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Imperialism, Revolution, and Class Struggle: A Marxist Analysis of Historical Change

Aftab Ahmad Mir

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Sociology & Social Work, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

*** Corresponding Author:**

Aftab Ahmad Mir
aftabmir57@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study critically investigates the development of Marxist history, following its change from classical materialism to its contemporary variants. Analysing how Marxists have interacted with imperialism, revolution, and global capitalism, it investigates the dialectical link between economic systems, class struggle, and historical transformations. Emphasising the change from moralistic criticisms to systematic historical analysis, the study compares utopian socialism with Marx's scientific socialism. It also covers the Eurocentrism of early Marxists, its applicability to non-Western civilisations, and the ideological differences among Marxists including Leninism, Trotskyism, and dependence theory. The paper looks at the limits of deterministic historical models and the difficulties presented by modern capitalist systems as well. This essay offers a complex view of historical materialism's relevance now by reevaluating the Marxist approach in light of current world events.

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INTRODUCTION

Marx's theoretical framework shaped his study of historical events by closely entwining active political participation. Not limited to abstract theory, his involvement in creating the Communist League in 1847 and authoring The Communist Manifesto (1848) sought to impact revolutionary movements. His dedication to proletariat organisation was shown even more by his membership in the International Working Men's Association (First International) in 1864. Marx's theories found a key testing ground in the European scene of the 19th century, shaped by capitalism transition. He evaluated the power and constraints of national bourgeoisies, noting circumstances wherein working-class support for revolutions may propel social change. He did, however, also find cases when bourgeois supremacy had faded but the proletariat lacked the will to grab power, resulting in reactionary losses.[1]

Examining the 1851 French coup, his study of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte revealed the interaction of class dynamics allowing Louis Bonaparte to build the Second Empire. Marx saw the complexity of class struggle and political contingency although he did not see history as a straight line process. Likewise, his analyses of the Paris Commune (1871) revealed his sophisticated attitude to historical materialism. Emphasising dispersed and democratic systems, the Commune embodied an embryonic form of proletariat government, but not quite matched with his theoretical model of historical transformation. Marx's opinions on non-European civilizations—especially India and China—were mostly informed by Eurocentric accounts of historical evolution. Though its exploitative character, he saw British colonial control in India as a disruptive factor that unintentionally set the stage for capitalist development. His understanding of the "Asiatic mode of production" mirrored the impact of British colonial ideologues who saw India as a backward, authoritarian civilisation.[2]

Though only in tandem with proletarian revolution in the colonising countries, Marx thought that the forced introduction of capitalism in India may finally result in socialist change. Though this viewpoint lacked direct interaction with local socio-economic systems, he regarded Western interference in China as a possible catalyst for historical advancement. Marx's view of the American Civil War (1861–1865) saw it as a struggle between two economic systems—slavery and free labour. His larger resistance to feudal and semi-feudal production relations influenced his constant backing of the North. But his study mostly ignored the role small-scale southern farmers who opposed both slave-based exploitation and capitalism played. Marx's support of the Union cause was strengthened by the ideological posture of the British ruling elite, which backed the Confederacy. Marx aimed to expand his historical materialist perspective beyond the European experience during his last 10 years of life. His ethnological notes point to a changing view of non-Western civilisations and the potential of other routes to social change. Although his previous works were firmly anchored in a Eurocentric view of historical development, his subsequent research shows an attempt to include more intricate, region-specific paths of historical change. This changing participation reveals the dialectical link between theory and historical actuality, therefore highlighting Marx's flexibility of approach.[3]

Review of Literature

Marxist scholarship offers critical insights into capitalism, imperialism, and ideological control. Sweezy (1942) and Mandel (1962) analyze the contradictions of capitalist development, emphasizing crisis tendencies and accumulation. Baran and Sweezy (1966) extend this critique by examining monopoly capitalism and stagnation. Bukharin (1915) and Magdoff (1978) explore imperialism as a structural necessity of capitalism’s expansion. Lukács (1923) theorizes class consciousness and reification, while Gramsci (1971) introduces hegemony and the role of intellectuals in shaping societal structures. Althusser (1970) reinterprets ideology through structuralist Marxism, stress the function of ideological and state apparatuses in perpetuating capitalist dominance.

