

# An analysis of marxist theory and its credibility politics essay



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This paper aims to show that various elements of Marxism do indeed focus on 'the weak' and that being such does not disqualify it from becoming a mainstream theory of International Relations. First, it will introduce the main strands of Marxist thoughts and define the terms 'weak' and 'powerful'.

Following that, this paper will establish that - given Marx's commitment to emancipation and the predisposition of following Marxist thoughts towards those with less power- Marxism does indeed focus on the 'weak'.

It will then move on to the analysis of the current political-economic climate to establish whether there is a crisis in the capitalist world-system that would indicate a growing relevance of Marxism in world politics. In order to do so, the author will use two Marxist schools of thought which are 1) Wallerstein's world-system theory and 2) Gramscianism. It will then conclude on whether Marxism can become a mainstream theory of IR given the current trend of crisis.

## **Introduction**

The key elements of Marxist thought as well as Marx's commitment to emancipation suggest that Marxism is a theory for those with little and thus have the most to gain from a revolution, which seems to be the proletariat and the 'periphery'. This paper aims to show that various elements of Marxism do indeed focus on 'the weak' and despite being such, Marxism continues to have growing relevance in the world politics given current geopolitical trends that could indicate a crisis in the capitalist world-system. These could make room for the rise of Marxism as a mainstream international relations theory.

## **1. Introduction to Marxism**

Marxism is indeed a theory for the weak as can be seen by Marx's commitment to emancipation and the emphasis of subsequent Marxist strands of thought on the exploitative nature of the capitalist system.

### **1. 1 Defining Marxism**

While there are many approaches to Marxism, there are three main elements that are common among them.

First is the holistic methodology in understanding the social world as a totality rather than dividing them into diverse fields of inquiry – economics, political science, etc...- as they believe that none can be properly understood without the others.

Second is the materialist conception of history. The underlying premise is that in order to survive, it is necessary for human beings to produce the material requirements of life and in doing so, they enter into very definite social relations – mainly, production relations. According to the classical interpretations of Marx's theory, ' the manner of production in a society shapes the character of the political and legal institutions, the morality and the prevailing ideas.' [1] It can be described in the base-superstructure model where the economic base involves the tension between the relations of production and the means of production while the superstructure involves the political and legal systems, culture, etc...

Third and lastly is the element of class division of society where in a capitalist system, society is divided into the bourgeoisies and the

proletariats. Marxists believe that society is inherently prone to class conflict, as evidenced by Marx's mention in the Communist Manifesto that ' the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.'[2]

## **1. 2 Defining the ' Weak' and ' Powerful'**

### The Weak

Generally, the weak are those who own little or no means of production and thus would have little power or say in the capitalist system. In keeping with Marx's division of society into classes, the weak would be the working class (proletariats) while in terms of the world-system theory; the weak would be considered those countries in the peripheral and semi-peripheral zone.

### The Powerful

In contrast the powerful would be those who own the means of production and would thus have more power and say in the capitalist system. In terms of Marx's division of society into classes, the powerful would be the bourgeoisie while in the terms of the world-system theory; the powerful would be the countries in the core.

## **1. 3 Marxism: A theory for the weak?**

Marx was committed to the cause of emancipation and his interest in the development of an understanding of the dynamics of capitalist society was mainly to discover ways to overthrow the prevailing order and replace it with a communist society.

Given Marx's predisposition towards the empowerment of the working class and thus their emancipation, it strongly suggests that Marx's theory would be mainly for the 'weak'. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx mentioned, 'The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.' The use of words such as 'exploitation' denotes certain antipathy to the bourgeoisies' method of spreading the capitalist mode of production.

Furthermore, the main strands of Marxist thought seem to favour the weak. It is evident in both the World-system theory and Gramscianism. According to World Systems theorists, 'the core, semi-periphery and periphery are locked in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained away from the periphery to the centre.'<sup>[3]</sup> Gramsci's concept of hegemony reflects his conceptualization of power where, by cultivating Machiavelli's definition of power arrives at the conclusion that power is 'a mixture of coercion and consent.'<sup>[4]</sup>

Therefore, in general, the different approaches of Marxism do seem to be fundamentally predisposed towards the weak and powerless.

