

## **Hope for the Marxist Scholars: Defending Marxism against the Contention That It is Dead**

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### **Abstract**

Most of the icons of twentieth century like Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Fidel Catsro have been seen as possessors of Marx's legacy i.e. his heirs. Within one hundred years of his death half the world's population was ruled by governments that considered Marxism to be their guiding faith. After the end of the cold war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, many declared that we had reached what Francis Fukuyama smugly called the "End of History". This paper seeks to explore the scope of Marxism in the present times and whether the theory is still alive despite dim hopes and all criticism against it.

The present society is a capitalistic society and fraught with unequal distribution of wealth and social inequality. Aristotle had cautioned that inequality everywhere is the cause of revolution. Such a revolution has been awaited for long by Marxist scholars but lately disillusionment has set in regarding the possibility of the collapse of capitalism and the building of a communist state. I have tried to assert through this paper that Marxism is still alive and sooner or later will overtake the Capitalistic society.

Since time immemorial humanity is in search for an ideal life and an ideal society. Beginning from 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, when Plato wrote *The Republic*, many more utopian novels have been written. The only motive behind such kind of writings is the human quest for

a welfare state.<sup>1</sup> Later utopian novels include Thomas More's *Utopia* (which has been called the first socialist novel), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and Aldus Huxley's *Island*.

It was, however, the works and thoughts of Marx in nineteenth century which provided the world with somewhat feasible models of an ideal state. Marx established a link between economics and intellectual life. Young Marx was concerned with alienation, human estrangement and morality of the labourers while in the later years, Marx was more engaged with an in-depth study of the workings of capitalism. As Shlomo Avineri describes it, Marx inherited three different traditions from three nations. From German intellectual tradition he borrowed the Hegelian method of dialectics and applied it to the material world. From French Revolution tradition he accepted the idea that apocalyptic change was not only desirable but also feasible and that such a change was motivated by 'messianic' ideas. From English economics he learnt to understand dynamics of capitalism and industrial revolution. In 1844 Marx became interested in working class movement and was introduced into Engels' study of political economy.

While living in Brussels, the two of them, Marx and Engels, began working in 1847 on *German Ideology*. Marx spent his later years in studying in British Museum from 1850 to 1860. It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who originated the idea that everything was fluid and was constantly coming into being and passing away. According to him it was only change that endured. Engels picked up this idea that everything was and was not. Similarly Marx and Engels believed that no social system could last forever. Capitalism was too a product of certain circumstances and so would it disappear with time.

The methodology that he used was the *Dialecticism* of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel which believed in a kind of logic to history. Marx himself acknowledged Hegel's contribution in recognising the world history as a constant motion or change and in understanding these movements and transformations. He also takes from the idea that the fundamental engine of change which will drive history forward is the dialectical. Hegel could very well be called an idealist who more or less focused on the history of philosophy in

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<sup>1</sup> The term has been used in the sense that William Temple used it during the Second World War, contrasting Britain's welfare state with the warfare state of Nazi Germany.

a theoretical manner whereas Marx went a step ahead and focused on economic issue; Marx was in this sense a materialist. According to Marx the mode of production and exchange was the final cause of all social changes and political revolutions. The major difference between Hegel and Marx is that while Hegel thought that the process worked at the level of the mind and ideas or what he calls Geist<sup>2</sup>, Marx thought it was fundamentally one of material change.<sup>3</sup>

Marx turned Hegel's ideas upside down and extended it beyond the philosophical dimensions using Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach's transformative method. It was not just that the material world was to be understood but was also to be transformed. Marx wrote in the *Theses on Feuerbach* 1845 that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however is to change it."<sup>4</sup>

In the opening statement of his *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx claimed that "the history of all hitherto existing society in the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another. . . ." (2). Marx divided the people into two classes called the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie was the ruling class while the proletariat refers to the workers or the labour class. In his analysis of history Marx mentioned the important role of ideology in perpetuation the false consciousness among people and traced down the stages which will be passed in reaching the goal of a socialist state. Both bourgeoisie and proletariat perform their historically determined roles. Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (64).

