

Major Schools of Thought: Marxism.

Marxism is a body of social, political, and economic thought derived from the writings of Karl MARX and his collaborator, Friedrich ENGELS. Various schools of Marxism have emerged since Marx's death in 1883. Many of these remain influential today .

At the centre of Marx's work is his analysis of CAPITALISM: how it arose, how it works (for whom it works better and for whom worse), and where it is likely to lead. Concentrating on the social and economic relations in which people earn their livings, Marx saw behind capitalism's legal facade a struggle of two main classes: the BOURGEOISIE, who own the productive resources, and the workers, or PROLETARIAT, who must work for wages in order to survive. Marx did recognise the existence of two other classes, the Petty Bourgeoisie and the Lumpen Proletariat, he argued that these two classes would disappear over time.

The main theories that make up this analysis--

- the theory of alienation,
- the labour theory of value, and
- the materialist conception of history

--must all be understood with this focus in mind. Even Marx's vision of socialism emerges from his study of capitalism, for socialism is the unrealised potential inherent in capitalism itself for a more rational and egalitarian social order in which people can develop more fully their distinctively human qualities.

Some socialist ideas can be traced as far back as the Bible, but Marxism has its main intellectual origins in German philosophy, English political economy, and French utopian socialism. It is from G. W. F. HEGEL that Marx learned a way of thinking about the world, in all its fluid complexity, that is called "dialectics." Adam SMITH's and David RICARDO's view that the values of commodities express the amount of labour time that go into their production underlay Marx's own labour theory of value.

From the French utopians, especially Charles FOURIER and the comte de SAINT-SIMON, Marx caught a glimpse of a happier future that lay beyond capitalism. With the paradox of an Industrial Revolution that produced as much poverty as it did wealth, these were the main ingredients that went into the formation of Marxism.

MARXIST THEORY

Marx's study of capitalism was grounded in a philosophy that was both dialectical and materialist. With dialectics, the changes and interactions that anything undergoes are brought into focus and emphasised, and special attention is devoted to whatever patterns emerge. This method enabled Marx, when examining a particular problem within capitalism, to keep in view both the broader interactions that made up the whole and the past and future development of present phenomena. In this way, capitalism as it unfolded as a system in history becomes the main object of his study. The uneasy tension between the historical forces promoting change and the systemic ones promoting equilibrium were captured in the idea of "contradiction," understood as a progressive pulling apart of what is functionally united.

Unlike Hegel's dialectic, which moved in a world of pure ideas, Marx's dialectic was materialist. Marx was primarily concerned with capitalism as lived rather than as thought about, but people's lives also involve consciousness. Marx's materialism puts ideas back into the heads of living people and treats both as parts of a world that is forever being remade through human activities, particularly in production. In this dialectical process, ideas also affect the social conditions and behaviour that more generally shape them.

Alienation

Marx's theories about capitalism are best understood as answers to his pointed questions about its nature, effects, and development. How do the ways and conditions in which people earn their living affect their bodies, minds, and daily lives? In the theory of alienation Marx gives his answer.

1. The people who do the work in capitalism own none of the means (machines and raw materials, for example) that they use in their work.
2. These are owned by the capitalists, to whom workers must sell their "labour power," or ability to do work, in return for a wage.
3. This system of labour displays four relations that lie at the core of Marx's theory of alienation.
4. The worker is alienated from his or her productive activity, playing no part in deciding what to do or how to do it.
5. The worker is alienated from the product of that activity, having no control over what is made or what becomes of it.
6. The worker is alienated from other human beings, with competition and mutual indifference replacing most forms of co-operation.
7. Finally, the worker is alienated from the distinctive potential inherent in the notion of human being.
8. The severing of these relationships leaves on one side a seriously diminished individual--physically weakened, mentally confused and mystified, isolated and virtually powerless.

On the other side of this separation are products and ties with other people, outside the control and lost to the understanding of the worker. In the marketplace the worker's products pass from one hand to another, changing names and form along the way--value, commodity, capital, profit, interest, rent, wage--eventually re-entering the worker's daily life as the landlord's house, the grocer's food, the boss's factory, and the various laws and customs that prescribe relations with other people. The world that the worker has made and lost reappears in the misunderstood form of private property to serve as the necessary conditions for reproducing his or her own alienation.

Theory of Value

What is the effect of the worker's alienated labour on its products, both on what they do and on what can be done with them? Smith and Ricardo used the labour theory of value to explain broad price ratios. Marx took this explanation more or less for granted; his labour theory of value is primarily concerned with the more basic problem of why goods have prices at all. The slave owner takes by force what slaves produce. The feudal lord claims as a right some part of what is produced by the serfs. Only in capitalism is the distribution of what is produced a function of markets and prices.

Marx's explanation of this anomaly concentrates on the separation of the worker from his or her means of production and the sale of his or her labour power that this separation makes necessary. As a result of this separation, all the things that workers produce become available for exchange, indeed are produced with this exchange in mind. "Value" is the general social form taken by all the products of alienated labour (labour to which the four relations of alienated labour apply). Such products could only sell (have "exchange values") and serve (have "use values") in ways that express and contribute to this alienation.

