent theory will also become outdated or obsolete.

IS THE WORKING CLASS (ALWAYS) REVOLUTIONARY?



If you are reading this book, you are certainly not one of the unluckiest people on earth!

At least you are not one of the 925 million people who are undernourished because of poverty.⁷

The bigger the numbers, the harder it is to understand them. To put it in another way, almost one in seven people on the planet suffers from hunger today.

Is it because the earth's resources are scarce?

No.

It is because more than 40 percent of the world's economic assets are in the hands of only 1 percent of the world's population!⁸

Billions of people are disciplined by a small minority through hunger.

Whether a child born into this world is nourished enough to develop healthily, benefits from health services, receives a good education, and begins to work in a way that contributes to humanity depends almost entirely on that child's luck.

What they call "equality of opportunity" is nothing more than the fact that the majority of participants in a 42-kilometer marathon race start without proper nutrition and education and with heavy loads on their backs, while some well-nourished and educated participants start the same race at the 40th kilometer. Of course,

a few of those who start the race at the 40th kilometer will not even be able to run the remaining 2 kilometers and will be passed by a few of those who run the 42 kilometers. Could there be anything more shameless than pointing to these people and saying, “See, the rich can lose, the poor can win, it’s all about running”?

The fact that what people can do in this world depends mainly on their luck is not just a problem of individuals, but of humanity itself. In this social order, which allows a very small number of rich people to live in incredible luxury, the vast majority of people either cannot work at all or can only work in ways that serve the interests of a small minority.

If everyone worked to meet the basic needs of people, there would be no hunger or poverty in the world. In a world where everyone could do something for the benefit of humanity, humanity could accomplish much more in much less time than it has so far. On the other hand, living standards that the vast majority of people cannot even dream of today could be made common living standards for everyone on this planet.

Can such a world be achieved?

Marx said “yes” to this question. But he did not attempt to design this world on paper. He did not construct a model of a future society. According to Marxism, the emancipation of humanity cannot be achieved by convincing people to implement a pre-designed model of society.

The only force that can abolish capitalism and pave the way to the classless society is the working class. Because the working class is the social force whose historical interests require the abolition of all exploiter-exploited, oppressor-oppressed relations. For the same reason, the emancipation of the working class will mean the emancipation of humanity.

Moreover, again according to Marx, the emancipation of the working class will be its own work. That is, the working class will not be emancipated by some people; it will emancipate itself.

But is it realistic to expect the working class to achieve this?

Before continuing, it would be useful to open a parenthesis about the quantity of the working class. After all, it is often claimed that the working class is disappearing or becoming insignificant.

The working class consists of people who cannot make a living by producing on their own and have to sell their labor power in order to survive, and of the family members who owe their livelihood to these people. Therefore, all wage earners, whether they use their manual or mental labor power, the unemployed who would work if they could find a job, and their families are part of the working class. And today, the working class constitutes the vast majority of the world's population, just as Marx predicted.

Well-intentioned relatives often warn revolutionaries: "You are ruining yourself for nothing. These people, these workers are incorrigible. They do not appreciate people like you. When they feel it necessary, they will stab you in the back." In other words, "human beings are ungrateful."

Yes, that is really how it is, under ordinary circumstances!

Today, even to live without starving, one must compete with others, ride on the backs of others. Those who want to get a job must explain that they will work better and harder than others who are applying for the same job. Those who are lucky enough to get a job have to compete with others to be promoted to a slightly better-paying position or to avoid being fired. From the point of view of those who cannot eat cake if they cannot find bread, unemployment means that the children at home must go hungry. Therefore, for workers, their coworkers are not only people who share the same fate, but also competitors.

On the other hand, in the competition among workers, one cannot win by "hard work" alone. Relatives, acquaintances, relations with fellow townspeople, ties to religious sects and communities, gender, ethnic origin, religious beliefs, political leanings, relations with superiors, and many other factors that are not directly related to "work" are of varying degrees of importance for those who want to get a job, keep it and earn a little more. It is almost impossible for