

Karl marxs influence on sociology and political thought



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There can be no doubt over the wide-ranging influence of Karl Marx's theories on sociology and political thought. His concept of communism overcoming the socioeconomic pitfalls of capitalism has not been a theory that has seen the light of day in the way that he may have hypothesized. There have been many throughout history that have misrepresented Marx's writing, which begs the question, if pure communism in the original Marxist sense is at all possible given that humanity appears to have an innate 'need' for hierarchy and a thirst for power.

Capitalism appears to satisfy the 'need' for power and acquisition above all else, and the evidence is seen in the growth of global wealth, which certainly does not amount to equal wealth. The gap between affluent and poor is ever increasing, which includes inequalities of life chances and participation in mainstream society. However, harsh evidence does not appear to change or transform capitalism, hence, Marx's concept of economic class struggle remains a contested issue.

This essay will explain and explore the concept of capitalism and how Marx believed that the origins and the dynamics of capitalism were intricately woven into the fabric of class struggles throughout history. In fact, this notion opens the first part of the Communist Manifesto with the now famous quote, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels 1967, p 79).

An understanding of the historical basis of capitalism is essential given that Marx based his work around the concept of historical materialism, originally derived from his development of Feuerbach's "Hegelian inversion".

Historical materialism is a concept explaining the vital function of human production for the sole purpose of basic subsistence. Without the means of subsistence, humanity would fail in all other activities and functions. Marx rejected Hegel's dialectics based on a movement of human thought and ideas, and argued that dialectics involved contradictions based on an economic system, otherwise known as dialectical materialism. Therefore, the dynamic for change eventually created by a process of dialectics lies in the conflict between two opposing factors (Lee and Newby 2000, pp. 114 - 119).

Marx conceived the base and superstructure approach that defines capitalist society. The base relates to all that is a function of production in society and conversely, the superstructure, which can be said to be derived from the base, relates to the values, culture, ideology and the governing bodies of society. The former creates and supports the latter by a process of legitimization of the economic activities, and in turn, the superstructure ensures the processes remain in place. Class domination plays a large part in this process of organization; for example, private education providing better opportunities for advancement and primary socialization into the higher echelons of society. However, a counter argument claims that the state is just as involved in the stresses and "struggles of civil society" as opposed to being a mere extension of it for the pure benefit of a particular class interest (Held 2001, in Hall and Gieben 2001, p 113).

According to Marx, the act of production and means of organization thereof, including the relationship between members of the opposing classes, is key to society and social development and this can be supported with analysis of per-industrial societies.

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Feudal societies organized production based on the relationship between the ruling class, the nobility and the subject class, the serfs. The monarchy ruled by divine right and a strict system of traditions commanding complete faithfulness and honor. Church involvement supported and emphasized this early form of social organization and any deviation from accepted behavior would amount to blasphemy. Social hierarchies were fixed and generally as immovable as the land owned by the nobility. Society consisted of small groups living in small agricultural communities. In the absence of an organized economy and bureaucracy, surplus production was seen by the landowners as theirs by right. The serfs were dependent on the grace of the landowners for their means of subsistence, which created a dominance and dependency relationship. As such, Marx asserted that conflict is inevitable in any society based on class (Bradley 2001, in Hall and Gieben 2001, pp. 188-189)

A shift in modes of production was gradual and evolved over hundreds of years of activity, which saw the creation of the stock-holding East India Company (circa 1600) and British colonization of the Americas in the late sixteenth century. Later, Adam Smith (1723-1790) in his work, *The Wealth of Nations*, created a theory in favor of a free market in direct opposition to mercantilism and the monopoly of land ownership. In contrast to 'tied' labor, a free labor would benefit all members of society. Smith believed that all individuals were "profit-seeking" but this created "harmony" in the interests of society as a whole. A free market and free trade would require a division of labor, which ultimately meant a more economically efficient mode of production in a competitive market (Brown 2001, in Hall and Gieben 2001

pp. 145 -149). As such, mercantilism saw the accumulation of capital that gave rise to Capitalism.

