

***Is Marxism A Liberal  
Or Oppressive Regime?***

**Part One Ethics**

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In order to answer this question, it must first be decided exactly what Marxism is. This essay will discuss several interpretations of Marxism, from the economic theories proposed by Marx to the applied Marxism of soviet Russia, with a brief discussion of more modern 'neo-Marxist' theories. An attempt will be made to define each of these schools of thought, taking into account historical factors, and each will be examined in relation to moral ethics in order to determine whether they can be classed as a liberal or oppressive.

Marxism has had a wide impact on politics, however exactly what is meant by the term is hotly debated, Heywood states that "At least three forms of Marxism can be identified"<sup>1</sup>, distinguishing between classical, orthodox and modern interpretations. The classical Marxism, as originally proposed by Marx and Engels, outlines an economic system that describes the relationship between the working classes and the upper ruling classes, the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, Marx thought that human society progressively moved from a kind of natural tribal communism to feudalism which then evolved into capitalism. In Marx's view, from this progression would then spring a spontaneous revolution of the working classes, indeed Marx saw himself as an educator of the working class, seeking to initiate this revolt. Marx stated that after the revolution, a temporary dictatorship would be required in order to ensure the former elite would not again seize power, after which a communist state would be established. This temporary party has in the past led to severe complications, the people placed in power are often too closely aligned with the previous capitalist ideals. This failing was not a failing of Marx but rather of his later followers, as Schmitt stated; "Marx realised that having state power is not sufficient, the state itself must be transformed"<sup>2</sup>.

Classical Marxism encompasses two central themes, firstly a description of the then-current state of affairs, and secondly a proposal of an idealistic form of non-government whereby each person was equally treated. The concept that underlies this theory is the effect that people have on themselves; Marx proposed that "By producing a means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life"<sup>3</sup>. Extrapolating on this realisation, Marx came to the conclusion that if the majority did not control the means of production, then they did not control their life. Later, Marx developed his theory even further, stating that the ideal situation would be one where there was no means of production or private property, believing that this is the natural way to join the incompatible interests of individuals and society. Schmitt highlighted Marx's belief that "full individual development and hence full personal freedom were possible only under communism"<sup>4</sup>.

From this we can see that there is an implied ethical judgement in Marx, though his writings lack a significant discussion of moral ethics. We can instantly see the humanistic side of Marx when he asserts that man should be in control of his own material life, clearly Marx places an implicit value on individual liberty, and even social freedom in general, though his theory is concentrated on the plight of the industrialised working class. Specifically, Marx sought to free the working classes from oppressive bourgeoisie rule, and it logically follows from this that if Marx wanted to create a new society, he would want to create it in as liberal a manner as possible.

The first problem that can be seen with classical Marxism is the problem of false consciousness, defined as "illusions generated by unfair economic relationships"<sup>5</sup>, in particular, the false ideology created to subdue the working class by the ruling class. If Marx had succeeded in educating the proletariat, he could in effect be constructing a new false consciousness; implanting the belief, be it true or not, that the ruling elite suppress the

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1 Heywood: 124-5

2 Schmitt: 186

3 Marx in Singer: 32

4 Schmitt: 201

5 Audi: 304

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workers. Thus the methods employed in creating a Marxist state could be argued to be no better than those used to perpetuate the existing capitalist one. Converse to this argument is the utilitarian viewpoint that the means would justify the ends, and that the creation of a new false consciousness would not be immoral as it would bring about not only the end of an oppressive regime, but also the start of a new, better system. Additionally, if Marx was correct that the ruling classes were perpetuating myths regarding the true nature of power, then Marx's re-education of the masses would not be a false consciousness, but a true one, and hence morally admirable.

Secondly, it has been argued that a purely Marxist world state would necessarily be an oppressive system. Critics of Marxism argue that individuals would lose a large number of personal freedoms, not only the right to choose how to be governed, but the right to own property, choose where to work and perhaps more fundamentally, the basic right to live how one chooses. Marx's reply to this would be that individuals do not have those kinds of freedoms in the current governmental system, they only believe they do due to false consciousness. Additionally, the establishment of a Marxist state would come about as a result of a mass change in social thought, and those under a Marxist communist state would not see such things as personal property as rights, but instead would have community centred goals.