## 2. The Relevance of World-System Theory in International Politics

### 2.1 Origins of World-System Theory

In his pamphlet Imperialism, the Highest State of Capitalism, -published in 1917- Lenin mentioned the evolved nature of capitalism since Marx published his first volume of Capital in 1867. With the emergence of monopoly capitalism came a two-tier structure 'with a dominant core

exploiting a less-developed periphery.’[5]This development has led to the dissolution of the automatic harmony of interests between all working classes because the bourgeoisie in core countries could pacify their proletariats with gains obtained from the exploitation of the proletariats in the periphery.

## 2. 2 Wallerstein’s World-System Theory

Immanuel Wallerstein asserted that the modern world system originated in Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century. It then expanded throughout the entire globe, with capitalism being its main engine of expansion which, as defined by Wallerstein is ‘ a system of production for sale in a market for profit and appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership.’[6]

Within the framework of capitalism, every institution in the social world is perpetually being created and recreated and the system itself is historically bounded. ‘ It had a beginning, has a middle and will have an end.’[7]

In addition to the core-periphery division, Wallerstein added an intermediate semi-periphery zone consisting of the countries with both characteristics of the core and periphery. Countries in the semi-periphery – although motivated by core economic interests – own their own industrial base.

### 2. 2. 1 Four Temporal Dimensions of World Systems Theory

Wallerstein identified four main temporal dimensions to the world-system which he considered important in facilitating a full understanding of it alongside the spatial dimensions.

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The first temporal dimension is that of cyclical rhythms in the capitalist economy where it undergoes a series of periods of high economic growths followed by economic decline known as boom and bust.

The second temporal dimension is that of secular trends where the capitalist economy undergoes ' deeper long run tendencies, such as general economic growth or decline.' [8]

Third would be the inherent contradictions of the world system where the optimal set of actions in the short run would result in an adverse effect in the long run where an opposite set of actions are considered optimal. The common example would be that of under-consumption where firms face the dilemma of lowering workers' wages in the short run to earn higher profit or increasing workers' wages in the long run so that the workers would be able to consume the goods produced.

Fourth and finally would be the concept of crisis where a once-in-a-lifetime ' crisis' in the world-system would occur due to the compounding of all the inherent temporal features of the world-system -the cyclical rhythms, secular trends and contradiction- thus causing the inability of the system to continue to reproduce itself. A crisis would signify the end of a specific world-system to be replaced by another system.

## 2. 3 Capitalism in Crisis and World-System Theory

Current problematic global events could be an indication of a crisis in the current world-system as can be seen in the devastating effects of the series

of financial crises as well as political chaos spreading through the Middle East.

Wallerstein's postulations on the temporal dimensions of the world-system theory can be applied to explain the effects of the recent series of financial crises – in particular, the 2008 financial crisis which brought the global economy to the brink of collapse and resulted in major bank defaults and spiraling state debts.

The accumulation of effects of cyclical rhythms and secular trends seem to have resulted in a beginning of a crisis in the world system. This point is clearly illustrated by Wallerstein where, in his analysis of the 2008 Financial Crisis, he mentioned that this time ' the structural trends may interfere with the cyclical patterns'[9]thus resulting in a movement away from cyclical equilibrium until it reaches a point where the system disintegrates resulting in ' high chaotic turbulence, which our world-system is experiencing at the moment and will continue to experience for perhaps another 20-50 years.'[10]

Alan Woods, a leading member of the International Marxist Tendency, stated in his article, World Capitalism in Crisis, that, ' It is a matter of indifference in which country the crisis begins. The main thing is that under modern conditions it will inevitably pass from one county and continent to another'[11]. This could be an indication of a crisis where the world-system is unable to continue to reproduce itself, thus making it vulnerable to replacement by another system. This is supported by Wallerstein when he mentioned in his commentary, ' We can assert with confidence that the



present system cannot survive. What we cannot predict is which new order will be chosen to replace it, because it will be the result of an infinity of individual pressures'[12]

Therefore, given today's geopolitical climate in which a crisis seems to have emerged in the world-system, a better understanding of the world-system theory could be more beneficial in the international relations arena which could lead to Marxism becoming a mainstream theory of international relations.

### **3. Gramscianism: Challenging Hegemony**

#### **3.1 Introduction to Gramscianism**

Gramscian thoughts revolved around the central question on ' Why had it proven to be so difficult to promote revolution in Western Europe?'[13]In answering this question, Gramsci used the concept of hegemony which, for Gramsci, reflected his conceptualization of power where he asserts that hegemony is maintained through a blend of coercion and consent, instead of focusing exclusively on the maintenance of hegemony through violence and political and economic coercion.

