

# The influence of marxism in Australian universities and society

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



Karl Marx was one of the most celebrated, yet misconstrued philosophers of our time. His ideology was adopted by many systems throughout history, for models on economic and political structure. At the heart of Marxism exists a central relation between class and power within institutions of society. Universities are institutions which embody much of Marx's ideology on cooperation, wealth, consciousness and political rights. In particular, the purpose of this essay is to examine how Australian universities essentially reflect Marx's ideas on the importance of economic development and structure. The structure of Australian universities will support my argument that we as university students reflect the Marxist ideal that we are all contributors to an economic superstructure and a capitalist reality. Firstly, the main concepts of Marx's ideology will be discussed, especially economic structure and political theory. Secondly, the impact of religion on university life and students within these institutions will be contrasted and compared with Marxist ideals of economics, materialism and idealism. Finally, the core parallels that exist between Marxism and today's Australian universities will explain the roles Marxist theory play in university life and the broader society. Many misconceptions about Marxism have been formed in the past few decades, and while Marxism is broad and its ideology consists of other concepts, these areas fall beyond the scope of my investigation and therefore will not be examined in the following essay. Ideology is defined as the set of beliefs and values in a society that can be explained by the economic structure. Ideology in Marx's sense is not an idiosyncratic complex of beliefs and attitudes caused by a unique set of experiences, but a figure of thought shared by many people and caused by whatever is common in their

situation (Elster, 1986). The recognition of ideological thought and philosophy began during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment period also influenced universities; new subjects were integrated and taught and student's minds were broadened and liberated with 'truths', in consistent with the Church at the time. There were new direction in theology, medicine, arts and science. At the heart of the Enlightenment were two monumental concepts. The first was a reappraisal of the human condition that led to the conception of universal human rights. The second was a belief in the inevitability of progress. Both led to cries for social, economic, governmental reforms, and both owed much to conceptual changes in natural philosophy. Marx's political ideology centrally argues the relation between the special interest of a given class and the general interests of society. The nature of the economic structure of a society determines the nature of its political and legal superstructures. The idea that the economic power of the ruling class must be protected and consolidated is Marx's second thesis. To paraphrase Marx, "The ideas of the ruling class are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material which make one class the ruling one..." Marx's ideology has often embodied materialism because it was adopted by Communist states in conflicts regarding the working class and the economy. However, this view is incorrect, as Marx endeavoured to create 'a kind of economic system where the position a person occupied, determined his or her consciousness' (Clark, 1983). What shapes and maintains ideological thinking in Marxism is the interest of the ruling class. On this point Marxism deviates from the Freudian conception of false consciousness, according to which it is necessarily the interest of the person himself that distorts his

thinking, not that of some other person or class (Hands, 2000). Freud theory assumes false consciousness is accompanied by an unconscious awareness of the true state of affairs – an awareness that the person is repressed, substituting a false representation for reality (Storr, 1989). False consciousness involves self deception, but the Marxist theory instead believes there is no dual belief system at work; that is, no self-deception. Marx offers class position rather than class interest as the source of ideological thinking. Ideology formed by wishful thinking operates when members of a particular class realise their interest coincides with the realisation of the interest of the society as a whole. The post-modern condition is the degree to which we live in a ' money-economy' and this representation influences life in determining the nature of our economic structure. Therefore, the object of universities and a degree is to make money and feed this economy we are part of. In a capitalist economy, we don't even belong to ourselves. The ' product' produced by the worker belongs to the capitalist economy, who considers it as a commodity to be sold for wealth. Money is the objectified and alienated form of life itself (Gauntlett, 2002). In the fully developed form of capital, money achieves an active, self-generating power through which it shapes the lives of the concrete individual. Marx refers to it as a ' visible God' (Clark, 1983). Marxist theory employed the concept of economic determinism to explain how economic resources determined social power, which in turn determined class struggle. " It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness" (Elster, 1986). Our material world is caused by three factors; the representational, ideal and material. Marx suggests the