In contrast to Marx's purely theoretical ideas, orthodox Marxism can be seen as 'practical' Marxism, as implemented in modern communist states. Russia has been cited as an example of why Marxism does not work, however not only was Russia not the industrialised society Marx envisaged leading the revolution, but also many of the key problems that Russian communism faced came about as a result of the context of the time; as Heywood notes, "although the communist parties that developed in the twentieth century were founded upon the theories of classical Marxism, they were forced to adapt these to the tasks of winning and retaining political power"<sup>6</sup>. The political problems required more than a small adaptation, culminating in Stalin's communist dictatorship established in 1924, which bore little resemblance to the Marxist ideal it claimed to be adhering to.

Kamenka states that the massively flawed implementation of communism in Soviet Russia was a 'vulgarisation' of Marxist ideals, but notes that "A vulgarisation *can* help to illuminate a doctrine, both by bringing out more sharply its initial lacunae and inconsistencies, and by reminding us of the practical consequences to which it can lead"<sup>7</sup>. The loopholes of which Kamenka speaks were fully exploited by Stalin's Communist Party, allowing them to commit gross acts against human rights, and it is important to remember that without proper amendment, any implementation of Marxist ideals could easily be subject to similar practical flaws. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of Marxism, and communism in particular, is that while the theory may be geared towards the creation of a liberal society, it cannot adequately be translated into a practical system of rule, and any attempt to do so will result in an oppressive regime such as we have seen in recent times, though it must be noted that "countless Marxists have in fact believed in and fought for human rights"<sup>8</sup>.

Conversely, many have argued that we have yet to see a truly communist society, that all attempts at communism have been subject either to political or economic pressures that have diluted their Marxist roots beyond all recognition; "Where communist regimes continue ... they have either blended political Stalinism with economic reform ... or suffered increasing isolation"<sup>9</sup>. If we accept that this is the case, then it may not be prudent to examine modern communist governments when considering the morality of Marxism. In contrast, there is a view that communism as we have seen it in recent years is exactly how a Marxist state would result,

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6 Heywood: 130-1

7 Kamenka: 54

8 Lukes: 66

9 Heywood: 137

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because human nature is inherently incompatible with Marxist ideals. Surely though, as Marx himself thought, 'human nature' is not constant throughout time but in continual flux, being determined by the society that produces it. Singer notes that Marx may have overestimated the changeability of human nature, stating that "the distance between Marx's predicted society and the modern reality ... may in the end be traceable to Marx's mis-conception of the flexibility of human nature"<sup>10</sup>.

If a society has not developed Marxist ideals, then any type of enforced Communist state would necessarily be oppressive at a fundamental level. If on the other hand a society is or becomes Marxist before a change of government, then the governmental change would liberate the people and therefore result in a liberally constructed society.

The third interpretation of Marxism, known as modern or neo-Marxism, attempts to marry classical Marx with insight gained by looking at modern attempts to install an orthodox Marxist government, resulting in a more philosophical, and arguably a more practical outlook. The basic tenets of modern Marxism stem firstly from a realisation, perhaps instigated by Weber, that class and economics were not the only factors relevant to political theory, and that Marxism needed to be expanded to encompass not only non-industrial societies, but also macro-economic factors that Marx simply had not considered when constructing his theory.

This adapted Marxism covers a broad range of theories, each trying to dissociate Marxism from communism. From the more humanistic approach first presented by Lukács to analytic Marxism and critical theory, modern Marxism takes on a distinctly theoretical theme and seems no longer to be classifiable under the title of 'regime', as most modern Marxist theories focus less on political injustice, revolution and alternative governments, and more on a sociological investigation of the current systems. Hence, a discussion of the morality of such diverse theories, if a morality can even be ascribed to many of them, seems beyond the scope of this paper.

In conclusion, we have seen a wide number of interpretations of Marxism, within the two broad categories of classical and orthodox Marxism. Each has been examined in terms of the results of historical attempts at implementation, the morality involved in theoretical terms, and certain problems unique to each school. It has been shown that Marxism, while theoretically intended to produce a liberal society, contains massive potential for abuse that can result in exactly the kinds of system that not only Marx would abhor, but that have proved to be some of the most oppressive totalitarian systems in modern history.

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<sup>10</sup>Singer: 75

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