

Is marxism and democracy are incompatible politics essay



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Karl Marx is widely thought of as the modern pioneer of the Socialist movement. His theory of radical social change through upheaval and class struggle has undoubtedly left its mark on the history of the world. Countries such as Russia, Yugoslavia, Albania and Cambodia have all attempted to use his model of Socialism. There are some present states such as Cuba, China and North Korea that would still be considered Communist. The question of whether or not Marxism is compatible with democracy is in effect two questions. First whether Marxism can be brought about within a pre-existing democratic framework and secondly whether democracy can endure and thrive within a Marxist regime. As a starting point, it should be noted that there are a number of different models of Marxism, including many formulated since the death of Marx. I will initially focus on the model as formulated by Marx himself, discussing some of the context in which he wrote and then I will then consider different critiques of the models that followed Marx's writing.

The term democracy is made up of the two Latin words 'Kratos' (which means 'rule') and 'demos' (which means 'by the people'). Democracy is widely defined by five key features: participation through elections, open and fair competition for power, avoiding tyranny of either the rulers or the majority, ensuring accountability of government and providing a forum for discussion of political issues. Whilst there are many different forms of democracy, Marx wrote extensively on his critique of liberal democracy and of the menace of Capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx refers to the abolition of the state through radical change and social upheaval. This change is needed because Marx contends that laws are made for and serve

in the interest of the bourgeoisie. He writes 'the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'[1]and that 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class to win the battle of democracy'.[2]

As a starting point for a critique of Marxism's compatibility within a pre-existing democratic framework, it is clear that, for Marx, winning 'the battle of democracy' is not about playing within the rules of democracy. The radical uprising and social upheaval he talks of in The Communist Manifesto involves power being seized by the workers from the ruling classes by revolutionary and non-democratic means. Whilst the Marxist- Leninists of the early 20th century would say that this would be the lesser of two evils and that social harmony would be reached in the end, the road by which they achieved this would be undemocratic.

Marx talks at length in The Communist Manifesto about the means in which the proletariat would seize the power. He explains that they would abolish all private property, income tax, inheritance rights and ultimately the class system. An aspect of Marx's vision that one could argue is democratic is the way that he critiques Capitalism in terms of the way the individual is suppressed by the employer. He holds that in a truly democratic society people would be able to create what ever they wanted and that through the abolition of social classes people would become individuals, creative and free. 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.'[3] Carol Pearce writes <https://assignbuster.com/is-marxism-and-democracy-are-incompatible-politics-essay/>

that the desirability of Marxism lies in 'the freedom of the individual to express their own tastes and personality, explore her own interests, and thus develop her human potential'.[4] Whilst there are other positive aspects of the Marxist utopian vision that our modern society would advocate, such as the abolition of child labour, the growth of individual freedom and (for some) the state control of the transport networks, there are many aspects of the Marxist utopian vision that do not coincide with a truly democratic society.

The question at hand also seeks to discover if democracy can thrive in a Marxist regime, thus questioning its compatibility with democracy. Norman Geras (1987) asserts, 'it is an axiom that Socialism should be democratic' [5], but this assertion is not necessarily true. It has been argued that Lenin's and then Stalin's interpretation of the Marxist vision distorted the original ideals of Marxism. Stephen Boner (1990) explains in the chapter Leninism and Beyond that at the time of the Bolshevik October revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks believed 'that democracy would become the price for a " premature" seizure of power under conditions of underdevelopment'.[6] However Gramsci, an Italian Marxist theorist, primarily saw these events as, 'a revolution against Marx's Capital '[7]. This is because of the fact that under Lenin there was to be a 'short cut'[8] on the road to Socialism. In an ideal social revolution, Marx explained in Capital[9], there would be gradual changes in order to reach true social democracy but this was not the case in terms of the October Revolution and critics of Lenin's brand of Communism have affirmed that there are no short cuts to achieving a true Marxist society.

Lenin's successor Stalin is also interesting to look at when discussing the democratic accountability of the Russian Socialist state in the years that followed. Stalin's dictatorship is well known for the cult of personality, his collectivisation policies, the mass death (from the famines that followed this policy) and the large-scale work camps for prisoners (the gulag system) that he created. Whilst Stalinists would have claimed that this was being done in the interest of the policy they called Socialism in one country, which would in the end strengthen the Soviet position in the world (with the aim that that the ideals of Socialism would ultimately spread), there are clearly many aspects deeply flawed with Stalin's interpretation of Marxism on a humanitarian level and the consequences that followed.

