



Assess the merits and limitations of the ideas of Karl Marx

Marxism, or scientific socialism as it is also known, became particularly popular during the 1970s as the realisation that functionalism was flawed became apparent, as it regarded stratification as a divisive rather than an integrative structure. It takes its name from the founder Karl Marx (1818-1883), and centres around the grand theory that 'Capitalist society creates class inequalities and alienation, which can only be removed through the revolutionary actions of the working class'. Surrounded by both support and critique, Marx has provided influence within politics and economics and an opposing argument to both Functionalism and Weberism as a sociological perspective.

Marx noted that in order to survive we enter relationships in order to ensure production - The forces of production and the relations of production, which together form the economic basic or infrastructure of society. The other aspect of society, known as the superstructure is shaped by the infrastructure. So for example, the education system is shaped by economic factors according to Marx: any change in the Infrastructure will thus lead to changes in the superstructure. This has been subject to numerous criticisms. Interactionists, for example, argue that Marx's concept of economic determinism places too much stress on the economy as determining all social life, and overlooks influences such as gender, ethnicity, Age and the power of the individual. Gramsci argues that it is not the economy that shapes society. Instead he refers to the way in which societies members are seen to construct society for themselves.

Marx claims that all societies today contain contradictions. What he meant by this is that one social group exploits another. This creates conflict of interests, as one social group, the owners of the means of production benefit off the back of others, a position he believed that could not continue.

The first contradiction in Marx's view, Wages versus Profit Achieved by the Bourgeoisie, states that society operates mainly through class conflict. In particular he argues that in capitalistic society the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are fundamentally opposed. Marx believed that real wealth was only created by the labour power of the workers, yet the wages that are paid to them is well below that taken in profit by the people who own the means of production. However, voting rights and the formation of trade unions have given the working class more power and influence in society than when Marx was writing, enabling workers to demand fair pay and working conditions. In spite of this there is still much evidence of opposing class interests and class conflict, such as strikes and industrial sabotage in the workplace. In 1989 British

Social Attitudes Survey reported that over half of the population of modern Britain still believes that there are strong conflicts between the rich and poor and between Workers and Managers.

Secondly Marx argued that, in capitalism large numbers of workers acting collectively achieves production, which he refers to as Organisation versus the Nature of Ownership. In contrast, just one individual owns that means of production and the profits do not flow to the workers who have organised themselves collectively. However, Dahrendorf recognised that today with the growth in the scale of business companies due to technological advances and the development of joint stock limited companies, the link between ownership and control of industry has been weakened. People can now effectively own the means of production via the share issues they own. Even though it is apparent that this is increasingly the case, as evidence in support of Marx, the means of production remain mostly privately owned in the hands of a small minority of the population, 10% of the population owns 53% of the wealth.

According to Marx, society is constructed from classes. In all societies, except the simplest, there are two major classes and it is people's relationship to the means of production that determines which class they belong to. The most powerful class is that which owns the means of production (The Bourgeoisie), and the least powerful is that which has to sell its labour to make a living (The Proletariat). However, in fact, the past century has seen the emergence of a middle class of professionals, managers, and office workers, between the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. While these groups do not own the means of production, they benefit from exercising authority on behalf of the Bourgeoisie, and have higher status, better income and life chances than the working class.

Major changes according to Marx are as a result of new forces of production. He used the change to capitalism from feudal society, the feudal nobility and the land serfs, which was based upon heredity, and so there was little movement within the system. Feudalism was based upon ownership of the land. The land serfs had to give part of their produce to the landowners; in return, the landowners protected them from rival noblemen. Therefore, the change between this system and capitalism resulted in contradictions. For example, capitalism is based upon wage labour, whereas feudalism was based upon mutual obligations. The new order, capitalism, sweeps out the old social relationships of feudalism and replaced them with new.

