

Critically assess marx's theory of class and stratification

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Marx class theory derived from his belief that class divisions are not found in all forms of society; classes are a creation of history. For Marx, classes are defined and structured by firstly, who owns or has property and means of production and who does the work in the production process, secondly the social relationships included in work and labour, and thirdly who produces and who rules the surplus human social labour can produce. All of these aspects of Marx class theory will be further explored in this essay.

Marx believed that class divisions are not found in all societies, classes are a creation of history. The earliest and smallest societies (tribal and primitive) were classless. It is universally true that all human beings depend on the quest of meeting their basic needs -food, water, shelter and clothing. In these primitive societies, the working day was taken up with required labour in order to meet society's basic needs and forces of production were distributed equally amongst the community.

But when basic needs are met, this leads to man's creation of new needs, as humans are forever dissatisfied animals. Marx defines human beings as producers (Callinicos, A, p. 98, 1996). Humans seek to transform nature to enable them to meet their needs and do this through two different mode of production. The first ' forces of production' which depends on what Marx calls the ' labour process'. " Labour is first of all a process between man and nature, a process by which man, though his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (C I 283).

The relations of production is the social aspect, which involves the property rights of the productive forces, it is what distinguishes the modes of

production for one another. Improvements in the labour force are determined by if man is able to produce the same amount of things but with less human labour. By been able to produce more effectively, therefore meant man gains more control over nature.

Thus the developments of the labour process are a reflection of humantechnology(Callinicos, A, p. 8, 1996) and Marx believed that the developments of science and technology in society provide a basis on which future societies can build upon. Although Marx never said in so many words what he meant by class, his theory lies on the statement that " the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. " That once beyond primitive socities no labour can exist without means of production, which is who controls the direct producers. The central classes in capitalism are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Class divisions arise in society when the direct producers are separated from the means of production.

The means of production, the bourgeoisie, become the monopoly of a minority and use exploitation and domination in relation to the producers, the proletariat. Marx looks at the working day in a class society and identifies how capital exploits labour wage. During the first half of the day the worker produces goods in which he is paid to but during the second part of the day the worker performs surplus labour. Surplus labour is generated by how much labour time is left over after the employer has made back the equivalent of the cost of the wages of the labourer.

The profit of this surplus labour is too small though to improve everyone's standard of living, so it is taken by the minority who control the means of

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production. Marx describes four main types of class societies: Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois, "the distinction between for example a society based on slave labour and a society based on wage labour - is the form in which this surplus labour is in each case exploited from the immediate producer, the worker" (C I 325). The practice of exploitation depends on the distribution of the means of production.

In the case of slavery, it seems all the slave's labour is surplus labour, he is not permitted to any of his product. But the slave has to be kept alive in order to gain surplus power, therefore a proportion of the slave's wages is set aside to provide him his basic needs. In feudalism society, the peasant may have owned his animals and tools, but did not own the land he works on, therefore must divide his labour time between the work that needed to be done in order to provide for himself and his family and surplus labour for his lord.

In both these modes of production, slavery and feudalism, exploitation is clearly visible and physical consequences are evident without question. However in capitalism exploitation is concealed. The worker is legally free, as he has volunteered to partake in the labour process. Marx wrote that workers are "free in a double sense, free from the old relations of clientship, bondage and servitude, and secondly free of all belongings and possessions, and of every objective, material form of being, free of all property" (G 507).

By not selling his labour power to the capitalist, the worker's only other option is starvation. The means of production use economic pressures as a means of control over workers, not physical actions. Thus once the employer

has employed the workers, he makes them work longer hours than necessary, creating surplus labour. In the case of feudalism, after centuries new methods of producing began to develop. But releasing these new methods worked against the ruling class—in the framework of the prior form of exploitation and the “ legal and political superstructure” that had arisen out of it.

This clash between the new opportunities and the structure of the previous order, was in severe crisis. Without new developments, the existing means of producing was not able to sustain any more development in the population, the Black Death followed, causing horrific events such as famines and disease and violence. The previous ways of shaping society and furthering the mode of production were brought to a halt. Marx foresaw that there could be revolution in society abolishing classes altogether.

Then begins an epoch of social revolution," , Marx wrote. Yet the ruling class were still dominating the workers, even though the mode of production had self-destructed. The ruling class dominates not only the way production is carried on, but all the other organizations and relations in society, whose structure aids the exploiters, control their power. As Marx explained, all class societies create a legal, political and ideological " superstructure" which functions to control the existing relations of production and guard the rulers from the ruled.

But an important tool for the ruling class to persuade the working class is ideology-- schemes of ideas that depict the recognized order as natural and positive to everyone, whatever its undeniable faults. Marx believed that the

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workers did not realise they were being exploited, had a false consciousness, a mistaken sense that they could count on their employer. He believed that ideologies help sustain the ruling class, by giving misleading views to people about the world in order to exploit others about their position in society.

It caused people to form mistaken views about the nature of society in order to keep the existing mode of production in action. Because the dominant or ruling class rules the social relations of production, the central ideology in capitalist society is that of the ruling class. Marx theory of class consciousness was an idea how to make members of a class aware that they have a common situation and interests and, moreover, are able to organize a collective defence of those interests (Elster, J, p128, Intro to Karl Marx).

Marx saw that there were many logics why the proletariat would develop into a class that is conscious of its own status, power, obligations, and prospects. The objective condition of a class subsists because of its position in the productive process. Possession or non-possession of the means of production, place in the labour process, and the control over surplus regulate this. However a class such as the bourgeoisie or proletariat, may be unaware of this position, or in any case the effects of this position.

Marx believed there would be a revolution, the workers would come together and rise up and fight to abolish the class system. Once everything had calmed down after the revolution, the proletariat would then own the means of production. He believed that no dominating class would exist and everything would be owned equally amongst society. He thought that if the working class were to take control of the means of production, they would

inspire social relations that would help everyone proportionately, and an organization of production less at risk to repeated crises.

Overall, Marx believed that nonviolent compromise of this issue was unrealistic, and prearranged and violent revolution would be necessary, because the dominating class would not surrender control without a fight. He speculated that in order to secure the socialist system, a dictatorship of the proletariat must be generated on a provisional foundation. Marx's forethought of a revolution did not come true. As societies developed and expanded, the working classes grew to be more educated, obtaining detailed job skills and accomplishing the type of financial welfare that Marx never thought achievable.