When considering the humanitarian implications of Marxism it is worthwhile to compare the different forms of Communism that have emerged up in the 21st century. While Lenin focused on the needs of the working class as the ruling class - the dictatorship of the proletariat - Mao in Communist China was concerned with the needs of the peasantry. Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French "New Philosopher", who became despondent with Marxism (he had been a Maoist) said there is: 'No socialism without camps, no classless society without its terrorist truth.'^[10]

Ultimately one could argue that all forms of Communism leads to the same place, namely that when the political state is abolished via revolutionary activity and non-democratic means ultimately this is followed by death, destruction of the people or that of their political freedoms. Max Weber explains this notion:

'no ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of 'good' ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones - and facing the possibility of evil ramification' [11]

One of the main reasons one could argue that democracy is not compatible within a Marxist framework is because Marxism has never successfully coexisted with democracy on a large scale. The federation of communes that Marx describes in his ideal social democracy is an institution, which under everyone makes decisions together - a direct democracy. In this collective everyone would have a say, however it could be argued that in order for a society to work you need people with expertise in certain fields or there would be social chaos and nothing would be achieved.

One of the key events that influenced Marx's political writings was the French Revolution. Marx wrote near the end of the 19th century and it could be suggested that it was the events of the hundred years before him that shaped many of his ideas. He had been born into time just after 'an age of democratic revolution'. [12] The American, English and French Revolutions had taken place in these years and the democratic world seemed to be a plethora of unrest and rebellion. Marx saw and commented on what had happened at this time. He writes in *The Civil War in France -part III (1871)* the features by term he understands democracy. He wrote that the Paris Commune that took place from 18th March to 28th May 1871 where the workers took control was a good model of democracy. Anarchists and Marxists are well known to celebrate this form of direct democracy.

One might argue that one of the only truly democratic models where Marxism has been known to work in the world was within the Kibbutz in Israel. The Kibbutz is - or at least was - a form of Communism in which there are small communities in which the people work together for equal pay and for equal share of the land. Originally these communes were set up by the Russian refugees in the early 20th century many of which who were escaping persecution from the Russian Tsarist regime. They set up these communities that were based around agriculture and with the strict view that each person would receive a share of whatever work they put into the community, a lot like Marxism. This model, although not entirely Marxist, is based on Marx's ideals of collective responsibility and is thought of to be one of the only known models of Marxism that has successfully incorporated a democratic element, perhaps because it is on a small scale.

Another way that one can approach the question of Marxism's compatibility with democracy is to consider the ways in which Marxism, as a form of social democracy designed by and for the people, falls short of success. Schumpeter (1965) refers to the idea that democracy is not an end in itself. The book *Can Democracy Be Designed?*[13] looks at the transitions to democracy from different societies and the intuitional choices that are made . Stable democratic societies are usually the product of natural democratic evolution. In the 1830's the Peel- and Pitt-ites who were anti revolutionary would have called it the 'organic' system of government and society that works best and that is the most stable. Professor Mayo writes that democratic societies are economically advanced where 'the emphasis is on the rights of the citizen and on freedom and tolerance. Democracy of this kind has evolved

slowly and is the result of long historical struggles'. [14] This means that because democracy comes about through slow development, that the violent change and class struggle that is associated with Marx is incompatible with the idea of democracy or it existing after a Marxist revolution.

Marxism emphasises the need to restructure the economic order and the way in which the workers' relationship with the employer is taken advantage of. The inconsistency with democracy therefore lies in terms of taking the power from the ruling class and then everything naturally falling into place with democracy after such radical social change. This would seem to be one of the major problems with democracy and Marxism's compatibility. Critics of Marxism have said that the key incompatibility lies in terms when used together. Joseph V. Femia writes, 'aren't the two terms in the title mutually contradictory? Is Marxist democracy not an oxymoron?'[15] A Marxian democracy if one were to exist would simply be a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'[16]as Marx called it. He explains that once the masses have taken control from the bourgeois parliamentary government that 'the dictatorship of the proletariat has to be cruel, stern, bloody and painful' [17]and that in terms of Lenin's legacy 'it is difficult to treat him as a philosopher of freedom'[18]

Writer Francis Fukuyama (1992) posits that liberal democracy has continually confirmed to be a more successful structure than any other system and that the world has entered the final stage of sociological development. He writes, 'The twentieth century saw the developed world descend into a paroxysm of ideological violence' which amounted in the Cold War to , 'finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of

nuclear war.'[19] Perhaps the concept that liberal democracies are the finalised and best-developed models of world than that of Marx is true an extent but his theory falls short in other ways. Fukuyama's *The End of History and Last of Man* states that the societies are in its final stage of development and that other models that have come before such as Marxism, the World has progressed past. Fukuyama states that ultimately society has reached the end of its development democratically with the end product being what we have today. However one can argue that his suggestions are parochial in the sense that in every society people would have assumed that their understanding and development would be the final knowledge of the world as they knew it.

