

Economic Game Changers: Karl Marx | Lesson Plan

How do economic choices and human flourishing work together?

Students will understand that socialism and communism tend to destroy both prosperity and liberty.

Learning Objectives:

- Explain how Marx divided society into classes.
- Describe Marx's concept of surplus value and his claim that capitalism is a system of exploitation.
- Distinguish between socialism and communism as Marx defined them.
- Evaluate the historical outcomes of Marxist ideas when put into practice in the twentieth century.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Capitalism:** An economic system in which businesses and the means of production are privately owned, and goods are exchanged freely in the market.
- **Bourgeoisie:** The social class that owns the means of production and is rich as a result.
- **Proletariat:** The social class made up of workers and is poor as a result.
- **Class Struggle:** Marx's claim that all of history is a continuous conflict between economic classes, with one, such as the bourgeoisie, oppressing the little guy, such as the proletariat.
- **Exploitation:** The claim that owners systematically pay workers less than the value of what those workers produce.
- **Surplus Value:** Marx's term for the difference between what a worker is paid and the value of what the worker produces — which, in Marx's view, owners take as profit.
- **Socialism:** A transitional system in which the state controls the means of production and land ownership on behalf of the people.
- **Communism:** Communal ownership of all production, with no private property, no competition, and no class struggle.
- **Marxism:** The body of ideas developed from Marx's writings, which uses class conflict as a framework for understanding economic, political, and institutional life.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.10, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Economics, U.S. History, Civics, Political Philosophy

What You'll Need

- Video: *Ca\$h Cour\$e: Economic Game Changers: Karl Marx* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Ca\$h Cour\$e: Economic Game Changers: Karl Marx* (Link [Here](#))



Scan to watch episode:

- Whiteboard for writing and a TV / Monitor to show video

Lesson Plan (45 mins.)

Warm-Up: (10 mins.)

Teacher Note on the Historical Context: Before introducing the lesson, briefly set the historical stage for your students. Karl Marx wrote in the mid-1800s, during the most disruptive period of the Industrial Revolution. Working conditions in factory cities like London and Manchester were difficult — long hours, dangerous machinery, crowded tenements, and child labor were all very common. At the same time, the standard of living for most people was rising for the first time in human history, and the ideas of free trade from Smith and Ricardo were driving genuine economic growth. Marx focused on the hardship people encountered, but not the progress that most benefited from. He proposed a radical reinterpretation of the entire economic system, which, as a result, unnecessarily vilified one group while victimizing the other. In neither instance did his logic recognize that well-to-do business owners were also workers, and that just because someone is economically poor doesn't automatically make them good. His ideas would later be put into practice in Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, and dozens of other countries — with devastating results.

1. Ask students: When you and a friend trade something — a snack, a video game, a piece of clothing — both of you usually walk away happy with the trade. Now imagine someone told you that even though you felt good about the trade, you were actually being cheated. How would you respond? (Take a few quick responses. Most students will push back. Some may consider whether the trade really was fair.)
2. Have students do a quick Think-Pair-Share with this question:
 - If you agree to take a job where a business owner pays you \$15 an hour and your work helps the business earn \$30 an hour in revenue, are you being exploited? Why or why not?
 - What costs does the business have beyond your wages? What risks does the owner take that you do not?
 - Let a couple of students share.
3. Write each Key Vocabulary term and its definition on the board. Ask students to take notes.
4. Introduce today's *Cash Course* video by explaining that students are going to hear about Karl Marx, a German philosopher who looked at the new industrial economy and concluded that the whole system was built on exploitation and grievance. His ideas would shape political movements around the world for the next century and a half.

Watch and Apply: (25 mins.)

1. Watch the video "*Ca\$h Cour\$e: Economic Game Changers: Karl Marx* " as a class.
2. After the video, discuss the following questions:
 - Explain Marx's thinking about capitalism; how did he view free enterprise and trade?