He maintained that consent is ' created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling class in society'13 and went on to emphasize on the importance of culture and institutions in enforcing hegemonic culture in order to seek hegemonic rule through consent. It highlights the need for Marxism to take the superstructure of the materialist conception more seriously as it is of great relevance in gauging the susceptibility of a society to change and transformation.

Gramsci defined the term 'historic bloc' as 'the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationships between the socioeconomic relations (base) and political and cultural practices (superstructure) that together underpin a given order.'<sup>13</sup> This definition implies that in order to transform society, the current hegemonic order needs to be successfully challenged which requires a counter-hegemonic struggle where 'the prevailing hegemony is undermined, allowing an alternative historic bloc to be constructed.'<sup>13</sup>

### **3. 2 Robert Cox and Gramscianism in World Politics**

Robert Cox, a Canadian scholar, was responsible for developing a Gramscian approach to the critique of current dominant theories in IR and also for developing an alternative framework in analysing world politics.

In his seminal article in 1981 titled 'Social forces and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', he mentioned that 'Theory is always for some one and for some purpose.'<sup>[14]</sup> By this he asserts that all knowledge implicitly contain a certain context reflecting a specific time and space.

He introduces the idea of critical theory being an attempt to challenge the current hegemonic order through a thorough understanding of the social processes that could lead to potential emancipatory change. Cox maintains Marx's view that the intrinsic flaws of the capitalist system would eventually lead to its downfall.

### **3. 3 Challenging the United States' Hegemony**

In Gramsci's perspective, cultural hegemony is when ' a social class exerts cultural " leadership" or dominance over other classes in maintaining the socio-political status quo.'[15]

Since the end of the cold war and the triumph of the US over the USSR, the structure of the international system could be viewed as a uni-polar world order with the United States as the hegemon[16]as evident in " the United States by the turn of the century had been transformed from a mere superpower (its designation hitherto) to what the French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine in 1998 termed a ' hyperpower'."[17]In his book, Promoting Polyarchy, William I. Robinson said that " The US, which may be the last ' hegemon', has taken the lead on behalf of the agenda of transnational elite."[18]

The strong US presence in international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank is a key indication of its primacy and ' cultural dominance' in ' maintaining the socio-political status quo' in the international arena. For example, the US holds 15. 85% of voting power in the World Bank -far more than any other country - with Japan coming in second at 6. 84%.[19]Also, being one of the five permanent members of the Security Council in the UN, the US holds veto power over all Security Council decisions.

In his article, The Decline of US Hegemony: Regaining International Consent , author Kevin Slaten, - through his analysis of the United Nations General Assembly voting data and cross-national attitude surveys- showed the

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loosening hold of the United States over the consent of most NATO countries to its hegemony. Slaten went on to conclude that, ' America had sufficient authority over NATO countries during the Clinton administration to lead a system of hegemony over those states, and the system of hegemony declined significantly during the Bush administration as policy choices caused a loss of authority among NATO countries.'[20]

The evident decline in US hegemonic power suggests the weakening of the current historic bloc. The mutual ' reinforcing and reciprocal relationships between the socioeconomic relations (base) and political and cultural practices (superstructure)'13 seems to be unable to sustain itself in the light of a weakening in both the economic base and the cultural practices as shown by the various financial crises as well as the reduction of US popularity in the international arena.

This could indicate a call for the ' counter-hegemonic struggle' that Gramsci proposed and prove right Cox's prediction that ' Inevitable economic crises will act as a catalyst for the emergence of counter-hegemonic movements.'[21]

#### **4. Conclusion: The rise of Marxism in International Relations**

The destabilizing of the current economic base in societies in the world-system due to the series of financial crises makes room for an analysis through the world-system theory. Of particular relevance are Wallerstein's four temporal dimensions of the world-system where the interference of

secular trends with the cyclical rhythms of the capitalist world economy threatens to undermine its equilibrium.

The weakening of the US hegemonic superstructure on the other hand, further makes room for Marxism in terms of Gramscian analysis of the historic bloc and the counter-hegemonic challenge.

Thus, current world events – be it in the economic base or superstructure of societies and states in the international arena – show the continued and growing relevance of Marxism despite it being a theory for the weak.

**Word Count: 2765**