To say that we may have progressed passed Marxism would be one assertion because perhaps due to what we have learnt from the dangers of Communism we have indeed developed past it. However to say that this is the end of history and that we have no more knowledge that will developed from democracies in the world is a narrow perspective no one can ever know what will happen next. This is even more so the case if we look according to what has happened in the world thus far. Usually it is out of the Capitalist or liberal democracies that comes the most revolutionary regimes in society such as Marxism. We can never know what will come next. Since the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War it seems there is a growing importance surrounding the notion of democratic peace theory. Democratic peace theory aims to explain how and why in the liberal democracies, states that are democratic generally 'do not fight each other'.[20] However neo-Marxists such as Immanuel Wallerstein who is a world systems theorist

would say that it due to there being a collective interest for peace within these countries that world wars and rebellions do not break out. He also says that this is not supposedly to do with the triumphs of liberal democracy but the fact that it is not in the economic interests of the most powerful countries to be at war.

In essence the question whether Marxism can be brought about and work within a pre-existing democratic framework and if democracy can endure and thrive within a Marxist regime is one that clashes because the two notions in both cases are incompatible. I think one of the fundamental arguments in terms of the apparent 'eclipse of socialism' is that Socialism has been superseded by other forms of government and ones that are more humanitarian, stable and that have worked for a longer time. Whilst it may be nice in some cases for a there to be direct democracy where people could vote on every issue they wanted to and for and some aspects of Marxism to be applied today, features of it would be impractical. If there were to be a referendum and monthly, weekly or daily commune I doubt this would work very well. Not only would decisions take a long time to be counted, but perhaps you need people in society with certain expertise like the men in parliament who we entrust our civil liberties with. Not only can the failures of Marxism been seen and the impracticalities of a purely Socialist democracy , but also Marxism can be perceived as outdated. Aspects of the Capitalist world such as the competition that is created in the markets could be argued to be compatible with democracy as there is a genuine choice people face whether or not they enter into this competitive race. Democracy in terms of economics is something that Marx focuses heavily on, whilst seemingly

failing to handle the social problems that inevitably arise from radicalism. His utopian vision is one that I believe is inherently incompatible with democracy.

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1888) *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 1, ed David Mc Lellan, Oxford World's Classics

[2] *ibid* Chapter 2

[3] *ibid* Chapter 2

[4] Carole Pearce (1991) *A Critique of Marxism-Leninism as Theory and Praxis*, *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 50, Africa in a New World Order, pp. 102-114, Taylor and Francis Ltd

[5] Norman Geras,(1987) 'Post Marxism?', *The New Left Review* 163, May-June 1987

[6] Stephen Eric Boner ,(1990) *Socialism Unbound* , pg. 87, Routledge: New York

[7] Antonio Gramsci, " The Revolution Against 'Capital' " in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, ed. Quinton Hoare, trans. John Mathews (New York, 1977), pp. 34ff

[8] Stephen Eric Boner ,(1990) *Socialism Unbound* , pg. 87, Routledge, New York

[9] Karl Marx (1867) *Capital* Vol. 1

[10] Bernard-Henry Levy (1979) *Barbarism with a Human Face*, 1st ed , New York: Harper & Row, pp. 155

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[11] Max Weber (1964) , 'Politics as a Vocation', in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, ed H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, New York, 1964 p. 121

[12] R. R Palmer, (1969) Age of the Democratic Revolution, The: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800: v. 1: Challenge, Princeton: Princeton University Press

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[15] Joseph V. Femia (1993) Marxism and democracy, â€– Oxford University Press: Oxford p. 1

[16] Marx (1852), Letter to Weydemeyer

[17] Marx Andrzej Walicki (1995) Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia, Standford Universtiy Press: Chicago pp. 280

[18] ibid pp. 332

[19] Fukuyama, Francis (1992). The End of History and the Last Man. London: Penguin.

[20] Daniele Archibugi(2008) The Global Commonwealth of Citizens. Toward Cosmopolitan Democracy, Princeton University Press: Princeton