Research Objectives

The study aims to examine the evolution of Marxist historical analysis, tracing its shift from classical materialism to contemporary interpretations. It explores the Marxist engagement with imperialism, revolution, and capitalism, critically assessing the ideological variations within Marxist thought. It also evaluates the applicability of Marxist theory to non-Western contexts and its relevance in understanding modern socio-economic transformations.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology, drawing from primary Marxist texts and secondary scholarly interpretations. It utilizes comparative analysis to examine ideological shifts within Marxism, critically engaging with debates on imperialism, revolution, and class struggle. Contextualizing Marxist theory within global historical developments, the research assesses its applicability to contemporary socio-economic structures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Classical Marxism and its Tradition

We ought to have a basic understanding of Marx's ideas at this point. It must be acknowledged that the presentation was a synopsis that omitted some of the complexity of Marxist theory and practice, which have pervaded history for over 200 years. For our purposes, traditional Marxism is based on concepts taken straight from Marx and Engels' texts. For the time being, any differences between Marx and Engels are put aside. It is commonly known that Marx and Engels collaborated closely for a long time and often wrote significant works together, including The Communist Manifesto. Let's review the main ideas of traditional Marxism point by point. Marx used the logic of Hegelian dialectics as a framework to comprehend historical social change and development. He did not subscribe to Hegel's idealism. According to Marx, being is the subject and thinking is the predicate in the interaction between the two.[4]

Hegel reversed this relationship by making thinking the predicate and the subject. Nonetheless, Marx's materialist philosophy differed significantly from the mechanical materialism of the Enlightenment and other prior schools. It did not see human behaviour as a passive result of material conditions, instead emphasising the actuality of mind and awareness. In order to comprehend economic structure and activity, one must consider its circumstances, productive forces, and production linkages. Geographical location, climate, and demographic characteristics, such as population number and composition, all influence the circumstances of production in a society.

Productive forces include equipment, technology, talents, and tools. The nature of property in a given society and the ways in which labourers interact to determine what, how, and for whom to produce determine the items and quantities of production, the technology used, and the distribution of the finished product. These factors are referred to as production relations. All of this contributes to a society's economic structure and production method. Marx believed that the economic structure of society was the foundation for the legal, religious, artistic, philosophical, and other ideological components. This also applies to a society's political climate and condition.[5]

Marx saw class strife as a constant element of all social phases in European history, with the exception of the early communist formations. These periods include capitalism, the feudal system, and ancient slavery in Greece and Rome. The social split between those who possess the means of production and those who do not leads to class tensions and struggles. The secret lies in the inconsistencies that exist inside a mode of production, as well as the motivation for switching between modes. As long as a mode of production's relations of production are compatible with the advancement of matching productive forces, it may be perpetuated. A mode of production may eventually reach a point where it is no longer feasible to develop the productive forces further within the constraints of the current production relations. As a result, property systems that are linked to a certain pattern of production relations and that have the legal approval of the ruling state impede the expansion of productive forces.[6]

According to Marx, this is the start of a period of social revolution in which a new class gains political power and social hegemony by acting as the leader of a newer productive force. "No order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured, in the womb of the old society itself," Marx said, firmly emphasising the importance of material conditions for the transformation of a socio-economic order. This is in contrast to any utopian leap or shoddy conformism. Marx believed that a classless society free from inter-personal alienation will emerge as a result of the proletariat's revolutionary victory.

When the proletariat, or propertyless class, abolishes capitalism, society is left without any kind of private property. The underlying source of estrangement is eliminated. All men and women are emancipated from alienation and the lack of true freedom when the proletarian revolution is successful. As previously said, the theories, concepts, and remarks contained in Marx and Engels' writings have been included into this study as classical Marxism. It deviates from the conventional meaning of the term "Marxist," which refers to ideas and methods purportedly inspired from Marx's theories. The concepts that are directly found in Marx and Engels' writings are thus designated as "Marxian." Even during Marx's lifetime, this divergence was apparent.[7]

There are reasons why we currently only consider the body of ideas developed by Marx and Engels as classical Marxism. For example, Engels wrote to Bernstein, a prominent member of the German Social Democratic Party, in a letter dated November 3, 1982, "The self-styled "Marxism" in France is certainly a quite special product to such an extent that Marx said to Laforgue "This much is certain, I am not a Marxist." It should make it easier for us to identify the latter effects of a tradition established by classical Marxism, which combined historical materialism with the fight for the eradication of capitalism by the proletariat. It could never support complete adherence to the set of all its initial claims because of the very practices of classical Marxism. Although the phenomena of class struggle, capitalist contradiction, and the necessity of a united oppositional movement towards socialism remain highly relevant in both situations, we must be prepared to face the harsh reality that a sound conclusion and direction that is valid for one historical context may lose its validity in another.[8]

