

# Marxism as an alternative theory

[Politics](#), [Marxism](#)



The contrasting social divide of 19th century Europe was one of the principle-instigating factor that inspired Karl Marx and Frederick Engels to come with Communist Manifesto in 1848. It called upon the working classes to declare war upon the bourgeoisie. In the opinion of Marx, capitalism with its inherent tendency to favor property accumulation, market system and wage labor system had always worked in promoting the clout and wealth of aristocracy while working to weaken the peasants class and sending them to the levels of subservience and just subsistence (Freedman, 1990, 1).

The philosophy was a major intellectual achievement of Marxism as it described the ills and problems affecting the society not in terms of faulty ideology and philosophy but in the terms of economic forces of capitalist development (Aune, 1994, 17). As Freedman (1990, 2) states, Marx viewed the major conflicts and events of world not as consequences of ethnic, lingual or religious factors but purely through economic perspectives. He argued that capitalism and its resultant class system have been the main instrumental factors in creating the present structure of human society and behavior.

Marxism attempts to correlate the entire progress and evolution of human civilization with Marx's staunch view that economic factors have determined the history of humanity. It attempts to understand the origin, functioning and structure of all the social institutions on economic models and assumes that once this knowledge is gained, it can be employed to recreate the social order that is beneficial for every member of society, while eliminating the ills of poverty, inequality and class distinctions (ibid).

Marxism also views state (government) as an instrument of the ruling class that works to protect the interests of the economically prosperous segments at the cost of the working population (Freedman, 1990, 2). The premises of this argument lies in the fact that typically every state is influenced heavily by the rich and wealthy section of society and as such its policies are inherently oriented towards safeguarding these affluent sections. The working-lower class is just treated as a tool to further the riches of this affluent section, while providing them with bare facilities that are hardly sufficient to maintain their existence.

School and churches are also viewed as extending arms of the same system that continuously works to maintain, and in fact, promote the social divide. Thus nation and state are essentially nothing but exploiters of working population. As a consequence, terms like patriotism and nationalism hold no meaning to the oppressed working society, which is made to work not for the benefit of the nation but for the few and selected elite group of people that in their limited numbers represent an entire nation.

A careful study of Marxism reveals following three major elements that define the structure of the world of Marx (Heilbroner, 1980, 21).

**Materialist approach to History:** The historical analysis of activities of people's activities that creates conditions of subsequent class emergence and struggle of present times.

**General view of capitalism:** Capitalism, and the economic forces that are the root of entire social divide

Commitment to socialism: It envisions a future where every man is able to create a just world through his own efforts and commitment.

Marxism, in its zealous criticism of the capitalist system, pronounced the immanent end through of capitalistic society through t its own contradictions and an eventual sweep over of the world by socialist forces. However capitalism has survived and contrary to Marx's vision, it has become mainstay of democratic and developed world, whereas Marxism holds it appeal for the poor and oppressed classes in underdeveloped countries (Freedman, 1990, 2)

#### Mainstream Political theories

The mainstream political theories have evolved from Machiavellian concepts to one that is focused on a welfare state that is founded around the concepts of participative democracy and social justice (Young, 1998, 479). As listed by Young (ibid) the mainstream political theories, developed consciously over last 25 years, although with inputs pning over past hundred and fifty years, are

Social justice and welfare rights theory: Unlike Marxist theory of handing over the reins of government to workers, the social justice and welfare rights theory attempts to strike a cord of balance among different economic classes with their commitment to socialequalityand economic justice. One of major themes running through this theory is egalitarian distribution of resources to people who have been deprived of them, it doesn't attempts forced equality among all classes of society.

Democratic theory: Also labeled as participative democratic theory, it lays emphasis on a concept of democracy that proceeds through age long ideals of democracy that proceed through active discussion, participation and decision making by citizen, against the emerging plebiscite and inter-group pluralist concepts of the democratic mode (Pateman, 1970). The theory aims to achieve the goal of social equality through democratic participation that both helps as well as promotes social equality. The thrust of the theory is that a democracy that only provides voting rights to people for representatives who rule them remotely lacks the element of a real democracy. Instead the democratic set up should be made to incorporate citizen's participation at every stage of the governance and decision making process. This in turns demands providing all the citizens with sufficient levels of education and economic and social uplifting whereby they are able to appreciate and exercise their democratic rights.

Feminist political theory: It is a major emergent trend in the mainstream political theories, and one that brings in the question of female participation, as a separate entity, in the working of democracy. It helps in to integrate the elements of family relations, sexual biases, and gendered related discrimination in the political question.

