Is Marxism Dead?

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The ideology of Marxism has been at the forefront of far-left political thought ever since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their groundbreaking thesis, The Communist Manifesto, in 1848. The publication gave birth to a new dimension of politics which has had a resounding influence on generation after generation throughout the modern world. However, despite the affect that Marxism has had on modern political agendas, the theory now resembles a fallen giant. This essay will argue that, although Marxism is not dead as such, it exists in such a diluted form that the ideology is no longer strong enough to stand alone, and it exists only in small traces throughout modern day society.

Predominantly, the question will be approached in relation to the influence of Marxism on the Western world and its demise throughout the 20th century. In order to examine the influence of Marxism we must first look at the ideas within Marx's original thesis. We will then look at Lenin's adaptation of Marxist theory in Russia and the consequences this has had on modern day Marxist ideology. The study of the Cold War period and the influence of McCarthyism in America will detail the fight against communism in the West, and the eventual downfall of the USSR will shed light as to why liberalism appears to have triumphed over all other ideologies. Finally, a more detailed case study of 20th century Britain will help explain the decline of left-wing political thought and the move away from socialism.

In order to assess the current state of Marxism it is important to define the elements of the ideology which are vital to this essay. In the opening statement of his "Manifesto of the Communist Party" Karl Marx claims that, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles… freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, in a word, oppressor and oppressed" (1977, p. 35). This comment – that all inequalities in any society have always been based on class – lays the platform for Marx's arguments. Marx goes on to explain his "scientific theory" that all societies will pass through a number of economic structures in order to reach the ultimate goal of a communist society that is free from all inequality. At the time Marx wrote it, he believed the Western world to have evolved out of the third stage of feudalism into the fourth stage of capitalism. Capitalism, Marx explained, was defined by the exploitation of the proletariat, more commonly known as the working class, by the bourgeoisie or the ruling class. Due to their "false-class consciousness" the proletariat fail to see, first that they are being exploited, and second that, as the majority, they have the ability to seize the power from the minority bourgeoisie. Marx predicted that in time the workers would develop class consciousness, thus, realising their unjust disadvantages and in turn rebel against the bourgeoisie. The result of revolution would be a desirable communist society. But, the most important consequence, Marx claimed, would be the "abolition of private property" as this was the most important tool in the repression of the workers (1977, p. 50). When analysing the development of Marx's theory it is important not only to study the success of Marxism as an ideology in itself, but also to assess the influence that the principles have had on modern day society.

Marx's theory and predictions were based upon the current state of Western capitalism. Yet it was in feudalist Russia in October of 1917 where Marxist theory was first put into practice. How much Lenin and the Bolsheviks actually followed Marxist thought, however, is open to much debate. Many have argued that Lenin betrayed Marxist ideology in order to gain power, whilst others have seen him as a genius who adapted Marxism in order to push through a revolution which he genuinely believed to be in the best interest of human progression. Instead of following the traditional Marxist theory that revolution will happen naturally Lenin consistently championed the idea of a forced

revolution from as early as 1902, when he published “What Is To Be Done?” in which he coined the famous phrase; “Working Men Of All Countries, Unite!” (Lenin, 1988, p. 74). Another so-called betrayal of Marxism can also be seen in the way in which Lenin used the Bolshevik party as the vanguard rather than the proletariat. This, according to the German revolutionist Rosa Luxemburg, had the consequence of an unethical, undemocratic use of centralised power and the events of October 1917 can therefore be seen as a coup rather than a revolution (Buckler, 2010).

Meanwhile, others see Lenin’s strategy as evidence of a man who held a “deep belief in the goodness of man” and who used a “common sense approach” in adapting Marxism to fit the conditions of the backwards feudal state of Russia (Hill, 1971, pp. 144-148). However, the lasting effect that the Russian Revolution had on Marxism can be seen more in the aftermath of the power struggle and in the consequent development of the USSR. Lenin’s “democratic centralism” soon evolved into a one-party Bolshevik regime which ruled over its people in a way which was of complete contrast to Marx’s communist ideals (Eccleshall, 2003, p. 86). As historian Robert Service commented, “Lenin’s activity ensured… a political order of extreme authoritarianism” (Service, 2000, p. 376). This was a viewpoint supported by another historian, Michael Lynch, who stated that Lenin had “as little time for democracy as the Tsars” (Lynch, 1992, p. 144). In contrast, historians such as Christopher Hill have expressed sympathy with Lenin’s ambitions and many see the real betrayal of Marxism as coming under Stalin’s rule. Whilst Stalin was treated with distrust by the likes of Churchill and Roosevelt, in Russia he had developed his infamous “cult of personality” and was treated as a God-like figure. Whilst censorship and social restrictions were rife during his tenure, the true nature of his dictatorship was not known until his death when Khrushchev’s “secret speech” of 1956 exposed the ruler as a tyrannical dictator, and told of the horrific orders for the NKVD to carry out executions. The official figure of deaths given by Russia was 681,692 but Western historians such as Robert Conquest predict the figure to be at least fifteen million (Conquest, 2007, p. vxi). The repercussions that this had on the reputation of Leninist-Marxism were catastrophic from a Marxist perspective and the vision of a classless society of equality was completely compromised. It is no coincidence that Western communist parties, such as the one in Britain, had little impact after Khrushchev’s denunciation (Eccleshall, 2003, p. 86). Consequently, the relative failure of Russian Marxism to create a communist society which was envisaged by Marxist philosophers played an extremely damaging role in the hopes for creating a Marxist revolution in Western society.

