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Marx Without Marxism? A Study of Karl Marx as an Influential Political Theorist

By Loloa Ibrahim

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The study of human political behavior raises numerous complexities. Although scientific in principle, it is not an exact science due to the unpredictability and changeability of human society. It not only revolves around factual matters but also answers to claims about how the world is and how it should be. It is often shaped by the social environment of its originator. All these factors however, do not disqualify it from the realm of science. Driven by the desire to analyze their environments, political thinkers develop theories or assertions that may not be immediately provable but can be confirmed or denied through forthcoming or historical experiences. Theory is testable. Unlike ideology, political theory need not be accepted as truth in its entirety. It is not a belief system nor is it adhered to or practiced incontestably. With that knowledge in mind it is fairly safe to assume that the ideas of Karl Marx constitute a theory, not an ideology. Through his theories, Marx aimed to explain those aspects of his society that demanded analysis. At no point however, did Marx present his ideas in the form of dogma or belief. This paper will expound on the concept of theory vs. ideology. Furthermore, it will aim to illustrate that Marx was not the originator of ideology but a political theorist and philosopher. That his ideas were later idealized and embraced by the masses is through no advocacy of his own.

Furthermore, the paper will offer an analysis the theories of Karl Marx based on selected writings and explain how and why his message is accepted as ideology by many of his followers even though that is in essence contrary to its true nature.

Marx's ideas take the form of analysis and prediction. Naturally he had a vision for the world and some suggestions on how this vision could be attained. However his work was not a collection of practical recommendations. Ideology is a value system that is accepted as truth or fact by a group of people. The group that adheres to an ideology believes it to be the best explanation of their world and they practice whatever recommendations the system advocates. To its enthusiasts it is indisputable and absolute. But it is precisely this adherence to ideology that Marx himself loathed. He disfavored the practice of religion saying "the more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself." In his writings, Marx refers to the superiority of communism and atheism.

Ideology is accepted entirely as truth. For example, the members of Al-Qaeda adhere to an ideology and they unquestionably accept all of its parts as truth. What Marx offers, however, is a series of

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theories based on historical and social assumptions and observations. His followers are free to accept or reject some of his theories. This has in fact taken place. History has disproved some of Marx's ideas such as those pertaining to class conflict and the impending fall of capitalism. So while one may accept the core ideas of Marx's work he or she may choose to reject those theories that have been disproved by history unlike with ideology where one must accept a message in its entirety.

Karl Marx observed his environment, located its flaws, and sought to explain them. Among his explanations was the division of human history into phases: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist. Through historical study he analyzes the stages and then expounds on how Capitalism, a system built on greed and exploitation, would inevitably transform into Socialism. To Marx, these transitions are unavoidable. When he studies the development of technology Marx concludes that due to automation the need for human labor would decrease and therefore reduce wages. He argued that this would divide society into two classes; wealthy capitalists and proletarian workers. Marx's idea that eventually the divide between the two classes would become so severe that a revolution would result is

not entirely without merit. Those who owned the means of production would not willingly concede power to the lower classes and would struggle to preserve their status. So the transition from capitalism to socialism would not take place without revolution. In essence, this was a sound hypothesis. But his theory never materialized. Possibly because the foundations of his ideas were themselves flawed. The labor theory of value for example has today been refuted by economists. But this is what theory is—it is a statement based on scientific observation that can be denied or confirmed by history. Marx's ideas are just that—theories that have been refuted by history.

If a theory is also defined as that which explains and predicts, then Marxism clearly qualifies as theory. Other than the economic theories, Marx's works also contain theories that expound upon the moral and psychological state of humankind. He writes about private property and how its absence ultimately results in "the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities" He writes about alienation and man's metabolic relationship with nature. Through the majority of his work Marx aims to both explain and predict. He asserts that:

"Communism represents...a phase in human emancipation and rehabilitation...Communism is the necessary form and dynamic principle of the immediate future."

In this quote there is both explanation and prediction. There is a clear message of hope for the future. His theories explained the changes taking place in Europe and predicted the end of capitalism and the rise of a new society ruled by the working class. His work also contained predictions about the behavior of humankind which he suspected would erupt into full revolution in response to continued exploitation. By offering both explanation and prediction, therefore, Marx's ideas certainly merit the definition of theory.

Based on his observations Marx develops theories about the nature of capitalistic society; about human emancipation, political alienation, subsistence living, and the class struggle. But what he really wrote about was that there was something wrong with his political community. He set out to change that community. Through scientific observation, Marx developed a philosophy on the relationship between the worker and the product he or she produces. He believed people became enslaved by labor.

"The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production, the more it increases in power and scope. The worker becomes a commodity that is all the cheaper the more commodities he creates."

