

# **From Natural Rights to Marx:**

## **or, the Philosophical Background of Marxism**

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

### **I. Problems with Empiricism**

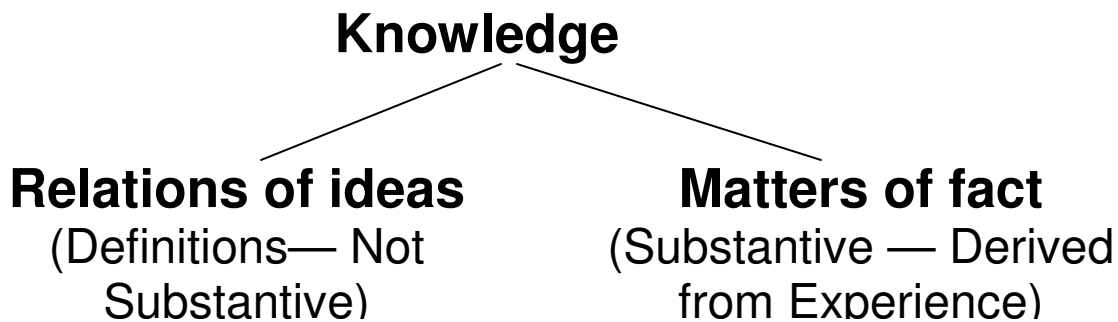
### **II. The Kantian Response**

### **III. Hegel's Dialectical Idealism**

### **IV. Marx's Historical Materialism**

# I. Problems with Empiricism

**“Hume’s Fork” (David Hume, 1711-1776)**



**We have no experience of ...**

## 1. Cause and effect

“When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other” (Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. 7, Pt. 1).

## 2. The future

“For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. ... It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance” (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. 4, Pt. 2).

### 3. Human Freedom

“A prisoner, who has neither money nor interest, discovers the impossibility of his escape, as well when he considers the obstinacy of the gaoler [i.e., jailer], as the walls and bars, with which he is surrounded; and, in all attempts for his freedom, chooses rather to work upon the stone and iron of the one, than upon the inflexible nature of the other. The same prisoner, when conducted to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards, as from the operation of the ax or wheel. ... Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but the mind feels no difference between them in passing from one link to another” (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. 8, Pt. 1).

### 4. Morality

“Reason judges either of matter of fact or of relations. Enquire then, first, where is that matter of fact, which we here call crime; point it out; determine the time of its existence; describe its essence or nature; explain the sense or faculty, to which it discovers itself. It resides in the mind of the person, who is ungrateful” (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix 1).

## **Consequence.**

We have no experience of causation, the future, freedom, or morality.

All our substantive knowledge comes from experience.

Therefore, we have no substantive knowledge of cause and effect, the future, free will or morality.

What *can* we know about causation, the future, freedom, morality?

Tautologies (true by definition)

“Whatever will be, will be”

“Do the right thing” etc.

**Empiricism —> Skepticism**

## II. Kant's Response.

### Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

We *do* know various truths about the future, cause and effect, human freedom, and morality.

The problem is to explain *how* we know these truths.

Rationalists just *assume* that we know these truths about the world innately; but they offer no explanation of *how* we know them.