Surplus value, the third aspect of value, is the difference between the amount of exchange and use value created by workers and the amount of value returned to them as wages. The capitalist's control over this surplus is the basis of their power over the workers and the rest of society. Marx's labour theory of value also provides a detailed account of the struggle between capitalists and workers over the size of the surplus value. Because of competition among capitalists, workers are constantly being replaced by machinery, enabling and requiring capitalists to extract ever-greater amounts of surplus value from workers remaining.

Paradoxically, the amount of surplus value is also the source of capitalism's greatest weakness. Because only part of their product is returned to them as wages, the workers, as consumers, cannot buy a large portion of what they produce. Under pressure from the constant growth of the total product, the capitalists periodically fail to find new markets to take up the slack. This leads to crises of "overproduction," capitalism's classic contradiction, in which people are forced to live on too little because they have produced too much.

After reading the above answer the following questions...

1. We all have needs that must be met in order to survive. List your basic needs?
2. The things that you own, or wish to own beyond these basic needs are wants. List the things that you want.
3. Marx referred to this unnatural desire (want) as, "Commodity Fetishism." What do you understand by this term?

Historical Tendencies

How did capitalism originate, and where is it leading?

In the materialist conception of history, Marx answered this question with an account of the transformation of feudalism into capitalism. He focused on the contradictions that arose through the growth of towns, population, technology, and trade, which at a certain point burst asunder the feudal social and political forms in which production had been organised. Relations of lord to serf based on feudal rights and obligations had become a hindrance to the further development of these productive forces; they were replaced by the contractual relations of capitalists to workers. With capitalists free to pursue profits wherever they might take them

and workers equally "free" to sell their labour power to capitalists however they might use it, the productive potential inherent in the new forces of production, especially technology and science, was freed. If profit maximisation leads to rapid growth when rapid growth maximises profits, however, profit maximisation restricts growth when growth proves unprofitable. According to Marx, the periodic and worsening crises of overproduction that began about 1830 attest to capitalism's growing inability to take full advantage of the potential for producing wealth that has grown up with it.

Within this framework the actual course of history is determined by class struggle. According to Marx, each class is defined chiefly by its relation to the productive process and has objective interests rooted in that relation. The capitalists' interests lie in securing their power and expanding profits. Workers, on the other hand, have interests in higher wages, safer working conditions, shorter hours, job security, and--because it is required to realise other interests--a new distribution of power. The class struggle involves everything that these two major classes do to promote their incompatible interests at each other's expense.

In this battle, which rages throughout society, the capitalists are aided by their wealth, their control of the state, and their domination over other institutions--schools, media, churches--that guide and distort people's thinking. X.ref: Althusser.

On the workers' side are their sheer numbers, their experience of co-operation--however alienated--while at work, trade unions, working-class political parties (where they exist), and the growing contradictions within capitalism that make present conditions increasingly irrational.

- To what extent are modern trade unions and The Labour Party vehicles for the Proletariat to promote the changes that Marx is referring to?

Marx believed that once most workers recognised their interests and became "class conscious," the overthrow of capitalism would proceed as quickly and democratically as the nature of capitalist opposition allowed. The socialist society that would emerge out of the revolution would develop the full productive potential inherited from capitalism through democratic planning on behalf of social needs. The final goal, toward which socialist society would constantly build, is the human one of abolishing alienation.

MARXISM TODAY

From its beginnings, Marxism has been under strong attack by critics, often for claims that Marx himself never made. For example, some have viewed Marx's materialism as evidence that he ignored the role of ideas in history and in people's lives. Others have claimed wrongly that Marx's labour theory of value ignored the effect of competition on prices.

Many argue that with the advent of the welfare state and the relative prosperity of workers in much of the Western world, Marxism is no longer relevant. Marxists answer that the basic structures that set capitalism apart from other social forms--private ownership of industrial wealth and alienated wage labour--have changed very little in the past 100 years.

Some, finally, point to the antidemocratic practices of many, "Communist" countries and claim that authoritarianism is inherent in Marxist doctrine. Marxists respond that Marx

concentrated on advanced industrial capitalism and never supposed that socialism could achieve its full promise in relatively poor nations.

- Provide examples of these, “Communist Countries.”
- What traits are associated with them?

Marxism, as defined here, has had its main influence among workers and intellectuals in the capitalist countries, especially in Europe, which have used it as a major tool in defining their problems and developing political strategies. In the Western countries even non-Marxist intellectuals, particularly sociologists and historians, have drawn considerable insights from Marx's writings. In the Third World, Marxism--considerably modified by a strong dose of voluntarism--has clarified the nature of the enemy for many liberation movements. In the Communist countries, selected doctrines of Marx have been frozen into abstract principles and formulas to serve as the official ideology of the regimes. The influence of these three versions of Marxism is as different as their content.

Marx has been described as an, “Economic Determinist.” Complete the following diagram to show what economic determinism is...