In his theory, using dialectics, Marx divided the human society in two parts: The economic "Base" and "Superstructure". The economic base has a corresponding superstructure which consists of society, political and cultural dimensions of human life. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their

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<sup>2</sup> It is roughly translated in English as mind or spirit.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete distinction between Hegel's and Marx's theory, see McLellan.

<sup>4</sup> This forms the theses XI from Thesis on Feuerbach by Marx written in 1845; These words are also engraved upon his grave.

consciousness” (11). He identifies five stages of economic development which were known to history. The stages are: Primitive Communism, Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism and Communism. We are currently living in a capitalistic society which Marx believed came after feudal society and will eventually be replaced by a communist society. According to him, in the fourth stage of capitalism the proletariat fail to see their power to overturn the status due to their “false consciousness”. After the proletariat revolted or overturned the bourgeoisie Marx claimed that there would be the “abolition of private property”. Marx states the bourgeoisie "has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands" (6).<sup>5</sup>

With the coming of technology the forces of production develop, the social relations change and ultimately the system ruptures giving birth to a new system better suited to the advancing forces of production. Thus, the phases continue in a cyclic nature.

The ideal state according to Marx was to be the socialist state or communism. The introduction of the *Manifesto* starts off with the popular quote "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism"(1). He believed that destruction of capitalism was inevitable because of its inherent contradictions. Between the destruction of capitalism and attainment of communism there was a transitional state called the “Dictatorship of the proletariat”.<sup>6</sup> In Marxist theory, Socialism refers to that phase of economic development which supersedes capitalism and is marked by redistribution of wealth. The criteria of production in socialism are according to use value and income is distributed according to individual contribution. In Engels’ and Marx's own words, from *The German Ideology*:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic (53).

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<sup>5</sup> This quote has been taken from *The Communist Manifesto*, co-authored by Marx and Engels.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed critique of Marx’s idea of Dictatorship of Proletariat, see Bakunin.

Marx described his socialism as “scientific”. The working class effectively controls the means of production unlike under capitalism, through cooperatives or public ownership and the surplus goes to the working class or the society as a whole.

Socialism gradually gives way to communism which according to Marx emerges invariably from the development of the productive forces which lead to wealth surplus. This is implied when Marx and Engels state in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat" (13).

Socialism has been variously understood by various philosophers and Marxian thinkers. Dr. Angelo Rappaport listed 39 definitions of socialism in 1924 and he was still not clear in his mind as to what it meant. R.N. Berki in his 1975 book called *Socialism* identified four basic tendencies in socialist ideology: egalitarianism, moralism, rationalism and liberalism. In 1998, Bernard Crick identified socialism with a special form of democracy and a set of values first espoused during the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. According to Avineri, “Common to all forms of socialism is a commitment to equality, fraternity, absence of exploitative relationships and socialized humanity.”

Marx believed that authentic socialism would emerge in economically advanced countries for such states would have the economic resources that make better living better. In such countries “political rights had been won, organization perfected, and consciousness matured among the working class” (Worsley 110). In such cases that working class coming to power would not be faced with chaotic situations in order to procure the resources or requires labour as they would be taking over the already developed economies. It would thus be convenient to change at every level. Worsley made an analysis of this phenomenon:

Further, criticism and opposition are ingrained and regarded not as crimes, but as civic rights and duties. The likelihood of complying authoritarian models borrowed from communism of backward. . . . And repeating their disasters can be avoided. Whether ruling classed would accept defeat without resorting to a massive application of centralized force in total showdown which would

eliminate those freedoms altogether and provoke authoritarian responses on the Left is unpredictable (110).

