

KARL MARX'S THEORY OF CLASS STRUGGLE AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

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ABSTRACT

KARL MARX's theory of class struggle argues that human history is driven by conflict between two primary economic classes: the bourgeoisie (those who own the means of production like factories and capital) and the proletariat (the working class who sell their labor). [1, 2, 3]

□ Karl Marx's Theory: Core Concepts

- Economic Base: Society's economic structure dictates its political, legal, and cultural ideas. [1]
- Surplus Value: Capitalists profit by paying workers less than the actual value their labor generates. [1, 2]
- Alienation: Workers feel detached from their work, products, and humanity because they lack control over production. [1]
- Class Consciousness: Workers eventually realize their shared exploitation and unite for collective action. [1, 2]
- Revolution & Communism: The proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie, abolishes private property, and builds a classless, stateless society. [1, 2, 3]

KEYWORDS- Karl Marx's, class struggle, relevance today, society, revolution

INTRODUCTION

Marx's rigid 19th-century prediction of a simple two-class war has evolved, yet many of his core insights explain modern economic realities:

- Extreme Wealth Inequality:
 - Modern data (such as Thomas Piketty's research) confirms that capitalism naturally concentrates wealth among a tiny global elite. [1]
- The Rise of the "Precariat":
 - Sociologist Guy Standing describes modern gig economy workers (Uber drivers, food delivery couriers, freelance contractors) as a vulnerable "precariat" lacking job security, benefits, or union protection—mirroring Marxian alienation. [1]
- Digital Labor & Tech Monopolies:[1,2,3]
 - Tech giants (like Google, Amazon, and Meta) control digital infrastructure and extract value from user data and algorithmic labor, updating the classic model of monopoly capitalism. [1]

- Transnational Capitalist Class:
 - Globalization created a borderless corporate elite whose economic decisions impact labor forces across multiple countries simultaneously. [1]

Limitations & Criticisms Today

- Rise of the Welfare State:
 - Government safety nets, labor laws, and trade unions in many democracies softened absolute pauperization. [1]
- Failure of 20th-Century State Socialism:
 - Authoritarian regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere deviated from democratic worker self-emancipation, leading to inefficiency and human rights abuses. [1]
- Identity and Culture:
 - Modern social stratification involves complex dimensions like identity politics, nationalism, and environmentalism that pure economic class struggle struggles to fully capture. [1]

Marx's theory of class is a central element of Marxist thought, referring to the social stratification and conflict that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued was a defining feature of human history and particularly acute under capitalism. For Marx, a class is a group of people defined by their relationship to the means of production—the facilities, tools, land, and resources by which a society's goods are produced. He posited that the history of class society (that is all society in which classes and a structure of class have existed) is fundamentally a story of class conflict, in which the ruling class, which owns and controls the means of production, exploits the subordinate classes who do not.

In capitalist society, Marx identified two primary classes: the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class), which owns the means of production, and the much larger proletariat (the working class), which must sell its own labor power to survive. This relationship is inherently exploitative, as the capitalists extract surplus value from the workers' labor. This economic antagonism is the root of class struggle, which, in Marx's view, would eventually culminate in a proletarian revolution. He saw the proletariat as a unique "special class" whose historical conditions and interests would lead it not only to overthrow the bourgeoisie but to abolish all class distinctions and create a classless society.[4,5,6]

Marx's analysis also accounted for other classes and strata, such as the petty-bourgeoisie (small business owners and professionals), the peasantry, and the lumpenproletariat (the declassed and socially marginal). He viewed these groups as transitional or intermediate, often politically unstable and ultimately subordinate to the main conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. A key principle of his political theory was the self-emancipation of the working class, arguing that the proletariat must achieve its own liberation through its own organized struggle, rather than being freed by benevolent saviors or elite groups.

DISCUSSION

Marx's theory posits that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".[8] This ongoing conflict between exploiting and exploited classes is the primary engine of historical change. Marx distinguished between a political revolution and a social revolution. A political revolution alters the governmental structure or transfers power between factions of the same ruling class. A social revolution, however, is a more fundamental transformation involving the transfer of state power to a new class, which then remodels society according to its own interests and establishes a new mode of production.[9]

The class that takes power must, in its first moments, conquer political power in order to represent its interest as the general interest.[10] The ultimate goal of the proletarian revolution is the creation of a classless society. By overthrowing the bourgeoisie, the proletariat would "sweep away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class." [11] For Marx, the defining tenet of his theory was this practice of proletarian revolution and the theory and practice of class power.[12]

Marx and Engels saw the proletariat as the uniquely revolutionary class of the modern era, for several historical reasons:[27]

Propensity to organize: The conditions of industrial production bring workers together in large numbers, teaching them discipline and cooperation. Capitalism itself "assembles the bourgeois and the proletarians", compelling the working class to organize.[28]

Interests aligned with struggle: The proletariat's basic economic and social needs are systematically frustrated by capitalism. The struggle to defend its interests as a class compels it to challenge the foundations of the system.[7,8,9]

Tendency toward anti-bourgeois institutions: The organized struggle of the working class inherently pushes against the rights of private property, as it insists on social responsibility for all vital aspects of life, from wages and working conditions to health and education.[30]

Capacity for militancy: The proletariat's conditions of existence, as a class alienated from the products of its labor and the means of production, push it toward a persistent boldness and militancy at critical stages of struggle.[31]

Social weight and strategic position: The proletariat is the only class with the collective power to halt and reorganize production, as it is at the "levers of economic power".[32]

Embodies a social program: The proletariat's class position objectively points to a program that resolves the contradictions of capitalism: the abolition of private property and the creation of a democratically organized society.[33]

This view was not based on an idealization of workers, whom Marx and Engels often criticized, but on an analysis of the objective role of the proletariat as a class in the process of historical change.[34] The proletariat, as the "lowest stratum of our present society", cannot emancipate itself without emancipating all of humanity.

