

Example of essay on marxism and the proletariat

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



Explain the analytical framework used by the authors in explaining social theory.

In classical Marxist theory, changes in technology, transportation and communications led to the rise of the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, which first began to take political power in Europe and the Northern United States in the 17th and 18th Centuries during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the French and American Revolutions. At the time these revolutions began, the new middle class was in the vanguard and represented a progressive force whose task was to sweep away the old feudal order. Liberal revolutions broke out in Europe in 1830 and again in 1848, although most were defeated by the forces of conservatism as well, but capitalist industrialization continued to expand as did the urban working class or proletariat. Unlike Hegel, Marx was a historical materialist who argued that class conflict rather than ideology was that driving force of history. He confined religion and ideology to the superstructure of society, and regarded them as expressions and reflections of the ruling social class in any given historical. Marx and Engels were premature in 1848 when they wrote in The Communist Manifesto that Communism was a specter haunting Europe, although socialist and working class parties were appearing in all the Western nations by this time, and the second phase of the 1848 revolution in France led to the brief creation of a Red Republic that was harshly repressed by the military. They realized that this particular event was indeed a harbinger of socialist revolutions in the future, although in the end none of these occurred in the Western capitalist core as they expected.

As certain regions of the Western countries became urbanized and industrialized, a new working class or proletariat began to emerge among the displaced and landless peasants who flocked to the cities in search of work. In the 19th Century, the hours of work in the new factories were very long and “ the wages earned by laborers left families on the brink of beggary”, while living conditions in cities like Manchester were hell on earth (Applerouth and Edles, 2010, p. 20). For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, then, the three main classes of society were workers, capitalists and landowners, while the older classes of peasants and artisans were gradually disappearing and being absorbed into the proletariat. Class struggle was “ the prime mover of history” and like other socioeconomic systems in the past, capitalism had unintentionally produced the class that would end up destroying it in a violent revolution (Applelrouth and Edles, p. 22).

Marx’s theoretical orientation was therefore rationalist and collectivist, in that he insisted that the primary social forces were classes in conflict over rational, economic self-interests. Marx believed that historical change was evolutionary and progressive, with each stage of civilization higher than the one the preceded it, and that economics and sociology could uncover the laws of historical development. He confined religion and ideology to the superstructure of society, and regarded them as expressions and reflections of the ruling social class in any given historical epoch. Traditional Christianity and feudalism were obsolete, just like the slavery system of Southern United States, while science was a progressive development in history.

Although Marx and Engels regarded capitalist collapse and socialist revolution as inevitable, they offered no real timetable for when this would occur, since capitalism was still a rising force in the world during the 19th Century. This is why they supported the North in the American Civil War of 1861-65, for example, and regarded it as the more progressive civilization that would sweep away the slaveholding aristocracy of the South. As Marx pointed out in *Das Kapital*, under American slavery and Russian serfdom, after all, exploitation was 100% and the labor force was bound to the land, treated like property and denied any political rights. Although capitalist exploitation of the working class was harsh—and necessary for the system to extract profits in the form of surplus value—it was not as repressive as earlier forms of labor control. Both men were skeptical that any country would be able to skip over a capitalist phase of development—as Lenin and Stalin attempted in Russia and Mao in China. For Marx, such revolutions would only result in an authoritarian type of ‘barracks socialism’, and he was correct in this prediction.

Project 1B (500-750 words) Do you think that the proletariat, or working class, has sunk deeper and deeper with the advance of industry, as Marx suggested? Why or why not? How prevalent is alienation in contemporary capitalist societies?

Contrary to what Marx and Engels expected, the working class never really became revolutionary in the Western countries, most likely because social welfare programs, labor unions and mass consumption took the hard edge off class conflict, especially in capitalism’s Golden Age of 1945-75. Workers

did not turn out to be a universal class “ that acts in the interests of society as a whole” and indeed did not even revolt as their jobs were transferred to low-wage export platforms in Asia and Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s (Kivisto, 2011, p. 28).

Just the opposite, all the 20th Century revolutions made in the name of Karl Marx occurred in countries that were colonies or semi-colonies like Russia, China, Cuba and Vietnam, where capitalism had hardly developed at all. Marxist theorists came to regard the Western working classes as “ suffering from a kind of collective brain death” and nowhere more so than in the United States (Kivisto, p. 30). They may have been alienated by the mindless routines of mass production but were bought off by higher wages, social safety nets and widespread availability of cheap consumer goods. Their sense of alienation and exploitation was simply not great enough in the West to translate into some type of mass revolutionary movement, not even in the Great Depression of the 1930s or the present Great Recession.

Antonio Gramsci, who wrote his Prison Notebooks while jailed in Fascist Italy, struggled to explain why the working class revolution predicted by Marx and Engels had not occurred, and indeed why Right-wing dictators like Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler had come to power instead, repressing all labor unions and working class parties. All the preconditions that Marx had believed necessary for a working class revolution were in place, never more so than in the Great Depression of the 1930s, yet no revolution had occurred. Gramsci argued that class struggle over economic interests was not sufficient, but that workers also had to develop their own intellectuals

and journalists, and struggle for control over education, cultural life and the media—all of which Marx has called the superstructure of society. Only by developing counter-institutions and counter-hegemony to elite control over these institutions could a working class revolution hope to succeed (Appelrouth and Edles, p. 29). Theodor Adorno, Hebert Marcuse and other Frankfurt School theorists also regarded the proletariat as having accommodated to capitalist culture and mass consumption and was therefore “ devoid of any obvious political goal of overthrowing capitalism” (Kivisto, p. 33).

Despite this transition of the industrial proletariat to low-wage countries, there has not yet been any revolutionary activity of the kind that Marx and Engels predicted, not even in severe economic downturns like the present. Karl Marx was correct in his predictions that capitalism would eventually evolve into a global system and that it would continue to experience resistance from the oppressed and exploited, as well as severe recessions and depressions, just as it always did in the past. In the present global recession, which Marxists and socialists have been predicting for years, came as a shock to the more thoughtless supporters of global capitalism. As late as 2005, most bourgeois economists did not see the disaster looming ahead, no matter that there were many warning signs like the Asian meltdown of 1997-98 and the dot. com crash a few years later. Free market and free trade economists proclaimed that the nation state was dead, along with Keynesian economics, redistribution of wealth and Fordist mass production industries. Instead, the new centers of economic growth and development would be regional and local economies that found new niches

within the global system, like the call centers and financial services of Ireland and India. New financial multiples and derivatives served as high-tech replacements for money, and the unregulated markets that bought and sold all these instruments of very doubtful value were also major contributors to the great crash. Even supposed capitalist success stories like China suffer from uneven development and regional imbalances between the coastal areas and the interior, a problem that became even more acute during the Great Recession and a major concern to the Chinese leadership. In Marxist terms, this is a 'contradiction' and indeed, China and other developing nations have been reexamining their economic models in light of recent events and may be moving more in the direction of improving internal markets and consumption levels rather than overly relying on exports to the West and international capital flows. Capitalist monopolies and oligopolies will also consolidate, as they always do during recessions. All the longer term trends of globalized capitalism, the Internet, high technology and open borders will continue in the future as well. Even so, the recent crash of the world economy was the worst since the 1930s, and only massive pump-priming, deficit spending and money-printing by central banks preserved this system from total collapse, at least up to now.

REFERENCES

- Appelrouth, S. and L. D. Edles (2010). *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era: Text and Readings*, 2nd Edition. SAGE Publications.
- Kivisto, P. (2011). *Key Ideas in Sociology*, 3rd Edition. SAGE Publications.