The Theoretical Contributions of

Karl Marx to Communist Ideology

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Karl Marx is a nineteenth century philosopher who developed and inspired communist ideology. Though Marx expanded upon the blueprint for communism, his contribution to the ideology was primarily theoretical. While Marx never outlined how communism should be implemented in the real world, he proposed the theoretical justification for communist revolutions across the globe. An examination of Marx’s philosophy reveals that his theories contributed to communist ideology by providing a historical foundation for communism, introducing the concept of class struggle, and redefining the concept of revolution.

Though Marx became the key advocate of communism, the communist movement began as an extension of socialism during the nineteenth century. According to historian Lynne Hunt (2009), socialism emerged as a criticism of the Industrial Revolution (p. 706). While the Industrial Revolution created a wider middle-class, it also led to deplorable working conditions for the poor and a widening gap between the haves and have-nots in industrial societies (2009, p. 706). The conditions in growing urban areas highlighted the inequalities that were inherent in industrialization. While the middle and upper classes often lived in spacious homes in wealthier quarters of urban areas, the working class lived in crowded slums where they were subject to unsanitary conditions and deadly epidemics (2009, p. 694). Further, poverty among the working class led to an increase in crime and an increase in dependency on welfare and charity in order to meet basic standards of living (2009, p. 694-695). Early socialists supported socialism as a means of alleviating the conditions faced by the working class.

Several thinkers emerged in the nineteenth century to establish the tenets of socialism. During the early 1800s, socialists called for a restructuring of society that would facilitate cooperation between workers and industrialists in place of a hierarchical societal structure (2009, p. 706). In *The Book of the New Moral*, socialist Robert Owen advocated for worker-owned businesses, called cooperatives, and an increased voice for trade unions in society (2009, p. 707). Further, socialist Claude Herne de Saint-Simon asserted that technicians, rather than politicians, should be granted the authority to make decisions on behalf of society (2009, p. 707). The emphasis on collectivization became the first contribution that socialists made to the theory of communism.

As Hunt (2009) notes, socialists in the latter half of the nineteenth century began to advocate for communism, which radicalized many of the tenets of socialism. Many socialists appealed to communism in order to aggressively eliminate exploitative conditions in society. The main distinction between socialists and the newly formed communists was that communists wished to completely abolish private property and establish collective ownership of goods in society (2009, p. 707). The rationale behind this shift was that communists viewed private property as the theft of goods that are produced by labor (2009, p. 707). Further, communists began to advocate for authoritarian, yet benevolent, forms of government that could use its authority to set the foundations for a communist society (2009, p. 707). As many students of communism can recognize, these socialist contributions of abolishing private property and adopting centralized leadership are indispensible to communist, both in theory and in practice. Before Marx contributed to the theory of communism, socialist thinkers had already outlined many of the basic principles of communism.

Yet, Marx made an original contribution to communism by examining history to provide a theoretical justification for communism. As political scientist Patrick O’Neil (2013) explains, the evaluation of human history forms the basis of Marx’s writings on communism (p. 259). Marx attempts to elucidate the exploitation faced by the working class by identifying the technological and political advancements that led to the exploitation of workers by industrialists (2009, p. 259). As Marx argued, technological advancement during different periods of time allowed for the leading class to profit off of the surpluses that were created by laborers (2009, p. 259). Marx asserted that feudalism was marked by technologies that allowed landowners and aristocrats to profit off of the surpluses produced by peasant laborers (2009, p. 261). The use of technology by the elites to take advantage of the poor was a recurrent historical theme identified in Marx’s writings.

Marx developed the concept of a historical struggle by drawing parallels between the exploitations of feudalism and the exploitation present during the nineteenth century. During the Industrial Revolution, Marx held that technology used by capitalists allowed the wealthy to elevate in status and profit from the surpluses created by industrialist workers (2009, p. 261). Marx asserted that the movement of history consisted of tensions between exploited laborers and the profiteering elites (2009, p. 261). Further, Marx argued that historical change takes place when the rulers of a given age are finally overthrown by the exploited and a new system is put in place (2009, p. 261). Marx’s effort to establish a historical context for communist thought enabled supporters to assert the inevitability of communism as a historical progression.

