

## Two Karls

Karl Popper was a great philosopher who **solved** the problem of induction and who shed light on many philosophical problems related to freedom. Popper showed that people learn through critical thought and discussion, not by building their views on non-existent secure foundations. Karl Marx was an intellectual lightweight whose utter misunderstanding of economics, his **antisemitism** and his worship of violence combined to form a poisonous brew that inspired all the terrible tyrants of the twentieth century from **Hitler** to Stalin.

Nevertheless, when BBC Radio 4 held a **poll** about who is the greatest philosopher, Marx was at number 1 and Popper was at number 10.

Why do so many people celebrate Marx? Marx was only one in a long line of philosophers who advocated socialism - the idea that people should collectively own property. But people cannot collectively own property. A given piece of property can only be put to a finite number of non-conflicting uses, and people are fallible, which is why they disagree. When people practise capitalism they decide how property will be used through agreements to which they subscribe voluntarily. Socialists and other opponents of capitalism license one particular group to use violence, or the threat thereof, to steal property from another. Favouring one group through violence prevents critical discussion of different ways to use property, which is anti-rational. Popper argued that we should have an open society in which people are free to criticise and work for the alteration of current institutions through reason and persuasion. Marx's **contribution** to this debate was to say that logic was a creation of the bourgeoisie and so logic is an evil tool of oppression. The workers, Marx said, had a different logic. When Marx had thrown logic out of the window he could say anything he liked and so was free to argue for socialism. Many of Marx's intellectual descendants have used Marx's argument against bourgeois logic to say their opponents are bourgeois and therefore necessarily wrong, without bothering to address their arguments. Thus Marx provided socialists with a way to cut short debates that they would have lost if they had stuck to rational discussion. That is why so many socialists love Marx: he gave them an excuse for their intellectual and moral irresponsibility. If our readers want an example of the sort of confusion that Marx's philosophy helped to encourage, we urge them to listen to the **discussion** on the programme that

announced the results.

People can only really use Marx's philosophy to entrench error. However, we can **use** Popper's insights on knowledge and the open society to puncture the pretensions of dogmatic philosophers, illiberal governments and tyrants, and to understand the nature of knowledge and freedom. Karl Popper and Karl Marx have the same first name, but there the similarity ends. .

Fri, 07/15/2005 - 14:23 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## A brave Popperian on hunger strike in Iranian jails

So true!

A bit OT:

Things are very heated up in Iran right now. One of the most important events of these times is being completely ignored by the MSM:

Akbar Ganji, the Iranian dissident, who is a staunch Popperian BTW, is on hunger strike for the past 35 days demanding his unconditional freedom. In the meantime he has been writing extremely bold and interesting letters and manifestos from inside the prison that are smuggled out.

President Bush has personally demanded for his immediate release. Unfortunately major news outlets are completely silent on this issue, with the exception of New York Sun that has been running articles and editorials about it.

As was posted before, you can read Ganji's letters and manifestos in English here: [www.freeganji.blogspot.com](http://www.freeganji.blogspot.com)

by AIS on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 01:03 | [reply](#)

## Voting anomalies

It is sad of course that Marx ended on #1 and Popper on #10. However, polls like this don't really mean that much. I don't mean that in the sense that you shouldn't take the responses of average people seriously. I mean it more literally: that the results don't actually convey very relevant information about the views of the people polled. For example, say you have 10 philosophers to vote on and 9 of them are rational and 1 is irrational. And say 72% of people vote for a rational philosopher and 28% for an irrational philosopher. Then the irrational philosopher will still end up at #1, even though only a minority prefer an irrational philosopher. The reason being that the other 9 'split' the rational vote, with each one receiving 8%. So too, from this BBC poll one can't draw any conclusion regarding the relevant question whether most people prefer Marx or Popper. This can only be seen using a **Condorcet** voting system. If all these same people had been asked: looking only at two philosophers, Marx and Popper, who do you prefer? Then there is no way to know from the results we actually have who would win. It's possible Popper would have beat Marx.

**Henry Sturman**

by **Henry Sturman** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 04:27 | [reply](#)

## I just wanted to add a little

I just wanted to add a little bit of context to explain why my comment was somewhat relevant to this post:

Islamism , especially in its form in Iran owes a lot to communism. The revolution in 1979 was a half breed communist-islamist one and the basic elements of the ruling ideology have many marxist elements, the hatred of the capitalist, "imperialist" West embodied in the United States being an important example. The hostage taking was partly the result of islamist and marxist groups competing for anti-imperialistic legitimacy. The interrogation and torture techniques of the Islamic Republic are directly inherited from Stalinism....

Now a new stand point, that of the open society is gradually dominating the discourse of the young and educated generation inside Iran, with people like Ganji leading the new way. The events surrounding Ganji's life and death battle is also the clash of the two world views.

by AIS on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 04:39 | [reply](#)

## Thanks for the link

Good to see that someone turned up on my Popper/Bartley/classical liberalism site from the link in your piece! And thanks for the information from Iran, I will post that on to my home blog, Catallaxy.

