

Karl marx
continuation of the
enlightenment
sociology essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Karl Marx is regarded as one of the classics of sociology. His social thought, considered one of the most important social theories, was a humanistic theory, concentrated on the condition of society and a place of individual in social structure. Marx is known as one of the greatest ideologists of the nineteenth century. His political theory was revolutionary. As a sociologist though, he is regarded to be a “ great heir of Enlightenment”[1], using and developing key concepts of the eighteenth century thinkers. This paper is aimed to discuss Karl Marx’ theory in comparison to the Enlightenment philosophy. I will try to answer a question: to what extent Marx’ work inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers? In order to that I will discuss the key concepts of the Enlightenment that were further developed in Marx’s works. In the following part of the paper I will compare the ideas of the eighteenth century thinkers with Marx’ theory, in regard to notions of progress, social structure, religion, science, materialism, state and individualism.

Social development, progress and social change

The theory of social development and progress was the key concept of the Enlightenment[2]. The experience of Renaissance - recovery from the “ dark ages”, rediscovery of antique philosophy, the expansion of colonialism and exploration of non-European cultures, violated established order and lead to expansion of new ideas doubting tradition. The Enlightenment recognized that human history changes and that societies experience material and mental, moral or philosophical progress. It became clear, that modernity is just another stage of development, that does not lead the end of history, but might be as well a beginning of some better, new society. Eighteenth century thinkers considered reason as the leading force of change, believing, that

<https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-continuation-of-the-enlightenment-sociology-essay/>

human knowledge and consciousness may develop linearly. Since the Enlightenment was an age of science and reason, philosophers tend to classify and order possessed knowledge. That led to a few theories of historical stages development of societies that arranged historical periods in progressive order[3].

Marx inherited from the Enlightenment that linear and deterministic perspective on development of societies, building his theory on the idea of progress. In his works he wrote about successive stages of development of societies: primitive society, feudalism, capitalism (bourgeois formation), socialism and communism. He abandoned the concept of reason as the leading force of progress, though. For Marx' the key force of development was ownership and mode of production emerging from it. HeEach of the stages presented different social relations, policies, politics and consciousness – all of which resulting from economic relations. The mode of production representing each of historical formation of society was regarded as a base, and resulted in different superstructures – culture, religion and politics. Every stage of history was more complex than another and led to the next one. For Marx it meant that the history of all societies is inevitable and must lead through the same phases.

The Enlightenment's attachment to the notion of progressive development of societies led to the ideas of future utopia – final, goal stage of social evolution. It was a very optimistic concept of history, beginning in dark, oppressive periods of the past, through ambiguous and chaotic modernity, leading to some “enlighten”, better and just future. Such utopian vision was described by Condorcet, for whom future society would prevail tyranny by <https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-continuation-of-the-enlightenment-sociology-essay/>

changing tradition and superstition into reason[4]. Delany wrote of the Enlightenment as "...characterized by a certain utopianism, which was a reflection of the belief in the promises of modernity to bring about freedom. Unlike earlier social thought, it displayed a great belief in the power of human action to shape the future"[5]. The same was true for Marx, who saw communism as the perfect and most of all - just, social system. For Marx the end stage of human history - communism - represented the most desired and final phase of human development. As Sideman wrote: " Marx never gave up his Enlightenment faith in the coming of a new era"[6].

But contrary to the Enlightenment philosophers, for Marx, the utopia was not to be obtained through evolution and development of reason, but through revolution of working class. The idea of revolution was not present in eighteenth century before the experience of French revolution. Though it is sad, that the Enlightenment prepared the ground for the revolt in France, works of eighteenth century thinkers did not appeal to force or violent change. Marx shared the romantic vision of revolution with socialist thinkers and activists supporting French strife. Moreover, unlike his eighteenth century ancestors, Marx sought emancipation in proletariat - the working class of modernity. The Enlightenment was an age of intellectuals, giving special role to philosophers in the process of development of society[7]. In eighteenth century thought, reason had the emancipatory force. Marx violent vision of revolution did not reserved place for intellectuals, though Marx was one of them.

Social structure

The Enlightenment was a period of a great expansion of egalitarian theories. The idea of natural laws developed and notion of equality had spread. Eighteen century philosophers attempted to find and describe origins of social order as well as discover best social conditions to maintain and expand individual freedom. Especially the latter - freedom, understood as unconstrained development and expansion of reason - was an important issue in the theory of state and governance. The Enlightenment cherished the idea of liberated individual in the society - free from state, church and other collective forms of organizations. To reconcile the concepts of state and freedom, the idea of civil society was developed. Individuals became citizens - residents of a state that had their natural, internal rights, individuals who through that civil rights gained freedom. Though human beings were not equal, especially because of different kinds and sizes of ownership, they had the potential of equality internalized through their natural, inalienable rights.