Let us now examine some of the stances taken by classical Marxism and the issues that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries regarding the policies and practices of the socialist movement (such as the strategy and tactics of a socialist revolution, the maturity of conditions for a socialist revolution, the type of party required for the proletariat's movement, and the nature and working of imperialism). Following the defeat of the Paris communards in 1871, the European workers' movement was beset by conflicting pushes and pulls from various anarchists and ultra-left sects. This served as the backdrop for the decision to relocate the International's headquarters to New York. In 1876, it was finally disbanded. "Let us give our fellow workers in Europe a little time to strengthen their national affairs, and they will surely be in a position to remove the barriers between themselves and the workingmen of other parts of the world," was one of the remarks made in the statement regarding the dissolution. The years 1848 to 1876 saw many changes in European history. All things considered, the primary characteristic of this complex process emerged in a number of cases where capitalist authority was consolidated, sometimes even by forming alliances with feudal elements, in opposition to the forces of the workers' revolution with the aim of advancing towards socialism. In 1883, Marx passed away. The Second International debuted in Paris in July 1889, six years later. At the time, it was the biggest international assembly in the history of the global labour movement, with 391 representatives from 20 nations. Another international labour conference was held in Paris at the same time, almost as a rival event.[9]

This was an assembly of legal Marxists and trade unionists who thought that some modification of the bourgeois legal system would bring about socialism. Although there were suggestions for such a unification in both conferences, Engels opposed any convergence of such forces. In any event, the union was formalised at the Brussels summit in 1891. Following the historical vexations we have just discussed, the expansion of capitalism led to a growing number of wage workers in an increasing number of European nations. By the end of the century, Japan had followed similar patterns in North America. Accordingly, the labour union movement saw significant growth throughout all of the capitalist nations. Furthermore, in the more developed capitalist nations, particularly Britain, the increase in productivity and the profits taken from imperialist exploitation led to a new strategy by the bourgeoisie to set one group of workers apart from the rest of the proletariat by offering them higher wages and other concessions. "The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois…..for a nation which exploits the whole world, this is of course to a certain extent justifiable," Engels wrote in a letter to Marx dated October 7, 1858, reflecting on this tendency.[10]

The Communist Manifesto stated that the path to achieving its goal was the forcible overthrow of the entire outmoded social order. Forcible overthrow may not always involve armed conflict. Marx believed that the achievement of universal adult suffrage might offer a sufficient measure for having political power to achieve socialism in nations like Britain and Holland, where the working class made up the majority of the population and capitalist transformation was linked to the beginning of democracy. Engels said in the

Principles of Communism that it is very desirable to abolish private property using nonviolent means. Conspiracy tactics are usually avoided by communists. Communists, on the other hand, will jump to the aid of the downtrodden proletariat if they are provoked into a revolution. Engels noted in the introduction to the 1895 edition of Marx's Class Struggles in France that the new military tactics posed greater challenges to the barricade combat methods used in the conventional form of people's revolutionary activity.

This was not a call to always refrain from violent insurrection, but rather a warning against adventurist behaviour. However, a portion of the leadership of the Social Democratic Party of Germany often used Engels' concept to defend legislative, nonviolent, and slow methods of accomplishing socialist goals. Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) was a prominent advocate of nonviolent means. He disagreed with the traditional Marxist views on the dictatorship of the proletariat and military revolution. In addition, Bernstein disagreed with traditional Marxist theories on industrial concentration, the certainty of economic crises, and the growing suffering of the working class. For ethical reasons, he was inclined to support socialism. He argued for a peace solution and voted against war credits during World War I as a social democratic member of the Reichstag. Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) was a prominent member of the Second International and another significant leader of the German Social Democratic Party. His conception of historical materialism was based on a natural evolutionary scheme of things that was comparable to Darwin's theories of biological evolution and natural selection. As a result, he thought capitalism will fail due to its inherent incapacity to effectively use the expanding productive forces. Because no dictatorship of the proletariat could override the objective economic rules by its decrees and brutality, the logic and viability of a proletarian revolution were therefore ruled out. Despite their disagreements, Bernstein and Kautsky were labelled "revisionists," suggesting that they departed from the traditional Marxist stance of class conflict and revolution. According to Kautsky, the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia was an event that was inconsistent with traditional Marxism.[11]