Industrialization was not solely responsible for capitalism but most certainly provided the impetus for it to become more widespread (Lee and Newby 2000, pp. 79 – 80). The industrial revolution saw the emergence of a new ruling class, the bourgeoisie, and following in the hierarchical traditions constructed by previous societies, the proletariat found their place at the lower end of the social scale.

For Marx, the idea of class struggle is based on the antagonisms present in the differences between the classes and he considered the emergence of the new ruling class, with its “ new conditions of oppression” as being the catalyst for greater divide in society than had gone before (Marx and Engels 1967, p 80). The industrial revolution changed the reasons for work and the meaning of the act of labor, which demanded the sale of personal time and effort in exchange for wages, otherwise known as the communication of labor power. In contrast to feudal times, which existed on a form of agricultural ‘ economy’, the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat, was based on the intensity of production for profit, which led to the ultimate exploitation of the workers. Production shifted from the feudal privately owned land to the industrial private ownership of capital. Given the proletariat’s exclusion from ownership of the means of production, they had no choice but to sell their ability to produce in exchange for tightly controlled wage labor, in order to survive. The conflict created by such an antagonistic system could only be resolved through transformation brought on by revolution.

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Conflict must also be understood in context of the social relationships, which became based on a wages versus labor dichotomy. During the Victorian era, the term ‘ class’ created social realities that ensured members of society ‘ knew their place’ according to their economic health. For Marx, the term ‘ class’ defined individuals and groups based on objective principles. Marx believed that consciousness, rather than being a determinant of social being was actually determined by social being. “ The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes”(Marx 1975 in Lee and Newby 2000, p. 115).

According to Marx, a revolution to transform capitalism into socialism could only take place once class consciousness replaced false consciousness. Class consciousness is defined as comprehension and awareness of the true situation of inequality brought on by exploitation, which ultimately leads to proletariat solidarity. An alternate viewpoint, based on consensus rather than conflict, would argue that a collective conscience derived from shared moral and ethical values is required to achieve solidarity. Durkheim’s (1858-1917) functionalist perspective claims that the different levels of society operating in the name of shared interests can fulfill the needs of the social system (Giddens 1971). However, poverty does not contribute to functional unity because of the existence of inequalities. This is most certainly evident in contemporary society, even if we consider the buffer in place through the welfare state; the poor are far from integrated into the rest of society.

The bourgeoisie, in the name of profit, demanded a high intensity of production, which was possible through a division of labor. This in turn created tedious, repetitive work, which amounted to the oppression and

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exploitation of the workers. The working class were 'free' to sell their labor to the highest bidder, but the ruling class benefited through economic supremacy. It would have been impossible for the working class to transcend their lowly position on the economic social scale as long as the ruling class owned the modes of production. In contrast to Adam Smith's idea that competition and profit would be a benefit to all of society, the capitalist dream is to own the monopoly leading to ever increasing profit and personal wealth. The workers become totally dependent on the smaller unfair 'share' through wages that do not recompense the reality of their efforts.

Furthermore, Marx highlighted that rather than being 'free' to sell their labor, laborers are a "commodity exposed to the vicissitudes of competition, and as such, to the highs and lows expected from an economic market" (Marx and Engels 1967, p 87). However, Max Weber (1864-1920) conceived another dimension to ruthless accumulation of wealth, which he termed 'rationalization'. Rationalization underpinned the spirit of capitalism. Weber theorized that greed and profit was intricately woven into a deep sense of "disciplined obligation of work as a duty". This 'irrational' duty is the objective of the rational organization of capitalist activity. It is worth noting that Weber wrote of this dimension as only one of many possible components that contributed to capitalism in industrial Europe (Giddens 1971, pp. 125-127).

Surplus value, a result of surplus labour, leads to products 'surplus to requirement', specifically in terms of basic need for subsistence. The high intensity of production leads to the inevitable alienation of the worker.