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This idea is manifest in his "Labor Theory of Value." This theory held that only labor affected the value of goods. In Marx's words, "working time is the measure of value." But, what often takes place is that the price of goods does not actually represent their true labor value. What results is capitalist business owners who pay their employees far less than the actual cost of labor that they exert in production. Marx was not the first person to radically criticize capitalist society. But he was certainly the first to form extensive theories on how capitalist societies usurp value from workers and gave it to those who owned the means of production.

Although one may choose to reject some theories, one may still choose to agree with Marx on issues such as the exploitation of producer classes by the ruling classes, or his take on the relationship between man and nature; man and possessions; freedom and private property. In that respect one is free to accept or reject any parts of Marx's theories. What is often confused with ideology is Marx's moral observations about his society. At the heart of his writings is his abhorrence of human exploitation. But one's affinity to Marx's moral and ethical judgments and his underlying philosophies about the state of humankind does not constitute an ideological belief. Primarily because it lacks practicability. One may agree with the labor theory of value but one cannot claim to practice it. Similarly, one may accept Marx's theories on the inevitability of revolution, but that too cannot be practiced. Marx, therefore, does not advocate rites or belief; his message is not an "ism" but simply an explanation.

So what is it that makes people want to associate themselves ideologically with Marx's many explanations? It was the need to transform his ideas into workable form. When Marx died, theories had been left unfinished and questions unanswered. He died before completing his mission and the conditions which he envisioned had not materialized. The world was not a peaceful place, labor unions lacked the revolutionary energy that he anticipated, and nationalism was not a driving force for the working class as he had visualized. He had not lived long enough to explain exactly how the state would cease to exist and how the ultimate goal of human freedom from materialism, labor and exploitation would come into fruition. Marx had created a system that denounced materialism and promised non-material rewards and at the same time indicated the importance of hard work. There were questions to be answered on just how this ideal existence would be possible. Was it through work? Or through social forces that would somehow pan themselves out? These questions prompted thinkers and followers of Marx's philosophy to try to form a workable plan to achieve these ends. It was after his death that Marx's theories begin to take the form of ideology. But this was not by his own doing. His ideas were changed by revisionists such as Edward Bernstein who saw the need to consolidate Marx's theories on industrial society with Russia's non-industrial society. This is how the "ism" in Marxism is born. Not through his own advocacy but through the interpretations of those who read his works and wanted to put his ideas into practice.

Political philosophy is a stepping stone to ideology. Marx's observations served as a stepping stone to communism—which is an ideology. His writings were influential enough to have been embraced by the masses. It is the public that chose to embrace his teachings as ideology even though they were nothing more than a rationalization of the class struggle. Marx was a revolutionary in that he introduced radical ideas into mainstream political thought that enabled human beings to think in a completely different perspective. He left us with theories, explanations, and even aspirations for the world that have had a profound impact on Western thought.

Loloa Ibrahim holds a BA in Government and International Politics from George Mason University.

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Interesting Facts About Poker

By Adel Awwad

Every gambling enthusiast loves a good game of Poker. Conversely, every trivia player loves a good dose of trivia. So, for the gambler a set of poker rules, a deck of cards, some poker chips and an ante-up will suffice, but what about all of those trivia lovers out there? Guess what, there a ton of fun and interesting facts about poker that trivia enthusiasts are sure to love. Let's take a look at some of these amazing poker facts below.

Did you know that nearly 50 million Americans partake in the game of poker every year? Poker is an incredibly popular game, even more so with its increasing availability on the Internet. Further, poker has grown in leaps and bounds: no longer is it just a Thursday night gathering for avid Poker players, it is also a big time gambling business. Such a fact is proven when statistics indicate that some 70 million standard decks of playing cards are sold every single year!

Another amazing poker fact that you can use to astonish your friends is the fact that President Richard Nixon used a large sum of money that he won in a poker game to fund his first campaign for Congress! That's right, after winning a cool six grand playing poker with his Navy buddies; Nixon won his way into office with his big poker winnings.

Is Richard Nixon the only famous person to be noted to play poker? Of course not! In fact, Groucho Marx earned his name from his poker playing tendencies. Groucho Marx used to wear a grouch bag around his neck all the time. Do you know what was in that grouch bag? You guessed it—his poker money!

Alternatively, we can take a look at John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich. Montagu venerated the game of poker, so much so that he would often engage in hours of gaming and would actually refuse to leave the tables to eat. His solution? He would have someone serve him bread and meat. So, not only do we have the Earl of Sandwich to thank for our noontime meals, we also owe the fascinating game of poker a tribute for the sandwich.

Finally, the origins of poker remain highly debated. Conversely, what there seems to be absolutely no debate about is that poker is here to stay. Poker, possessing both a fascinating history and recreational appeal will continue to be played both online and in brick-and-mortar casinos everywhere!

Adel Awwad is the webmaster of Online Casinos – Copyright © 2005

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