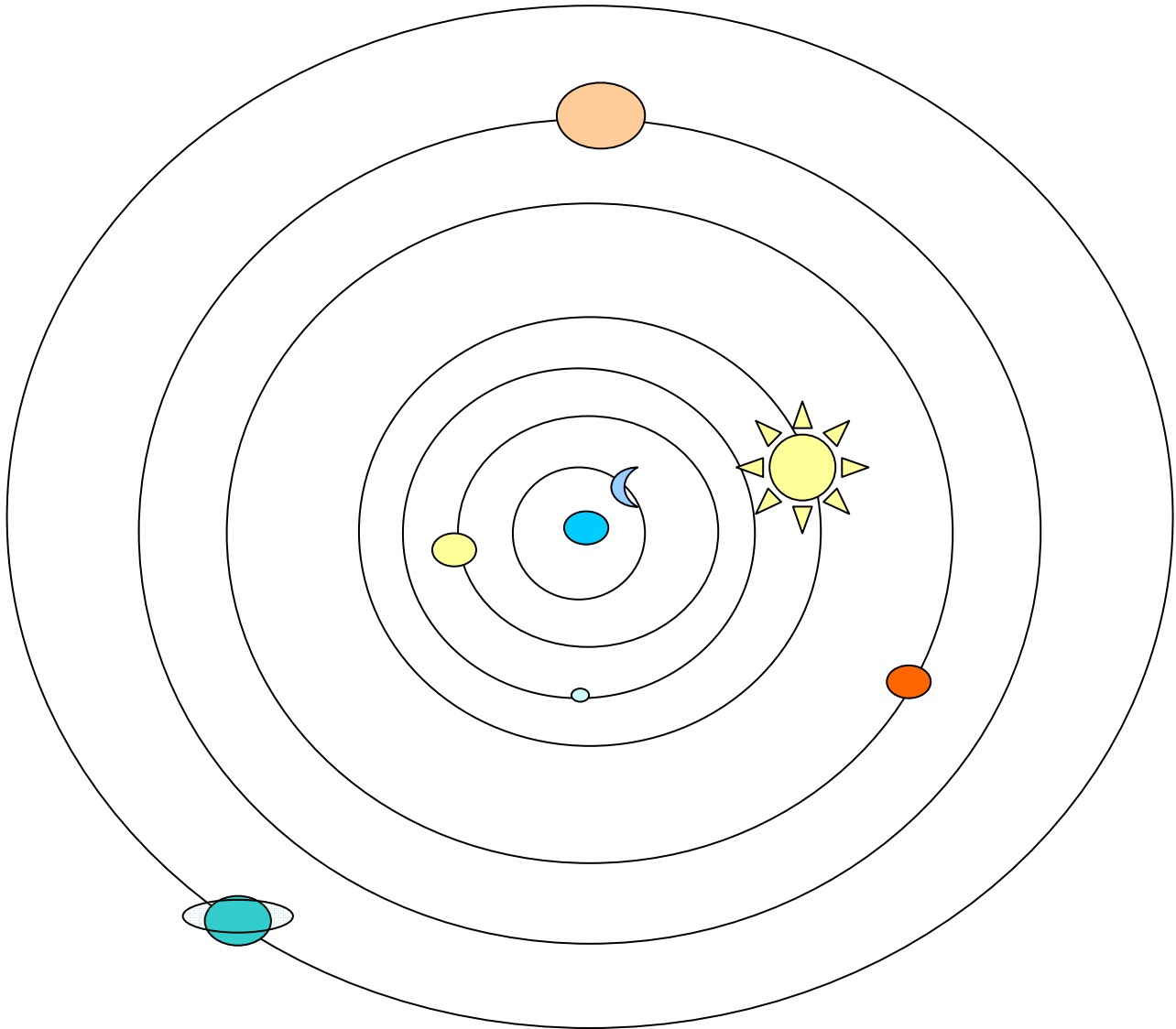
Empiricists not only fail to explain how we know these truths; they cannot even claim that we *know* them.

### Kant's "Copernican Revolution"

The explanation for why we know these truths is to be found partly in the way *the world* is, and partly in the way *we are constituted*.