This was related to the preconditions of Russia's inadequate capitalist growth. In reference to the development of economic circumstances necessary for the collapse of a mode of production, Kautsky brought up the fact that historical materialism emphasises: "No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed." In his well-documented study, Vladimir Ilych Lenin (1870–1924) examined the evolution of capitalism in Russia (Development of Capitalism in Russia, 1899). Its backwardness was acknowledged by him. In reality, one of the elements ultimately enabling the Bolshevik takeover of state power was the fragility of the Russian bourgeoisie. To put it simply—and maybe a bit strangely—the bourgeoisie was unable to defend their own position against Tsarist tyranny, therefore the proletariat's leadership was forced to push for socialist control of the state.[12]

As Lenin said, "Russia has evidently witnessed, and most painfully experienced, one of the most abrupt twists of history as it turns from imperialism towards the Communist revolution." We overthrew one of the most ancient, strong, savage, and cruel regimes in a matter of days. We went through many phases in a matter of months, including removing petty-bourgeois illusions and reaching a settlement with the bourgeoisie, which took decades in other nations (V.I. Lenin, Selected Works Vol. II, Moscow, 1947, p. 308). In the passage above, Lenin makes reference to Russian imperialism. In Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916), Lenin examined a crucial aspect of capitalism. Marx predicted the unavoidable trend of competitive capitalism towards increasing capital centralisation and monopoly formation in the first volume of Capital. Marx contended that this was the process that would increase the number of proletarian members and spell the end of capitalism. Lenin expanded this traditional Marxist stance to include the identification of connections between monopoly capitalism and imperialism aimed at global dominance and division. In order to use inexpensive labour and raw resources, capital exports are directed towards the subordinate areas.

Among these struggles and objectives, the first global war was an imperialist fight. In fact, the weakest link in this imperialist nexus was Tsarist Russia and its underdeveloped capitalism. Lenin pointed to this element as one of the causes of the 1917 Russian Revolution's acceleration towards the socialist supersession of capitalism. In the face of a global revolution, it was probably going to help capitalism fall apart on a global scale. Kautsky had a distinct stance on imperialism. He contends that there were no disputes between the developed capitalist nations throughout the imperialist period. Only between the world's developed and developing nations would there be strife. Capital exports from the imperial wealthy to the colonial poor and excess appropriation in an economic environment with cheaper labour and raw resources were not the only

ways that the undeveloped nations were exploited. The rates of exchange between the commodities of the more or less capital-intensive manufacturing might also be the cause. In fact, the elements of Kautsky's analysis have somewhat impacted the development of the dependency theory since the Second World War, which focusses on imperialist hegemony over developing nations and the historical setting in which the United States was the dominant capitalist nation in the world. There are no historical laws in classical Marxism or its later development that prevent the coexistence of profits from both production and circulation on an international scale, and the scope of such supremacy has been further strengthened since the fall of the Soviet Union in the last decade of the 20th century. Marx and Engels emphasised that "the working class cannot act as a class" until a political party is established. They primarily presented and clarified the Marxist view of history, class conflict, and the eradication of capitalism throughout the Communist League and First International's existence. During the Second International, national Social Democratic Parties began to function in Europe's various capitalist nations. It should be mentioned that the Paris Commune, although its brief existence, was a significant event that took place during the First International era before delving into the specifics of the principles in issue with regard to the Second International period.[13]

Marx believed the Paris Commune offered a good example of the methods and means of the dictatorship of the proletariat with its measures of decentred, democratic treatment. The issue of the proletarian party mediating the revolution's outcome and subsequent revolutionary government is at the heart of this. Lenin and Kautsky agreed that the proletariat needed to be exposed to political awareness from outside, notwithstanding their many important disagreements. It would not logically flow from their struggles and economic misery, which were restricted to the realm of trade union awareness. Marx and Engels had already discussed the function of bourgeois ideologists who had attained a theoretical comprehension of the historical process as a whole in the Communist Manifesto. Their job would be to instill revolutionary awareness in the working class. Such a process of increasing awareness undoubtedly makes mediation more difficult, as does the kind of person that might satisfy the commitment. Lenin believed it was appropriate to form a small, hierarchically structured party of professional revolutionaries in light of the illegality and authoritarianism that were then prevalent in many European nations, particularly in Russia (What is to be done?, 1902). He supported the organization's expansion into a mass party during the Russian Revolution of 1905, but with stringent guidelines for democratic centralism. The question of centralism was the first cause of the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia. The 1879–1940 Leon Trotsky was not a supporter of centralism. The German Social Democratic Party's Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) opposed Lenin's notion of a highly centralised vanguard party. She had great trust in the working class's ability to learn from its own experience and worked to support their initiative and self-activity. Questions about the proper organisational principles for the party of the proletariat must be raised by the experience of the communist movement throughout the twentieth century, including its successes and setbacks, Lenin's own concerns about bureaucratic excesses within the party on his deathbed, and the fall of Soviet Communism in the final decade of the century.[14]