The anti-communist crusade within America throughout the Cold War was undoubtedly a damaging blow for the development of Marxism. The emergence of communism as an ideological phenomenon caused America to fear the spread of Marxist ideology into its own borders. The origins of the so-called anti-communist network can be seen in grass-roots movements in the U.S. even before the era of McCarthyism. Various groups formed throughout the 1940s which largely attracted republicans, but also leftists (Schrecker, 2002, p. 12). However, the impact of the government’s own anti-communist agenda under the influence of Senator John McCarthy perhaps signalled the height of the ideological intensity. The government implemented policies, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which in the late 1940s began to deport foreign-born communists and labour leaders (Schrecker, 2002, p. 25). This sent out an early message to the American public of the harsh measures that the government was willing to take. However, perhaps the right-wing politicians were right to be worried. In a statement in 1949, the Communist Party of the United States declared on five different occasions the aim to “overthrow… the Government of the United States by force and violence” (Schrecker, 2002, p. 200). In that case it is no surprise that the FBI attempted to weed out any communists within the state apparatus by introducing the Responsibilities Program in 1951. This was followed in 1956 by a *COINTELPRO* against the Communist Party in order to seek out threats to the state (Schrecker, 2002, pp. 281-282). Equally, the denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev in 1956 added more weight to the anti-Marxist propaganda which had successfully been engrained into the minds of the American population. Although it can be said there was never any real threat of a Marxist revolution in America due to the lack of a dominant left-wing ideology, the precautions taken on a national level did help to prevent the spread, weaken the argument, and decrease the popularity of Marxist ideology.

In twentieth century Britain, the rise of democratic socialism, with its political basis rooted firmly in the Labour Party, carried many Marxist traits. Therefore, it is not surprising that Marx wrote of how democratic socialism was the only form of socialism which Marxists could attempt to work alongside due to their corresponding grievances (Marx & Engels, 1977, p. 95). Incidentally, Lenin also saw revolutionary potential in the social democratic movement in his quest to mobilise the proletariat (Lenin, 1988, p. 71). The difference between the two, however, is that, while Marxists

aim for revolution and ultimately the destruction of capitalism and the abolition of private property; Social Democrats attempt to work with the system in order to gradually improve conditions for the working classes. The Labour Party's endorsement of social democracy and its rise to the political apex, gave the working class an influential political voice which they had previously been denied. Despite the fact that the rise of social democracy may have had a detrimental effect on Marxist ambition for social revolution, Marxist ideology was still deeply engrained in the left-wing socialist Labour governments of the 1960s and 70s (Buckler, 2010). However, the Labour government's term in power in the late 1960s was blighted by the dissolution of trade unions with Labour's policies, and this consequently damaged the relationship with the working class. These issues came to the fore after the 1974 election when, with the global recession looming, Labour reverted to pragmatic solutions rather than those based on their left-wing ideological tendencies (Hall & Jacques, 1983).

By the time of the 1979 election it appeared that British left-wing politics had reached a crossroads. The social democracy which had long been seen as a compromise between socialism and capitalism was failing due to an apparent incompatibility of the two contrasting ideals. The return of a Tory government became inevitable. Less inevitable was the unprecedented way in which Margaret Thatcher's policies appealed to classes all across the political spectrum. The most surprising element was her popularity amongst the working classes. In gaining this popularity and succeeding in encouraging many of the working class to engage in right-wing politics, Thatcher all but destroyed the potential for a future socialist Britain, along with any remote Marxist tendencies that existed in mainstream British political thought. The ability of the Conservatives to turn the Marxist idea of class exploitation on its head and re-embed what Marx defined as "false-class consciousness" was best indicated in a quote made to a reader of Women's Own magazine, where Thatcher condemned the language of an audience member in a conversation about workers' rights:

> "Don't talk to me about 'them' and 'us' in a company. You're all 'we' in a company. You survive as the company survives; prosper as the company prospers- everyone together. The future lies in co-operation not confrontation" (Hall & Jacques, 1983).

However, this reinforcement of right wing values was done not just through twisted logic. Thatcher's political programme was in fact based on the real, yet contradictory, experience of the majority under social democracy. Her convincing argument was that a firmer government hand was needed to deal with the problems – albeit exaggerated ones – within Britain's education system, unemployment levels, and law and order. This propaganda was arguably best reflected in Thatcher's most famous quote that "there is no such thing as society" (Keay, 1987). This anti-Marxist quote shaped party policy and became synonymous with the reign of Thatcher.