Kant's Analogy with the "real" Copernican Revolution

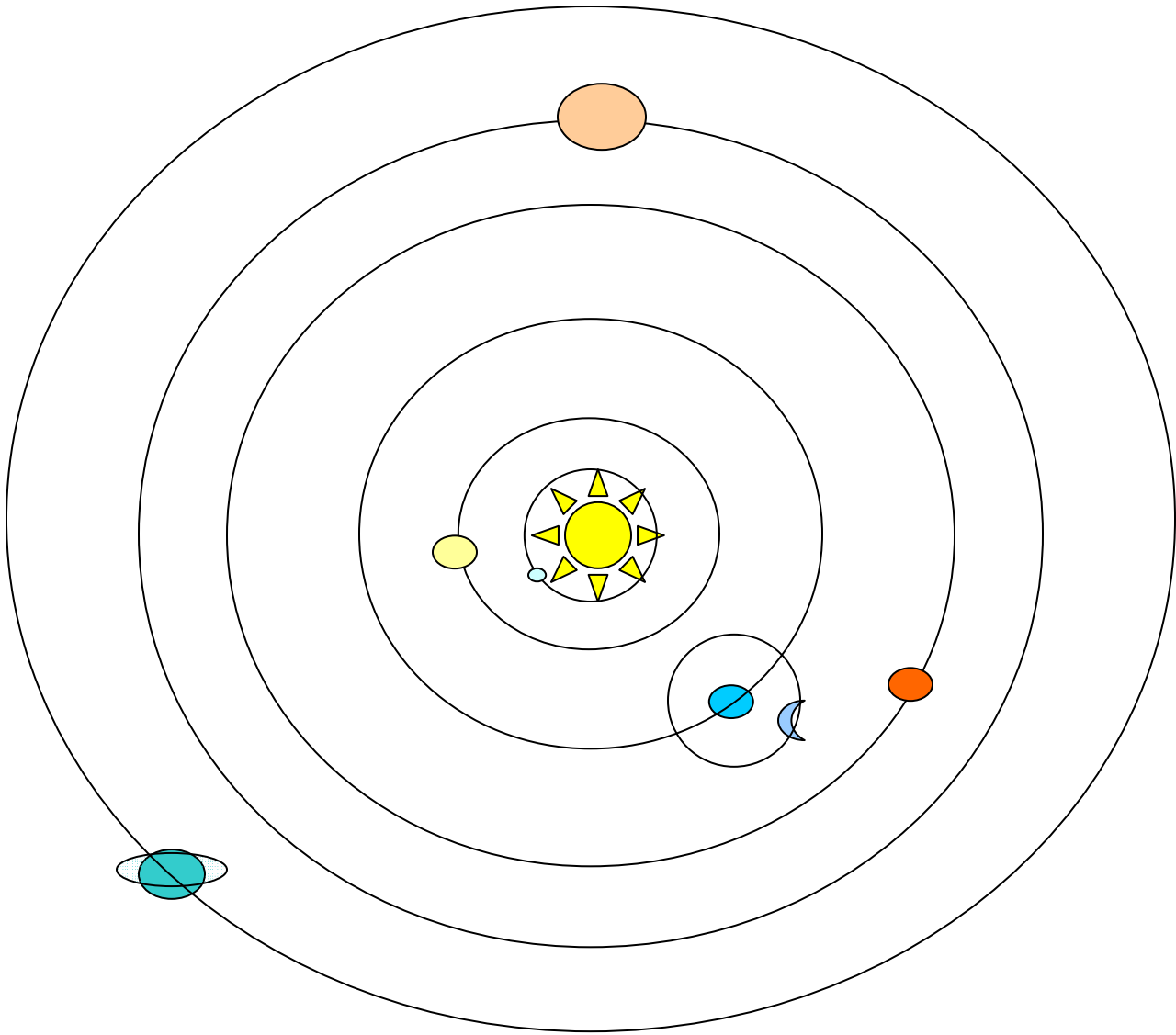
# Geocentric Model



**Observed** motions of planets are taken to represent **actual** motion of planets.

Earth and observer are assumed to be stationary, and therefore, **neutral** to the explanation.

# Heliocentric Model



Earth and observer are in motion, so are ***not*** neutral.

Observed motions of planets are explained partly by planetary motion, partly by motion of observer.

# Upshot of Kant's Copernican Revolution

Just as Copernicus explained the motion of the planets with reference to the condition of the observer,

*[The apparent motion of the planets is explained partly by their actual motion and partly by where we are standing when we observe them]*

So did Kant explain our claims to knowledge with reference to how we are constituted as perceivers and knowers.

*[The apparent truths about causation and so forth are explained partly by how the world is, independent of us, and partly by the way our minds work.]*



# Kant's Transcendental Idealism

We are constituted so as to perceive and to understand the world as fitting within particular formal structures: e.g., space, time, cause and effect, substance, necessity, possibility.

We **cannot** say that those formal structures will fit the world, *independently* of how we experience it.

But we **can** say that those formal structures will always fit the world as we experience it.

## “Two worlds”

1. **Phenomenal World** = The world we experience: partly shaped by the way we experience it.
2. **Noumenal World** = The world independent of our experience: unknowable by us.

## ***“But what is the world like, really?”***

If “really” means, “independent of any possible experience a human being can have” of the world, then there is no way to know. We simply can’t say.

That is, from a ***transcendental*** perspective (transcending all possible human experience), the world we experience is ***ideal*** (that is, exists only in relation to our minds and ideas).

But if “really” means, “what our best and most careful observations, and theories about those observations, tell us about” the world, then the world is really more or less like we think it is.

That is, from an ***empirical*** perspective (relying only on the evidence of our experiences), the world we experience is ***real*** (it will bear up under continual and repeated tests).

## **Transcendental Idealism – Empirical Realism**

**Human Reason is not merely reflective, but creative – we make the world we perceive.**

# Kant's Ethics

We also **make** our moral law.

## 1. We are **rational beings**.

= We are able to conceive of the world as ordered by general concepts, and we are able to conceive of objects in the world as related by universal laws of nature.

