

To what extent is Marxism a flawed political ideology?

Ever since Marxism was established as a political ideology it has been subject to much scrutiny; as Karl Marx gave his opinions of society based on either scientific evidence or personal belief, it was only natural that some would disagree and thus criticise his convictions.

The majority of Marx's ideology was based on the idea that the superstructure of society was totally dependent on the economic base (and any changes made to it), and that the capitalist society in which we currently live would create a revolutionary working class which would ultimately lead to a communist society. Essentially, Marx claimed that communism was inevitable, and this was a heavily criticised aspect of Marx's overall ideology. As this suggested that human history is not something that individuals have any control over, critics argued that Marxism was more comparable with a religion rather than a scientific theory. This was further reinforced by Karl Raimond Popper's argument that Marxism was unscientific as it could not be disproved. Defenders of Marx claimed that although Marx had publicly used the term 'inevitable' on several occasions, it was only to emphasise the importance of his ideas; in his more serious works he did not suggest that communism and other stages of history which he discussed were inevitable. For example, it is argued that one of his ideas that was often misconstrued was the idea that a capitalist society would eventually collapse and become a communist society, when in reality he was simply saying that there are social pressures which gives capitalist societies a 'tendency' to collapse, rather than it being an inevitable process.

Marx also claimed that his theories could be scientifically investigated i.e. to take an objective and rational approach to the investigation of economic history to prove that socialism was more efficient than capitalism. Those opposing this approach i.e. taking an emotive irrational approach argued the case for socialism in moralistic and humanistic terms. Marx objected greatly to this view as he never claimed that communism was necessary because capitalism caused suffering, but because it could be scientifically proved that capitalism was a flawed economic system that would eventually lead to crisis. He supported his argument by trying to explain features of society by exploring firm evidence, rather than supernatural forces as well as acknowledging verifiable natural *and* social laws.

Additionally, he viewed issues beneath superficial appearance in order to investigate their real nature.

"All science would be superfluous if the forms of appearance of things coincided with their essence."

Another result of Marx's fundamental theory that the superstructure is entirely dependent on the economic base has caused critics to call him an 'economic determinist' in that he refused to attribute any other factors in the outcome of society.

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, it is their social existence which determines their consciousness."

Quotes such as this have led critics to believe that Marx suggested that human thought cannot be controlled by human choice, and that individuals are merely puppets of the environment in which they live. In Marx's defence, it was argued that he believed that the working class would only be able to revolt and create communism once they realised their position in society, and false consciousness was eliminated. Moreover, it was also argued that although Marx believed that a truly democratic society could only be created once the economic base (in a capitalist society) was changed, he never suggested that the economic base was the *only* factor, but had a significant influence on how the struggle between classes would occur in each society.

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."

One defender of Marx, Friedrich Engels argued this point when he said that "if someone twists this into saying that the economic base is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract and senseless phrase." He supported and developed Marx's argument that the economic base was a crucial, but not the sole factor in terms of the outcome of the superstructure of any one society.

Marx's ideology did not solely revolve around the societies of the 19th century, he also explored how society itself was formed, and how he believed it developed into the current state of capitalism, which would eventually collapse and go into a state of communism. Marx's theory of history (as it was known) argued that human history was a series of struggles and struggles between different classes, and therefore religion, important/famous historical figures, and chance had no influence on the creation and development of society throughout history. Critics disputed that this deterministic approach to describe the progression of human history was too simplistic, and that it does not comply with what has actually occurred throughout history. In opposition to Marx's idea that history was a progression of ever improving stages which would eventually lead to the final (and 'best') stage of communism, it was argued that critical accidents and mistakes e.g. Hitler's decision to invade Russia in 1941, which led to his downfall, played an

important role in history. Others argued further that human history was not a series of ever improving stages, but cycles whereby social development could have gone backwards or forwards in improvement. Additionally, some believed that G-d has an overall plan and decides the development and fate of human history. Once again Marx was defended in the argument that his concepts had been misconstrued to be more deterministic than they seemed; Marx's theory of history was not supposed to reflect every period of human history, as he acknowledged that society could go backwards and forwards in development. Marx's concepts examined the key turning points in history, mainly the r/evolution of society charting transitions from feudalism, to liberalism, then capitalism, and eventually communism.

Marx's theory of history also led to his concept of class and how society became divided between the working class (proletariat) and the ruling class (bourgeoisie). Marx argued that once humans had created a society whereby they had the basic necessities needed for survival, one person or group would eventually seize control. This developed into a society consisting of slaves and slave owners, whereby production motivation was based solely on the need for trade, not profit. This slave society was eventually replaced with a feudal society, which also deemed trade as the single reason for production. Although capitalism had not yet been established, Marx argued that society still consisted of classes as long as there were those who owned property (which there were). Class conflict led to the French Revolution, which resulted in two new classes being created – the ruling bourgeoisie (capitalist) class, and the working proletariat class. Capitalism was then established as for the first time profit was a motivation for production, but only for the ruling class. For Marx, this society was a result of property ownership in which the ruling class would always exploit the working class to make profit, and he subsequently argued that individuals are products of their society, and other factors had no influence. This led to several more concepts for Marx which involved how the capitalist society affected the individual, which could be changed for the better only if revolution were to take place and the economic base were changed.