dichotomy between the ideal and the material are outdated in human activity. We cannot form the concept of an 'ideal' sphere unless we also conceive a 'material' realm. According to Marx, it is logically impossible to separate the material sphere from the ideal. Our artistic and cultural achievements, our material advancement, depend on co-operation that is considered globally. Human beings are involved in an immense scheme of co-operation; the student learns in order to provide skills and services needed to create products and sell them essentially, whether this be in the form of a brick layer or lawyer. Universities are about just that - increasing skills and knowledge and this ideal building on shared knowledge that has been accumulated over the ages and centralises what universities are about. Shared ideological beliefs arise in two ways. They can emerge randomly in the minds of many people, who experience exposure to similar external influences and psychological processes. Or one person may develop an idea and their peers adopt this way of thinking. This is the environment Marxist ideology creates in a university. Students are encouraged to think spontaneously and share ideas amongst their group. Co-operation and learning go hand in hand so that the student may one day become a 'worker' and fulfil Marx's ideal; to produce goods and services. Another significant ideal of Marxism was the effect of religion on the superstructure. Marx said religion helped people adapt to their miserable lives in this world. One cannot enjoy equal political rights unless religion is transcended. Religion was an important part of Marx's ideology and its role in society seemed to how it served the interests of the ruling class, and not as a fulfilment of a need of the exploited classes. Equally significant was the

actual connection between religion and capitalism. How could capitalist behaviour be guided by religion? Could the religious worker create high rate of savings and investment? A metaphor of Marx's ideas on the working class and how this relates to Australian universities, is this quote from Wolff (2002): The Marx social division of labour [can be described] as how some make chairs, some make shoes, but each craftsman tends to make the whole object. In a university setting, each student aims to hone their knowledge and skills in a certain craft, be it the Arts, or Medicine or Law. This is in essence, divided labour, and Marxism claims that divided labour increases production dramatically. We have internalised the attitude that unemployment is almost a moral failing. Thus not only do we see law and politics adapting to the needs of capitalism, the very ideas people have are also generated the same way. Marx says: " The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production. Innovate or die is the logic of capitalism". (Burton, 1983) The idea of an institution that offers a chance for people to attain a degree in a specific field of study is centralised around Marx's ideas of capitalism and its logic. The object of individual attitudes is the individual himself - his experiences, his perception of other people, including his perception of their perception of him. The above quote illustrates that the individual cannot thrive in a capitalist nation, locally and globally, unless we continue to innovate the means of production. In this sense, universities are a structure put in place by the capitalist society in order to create ' workers' which will continue to create new technology that increases production as a result of their conditioning inside the university. Marxist theory is sociological, Freud is psychological. The Marxist

ideology conceptualises the factual and normative beliefs about society, where human beings have individual and collective material needs. Individual thought and social processes are not enough for one to interact successfully with the world after university. In order to satisfy their needs, human beings must labour together on the world, yet in doing so they evolve evermore complex forms of production and social interaction. The Marxist ideology speaks often in terms of 'locally' and 'globally'. I think in terms of how ideology plays a role in universities in Australia locally, we buy and sell ourselves to our local economy, and this creates the opportunity for global trading. Marx believes that we can only become economical ideal when class and power structures have been stabilised. Just as the material and ideal world cannot live without one another, neither can society without notions of class and power. In a university setting, power structures are created by students within the student body, by staff within in the alumni, and the two may also collide. Class is relevant in this setting because of the wide accessibility of universities and its recruitment processes. The role of Marxist ideology in class and power struggles of society is that one must aspire to gain consciousness of how these notions are policed in order to overcome them and essentially develop the best human productive power possible. Marx's economic structure for the ideal society is centred on labour and the worker. For the student in an Australian university setting, and as a future worker in the economy, Marx spoke of a distinction between political and human emancipation (Wolff, 2002). Political emancipation consisted of the 'right of man and the citizen'. For a political ideology to be successful, it must be inherent in terms of the general interest. Marx argued that this success

could still be thwarted by religious differences of a conflict of interest between groups. Before the modern age, political ideology still painted a picture of the natural rights, duties, and obligations of the different social classes. The universalistic political ideology they created turned out to have consequences beyond what they had intended. There is now law any society can provide that protects every citizen for all the necessary human rights one should have. Marxist ideology acknowledges that there are loopholes in the law which allow people to employ people of their own social class, religion or race (Wolff, 2002). It is the nature of Australian universities today to promote harmony and multi-cultural attitudes towards the student body and faculty. This is seen to promote the well-being of all potential workers and allows them to thrive. The role of the Marxist economic structure is a sub-conscious objective of all universities' purpose. Marxist ideology still plays a large, if not subconscious role in our society today. Within that society, we as a capitalist nation at heart, rely on our 'workers' to produce goods for the economy which sells these goods and services locally and globally. The idea behind tertiary institutions such as universities, is to train and arm students with skills and knowledge in specified areas so they may go out into the workforce and maximise production for the economic superstructure. However, ideology also encompasses the impact of religion on capitalist values and morals. That is why Marxism states that we must be emancipated politically and morally and transcend religion in order to blur the lines of