## 2. We are **practical rational beings**.

= We are able to **act** under the conception of universal laws.

= We can develop plans of action that presuppose the operation of universal laws, and we can conform our behavior to those plans.

## 3. To act **rationally** is to act according to the conception of universal law.

Strip away any specific desires or inclinations you have as a particular person.

## **Categorical Imperative**

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

***The fundamental modern rival to utilitarianism***

### III. Hegel.

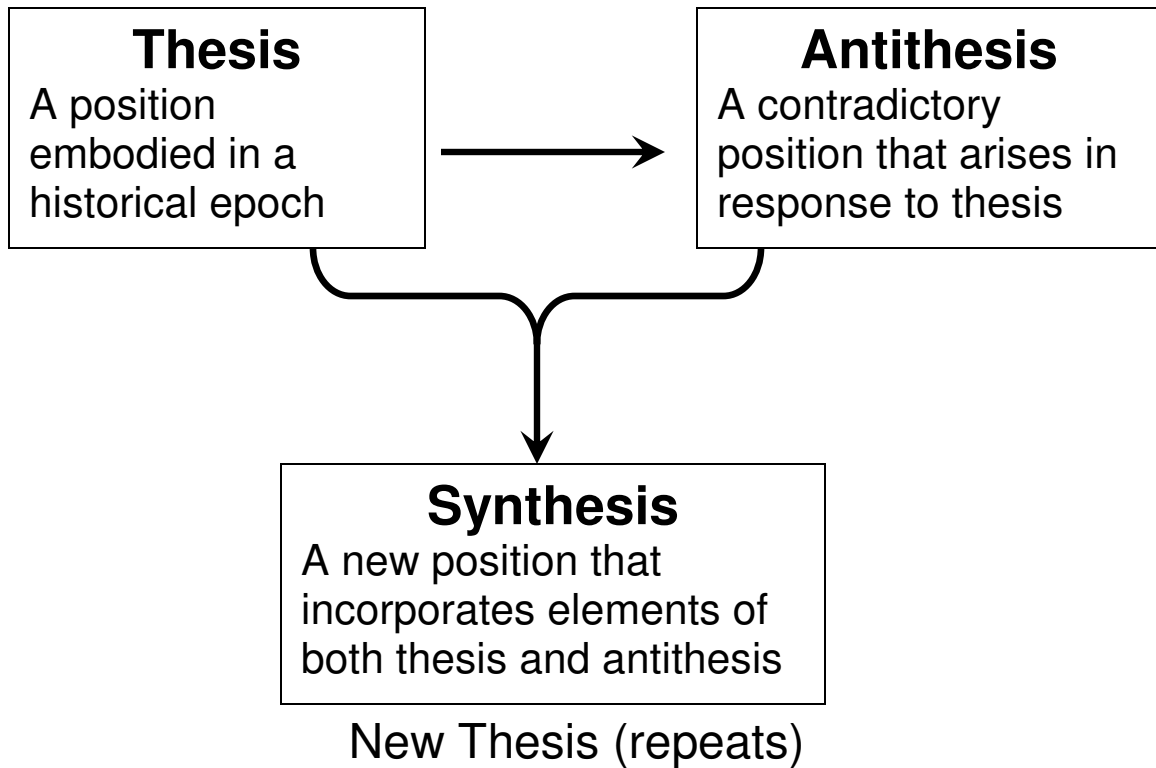
#### Saw several problems with Kant:

- (1) No reason to believe that there is a “noumenal world.”
- (2) Kant simply takes human reason as having a *given* structure, for all people, at all times.