For Marx idea of equality was a goal of the development of societies. Contemporary social structure was far from egalitarian one. To describe social structure Marx used a concept of class as sets of people or parts of society that differ by the " effective control over the means of production and property ownership"[8]. The class designated people who lived in similar conditions. For bourgeois stage of development social structure was basically dichotomous, consisting of two classes - owners (capitalists) and workers. Since individuals within one class shared alike economic positions - they also shared the same interests. Individuals from different classes, on the other hand, remained in permanent conflict as they interests were opposite. For in

Marx' theory class structure is a structure of permanent class-conflict. As E. C. Cuff and others expressed it: " Since the inequality between the owning class and the labouring class is not simply an economic one, narrowly defined, but involves a social relationship of power and control, the difference of interest between these classes refers to freedom" and further: " The conflict of interest between owning and labouring classes is, then, a conflict over power and freedom." [9] Once again Marx' theory rejected peaceful and optimistic assumptions of the Enlightenment.

Ideologies and religion

The end of the Middle Ages ended the era of god's laws and theological explanation of social order. The Enlightenment separated religion from politics. Eighteen century brought to life the concept of public – private spheres. Religion became private matter of citizens. God's rights no longer decided on political questions and social relations. Secular society was based on secular rules. The Enlightenment believed in reason and science, and through them sought emancipation from religion and superstition. " Social change required that cultural traditions be weakened to allow for new ideas and attitudes favoring social progress" [10]. Religion and tradition constrained social change and overruled the utopian vision of future. It does not mean that the Enlightenment was a truly secular era. Rejection of religion covered only public, political sphere. None of the great philosophers of the period – Bacon, Diderot, Locke – postulated atheism [11]. The issue was to separate religion from science, theology from logical reasoning. Religion intruded cognition, so had to be abandoned in the sphere of knowledge.

<https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-continuation-of-the-enlightenment-sociology-essay/>

Marx also shared with the Enlightenment the concept of secular society, though he brought the idea of secularization further. For Marx every ideology and meta-narration of society, in every stage of its development, was a product of current economic relations, and so was religion. Religion - internalized rules, regulations and prohibitions - served justification of the conditions of production and hence, the justification of exploitation. In this sense religion was a mechanism of oppression. It was no longer a private issue, but a political one, that justified bourgeois order. As in the eighteenth century - religion obstructed change, but this time, though, it was not suppose to be withdraw from public life, but destroyed absolutely. That is why, according to Marx, emancipation not only required rejection of theological order of the world, but also complete rejection of religion. Once again this emancipation required revolution - dramatic and sudden change of economic conditions that would change social relations, including execution of religion.

The role of science

The Enlightenment was the era of development of sciences. A great expand of sciences such as mathematics, medicine, natural sciences changed the view of modern philosophers on the world and human kind. Science revealed mystery of existence and the order of nature. That is why science became one of the ways to obtain individual freedom. Eighteenth century philosophers presumed that one day science will lead to discovery of logical, rational order of human and societal relations.

For Marx science also had an important role in revealing the rules of organization of society. Marx knew that “ in order to change, it is necessary to understand the social forces – institutions, cultural traditions, social groups”[12]. In Marx’ theory science held the explanatory role by revealing the real nature of social order, gave information about social classes, modes of production and rules of historical development. According to Marx, science should be based on rational assumptions and logical laws, it should reject common sense and superstitions.

When discussing the role of science in Marx’ theory, his contribution to scientific methods is worth mention. The Enlightenment admired achievements of modern mathematics and physicists, especially those of Newton. Philosophers were dreaming of finding scientific method, similar to methods used in physics and mathematics, to investigate and describe social world. Modern thinkers presumed that since the complex world of nature can be characterized through clear rules and patterns of numbers, the same can be done with human environment.

Marx’ sought different path of inquiry. His scientific method characterized as “ historicism”[13]postulated investigation on every social phenomena in their historical context. Marx claimed that all individuals and their actions are embedded in broader setting, since none human being exists separated from his environment. Moreover he posed the question of a researcher as a social actor, entangled in social reality beside investigated objects. Marx claimed that scientist shares common consciousness to the same degree as all other members of society. True scientific method required from the researcher detachment from false, superstition knowledge embedded on the surface of <https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-continuation-of-the-enlightenment-sociology-essay/>

social life[14]. Here again Marx expressed belief in reason and logic, similarly to his eighteen century ancestors.