Socialism emerged in order to counter the injustice, exploitation and inequality within capitalism. It promised a human and an equalitarian society. Though the disintegration of USSR in 1989 was a big setback for Marxian thinkers but how far that was in line with Marx's original theory is not much clear. The October Revolution of 1917 led by Vladimir Ilyich Vlyanov Lenin, which established the first communist state in Russia, rejected social democratic approach and advocated staging of a revolution with the help of professional revolutionaries. Lenin regarded dictatorship of proletariat as the necessary transition period from capitalism to socialism. In 1917 essay titled *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin laid down his thoughts about the functions of financial capital to ensure profits and in an essay published in 1902 called *What is to be Done?*, Lenin talked about the idea of forces revolution championed the idea of a forced revolution and coined the phrase "Working men of all countries, Unite!"

With time thinkers have tried to rework Marx's theory and to integrate with it the need of democracy. Ludwig Lichtheim once wrote that the choice is between socialism and democracy. The collapse of communism proves that it is important to combine the two. In order to remain relevant Socialism must retain its libertarian ideals which involve the welfare of the people and social and economic equality. Lichtheim opines that "One can have democracy without socialism and vice versa, whether the two can be effectively combined is the primary question of our age."

Edward Bernstein went on to espouse such a vision. He realised the need to simultaneously realise democracy and socialism. In his opinion, within democracy, social democracy would have to have work towards strengthening the access to resources and justice to all the people. Other thinkers who have theorized about various forms of Marxism include Karl Johann Kautsky, also known as the 'Pope of Marxism' who retained his conviction till the end that there is a need to combine both democracy and socialism for realising a more free, equal and a just society. Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov tried to make a systematic break with populism which was the predominant revolutionary movement in Russia in 1860s and 1870s. His political philosophy was a bridge between Populism and Marxism. The communism of Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* was one of the most important re-thinking of

Marxism. Gramsci's assertion on the role of the intellectuals in the society is an important contribution and relevant till today. Thus, many re-workings keep appearing from time to time and refresh the tenets of the Marxist theory in the minds of the present generation.

We are living in a capitalistic society and there appears no possibility of its collapse in the near future. Intellectuals around the world have been waiting for a revolution but capitalism comes across as a strong system that fails to give way to socialism. Ronald Aronson in *After Marxism* claimed that because Marxists are "unable to point to a social class or movement" away from capitalism, Marxism is "Over" as a project of historical transformation. The disillusionment with the Marxist ideology was so much so that Martin Jacques, a British academic and former magazine editor wrote about *Marxist Today* that magazine title "was now an albatross" in world dominated by liberal capitalism.

In an controversial book published in 1992, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama says that after the end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the progression of human history as a struggle is at the end and that liberal democracies and capitalism are here to stay largely due to improvements made within capitalism which include quality of life, equality of rights, etc. He states that "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such.... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

The possible reason for continuation of capitalism can be found in *Communism Manifesto* wherein Marx gave three reasons which made capitalism attractive. First, it brought about remarkable economic progress by revolutionizing the means of production and technology. Secondly, it built and encouraged the growth of commerce and factors on the large scale - Cosmopolitan and International. And thirdly, it eliminated the distinction between towns and country sides and enabled the peasant to come out of what Marx called 'the idiocy of rural life'.<sup>7</sup>

One way that capitalism has historically been able to avoid social breakdown has been to innovate economically and technologically.<sup>8</sup> This factor puts the notion of 'limits to growth'

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<sup>7</sup> This phrase first appears on page 5 of Communist Manifesto and is repeated thereafter.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed discussion on such innovations, see Worsley 109.

in doubt by introducing microchips, robots, super computers, etc. With the resulting unequal distribution due to such technological changes cannot be doubted. A popular defence of advanced capitalism as a just system was provided by the Democratic Pluralist view which uses the phenomenon like equality of opportunity, classlessness, etc as defending points. Ralph Miliband in his *The State in Capitalistic Society*, published in 1969, made a detailed critique of the pluralist view and asserted the superiority of Marxist analysis.