Eventually Marx believed there would be a final epoch where a communistic or socialist society would take over from capitalism. This will not be the result of a new force of production, but will get rid of the contradictions that so far characterised changes between Epochs. Collective production would remain, but ownership would change dramatically. Instead of the Bourgeoisie owning the means of production, ownership would be collective and members would share wealth that their labour produced. This new infrastructure would not be based upon exploitation and contradictions, instead a new final epoch would be born, one, which would have no need to change. It would thus result in the end of history. This presents a major limitation in the credibility of Marxism, as the revolution that Marx believed would occur, of course never has. Louis Althusser suggests that this is because "it is very difficult for the masses to overthrow capitalism as the superstructure works together

to prevent a revolution. However, even though Communism has never emerged, Dahrendorf cites five changes of the social structure that have been sufficient to produce post-capitalist society, suggesting a new epoch has emerged, one which Marx had not anticipated.

Firstly 'The Decomposition of Capital': the link between ownership and control of industry has weakened through technological advances and the development of the stock exchange. Secondly 'The Decomposition of Labour': Workers have become increasingly aware of differences between themselves. Thirdly 'The Development of a New Middle-Class', a category rather than a class in terms of Marx's use of this concept, and is made up of white-collar workers, such as Teachers, Accountants, Surveyors, Nurses, and Clerks, which have emerged to further complicate the class system. Also 'The Growth of Social Mobility': The class system does appear to have some form of Meritocracy, where individuals can move between classes, most often this is intergenerational between occupations. Finally 'The Growth of Equality', both Social and economic, have been reduced both through the Welfare State and the Human Rights Act, 1998. Dahrendorf concludes that society can be characterised correctly in terms of conflict between competing interest groups. In the light of these arguments Dahrendorf points out what he considers the weakness of Marx's theories. For him, the basic weakness of Marx's approach is the way that he ties power – economic and social, political to the ownership of the means of production.

Capitalism has remained durable, in the west it has survived for two hundred years. Marx claimed this is as a result of the role of the superstructure, which is shaped by the infrastructure. So for example, the ruling class elite had monopolised political power, laws, and other institutions to maintain their control. By propagating the ideas of equality and freedom they have thus managed to legitimate their power and hide from the people the true nature of their exploitation. For example, the relationship between the worker and the owner of the means of production is seen as an equal exchange. However, in reality it is not, although there is a degree of choice of who to work for, in reality we must work to survive. In Marx's words, all we do is exchange one wage slavery for another. However it can also be argued that it is the State (the bourgeoisie) that is helping to reduce inequalities. For example, compulsory education has given the working class more chances of upward social mobility and the welfare state provides a safety net guaranteeing a minimum income for all. Even so, just as Marx outlined, the owners of the means of production still have much more power and influence than the majority. For example, the privileged rich who have attended public schools hold the major positions in the state, industry, banking, and the mass media.

More importantly, the ruling elite is able to dominate the ideology of the time through the Superstructure (The legal system, Education and the Mass Media) which he refers to as the 'ruling class ideology' since they justify and legitimate ruling class dominance and project a distorted picture of reality, moreover, to stop us seeing the contradictions. Marx further argues that the upper class directly benefits from the criminal law and selective law enforcement, and states that any general support, from the Proletariat, for the legal system reflects a false consciousness within society. Marx calls this a false consciousness of reality. However he also claimed that it will only work so long and eventually people will see through it, creating a revolution against

the ruling class. On the other hand, it is also observed that Legislation is passes by a democratically elected Parliament, chosen in free elections. Therefore, the law may be said to represent the will of the majority not just the ruling elite. Even so, the law is still said to favour the Bourgeoisie, such as those who try to weaken trade unions and make it difficult to take legal strike action. In the Guardian ICM survey, 67% of the population agreed that there was 'one law for the rich and one for the poor'.

In spite of all the critique surrounding him, it is no exaggeration to say that, of all theorists of society, Karl Marx has deeply touched and affected all our lives. Our modern political landscape reflects divisions established in Marx's time, and in part under his influence. Whatever their protestations, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party were profoundly affected by the challenge of Marxist movements, summarised in one of the biggest selling works in history, The Communist Manifesto. It has been claimed by many that Marxism is no longer applicable to modern day society, however, it cannot be denied that his line of reasoning at the time of writing was credible, and in response, evoked much debate over the function, position and future of society.

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