Alienation can be defined as a state of detachment that relates to two areas

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of production. The first is the alienation of the worker to the actual product created through his or her labor. The second refers to alienation from the actual task of production; a complex division of labor creates standardized processes and simplification of labor tasks for the ultimate end of increased production. The presence of alienation suppresses individuality and the process of creativity through monotony. Whereas once skill and craftsmanship gave credence to a certain sense of fulfillment, in contrast labor under capitalism, divorces the self from the powers of creation that exist within. Furthermore, Marx's theory of commodity fetishism supports alienation in the sense that as workers labor under tedious conditions, with no opportunity for creative expression they find new ways of satisfying a sense of expression and this is through the accumulation of commodities. This serves and strengthens the power and drive of capitalism (Lee and Newby 2000, p. 117). Bythell (1983) goes as far as claiming that the "common man of the relatively classless world of the cottage industry was certainly happier" (p. 18).

If mass production "brutally displaced" an earlier, kinder, more family orientated organization of production (Bythell 1983 p. 18), then according to Marx and a theory of dialectics, communism would eventually displace capitalism. The process of dynamic change would take place because of the contradictions created by capitalism and this would be an inevitable process. Capitalism would always strive to maximize profit through the process of exploitation of the working class. An over production of goods would eventually lack movement on the economic market owing to increased competition of market forces which drive down exchange value. Marx

asserted that “ too much” of all that drives capitalism is the crisis that will see its downfall (Marx and Engels 1967, p 84). Marx claimed that each economic crisis that takes place would ultimately lead to weakening of the hold of capitalism. A combination of bourgeoisie activity, the inevitable compounding effect of further poverty of the working class and a process of development of a class consciousness, helped in part by the gathering of large numbers of workers under one roof, gives rise to a revolutionary movement towards a socialist society (Giddens 1971, pp. 58 -60).

The transcendence of capitalism to socialism has not happened. Large organizations have increased in power and capitalists have found new ways of driving down costs, for example relocating production to countries where lower wages, longer working hours and questionable work practices are a relative norm. In addition, economic lows receive the involvement of the state as a means of protection from failure. This is evident in recent months with the government subsidizing Northern Rock.

Furthermore, Weber observed noteworthy reasons why a revolution did not take place. Complex capitalist function required bureaucratic systems, which saw the emergence of the office worker, who commanded higher salaries than their working class cousins. Although the petite bourgeoisie could not lay claim to ownership, they added a further dimension to class structure through competitive activity towards a rewarding social status. Weber believed this situation powerful enough to prevent the downfall of capitalism (Bradley 2001, in Hall and Gieben 2001, pp. 196 -197).

It is impossible to do justice to the work of Karl Marx without years of concrete research, yet this essay has attempted to outline the process of theories that led Marx to assert that capitalism was based on a system of class struggles. There has been reference to important historical developments, which laid the foundations for capitalism and its inevitable rise through the industrial revolution. We have seen a shift in modes of production from the means of subsistence to the means of production in the name of profit and desire.

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism would hold true in current productive activities and society's relentless demands for consumer products. The relationship between consumer and rates of production is symbiotic in the negative sense; as society produces, society wants what it doesn't need, therein lays the irony. Observation suggests that alienation has taken hold of humanity; acquisition has transformed social interactions, which support a 'live to work' ethos. Relations within a capitalist society are stitched together with fiscal threads of steel. Proliferation of constant media images desensitizes society to the poverty-wealth divide and individualism aids us in justifying its existence. The collective human soul appears to be numb to an innate creative ability. Perhaps it is too much to ask for all that is egalitarian in Marx's theories to become widely accepted for the good of all, given that the power and prestige of economic status is deeply embedded in the psyche. The Communist Manifesto acknowledges the immense influence of economic power "..... is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world" (Marx and Engels 1967, pp. 85 - 86).