The economic downturn undoubtedly encouraged a significant number to abandon any socialist tendencies and clutch desperately at the idea of economic competitiveness between individuals (Hall & Jacques, 1983). From a Marxist point of view this reaction may have been seen as the workers fighting among each other in order to attain social mobility in an evil capitalist system, when they should have been united against the state. However, this is not to say that there were not left-wing movements remonstrating against Thatcher. Protest songs (Heard, 2004) and the anti-poll tax demonstrations of 1990 are just two examples of these, but by this time Thatcher had already won landslide elections in 1979, 1983, and 1987, and thus, enjoyed a decade of re-politicising British society (Wainwright, 1995).

After three heavy election defeats Labour reinvented themselves, distancing themselves from their previous socialist goal of equality of outcome. The party promoted themselves as "New Labour" and focused on pragmatism and fairness. This was undoubtedly a far more liberal outlook and although Labour retained some elements of democratic socialism, there was a de-emphasis on collective action and more focus on the individual (Beech, 2006). This sideways step towards the centre of the political spectrum in an attempt to win over voters has been denounced by many socialist Labour supporters as a sell out of ideology. For many other political theorists it has signified the end of ideology in British politics and a victory for liberalism over all other ideals. This view is reflected in the Labour manifesto of 1997 which placed emphasis on "ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works" (Beech, 2006).

Altogether, the development of the welfare state, the relatively efficient National Health Service, and the increase in the minimum wage throughout 20th century Britain has done enough to appease those who, in poorer nations in a different era, may have been seen as potential Marxist revolutionaries. The fact that there are now no longer distinct classes in Britain means that the line between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is blurred. The richer working class now has similar morals, principles, and outlooks with those of the poorer working class. For instance, it is unlikely that rich footballers or entertainers can be seen from a "them" and "us" mentality when the backgrounds are so varied. Therefore, the ideology of Marxism can be painted, in Great Britain at least, as a frail incompetent figure to which society turns a blind eye and thus is prevented from employing his complex initiatives.

However, it has been argued that, on an international level, the end of the Cold War already saw to the death of ideology. The collapse of the Soviet Union again highlighted once and for all the failures of communism and with it represented a triumph of liberalism over Marxism and all other ideologies. The opening of the USSR government archives revealed social statistics which pointed to the atrocities of the Soviet Union, such as the execution rates under Lenin and Stalin. This tarnished the reputation of communism still further. Meanwhile, the end of ideology was perhaps best symbolised in Britain by the final publication of Marxist Today magazine with the editor, Martin Jacques, giving the reason that the magazines title "was now an albatross" indicating that he too believed the magazine no longer had a place within a world dominated by liberal capitalism (Jacques, 1991, p. 29). One theory on the death of ideology has been given by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama argues that rather than the Cold War representing the end of ideology it actually represents the "end of history." Through the spread of capitalism across the globe, Fukuyama argues, the last alternative to liberalism has been defeated and the result of this is the relegation of Marxism and Fascism from predominant ideologies into fringe ideas. This is largely because of the basic improvements made within capitalism such as the quality of life, social mobility, and equality of rights. However, Benjamin Barber argues that fallen ideologies such as Marxism will simply be replaced by other challenges to the hegemonic ideology of liberalism, such as Jihad (Buckler, The End Of Ideology, lecture, 2010). Therefore, it is undoubtedly true that the fall of the Soviet Union represented a triumph of liberalism over all traditional ideologies, including Marxism, thus, all but eradicating Marxist thought from mainstream Western politics.

Therefore, we can conclude that Marxism in the Western world as a potential challenge to liberal capitalist democracy has been eliminated. The failures of the Russian revolution went a considerable distance towards eradicating the Marxist belief that a communist state was the ideal society in which to be a part of. Furthermore, the anti-communist propaganda which was a dominant feature in American life throughout the Cold War was ultimately successful in marginalising any communist ideology which may have been present within the country. There was certainly no basis for revolution and any communist activities were small and under intensive governmental scrutiny. Unlike America which was dominated by right-wing liberal ideology, Britain had a strong socialist movement which was heavily influenced by Marxist ideas. Although a communist revolution was never in the cards, the Labour Party made large strides towards establishing a form of democratic socialism based on Marxist principles. However, the ill-timed recession of the 1970s helped the Thatcher government into power, which succeeded in moving the politics of Britain towards the right and away from Marxist principles. Meanwhile, the end of the Soviet Union can also be seen as the end of Marxism in its quest to oust liberalism as the dominant international ideology. Therefore, although principles of Marxism can still be seen in Western left-wing politics, the theory of Marxism as set out by Karl Marx is dead, along with the potential for a proletariat revolution.

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