

## Karl Marx: Historical Materialism and the Critique of Political Economy

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# Biographical elements

- **5 May 1818:** Born in Trier (Kingdom of Prussia).
- Studies in law (University of Bonn), then philosophy (Berlin); member of the Young Hegelians.
- **1841:** Doctoral dissertation on the natural philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus.
- **1842:** Contributor to, then editor of, the *Rheinische Zeitung* (Rhenish Gazette).
- **1843:** The *Rheinische Zeitung* is banned. Marriage to **Jenny von Westphalen**. Moves to Paris.
- **1844:** *Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher* (Franco-German Annals, one issue).  
Writes the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.  
Meets and becomes friends with **Friedrich Engels**.
- **1845:** Expelled from Paris; settles in Brussels.  
Writes *The German Ideology* (with Engels).

# Biographical elements

- **1847:** Writes the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (with Engels), published in London in 1848.
- **1848:** February Revolution in Paris (proclamation of the Second Republic on 24 February).  
Marx is expelled from Brussels → Paris → Cologne → Paris.
- **1849:** Failure of the revolution. Marx is expelled from France and settles in London (journalism – *NY Daily Tribune* - and financial support from Engels).
- **1859:** *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.
- **1864:** Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (First International).
- **1867:** *Capital, Volume I*.
- **December 1881:** Death of Jenny Marx (liver cancer).
- **14 March 1883:** Death of Karl Marx (bronchitis & pulmonary complications)
- **1885 and 1894:** Publication of *Capital, Volumes II and III* (edited by Engels).
- **1905–1910:** Publication of *Theories of Surplus Value* (edited by Karl Kautsky).

# Historical Materialism

Marx is generally seen as being influenced by three main intellectual traditions:

- **German philosophy** (Hegel, Feuerbach),
- **French socialism** (Proudhon, Leroux, Fourier...),
- **British political economy** (Smith, Ricardo mainly).

Throughout his work, Marx both draws on and criticizes these three currents of thought.

# Historical Materialism

- Marx and Engels criticize the **French socialists** for their **excessive idealism** and for failing to grasp the true nature of capitalist society, in particular the importance of **class struggle**.
- As “**utopians**”, they advocate “organization of society specially contrived” (*Communist Manifesto*), and their ideas cannot serve as the basis for any real transformation of society.

# Historical Materialism

- Marx and Engels present their socialism as “**scientific**”, in contrast to the “**utopian**” socialism of their predecessors.
- Proudhon (1846), *The System of Economic Contradictions, or The Philosophy of Poverty*  
(*Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère*)  
→ Marx (1847), *The Poverty of Philosophy*  
(*Misère de la philosophie*)

# Historical Materialism

- The critique formulated by Marx and Engels of **German philosophy**, and of Hegel in particular, is often summarized as an **opposition between materialism and idealism**.
- The philosophy of history lies at the very core of this opposition.
- “We know only one single science, the science of history.”(*The German Ideology*)

# Historical Materialism

- Note: The materialist conception of history is not an invention of Marx and Engels.
- See, for example, the tradition of “**conjectural history**” or *histoire raisonnée* developed by **Turgot, Adam Ferguson or Adam Smith** in the eighteenth century.
- Through this view, **human history is understood as the outcome of physical or material causes.**
- It unfolds through four successive socio-economic stages, or modes of subsistence: hunting and fishing, pastoralism, agriculture, and finally commerce.

# Historical Materialism

- Marx and Engels, in a sense, **combine this materialist framework with Hegelian dialectics**, while radically transforming it.

# Historical Materialism

- Hegelian philosophy belongs to an intellectual tradition that **seeks to give “meaning” to history**, that is, to show that it **tends towards a definite end**, even if this end escapes individual consciousness — including that of the “great men” who take part in it.
- “What is rational is real; and what is real is rational.”  
(*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 1820)

# Historical Materialism

- The history of human societies is thus understood as a continuous **process of transformation**.
- This approach is grounded in the idea of the **opposition of contraries**, an opposition which constitutes very principle of movement.
- The movement of history is **dialectical**: it proceeds through affirmation, negation, and the negation of the negation (commonly rendered pedagogically as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis).