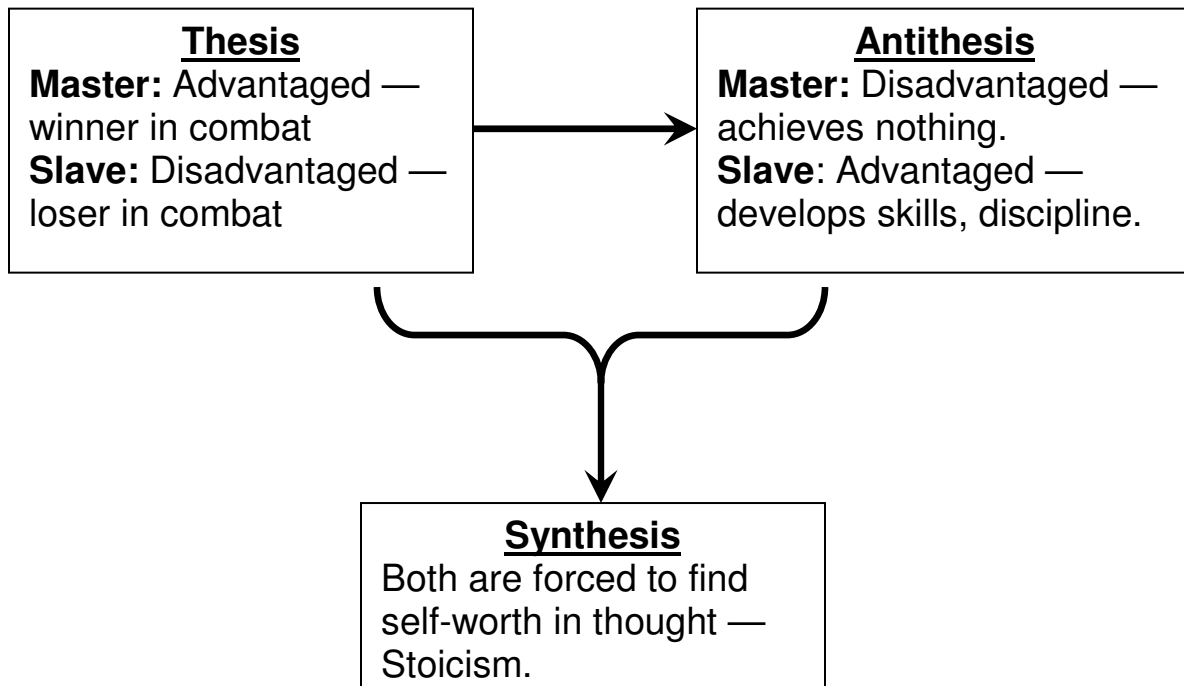
#### Dialectical Idealism.

1. Everything is in the *phenomenal world* – everything exists in relation to mind.
2. Reason and consciousness *develop* historically, through *dialectic*.
3. *Dialectic*: The process of arriving at the truth by considering opposing positions, and developing better positions through *internal critique*.
4. *Internal Critique*: Since we can’t “get outside” the phenomena to see how things really are, we have to reveal problems with views by showing that they give rise to contradictions.

# The Dialectical Process



## Example: The “Master-Slave” Dialectic



## **A historical and social process**

### **Contradiction is creative and productive.**

1. Two primitive men meet. They fight. One surrenders (“seized with dread”) and becomes the slave; the victor becomes the master.
2. The master is nominally powerful. He is recognized as the master. But this recognition comes from a slave. The slave’s recognition is worthless. Moreover, the master merely enjoys the products of the slave’s work; he achieves nothing on his own. So, the master has nothing of value. Contradiction!
3. The slave is nominally powerless. He is treated as a slave. But the slave has to *work* – he is forced to impose his will on nature. This gives the slave discipline and skill. This gives the slave something of value. Contradiction!

## Hegel's Central Contributions

- Reason *develops* through history, by conscious beings making things count as reasons
- Brought historical dialectic to the fore in explaining ideas
- Emphasized conflict and contradiction as creative

## Marx's Response

“Stood Hegel on his feet” (Engels): for Hegel was standing on his head

**Hegel:** All historical development is in the development of *thought* and *ideas* (since all that exists is the *phenomenal world*).

**Marx:** Historical development is driven by *material* conditions. Ideas arise from the material conditions of life. (See *Manifesto*, 174)

# IV. Marx's Historical Materialism

## Marx's Life

- Born 1818
- Studied philosophy at Trier
- A “left Hegelian” – influenced by Feuerbach
  - Feuerbach: a materialist – religion and philosophy serve material purposes
- Developed his economic and philosophical views 1841-45
- Met Engels in 1842
- Wrote *Manifesto* with Engels in 1848, ahead of the revolutions of that year
- From 1845 – lived an impoverished life in London, supported by Engels
- Died 1882, buried in London