On the other hand Herbert Marcuse asserted a new idea. He accepted that there were irrationalities and inequalities in advanced capitalism and felt that there was no probable escape from them because he thought that there was some rationality in these irrationalities as well.<sup>9</sup> According to him these irrationalities were valued by all and one such irrationality was the prevailing false consciousness. For Marcuse, Marxism is a genuine philosophy of humanism and agreed with Marx's reasoning but differed in his conclusions. In a book called *One dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Herbert Marcuse give a critique of capitalism and society of Soviet Union. Marcuse states that false needs are created by "advanced industrial society" which tries to involve the consumers into the market via media, advertisements, bonus benefits and various modes of thinking. According to him, this results in "one-dimensional" ways of thoughts and behaviour at a universal level wherein critical thinking is side-lined and contrapuntal readings is. In order to counter becoming a one dimensional man, Marcuse advocates the "great refusal" as the only appropriate method to oppose those methods of control. The book promotes "negative thinking" as a counter force to the positivism that prevails.

Marx told his daughters Jenny and Laura in 1865 while playing the game of Confessions that his favourite maxim was "Nihil Humani a me alienum puto" i.e. Nothing human is alien to me.<sup>10</sup> What he meant was that he himself was not infallible and as Crosland points out in *The Future of Socialism*, "Ironically it was in his various letters on Russia that Marx disregarded the possibilities open to its new theory and here blind spot: like Hegel himself he did not subject his own theory to a dialectical critique." Marx's major intellectual deficiency is generally regarded to be his disregard of the different possibilities that could emerge from

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<sup>9</sup> For further explication, see Ramaswamy.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Marx's answers to various questions, see Wheen 338.



his theory. What Marx himself thought of his theory had been interpreted and reinterpreted multiple times. “The McCarthy’s witch-hunt of 1950s, the wars in Vietnam and Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the massacre of the students in Tiananmen Square – all these bloody blemishes on the history of the twentieth century were justified in the name of Marxism or anti-Marxism. <sup>11</sup>”

Many consider the disintegration of the USSR to be the fall of Marxism but according to Bob Stone, “Marx’s own vision was not a failure on the demise of USSR because Marx did not envision governmental control of means of production but control by the working class joined to democratic planning not by bureaucrats but ‘by the associated producers.’”<sup>12</sup> Russia has minority of working class. Capitalism is fully alive so is the heart of Marxism. Marxism is a tool not an end in itself but rather as Stone puts it, “It is a repository of many which are together indispensable for concerning capitalism as a whole.”

Besides all that has been said and done in order to diminish or undermine the scope or Marxism, the bottom line remains that as long as capitalism survives, Marxism will live at the heart of it. The capitalism with all its advances and benefits is bound to breakdown due to the sheer fact that it is a non-just system. The major adverse effect caused by capitalism is the suffering of the working class which includes eviction of peasant from their land, the loss of their source of income, their vagabondage, their assembling in the cities where they became dependent at starvation wages, etc. In *Das Kapital*, Marx introduced the notion of surplus value which in turn leads to inequality and Exploitation. The advancement in the technology has led to more and more alienation of the workers. The industries have become ‘appendages of machines’ in more ways than what was in the nineteenth century when the phrase was coined. Most of the manual jobs have become routinized. There has been a tremendous increase in discontent of the workers.

Labour tries constantly to survive under the capitalist system under dim hopes of some new control. They do not own the fruits of their hard work, the bourgeoisie – owns it. The proletariat are trapped in an endless cycle of meaningless activity in a way and live at the mercy of the rich. They are ‘alienated’ from both each other and from what they produce. <sup>13</sup> Market

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<sup>11</sup> For more global events which were misinterpreted, see Wheen 4-6.

<sup>12</sup> For complete essay, see <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Soci/SociSton.htm>

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion on the concept of alienation, see Cutler.

apparently looks to be free but it is an inhuman mechanism that binds the majority of us and creates a form of mental enslavement.