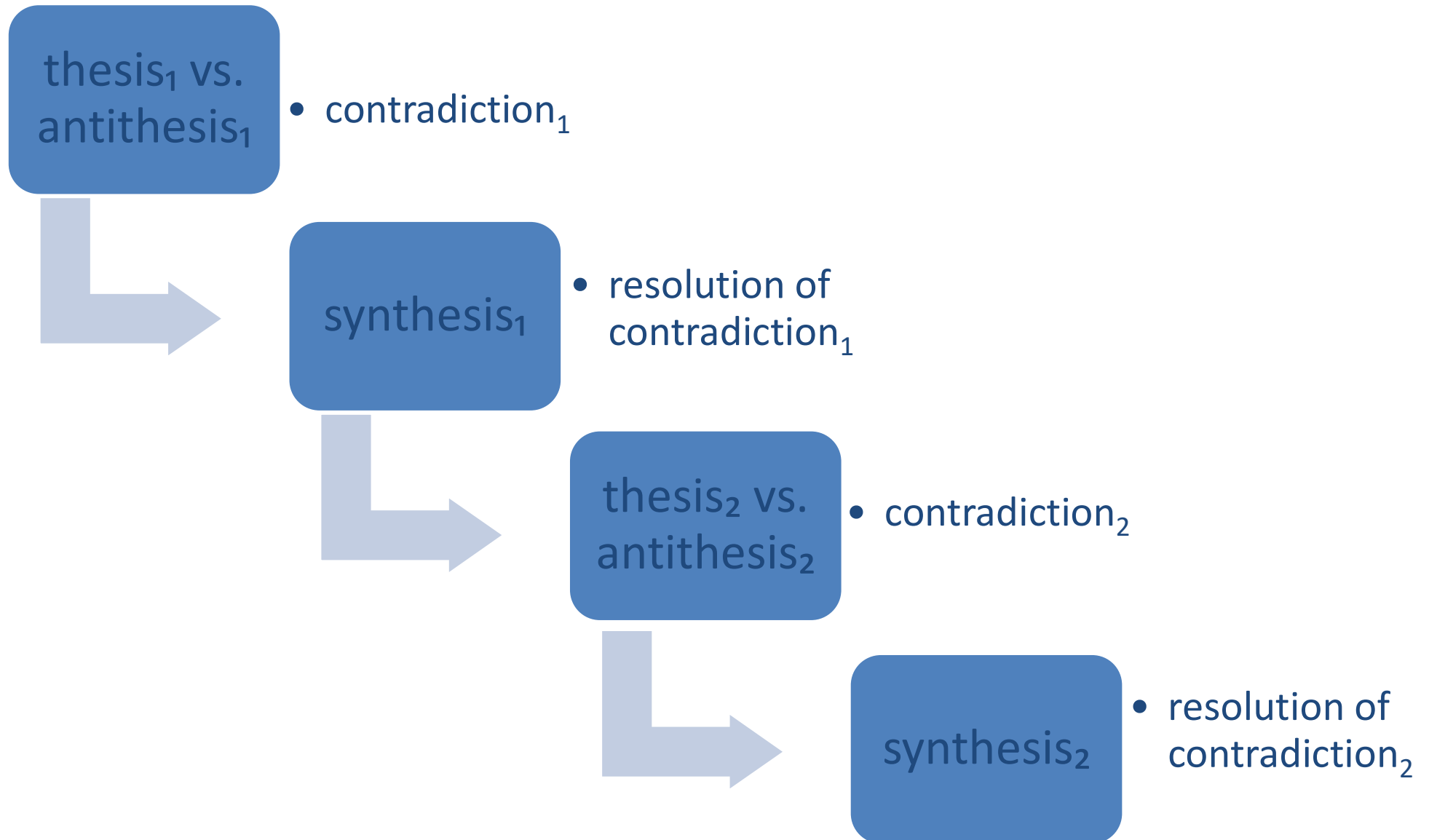
# Historical Materialism

- In order to realise itself, or to become conscious of itself, the World Spirit (*Weltgeist*) makes use of **dialectic**:

- thesis<sub>1</sub> vs. antithesis<sub>1</sub> (contradiction<sub>1</sub>)  
⇒ synthesis<sub>1</sub> (resolution of contradiction 1)  
= thesis<sub>2</sub>

thesis<sub>2</sub> vs. antithesis<sub>2</sub> (contradiction<sub>2</sub>)  
⇒ synthesis<sub>2</sub> (resolution of contradiction<sub>2</sub>)  
= thesis<sub>3</sub> *etc.*

# Historical Materialism



# Historical Materialism

- Through this framework, Hegel conceives the movement of history as the progressive development and realisation of ***Spirit*** (*Geist*).
- History is the process through which *Spirit* comes to know itself (paraphrasing Hegel).
- ***Spirit* realises Reason through history.**

# Historical Materialism

- Marx and Engels adopt this dialectical framework but criticise Hegel for his excessive idealism.
- The principle of social transformation is to be found not at the level of “ideas” or “Spirit”, but in **relations of power and in the material conditions of human existence** in society.
- History is not the self-realisation of Spirit, but the outcome of material social relations.
- The task is therefore to put Hegel—and German philosophy more generally—back on its feet: **it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.**

# Historical Materialism

- “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely **relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.** The totality of these relations of production constitutes the **economic structure of society**, the real foundation, **on which arises a legal and political superstructure** and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. **It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.**”

*(Contribution, 1859, preface)*

# Historical Materialism

- “Matter” therefore prevails over “ideas”, in the sense that the **economy**—understood as the activity of production—constitutes the **infrastructure** of any society.
- From this economic infrastructure derives a **determined superstructure** that is legal and political, but also religious, moral and cultural.
- In short, a comprehensive **“ideology”** whose function is to **legitimise the position of the dominant class** within the economic sphere.