Economic perspective

Though Marx' theory shares materialistic perspective, he was not the one to introduce economic interpretation of social life. Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and others eighteen century thinkers saw the leading role of economy in social life. Those early economists wrote about dehumanization of work and disintegration of society through modern specialization of production and technical development of the production process[15]. Industrial revolution of eighteen century brought to light new phenomena that were not overlooked by present-day thinkers. Negative effects of industrialization, demographic explosion and urbanization were thoroughly discussed by that time.

As we can see, the importance of material conditions for human individual and collective life was not the Marx' invention, though he also observed that technology destroys social relations. According to him, innovations, machines and devices used in the process of production serve the dominant class for exploitation of workers[16]. Nevertheless, with his materialistic view on society, Marx went further with the idea, claiming that: “ the reproduction of material life precedes the production of culture”[17]. For Marx material conditions of existence were the basis for all other characteristics of life. In this concept, living conditions determined social structure, policies, rules and morality. Marx showed that certain social conditions shape certain forms of consciousness. That was a great contribution of Marx' thought to social sciences. Since Marx, social scientists began research on the role of material

conditions on human thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, giving a start to many disciplines of social sciences, as sociology of thought, sociology of knowledge or sociology of religion[18]. Moreover, since then, social scientists considered development process and ownership relations of societies as some of the most important criteria of social studies analysis.

The concept of state

Eighteenth century philosophy was critical towards the old order or regime. The Enlightenment developed several state theories[19], all connected with the concept of social contract. Hobbes, claimed that the states are made on the basis of common agreement in which citizens give their rights to absolute power. John Locke postulated conception of liberal state based on tolerance, private ownership and freedom of economic action. In this conception it was not the absolute ruler but society that hold the power. Kant, on the other hand, proposed peaceful republican regime of federation of states. Finally Rousseau wrote about egalitarian regime of equal chances, conditions and rights of citizens. All the eighteenth century concepts of authority were positive ones, assuming rationality of power and universality of interests.

Marx' concept of the state was not the optimistic one. In his works state power had class character[20]. Regime authority served class interest of dominant group of society – capitalists, through organized violence towards the suppressed class. There was no possibility to gain freedom through or within the state. Unlike the eighteenth century theories, Marx' project of desirable future assumed abolishment of the bureaucratic, oppressive, class

regime. Decomposition of the state should be accomplished through a proletariat revolution that would lead to class-free society of common owners.

Individualism and collective action

In earlier philosophy, the status of human being in society was constant and determined, not by human himself, but by external forces - the world order, god's will, some kind of justice and internal sense of social existence.

Enlightenment and especially the French revolution, brought the idea of civil society and civil rights[21]. The Enlightenment claimed that all human beings share some common characteristics that are independent of external, historical or natural conditions. It was the kind of individualism, that claimed that human nature in general have some common qualities inherited from the state of nature. That is what makes society egalitarian - differences between human status in society are merely secondary, in a sense that all (male) human beings are equal and share the same civic rights.

Emancipation in this context was a political emancipation of citizens from feudal, traditional relations.

Marx connected human position in social structure with material conditions and idea of work and ownership. For him the idea of society was not based on the idea of civil rights, but on the idea of economic relations between different social groups - classes. It was dichotomous vision of society made of workers and capitalists - the owners of means of production. Emancipation was possible not on the basis of civil rights, but on the basis of changing economic relations. This was a revolutionary perspective, leading to turnover

of social order. Unlike the Enlightenment, Marx' did not perceived emancipation and concept of freedom in individual actions. He clearly rejected individualism - both in terms of individual social actions and as the method of inference about human conditions. Marx claimed that every individual is rooted in his collective history and society, and his consciousness, as well as beliefs, goals and needs are shaped through that heritage. That is why not only analysis of human conditions, but also the projected change of social relations, has to take into consideration collective baggage and collective effort.

Conclusions

As we can see, Marx benefited much from the Enlightenment philosophy, though we have to keep in mind, that issues presented in this paper are merely examples of eighteen century tradition in Marx' thought. Marx indeed was " a child of the Enlightenment" in a sense, that he took form that tradition in different ways, sometimes directly, sometimes developing further ideas and sometimes criticizing and negating the eighteen century thought. This heritage however seems somehow natural, since we cannot abandon of our history and are always influenced by previous discourses. What we have to remember about is, that eighteen century tradition does not exhaust Marx' thought but merely enriches and embeds it in historical context.