- What did Marx mean by surplus value? How did that connect to exploitation for him?
 - Identify Marx's stages of history beginning with primitive communism in small tribes.
 - Define socialism and communism; how are they alike? How are they different?
 - What is Marxism?
3. Talk through the central ideas Marx introduced. Emphasize that his framework recast every economic relationship as a power struggle between oppressors and the oppressed, and that this framing has consequences when it shapes policy. Especially point out that the ideas have had deadly consequences in every place they have been tried.
 - **Class Struggle** → Marx claimed all of history is a conflict between economic classes.
 - **Surplus Value** → Marx redefined profit as the value owners take from workers, ignoring the costs, risks, and contributions of owners themselves.
 - **Socialism and Communism** → Marx predicted capitalism would inevitably collapse and be replaced first by state control, then by a final stateless system. Neither prediction came true as he described.
 4. Hand out the worksheet. Students can work independently or in pairs, depending on class needs.

Wrap-Up: (10 mins.)

1. Recap the lesson objectives. Go over the worksheet as a class. Review responses.
2. Connect the concepts to real history. Ask: Marx claimed that his theories would lead to a system of abundance without oppression. In the twentieth century, dozens of countries put his ideas into practice. What ended up happening in those countries? Why might there be such a gap between Marx's predictions and the historical results?
3. **Exit Ticket (Door Check):** Ask students to respond to this question on the back of their worksheets before handing in:
 - Name three countries that tried Marxist ideas.
4. Collect the worksheets as a formative assessment or assignment completion.

Optional Extension Activity

For teachers with a 60-minute block, or for those who want students to engage with the historical record of Marxist ideas in practice. Students examine real twentieth-century attempts to implement Marx's framework using PragerU video resources.

Materials:

A computer or tablet with access to the ability to play PragerU videos. Students will work in small groups, with each group assigned one country that adopted Marxist or socialist policies in the twentieth century. Each group will watch a different PragerU video matched to their country.

Country and video assignments:

- The Soviet Union under Stalin: *The Hall of Evil: Joseph Stalin*
(prageru.com/video/the-hall-of-evil-joseph-stalin)
- The People's Republic of China under Mao: *The Hall of Evil: Mao Zedong*
(prageru.com/video/the-hall-of-evil-mao-zedong)
- Cuba under Castro: *The Hall of Evil: Fidel Castro*
(prageru.com/video/the-hall-of-evil-fidel-castro)
- Venezuela: *How's Socialism Doing in Venezuela?*
(prageru.com/video/how-socialism-doing-in-venezuela)
- North Korea: *North Korea: Learning the Truth*
(prageru.com/video/north-korea-learning-the-truth)

Round 1 – Watch and Take Notes (10 mins.):

Each group watches its assigned video together. As they watch, group members take notes on three questions:

- What did the leaders of this country promise their people?
- What actually happened economically? Look for what happened to food, jobs, and the overall standard of living.
- What actually happened politically? Look for what happened to free speech, free movement, and political opposition.

Round 2 – Share and Compare (10 mins.):

Each group presents their findings to the class in two to three minutes. The teacher writes the country names on the board along with one or two key outcomes from each presentation.

Debrief - (5 mins.):

After all groups have presented, look at the board together. Ask:

- What patterns do you see across these different countries?
- Marx predicted his system would produce abundance and end oppression. What actually happened?
- Why might there be such a consistent gap between the intentions of Marxist policies and their actual results?

Surface the central insight. Marx assumed that if the state took control of the economy on behalf of the workers, the result would be abundance and freedom. In practice, every country that has tried this approach has produced famine, mass imprisonment, and the deliberate killing of its own citizens on a scale humanity had never seen before. Mao's policies killed tens of millions of Chinese. Stalin's regime killed roughly twenty million Soviets. The Khmer Rouge killed nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population in less than four years. North Korea continues to run concentration camps for three generations and counting. When it comes to bad ideas, this ranks as one of the worst in history.

Connect it to the episode. Marx claimed to be writing on behalf of working people, and for sure, the hardship he saw in industrial cities was real. But his own life raises serious questions about how sincere he was. He rarely worked, lived off the financial support of his wealthy friend Friedrich Engels — whose money came from the very factories Marx condemned — and spent decades in the British Museum theorizing about workers he never lived among. Whatever his motives, the framework he built — class struggle, surplus value, state control of production — has been tested at scale in dozens of places. The very workers Marx claimed to defend have been the ones starved, imprisoned, and killed in unimaginable numbers wherever his ideas have been put into practice.

Don't have time for the full lesson? Quick Activity (10-15 mins.)

Distribute the worksheet and have students complete it as they follow along with the video. Or, have students watch the video at home and use the worksheet as a quick quiz the next day in class.