As noted in "The Two Marxisms," in Alvin Gouldner, For Sociology, Pelican Books, 1975, p. 419, the historical role that classical Marxism ascribed to the proletariat "was assigned by an invisible intelligentsia, by an intelligentsia that never made an appearance in its own theory, and whose existence and nature are therefore, never systematically, known even to itself." In actual history, pre-capitalist systems are affected differently by the conquering of capital and its universal function. Numerous combinations of capitalism and pre-capitalist systems of production show the distinctions. The prior power structures and production processes are essentially unaltered, yet such arrangements allow for the extraction of capitalist profit. In similar situations, the traditional Marxist view of the phases must take into account more recent prospects for historical change. Transitioning from feudalism to capitalism is no longer sufficient. Since capitalism and precapitalism have historically intertwined their methods of exploitation and power, no such movement can really represent anything in terms of advancement.

Marx and Engels did a good job of explaining historical moments that were marked by the emergence of complexes of power and exploitation that combined the old and the new. In nations outside of Western Europe and North America, this circumstance has often surfaced. It's possible that a timid and feeble bourgeoisie won't be able to advance the bourgeois democratic revolution. The onus thus shifts to the working class, who must move swiftly from the dismantling of the feudal system to a campaign to eradicate the

bourgeoisie. Trotsky introduced the concept of "permanent revolution," which refers to such a revolutionary actuality. Marx and Engels used the phrase for the first time in their 1850 General Council Address to the Communist League. What happened to the anticipated unity of the global (universal?) working class revolt against capitalism is still unknown. Since 1917, no historical shift of essential importance for the shift to socialism has ever expressed this crucial action parameter of Marx's theoretical framework of history. The October revolution in Russia, according to the Bolshevik leaders, would usher in a period of global proletariat revolution.[15]

After losing the four-year global war, Germany was predicted to be the first developed capitalist nation to implement a socialist revolution. The historical facts were different. The task of establishing socialism in a single nation fell to Bolshevik Russia, and the classical Marxist tradition was unable to assist in this endeavour. China had another significant socialist transition in the 20th century, with the peasants serving as the main catalyst for the uprising. There are several problems about its growth after the communist takeover of power that the standard Marxist tradition cannot directly address. Regarding the historical perspective of sociopolitical revolution, the cases of Cuba, Chile, and Vietnam are likewise considered outliers to the traditional Marxist viewpoints. Importantly, Marx engaged in some critical research on Russia's pre-capitalist rural communes during the latter ten years of his life. Despite the lack of maturity in the country's capitalist development and proletariat growth, he responded to enquiries from Russian Narodnik leaders such as Vera Zasulich, Danielson, and others about the potential of those communes to serve as mass agencies for socialist transformation.[16]

Marx explicitly said in Capital that his theoretical stance was exclusively applicable to the experience of western Europe, particularly the capitalist growth of Britain, and that it would be completely incorrect to use those concepts to comprehend circumstances in a different setting. Marx stressed the need of abolishing the Tsarist monarchy and the likelihood of being linked to socialist revolutions in west European nations in order to realise the socialist potential of Russian communes. Marx saw two innate historical tendencies in the communes, namely. The communal concept gives the commune vitality and qualifies it for socialist transformation, whereas the private ownership principle undermines the communes. Marx sent three versions of a letter to Vera Zasulich in which he expounded on these concepts. Marx began reading extensively on pre-capitalist collective land ownership in the years 1880–1882. According to Lawrence Krader's Introduction to The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx (ed.), Amsterdam, 1974, p. 4, Marx seems to have read in them "an index that modern man was not without an archaic communal component, which includes a democratic and equalitarian formation, in his social being."

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Marxism from its inception to the late twentieth century has been marked by theoretical complexity, reinterpretation, and adaptation to diverse historical conditions. While classical Marxism provided a structured analytical framework, its application has varied significantly, reflecting the changing dynamics of capitalism and social movements. Marx himself acknowledged the complexities of historical transformation, evident in his broad range of studies, from European class struggles to non-European social formations. Despite divergences between Marxist predictions and historical developments, the dialectical method remains a crucial tool in historiography, emphasizing the interplay of economic, social, and cultural forces. The Annales school, with its focus on micro-histories and long-term structures, echoes Marxist concerns, demonstrating its enduring influence. Rather than being a rigid doctrine, classical Marxism continues to offer valuable insights into historical change, reaffirming its relevance as an evolving framework for understanding past and present social realities.

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