

Marx vs. weber on capitalism essay



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The capitalism, its roots and impact on social development were the sphere of interest of the outstanding sociologists Karl Marx and Max Weber.

However, their ideas were essentially different. Weber studied the concept of capitalism in light of culture and its development, whereas Marx emphasized the economic element of the capitalism.

The aim of this essay is to compare the approaches and views of Karl Marx and Max Weber on capitalism.

The evolution of thoughts on the roots and consequences of capitalism can be explained by the social and economic transformations occurring during the history. The major changes in sociological thoughts occurred in the end of the XIX century. Besides, this time was the period of the close attention of the sociologists to the bourgeois society and the development of capitalism.

“ The debate over the relationship between Marx’s political economy and Max Weber’s interpretative sociology, which has raged with varying degrees of intensity since the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1932) in 1904, has determined many of the major issues for research in the social sciences in the twentieth century” (Löwith & Turner 1-2).

Karl Marx was the outstanding German philosopher and sociologist. *Capital*, one of his famous works, represents his ideas on the economic development and social progress emphasizing, in general, the negative side of the capitalistic society. The objection of capitalism by Marx is explained primarily by his view on its self-destructing nature caused by the inherent contradictions.

Furthermore, Marx considered capitalism as the unethical social arrangement leading to the social inequality, poverty, and exploitation. The theme which occupied an essential place in Capital is the capitalism system itself which was intrinsically unjust due to “ the parasitic exploitation of the labor force by direct producers” (Löwy n. pag.). The ideas expressed by Marx gave rise to the workers’ movements and the social protests against capitalists’ expansion.

“ Yet even Capital is not simply a critique of political economy, but a critique of man in bourgeois society in terms of its economy. The ‘ economic kernel’ of this economy is the commodity form of the product of labour” (Löwith & Turner 100).

The profound study of the concept of value added allowed Marx concluding that the capitalistic arrangement ultimately divided the society into the bourgeois who exploited the labor force and the proletariat which had to sell its labor because it was forced to do so in order to survive.

Thus, Marx compared people in the capitalistic society to ‘ commodities’. Such society would ultimately lead to the social alienation of the individuals according to Marx. He stressed that the social injustice resulted in the manifestations of workers struggling against “ exploitation of children, miserable wages, inhuman working hours, and the sordid conditions of the working class life” (Löwy n. pag.).

Marx stated that the strategy of the capitalistic development lead to the concentration of the capital in the possession of the small social group which enriched itself on the impoverishment of the other social groups.

Marx concluded that the capitalistic order would eventually destroy itself and it would be changed by the more progressive socialistic order.

Max Weber was the outstanding German sociologist and one of the founders of the sociology as a science. The transition of the society from the old conventions to the modernity is considered to be the central topic of study of Max Weber.

The scholars argue that Weber approach can be primarily described by his explanation of social changes through the concept of rationalization.

However, Weber also paid close attention to the influence of the religion on the society. These basic features of his sociological research can be found in his ideas on capitalism as well.

Weber introduced his own views on capitalism expressing the objection to the theory of Karl Marx. In particular, Weber considered Marx's theory biased towards Marx's own value judgments (Löwith & Turner 54).

The modern sociologists consider the views of Weber on capitalism much more contradictory than the ideas of Marx. " Rejecting all socialist ideas, Weber did not hesitate occasionally to employ apologetic arguments in favor of private capital" (Löwy n. pag.).

Although Weber had a rather critical attitude to the bourgeois society, he considered the capitalism as the more progressive social arrangement than some others, the feudalism, for example.

" According to Weber, capitalism could only become the ' most fateful' power in human life because it had itself already developed within the framework of

a ‘ rational way of life’” (Löwith & Turner 63). The bureaucratic rationalization of the modern capitalistic society was one of the main features making Weber’s interpretation of capitalism distinct from the interpretation of Marx. Weber considered that the bureaucratic rationalization developed regardless of the form of ownership on the means of production.

The main distinctive feature which made the approach of Weber different from that which was introduced by Marx lied in the ethical understanding of the capitalism. Marx considered the pursuit of gains and greed as the underlying features of capitalism making this social arrangement unethical.

In contrast, Weber considered that the capitalism, in its essence, was characterized by the spirit of entrepreneurship. Weber stressed that the pursuit of gains and greed were independent from the social arrangement as they were inherent in the people nature.

The controversy and ambiguity can be seen in the Weber approach. In particular, the sociologist considered the bureaucratic rationalization and the capitalism as the progressive step in the social development making the society absolved from the irrational actions, on the one hand.

On the other hand, he stressed the mechanicalness of the capitalist society and thus the limitation of the freedom of personality. “ Weber compared this constraint to a kind of prison where the system of rational production of goods imprisons individuals” (Löwy n. pag.).

According to Weber, the main positive aspect of rationalization underlying capitalistic society was the progress which it facilitated in science.

Undoubtedly, Marx made a significant influence on Weber understanding of social development but Weber's approach to capitalism should be rather characterized as the culturological, although he came to it through the political economy introduced by Marx.

The capitalistic social arrangement was one of the main themes of study of Karl Marx and Max Weber, two outstanding representatives of the German philosophy and the founders of sociology. The comparison of their views on capitalism allowed concluding that both of them considered capitalism as the new more progressive way in the development of the society.

However, Marx criticized the capitalistic arrangement for the economic degradation to which it would eventually lead. In contrast, Weber stressed the benefits which the capitalism provided to the cultural and scientific development.

Löwith, Karl, and B. S. Turner. Max Weber and Karl Marx, New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Löwy, Michael. "Marx, Weber and the Critique of Capitalism". 31 August 2006. Internationalviewpoint. org. Web. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1106>

Marx and Weber both agreed on one point. Marx believed that capitalism sees all human interactions as money-related. It disregards moral and

emotion as something superfluous. Weber expressed similar ideas in his *Spirit of Capitalism*.

The core of the Marx-Weber debate is their disagreement on the nature of the class. Marx viewed class struggle as the main catalyst of social change. Weber believed that social stratification defines the difference in life chances.

Max Weber had a strong affiliation with Marxism. A liberal Calvinist himself, he dedicated his life to Marxist study and critique. He was also an influential figure in the development of structural functionalism.

Weber viewed capitalism mainly in cultural and sociological terms. He believed that Western capitalism is rooted in religion, Protestantism in particular. Marx saw capitalism as an economic device. The theorist claimed that capitalism exacerbates social stratification.