# Historical Materialism

- «The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. **the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.** The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. » (*German Ideology*)

# Historical Materialism

- Economic infrastructure = the “**mode of production**”.  
Each major period in history corresponds to a specific mode of production, made up of two elements:
  - a. A given level of development of the **productive forces**, which conditions a **society’s capacity to produce wealth**:  
the level of technological development, the degree of division of labour, the forms taken by capital, the general level of knowledge, etc. Productive forces, like the history of societies itself, are **in constant evolution**.
  - b. A specific set of **relations of production** (slavery, serfdom, wage labour), which determines the positions of social groups and shows that, in each period, **one class dominates another in the organisation of production**.

# Historical Materialism

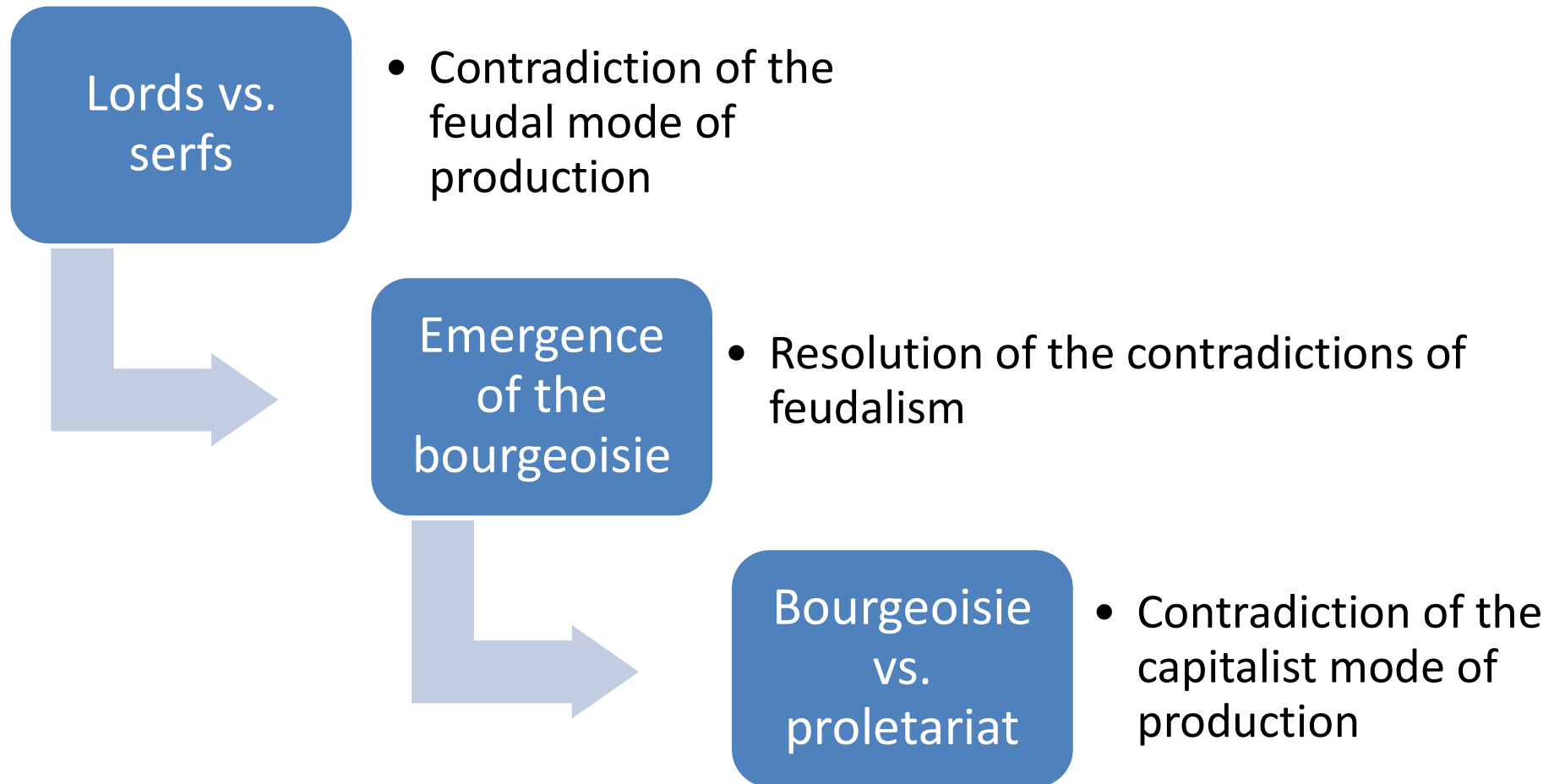
- It is first and foremost at the level of **relations of production** that the **dialectical** dimension of the materialist conception of history takes shape.
- In each of the major modes of production that have succeeded one another in Europe, **two classes have been in radical opposition: the exploiting class**, which owns the means of production, and the **exploited class**, which is deprived of them:
  - **Ancient** mode of production: citizen masters vs. slaves;
  - **Feudal** mode of production: lords vs. serfs;
  - **Capitalist** mode of production: capitalists (or the bourgeoisie) vs. workers (the proletariat).