While socialists were concerned with the plight of the working class, Marx’s contributions to communist ideology placed a strong emphasis on the tensions between the downtrodden and the advantaged in society. Through his description of the conflicts between haves and have-nots throughout history, Marx developed the concept of the class struggle. Marx’s emphasis on class can be partially attributed to the contributions made by his writing partner, Friederich Engels. As Hunt (2009) notes, Engels was born to a wealthy English family, but he developed his class sensibilities when he worked at his family’s manufacturing business in Manchester (p. 707). In *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844,* Engels expressed his outrage over the conditions that were faced by the working class in an industrial society (2009, p. 707). This same focus on class disparities influenced Engels when he partnered with Marx to author several documents on the philosophy of communism.

In his writings, Marx developed detailed analyses that detailed the role of class in the communist movement. Marx and Engels asserted in their 1848 work *The Communist Manifesto* that history can be defined as a continuing class struggle (2009, p. 708). Further, the defined the two classes that were involved in the present social conflicts: the middle class, or bourgeoisie, and the working class, or proletariat (2009, p. 708). Observing the conditions of their time, Marx and Engels asserted that the bourgeoisie were responsible for maintaining a system where they could control private property, and it was the proletariats who were a victim of this established system (2009, p. 708). Further, Marx believed that it was the proletariat who must lead in dismantling the hierarchies of industrialized society in order to create a classless society (2009, p. 263). As O’Neil notes, Marx Marx believed that an increase in class-consciousness was necessary in order for communism to emerge in industrialized societies (2013, p. 263). Thus, Marx’s communism required adherents to become cognizant of the role that class played in their exploitation and utilize that knowledge to eliminate economic stratification in society.

Finally, Marx enhanced the communist introducing a modified conception of revolution. Prior to Marx’s writings, the term “revolution” had less profound implications for society. As Hunt (2009) explains, the original conception of revolution entailed a cyclical change in society (p. 621). A social revolution involved returning the social order back to a previous state, or returning to the beginning. However, through Marx’s contributions to political thought, the term revolution evolved to refer to a linear progression between two points in history (2009, p. 621). Marx pointed to the French Revolution to model the eventual progression of communism. Pointing to French society, Marx noted that the revolution sought to sever the influences of feudalism on society and replace feudalism with capitalism (2009, p. 621). However, Marx noted that instead of resting at capitalism or regressing to a previous condition, a further revolution would take place to demolish capitalism and install communism (2009, p. 621). By describing the transitions between feudalism, capitalism, and communism, Marx shifted the conception of a revolution from a cyclical affair to a linear progression that requires consistent struggle on the part of revolutionaries.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, socialist thinkers had already developed many of the key concepts that are attributed to communism. The proposals to abolish private property, elevate the status of the working class, and utilize centralized administration were developed by notable proponents of socialism. Further, socialists who initialized the beginning stages of the communist movement had already advocated for the abolition of economic classes. Thus, the core features of communism were established before Marx’s writing. Yet, through his intellectual talents, Marx developed a theoretical framework that justified and defined the communist revolution. Marx analyzed history in order to identify the historical necessity of a communist struggle. Further, he defined the classes that were in conflict and advocated for the rise of class-consciousness as a starting point for communism. Additionally, Marx championed a vigorous definition of revolution that allowed communist leaders to look towards the future in promoting their struggle. These three contributions lifted communist ideology beyond the local concerns of individual industrialized cities and transformed communism into a universally applicable ideology. Marx’s ability to elevate the intellectual foundation of socialist and early communist tenets was critical in the development of communism as a worldwide movement.

References

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