<http://badanalysis.com/catallaxy/>

by **Rafe Champion** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 14:09 | [reply](#)

## I Disagree

Shoddy arguing. I expect better from **The World**. Two examples:

*That is why so many socialists love Marx: he gave them an excuse for their intellectual and moral irresponsibility.*

I believe that socialists, on the whole, are genuinely persuaded and mean well. Extraordinary claims like their desire for excuses (and thus their implicit admission that they are bad) require extraordinary arguments, which were omitted.

*People can only really use Marx's philosophy to entrench error.*

This is false. Marx's philosophy can be used for lots of things.

It is misleading. If my friend is a socialist hope is not lost. If my friend remains a socialist for decades, hope is still not lost. I should not assume his views are entrenched. If I do, and treat him worse

as a consequence, or fail to tell him my arguments in the normal

way, then I am doing him a disservice, and helping \*cause\* this supposed entrenchment. I must avoid thinking of him as damaged, and I must avoid being frustrated by perceived entrenchment when I talk with him. Instead, I must take him seriously as a thinking person.

In our history, there have been effects other than "entrenching error" that have come about from putting Marx's ideas into practice. One effect has been to test some of Marx's ideas (they aren't all testable). Further, the effects of people thinking about Marx's philosophy have included thinking. And the effects of people discussing it have included discussion. All this thinking and discussion was not to entrench error or anything of the sort, by and large it was people doing their best to figure out good ideas.

I want to further add that the defense of capitalism above is incomplete. And I think the ways it is incomplete will jump out at most Marxists, so this is an important oversight. One way it is incomplete is it says capitalism means consensual use of property, but it doesn't address the case of me wanting to use my neighbors' property. It is not obvious that all cases of me wanting to use my neighbors' property are bad. It also fails to address the common complaint of people born into bad situations they do not want.

Finally, statements like "Karl Marx was an intellectual lightweight whose utter misunderstanding" are ad hominem and will do nothing but entrench your point of view. Right?

-- Elliot Temple  
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 15:45 | [reply](#)

## Re: Voting anomalies

Henry,

While you have a technical point, I'd point out that most famous philosophers are crap, and the people who will be most aware of that are probably Popper supporters, so I would expect his votes to be least fractured.

EDIT: BTW, even if they are wrong that most philosophers are crap, I still think Popper supporters are most likely to believe it's true, so the voting phenomenon will still happen.

-- Elliot Temple  
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 15:49 | [reply](#)

## Re: Voting Anomalies

Henry –

If Marx had won with 1% of the vote and all the others had received

just under 1%, then your point would hold. But Marx winning 27.93% of the vote is appalling in itself, and would be almost as appalling if he had come third rather than first, and even if every one of the 72.07% who did not rank him first, ranked him last.

So this outrage is not an artefact of voting anomalies.

by **David Deutsch** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 19:16 | [reply](#)

## Appalling

Eh, it's not the end of the world. People have heard of him. Voting for him doesn't mean they're bad people. Most weren't voting seriously. That's ok, it wasn't a serious poll.

-- Elliot Temple  
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 19:26 | [reply](#)

## Re: voting Anomalies

David -

Yes, you're right. I worded my point too strongly. The poll does indeed convey relevant information, namely the appalling fact that 28% of people rank Marx first. I should have said only that there is a small consolation due to a *possible* voting anomaly: it is still possible that most people would have ranked Popper above Marx.

## Henry Sturman

by **Henry Sturman** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 20:46 | [reply](#)

## Re: Voting Anomalies

Agreed.

by **David Deutsch** on Sat, 07/16/2005 - 21:09 | [reply](#)

## Re: I disagree

Finally, statements like "Karl Marx was an intellectual lightweight whose utter misunderstanding" are ad hominem and will do nothing but entrench your point of view. Right?

No. In that sense, the whole contest, and every vote cast, was "ad hominem". Our comment was apt in this context. Many people, even those who have strongly opposed Marx, even Popper himself, have succumbed to the misguided aura of respectability that has surrounded Marx and treated him as though he were a philosopher. Our comment was not an argument. It was a reminder that the Emperor has no clothes.

**Update:** Think of it as being addressed to Popper, not to Ken

Livingstone.

by **Editor** on Sun, 07/17/2005 - 15:17 | [reply](#)

## No Clothes

Deciding people you disagree with don't have clothes is not the way to make progress.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 07/17/2005 - 17:14 | [reply](#)

## Fame is the name of the poll game

"Nevertheless, when BBC Radio 4 held a poll about who is the greatest philosopher, Marx was at number 1 and Popper was at number 10."

We might ask, "What is the greatest soft drink?" to a similar audience. Likely Coke would be at number 1 and another as yet unnamed soft drink would be at number 10. Would that poll result be equally unmeaningful?