# Historical Materialism

- **“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”** (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, chap. 1)

# Historical Materialism

## •Marx and Engels' dialectical framework



# Historical Materialism

- The second dialectical element of historical materialism is to be found in the **internal contradiction** within each mode of production, **between the development of the productive forces and the dominant relations of production.**
- While the former are, as we have seen, in constant evolution, **the latter tend to persist**, since they benefit from an ideological superstructure aimed at stabilising and consolidating them.
- At certain moments in history, the **dominant relations of production thus act as a brake on the development of the productive forces.**

# Historical Materialism

- “At a certain stage of development, the **material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production** (...) From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. **Then begins an era of social revolution.** The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.” (*Contribution*, 1859, preface)

# Historical Materialism

- The **synthesis of this dialectical opposition** between the productive forces and the relations of production leads to the **replacement of old relations by new ones, better suited to the state of the productive forces** and therefore more favourable to their further development.
- Thus, the decline of the feudal mode of production can be understood as **the progressive obsolescence of a relation of production—serfdom—**well suited to economies primarily based on agriculture, **and its replacement by a new relation—wage labour—**far better adapted to the development of an economy based on manufacture and industry.

# Historical Materialism

- Without going any further, the essential point here is to emphasise two things:
  - **exploitation is not specific to the capitalist mode of production**, since it already existed in ancient and feudal modes of production, *albeit in different forms*;
  - **capitalism is only one stage in history**, destined like its predecessors to be superseded, and is neither the natural nor the final form of organisation of human societies.

# The critique of political economy

- Marx first distinguishes two types of economic discourses:
  - **Vulgar economy**, which “deals with appearances only” and offers an apology for capitalism while overlooking its contradictions. Its representatives, such as Jean-Baptiste Say, generally reject the explanation of value in terms of labour.
  - **Classical political economy**, which “has investigated the real relations of production in bourgeois society” (that is, class antagonisms) and whose method can properly be considered scientific.  
**Ricardo is its emblematic representative.**

# The critique of political economy

- It is this second group of authors that Marx criticises.
- However scientific their work may be, their discourse nevertheless belongs, in his view, **to ideology**—that is, a representation of reality that serves to **consolidate the position of the bourgeoisie**.
- As part of the **superstructure**, classical economists function as the (conscious or unconscious) scientific spokesmen of the ruling class. Their discourse is therefore above all a **discourse of legitimation**.
- This, in turn, gives rise to a **number of distortions**.

# The critique of political economy

- Marx reproaches the “classical” economists for:
  - An **individualistic** conception of society, which, according to him, underlies the whole of bourgeois ideology (modern natural law, “Robinsonades,” the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, etc.).
  - The “**naturalism**” of the classical view. For Ricardo, the rules governing capitalist exchange and accumulation appear to belong to a natural order. Such an approach, **blind to history**, prevents understanding the true meaning of economic categories, as well as the historical character of capitalism itself.

# The critique of political economy

- **Commodities, capital, wage labour, and commodity exchange** must be understood as **historical and transitory categories**, rather than as natural and definitive ones.
- Although the approach of classical economists is genuinely scientific, **Marx criticises them for never explaining these concepts, which they take as given** and which form the basis of their analyses.
- To carry out the anatomy of the capitalist mode of production therefore means, on the contrary, reconstructing the **genealogy of its essential categories**.

# The critique of political economy

- Capitalism relies in particular on the **generalisation of commodity exchange**, which constitutes its main characteristic and one of whose most striking consequences is **wage labour**.
- The **wage relation conceals capitalist exploitation**: the fact that exploitation is rooted in an exchange—implying juridical equality and the formal freedom of the contracting parties—tends to render it invisible to economic agents.
- This generalisation of commodity exchange presupposes the **commodity**, the central concept to capitalism. Marx's critique therefore logically begins with its analysis.