One concept which Marx discussed involving the individual was that of human nature; he argued that the capitalist society created competitive, acquisitive and aggressive individuals. As Marx believed that these qualities were created purely from inequality in society, he argued that individuals were capable of being unselfish and cooperative in the appropriate social conditions, and therefore if the economic base was changed so that inequality was removed, so would be the forms of unpleasant human behaviour which resulted from capitalism. Marx was labelled by critics as naïve to think that human nature would change simply if social inequalities were removed; classical liberals in particular argued that true freedom would never be possible as greed was a natural human quality, and there would always be

destructive individuals in society. Classical liberals also argued that inequality provides a useful motivating factor for individuals to strive to reach their full potential, whereas communism would create a similar lifestyle without motivation for improvement. This was further disputed by marxists who claimed that human nature is non-existent and that if there was an equal and plentiful society which did not hold threats such as unemployment or poverty, this would subsequently create content and cooperative individuals who would not feel betrayed by social problems. Moreover, marxists argued that a communist society would give individuals real choices in what they wanted to achieve, and that it would fathom better methods of motivation to improve than fear of poverty and economic inequality.

The role of the state was also highly debated between Marx and his opponents; Marx's argument was that as the state was part of the superstructure, it was therefore largely influenced by the economic base and reflected the class structure of the economic system. Furthermore, as society was divided into fundamentally conflicting social classes, the state could not work for the welfare of both, and subsequently was labelled as a subjective political guardian of one class – the bourgeoisie. Marx therefore deduced that the state was only necessary in a society where class i.e. property ownership was an issue, to intervene and resolve conflict which may arise from disagreements between capitalist organisations, workers threatening to go on strike, or economic crisis. Marx therefore considered the state as part of the problem of capitalism, which could subsequently not be used to solve this problem unless the ruling class is overthrown and classes do not exist. Coinciding with Marx's theory of history, Marx maintained that a society under capitalism would ultimately lead to crisis and the eventual establishment of communism, causing the state to be unnecessary and gradually "wither away". This theory was opposed by critics who said contrarily that the state works in the interest of the people and not just the ruling class, and elections held create a neutral and democratic government which the majority can use to ensure that their wishes are carried out. Moreover, critics argued that even under communism the state would have a large role in controlling the disruptive individuals of society, which *they* maintained would still be present regardless of any drastic social or economic changes. Marx further disputed this by saying that the state would only "wither away" once capitalism had been replaced, and a true democratic society had been established.

As Marx always argued in favour of communism, basing part of his argument on the fact that a capitalist society can never be truly democratic, critics disputed his theory saying that communism leads to dictators like Vladimir Lenin. Similarly, Marx's references to dictatorship of the proletariat (one of the stages leading to communism), contradicts the idea of true democracy. Modern liberals argued further that as long as there is

equality of opportunity, democracy is possible despite economic inequalities, in combination with checks and balances to make sure no single group can dominate. Defenders of Marx argued that in a society divided by class and economic inequality, true democracy could not exist; only when all wealth producing property is collectively owned by society can these inequalities be abolished thus creating true democracy.

Another of Marx's fundamental points of his ideology was that any capitalist society would always lead to crisis, and gradually reform into a communist society. An opposing argument that is sustained even today states that capitalism hasn't collapsed, whereas attempts of communism *have*. In complete contradiction to Marx's theory, critics argue that evidently capitalism can be maintained as a stable and well managed system with careful management. They claim that capitalism is the most successful and productive system so far, and as a result there is no need to replace it; Fukyama furthered the argument by claiming that capitalism was the final stage of history, not communism. Marxists opposed this argument claiming that although capitalism could be prolonged with economic tools such as credit, this would become less dynamic; under communism people would produce goods when society needed them, and not with profit based intentions.

The main argument which contradicts almost all of Marx's theory, is whether or not the fall of the Soviet Union was a result of the nature of Joseph Stalin's rule, or simply because Marx was wrong and communism could not successfully function. Frank Furedi defended Marx in saying that Stalin went against the principles of communism by discouraging the working class to participate in the running of society. Unlike capitalism, communism does not have the element of force, but relies on people being actively involved in decision making. This led to lack of morale amongst the working class, and in combination with lack of competition between producers, this created an uninvolved working class who subsequently became subject to alcoholism and depression. Furedi's argument in defence of Marx was effectively that because Stalin went against the main principle of communism, it cannot be concluded that communism is doomed to failure, but that it could work under better circumstances. Others argued that the fall of the Soviet Union was inevitable mainly due to the absence of capitalism and the unintentional concentration of power. They argued that without the opportunity to make profit, motivation declines, as does people's interests in reaching their full potential. Additionally, they argued that although communists want to create a society of true freedom and democracy, history has shown that it can only lead to a dictatorship whereby power is concentrated within one person or group e.g. Lenin.

Although Marx's theories are concise and clearly thought-out, it would appear that occurrences in history have contradicted his ideas and

predictions. Although Marx claims that his ideology is scientific, the fact that he is also deterministic allows for the benefit of the doubt i.e. there is no reason why his critics' arguments that many of his concepts do not allow for 'chance' influences cannot be taken into account. For this reason, it can be concluded that Marxism (as with all ideologies) is flawed, as although it is mainly logical, there will always be unanswered questions.