As to polls, ask a silly question, get a silly answer.

by a reader on Mon, 07/18/2005 - 01:04 | [reply](#)

## Re: I Disagree

In many respects socialism is an emotionally appealing ideology. People see poor people going without and naturally think that if only rich people would give their money to the poor everything would be fine and dandy. So when somebody argues against this idea, some socialists are not inclined to accept that argument because they find it emotionally upsetting and what they would really like is an excuse not to listen to it at all. Marx provided them with an excuse. The socialists who accept this excuse are not bad people, but they are intellectually and morally irresponsible even if they have good motives.

by **Alan Forrester** on Tue, 07/19/2005 - 01:38 | [reply](#)

## Two Marxes

*Thus Marx provided socialists with a way to cut short debates that they would have lost if they had stuck to rational discussion. That is why so many socialists love Marx: he gave them an excuse for their intellectual and moral irresponsibility.*

Thus **The World** provided libertarians with a way to cut short debates that they would have lost if they had stuck to rational discussion. That is why so many libertarians love to call Marx

socialist: it gave them an excuse for their intellectual and moral

irresponsibility.

There are 2 Marxes: one as a political engineer (a rather bad one, as almost any other great philosopher though) and one as a great philosopher. What you mentioned here is only his stupid political agenda, nothing more. However, his philosophical ideas are entrenched into many peoples minds: "verification by practice", dialectics, materialistic view etc.. You prefer not to even mention them for public. Otherwise you will have to do a long discussion instead of very short one. In fact, you don't even have a discussion of Marx's heritage. All you have here is a political slogan.

Most of the posts here are like political slogans and become every day less and less intellectually appealing for me. Sorry

by a reader on Wed, 07/20/2005 - 11:41 | [reply](#)

## Political Slogans

*Most of the posts here are like political slogans and become every day less and less intellectually appealing for me.*

Out of curiosity, which blogs do you like better?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 07/20/2005 - 17:18 | [reply](#)

## Re: Political Slogans

*Out of curiosity, which blogs do you like better?*

There are plenty of them nowadays. Some consist of short notes saying mostly something like "You know this guy - Marx. I don't like him" and some have real discussions (while very few can have really comprehensive analysis - but hey, that is just a weblog!).

I have found interesting material here, for example on conspiracy theories or history of Israel. But as I keep reading your posts they move towards the first type of blogs.

Marx is definitely not no. 1, but neither is Karl Popper, whether you like it or not. Defining no 1 in philosophy is kind of stupid anyway. Then why bother discussing who should be in top-10 and who shouldn't?

by a reader on Wed, 07/20/2005 - 18:43 | [reply](#)

## They aren't my posts. Who

They aren't my posts.

Who is better than Popper?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 07/20/2005 - 20:00 | [reply](#)

## Who is better than Popper?

I am surprised you are still pursuing this question! How can you define? The only thing you can do is to ask "who sells better?" or "who is the most popular?".

Just because Popper suits better to libertarianism as a political movement doesn't mean he is bestest of the bestest. Not long ago people were asked "who is better than Mao" or "who is better philosopher than Lenin". We've seen this all and don't want to go this way again.

Philosophy is more for thought than for charts.

by a reader on Thu, 07/21/2005 - 11:00 | [reply](#)

## Thought

What sort of thought never reaches any conclusions about whether one set of ideas is truer than another?

by **Editor** on Thu, 07/21/2005 - 11:04 | [reply](#)

## Thought

Philosophy is not a "set of ideas" and neither as a "falsifiable theory". You confuse philosophy with something else, for example politics, or perhaps chemistry. Philosophical system is a system view of the world. Philosophical systems don't get rejected when a new evidence emerges that can falsify one theory and favor another.

Marx saw society as an extension of family and build his economical system on this basis. You cannot say straight away whether he was right or wrong in his thoughts. When it comes to practical implementation of his political agenda only then one can ask "whether one set of ideas is truer than another".

by a reader on Thu, 07/21/2005 - 13:43 | [reply](#)

## Re: Thought

A reader wrote:

Philosophy is not a "set of ideas" and neither as a "falsifiable theory". You confuse philosophy with something else, for example politics, or perhaps chemistry. Philosophical system is a system view of the world. Philosophical systems don't get rejected when a new evidence emerges that can falsify one theory and favor another.

We can refute philosophical ideas by argument. For example, a

solipsist might say that the world doesn't really exist and that he made it all up. However, if he is right then vast portions of his own mind are entirely outside his control. He cannot win the National Lottery, fly by flapping his arms and so on. And there are many things about this supposed dream world that nobody understands like dream quantum gravity. So all the solipsist has done is label the vast, complex and only partly understood structure of the real world as a dream. This adds nothing to any explanation of how the real world works and so we can reject it.

Marx saw society as an extension of family and build his economical system on this basis. You cannot say straight away whether he was right or wrong in his thoughts. When it comes to practical implementation of his political agenda only then one can ask "whether one set of ideas is truer than another".

Nope. We refuted some of Marx's ideas above. Economists like **F. A. Hayek** and **Ludwig von Mises** refuted others.

by **Alan Forrester** on Sat, 08/13/2005 - 01:57 | [reply](#)

## We

Who does "we" refer to at the end?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 08/13/2005 - 02:13 | [reply](#)