# Historical Materialism

Accepted Hegel's dialectical framework –  
history advances through conflict

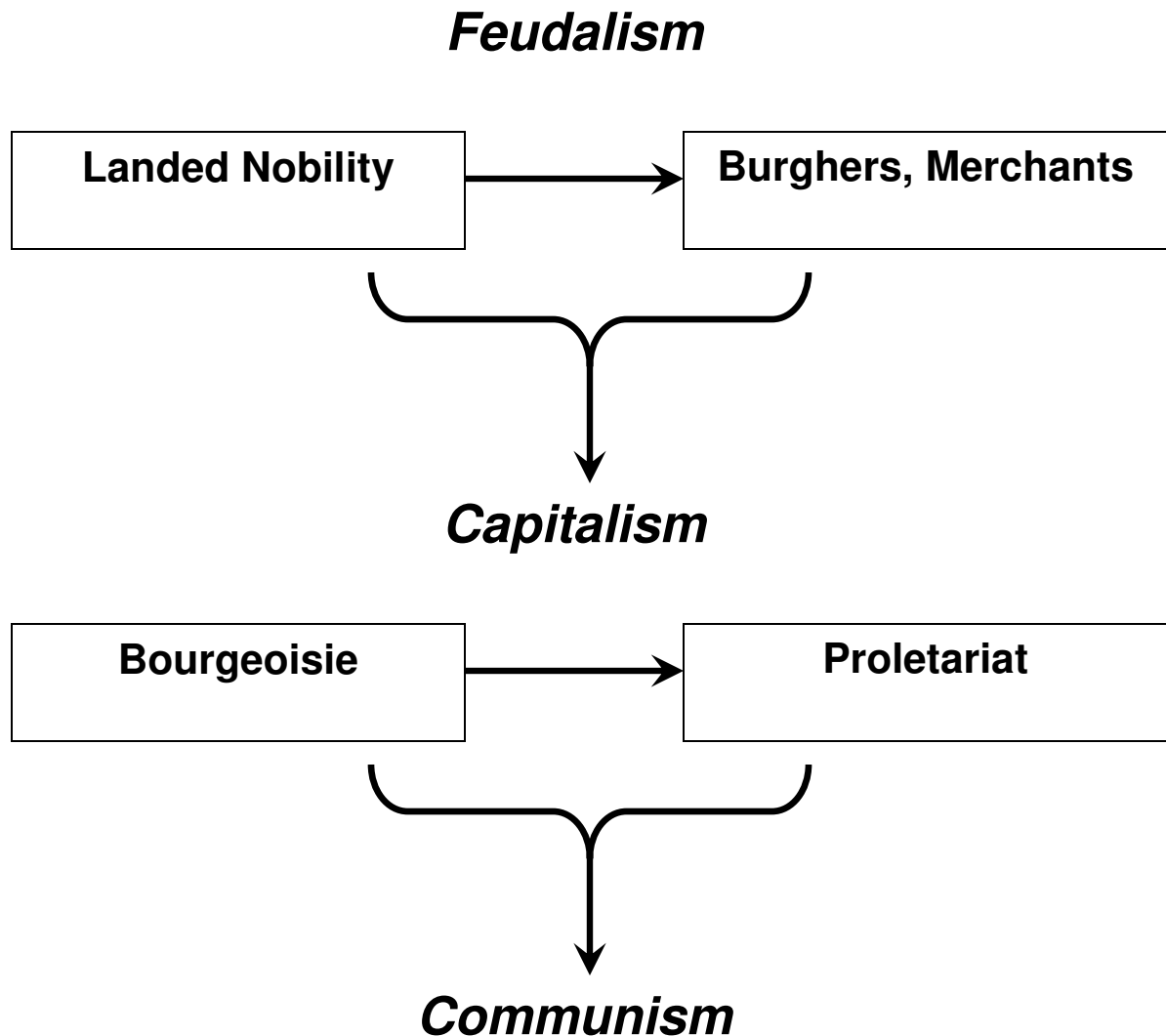
Nature of the conflict isn't between ideas but  
between **classes**

**Class:** A group of people who share a set of  
economic circumstances and who stand in  
specific power relations to other groups  
(classes).

This account of **class** implies:

- All members of a class have a set of material interests in common with others of that class.
- Different classes have different material interests, which can (and frequently do) conflict with each other
- In order for any classes to exist, there must be at least two
- It is possible to be a member of a class without being aware of it (“false consciousness”)

# Marx's Dialectic: An Example



*Dictatorship of the proletariat for a time*

*The state withers away: Classless society, the end of history (i.e., the end of historical conflict)*

# Questions

## For the *Manifesto*:

- How is the historical process of the development from capitalism to communism supposed to occur?
- What critique is present of “natural rights” and the theory of property as present in Locke (and Paine)?

## For the selection from the *Manuscripts*:

- What are “alienation,” “alienated labor” and the “species-existence” of a person — and how are these related to each other?

## For the selection from *German Ideology*:

- What is “ideology” and how does it arise?
- What is “division of labor” and why is it troublesome?