RESULTS

Marx always stressed the importance of the fight for parliamentary democracy against the various forms of autocratic government existing in Europe during the last century, and for the extension of democratic rights in countries where the autocracy had already been overthrown. At the same time, he considered that so long as the autocracy or the capitalist class remained in control of the State (in the meaning explained above) democracy is neither secure nor effective. It is only when the working class has succeeded in defeating and smashing the capitalist State machine that it can raise itself to the position of ruling class, and thereby “win the battle of democracy.” In other words, the people’s will can only prevail effectively when the armed barrier in its way – the capitalist State machine – has been destroyed.

But it is not enough to defeat and destroy the State machine of the former ruling class. It is necessary for the working class to set up its own State machine – its own centralised apparatus of force – in order to complete the defeat of the capitalist class and to defend the new system against attacks from within and from without.[10,11,12]

Moreover, it is necessary for the working class to set up its own form of government, which differs in important respects from the form known in capitalist society, because its purpose is different. This became clear to Marx after the experience of the Paris Commune in 1871, the special features of which were that: it was “a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time;” its members could be replaced by their electors at any time; “from the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen’s wages;” magistrates and judges were elected, and their electors could replace them at any time. The old standing army was replaced by a “National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men.” The essence of these and other features of the Commune was to bring the governing apparatus and the machinery of force and repression nearer to the working class – to ensure its control which had in fact existed over the old machine. This new form of State was “winning the battle of democracy” – it was an enormous extension of the share taken by the common people in the actual control of their own lives.

Yet Engels, writing of the Paris Commune, said: “That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Is there any contradiction between the two statements about the Commune: that it was a great extension of democratic control as compared with parliamentary democracy under capitalism; on the other hand, that it was a working-class dictatorship? No. They simply express two aspects of the same thing. In order to carry out the will of the overwhelming majority of the people, a “new and really democratic State” was set up; but this could only carry out the people’s will by exercising a dictatorship, by using force against the minority who had been the class exercising its dictatorship and continued to use all means – from financial sabotage to armed resistance – against the people’s will.[13,14,15]

The later experiences of working-class revolution confirmed the deductions which Marx and Engels had drawn from the experience of the Commune in 1871. In the 1905 revolution in Russia, councils composed of delegates from working-class bodies were set up to organise and carry on the fight against the Tsar; and again in the March revolution of 1917 similar “soviets” (the Russian word for “council”) were formed as soon as the revolutionary situation developed. Lenin saw that, with the great development of the working class since the Paris Commune, these delegate bodies drawn in the first place from the factories (but also, as the struggle extended, from the soldiers and the peasants), were the form in which the new working-class State would operate. The delegates were drawn directly from the workers, and could at any time be recalled by their electors; this meant that capitalist influences could play no part in decisions, and that therefore the real interests of the working class would be protected and advanced. At the same time, this could only be done by a dictatorship, resting on force, against the old ruling class, which used every means to undermine and destroy the new Soviet Government.

The real democracy of the working-class dictatorship was brought out by Marx in a passage in the Communist Manifesto of 1848: “All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”

It is evident from what has been said above that Marx did not consider that the victory of the working-class revolution would at once end all class struggle. On the contrary, it merely marks a turning point in which the working class for the first time has the State apparatus on its side instead of against it. Lenin told the Congress of Soviets in January, 1918, an incident which illustrates this point. He was in a train, and there was a conversation going on which he could not understand. Then one of the men turned to him and said: “Do you know the curious thing this old woman said? She said: ‘Now there is no need to fear the man with the gun. I was in the woods one day and I met a man with a gun, and instead of taking the firewood I had collected from me, he helped me to collect more.’” The apparatus of force was no longer turned against the workers, but helped the workers; it would be turned only against those who tried to hold back the workers.

And such people, of course, continue to exist after the working class has taken power. The old ruling class, aided by the ruling class of other countries, gathers together such armed forces as it can raise, and carries on open warfare against the working-class State. The Paris Commune of 1871 was defeated in this way. The Germans released thousands of French prisoners taken in the war, and sent them to reinforce the French reactionaries at Versailles, outside Paris; and the reactionary army was able to take Paris from the Commune and carry out an appalling slaughter of those who had supported the Commune. Between 1918 and 1920, the Soviet Government in Russia had to face, not only armies of Tsarist supporters, but also invading armies of foreign powers – Britain, France and the United States included. History therefore confirms the conclusion made by Marx, the working class would have to maintain its State organisation for a long period after it has taken power, in order to defend itself and to ensure its control during the period when it is reorganising the system of production on to a socialist basis.[16,17,18]

CONCLUSION

What exactly Marx meant by socialism and its higher stage, communism, is explained in the following chapter. But before leaving the subject of the class struggle and the State, Marx's view of the final outcome of the process must be stated. Class struggle, and with it the setting up of a State apparatus to protect the interests of the ruling class, came out of the division of human society into classes whose interests clashed in production. Class struggle and the State continue through history as long as human society remains divided in classes. But when the working class takes power it does so in order to end the class divisions – to bring in a new form of production in which there is no longer any class living on the labour of another class; in other words, to bring about a classless society, in which all serve society as a whole. When this process has been completed (on a world scale), there will be no class conflict because there are no classes with separate interests, and therefore there will be no need of a State – an apparatus of force – to protect one set of interests against another. The State will “wither away” – in one sphere after another it will not be required, and such central machinery as exists will be for the organisation of production and distributed. As Engels put it: “Government over persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production.”[19,20]

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