Marx wants freedom for the working class. What Marx expected from Marxism was much more than just freedom from hunger, exploitation and unemployment. He sought true Freedom<sup>14</sup> where humanity would become truly human and moved 'beyond the sphere of actual material production.' Freedom requires the development of a society in which man is genuinely inclined towards the greater good of the humanity. Man can free himself by overthrowing the capitalistic economic system that currently entangles him by building a new communist society. Such a government will lead to abolition of private property and workers can produce what they genuinely want to produce. Communist Manifesto closes with an influential discourse, "Let the ruling class tremble at a communist revolution: The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. 'Working men of all countries, Unite!'"

All the modern thinkers who love to quote the buzz- word Marxism as a solution to the inequalities that have swept in the society fail to realise that Marx was already on the case in 1848. Many spelt his death by 1990s till his reassessment appeared in October 1997 in a special issue of the *New Yorker* billed Karl Marx as 'the next big thinker', a man with much to "teach us about political corruption, monopolisation, alienation, inequality, and global markets." In the same issue one wealthy banker declared the "The longer I spend on Wall Street, the more convinced I am that Marx was right. . . . I am absolutely convinced that Marx's approach is the best way to look at capitalism."

Capitalism, thus, remains vulnerable to the withdrawal of mass support and to giving way to a new form of government. The protests in May 1968 in France show its vulnerability. The contradictions of capitalism are many and cannot be easily or readily controlled or eliminated as was assumed to be the case during the long Keynesian post-war period. Keynesian theories and remedies disappeared never to be reborn after 1974. Because the nuclear balance of terror USA consumed around a third of world's output of many major commodities. It is also an indication of the 'Anarchic' nature of capitalism, as Marx would

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of Marx's idea of freedom, see Worsley 107-09.

have called it. The present capitalistic world is obsessed by consumerism and ‘planned obsolescence.’ Opposition is difficult because it grows into:

Something Serious, tends to result in opposition to state, and thereby to become ‘political. Because there are few effective legitimate channels for expressing criticism of public policy the most effective forms of protests have been illegitimate and unconstitutional, such as riots and strikes, which easily escalate into violence even though they may only be aimed at achieving quite limited demands. (Worsley 109)

## **Conclusion**

Friedrich Engels predicted in a graveside oration at Highgate cemetery that ‘His name and work will endure through the ages, and also will his work.’ To quote Francis Wheen, “It seemed an unlikely boast, but he was right.” It has always been believed that the great intellectuals and their works never die and are never anachronistic. Marx’s works, which predicted the birth of the intellectuals, are also as alive as they were in the last century.

Marxism is a very vast theory and still holds power to charm the intellectuals around the world and to provide the possible solutions to the problems of the have not’s. Jon Elster wrote in *Making sense of Marx*, “Marx’s views on technical change, exploitation, class struggle and belief formation retain an importance beyond the value they may have as instances of the Marxist method, if there is one. . . . Even today, not all of his insights have been exhausted.”

The fall of capitalism is inevitable but how and in what manner is still a question to be pondered upon and answered. One possible way is suggested by Bob Stone who feels that “Cooperativization could displace capitalism. It will lead to abolition of exploitation and blocking non-worker accumulation of capital. Marx envisioned a world free of domination, a world of direct self-determination by ‘the associated producers’ in which states will have ‘withered away’.”

Marx was the proponent of emancipatory reason which emerged through the rationalist scrutiny of the world. Marxism can never be outdated because of its commitment to human freedom and to liberation from oppression. Marx used historical materialism and social analysis in trying to understand the history and even predicted the future. He gave to the world the idea

of political materiality of power. He is to be highly appreciated for his emancipatory project, for his dialectical openness, sensitivity to contradiction, to comprehension, to opposition, to antinomies and to conflicts in the society. Michael Burawoy wrote in *Socialist Review* that socialism will remain, we can be sure of that even where it really fails, its promises will live on as long as there is capitalism. Even in present times what the world need is a relook at the original principles of Marxism and arrange for the change to happen. One cannot fail to agree with Leopold Schwarzschild who wrote in 1947 in preface to his biography titled *The Red Prussian* that “In one way or another, the most important facts of our time lead back to one man – Karl Marx.”

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