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As noted above, the essential philosophy Marxism lies in defining all the historical and social events in terms of manipulation of resources by capitalist forces that worked in depriving a majority of population from basic means of living. Marxist approach viewed social structure in terms of non-owning workers and non-working owners that was the root cause of every

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social and political evil. Marx defined all the events in form of 'class struggle' and placed supreme faith in human will (Freedman, 1990, 6).

Marxism views human beings capable of molding their own destinies, creating their own world, and change the entire structure of a oppressive society to one where every one holds same dignity and right to a provisioned life. However its more than hundred years to Marx's momentous work Das Capital that predicted downfall of bourgeois and capitalist system, an event which completely failed to materialize (Wolfe, 1985, 317). It points out to some considerable short sighting or inappropriate reading by Marx of the nature of interaction of social and economic forces.

Marx, in predicting the immanent downfall of the existing capitalist system through popular revolution and protests by bourgeoisie, had given a sweeping and generalizing theory that was supposed to take into every possible factor and consequence of historical, social and human events. The theories of Ricardo, Hegel and Smith that Marx used to develop his own general explanation of all events were relatively semi -developed and in the transitory phase (Freedman, 1990, 126) and as could provide a very weak base to the daring presumptions and foresights that Marxism professed boldly.

The theory failed to take into account the results of people's will to act outside the boundaries that it imposed. It was, in a sense then, technically incapable to address issues emanating from this scenario, a flaw that later on emerged as a major shortcoming of the entire Marxist model.

Marxism always stands in direct contrast to critical theory that was developed by Max Horkheimer in 1937 (Therborn, 1996). It was meant to be a critique of the theory of political economy and provide replacement of materialism embedded in the Marxist approach (ibid). Critical theory rejected the principles of division of labor and believes in social advances through meaningful and coordinated interaction among various classes, as against the Marxist approach of inherent and inevitable class struggle that has shaped up history

### Historical Materialism

In the Marxist philosophical approach, history is a study in the development and evolution of the capitalist system. In the opinion of Marx the consciousness of a man is the product of his social being which defines the legal and political superstructures (Heilbroner, 1980, 62). The materialism of Marxism differed sharply from idealism contained in the other approaches that saw history as product of different beliefs and approaches. Marx clearly stated that history is the product of labor, efforts and determination of countless men and women who worked to improve their material conditions in a material environment.

Primarily what it signifies is that entire history of world is composed of forces of economics and compulsions of existence through limited resources. The thought processes and ideas that have been assumed to shape history, in Marxist ideology, were themselves product of the materialistic conditions (Heilbroner, 1980, 63). Marxism further takes the concept of materialism and intertwines it with class structure to lay the foundation of theory of class

struggle that is presented as a direct consequence of material forces in operation.

Although the historical materialistic view point of Marxist philosophy had been validated in defining some of the major events of history, however its broad generalization of economic activities has brought it under criticism from many theorists. Whereas Marxist ideology attempts to focus not primarily but only on economic factors, it has been perceived that even economic factors themselves are affected by social, political and religious factors (Heilbroner, 1980, 64).

#### Marxism in context of USA

As a political and social theory Marxism has traditionally failed materialize in the USA. This is because the socialist theory of Marxism conflicts with the principles and ideals of democracy. Although it is true that true socialism as envisioned by Marx was never practiced anywhere, but the fact remains that within the scope of political models of Marxism there are ample opportunities for a political system to become authoritarian, culminating in kind of dictatorship that was hallmark of socialist USSR government (Geras, 1994). This is to say, the socialist structure proposed by Marxism is seriously vulnerable to deformation by individuals with such designs.

However, within the framework of classical Marxism also democratic ideas have not found much support. Essentially Marxism advocates liberation and rule of workers, which has to occur independent of any form of government (ibid). Therefore it is indeed successful in outlining the process of social and political change but falters on the final form of governance that opens the



doors for ambiguity, deformation and misinterpretation. This severely limits the democratic angle of Marxism.

Further, with its sole emphasis on workers right and class struggle between proletariat and the bourgeois, Marxist ideology aims to create a society that lacks economic incentives to evolve and move ahead. In its aim to bring marginalized sections of society in the center, the model threatens to create a new section of marginalized. These inherent ideological differences with free, democratic and progressive ideals that USA has cherished since its independence define the incongruity of Marxism in the USA's political, social and economic atmosphere.

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