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1

Introduction

The Challenge of Marxist Theory

Marxism is perhaps the most influential, yet most criticised and most misunderstood of all social theories. Indeed, even the question of its status as a social theory is open to debate since few Marxists would define themselves as social theorists first and foremost. The sheer scope of Marxism causes most problems to the interested reader. For Marxism spans philosophy, sociology, economics, politics, history, cultural studies and many other fields. Yet Marx himself, and many of his followers, refuse to consider such ‘academic’ categorisations, stressing instead that Marxism is more than just a theory, it is a way of understanding the world and acting upon it. Marx frequently criticised philosophers and political economists for being trapped in their own systems of thought and failing to see the broader picture of the way the world is. If any ideas are put forward, then this should be with the purpose of practically engaging with the world to improve the conditions of social life. In this respect, Marxism is unparalleled in its ambition. Seeking to gain a comprehensive understanding of the *totality* of social life – indeed insisting that individual components of the social world can only be comprehended within a totalising framework – Marxism claims to link this understanding to practical action aimed at remedying this situation. No other set of ideas links such a range of theories to human practice in such a comprehensive way. It is a testimony to the power of Marxist thinking that this tradition is still developing and being engaged with so long after Marx first started to write.

This book has two aims. First, it is intended to introduce the reader to a range of schools and debates within Marxist social theory. Then it aims to summarise those debates and to critically assess Marxist theory in order to consider potential strengths and weaknesses. This is done by looking at two contemporary theories that have offered a critique of orthodox Marxism – the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe and the critical realism of Bhaskar and others. First, a number of different schools of Marxism are examined, then some areas of application are discussed, then debates over Marxism’s role and the validity of its claims is addressed.

In a sense, such an approach is in keeping with Marxism’s own advice. Of course it is necessary to present Marxist ideas to the reader. But it is also

necessary to subject these ideas to critical scrutiny. One of the fundamental principles of Marxist theory is to approach the social world in a critical way and to suggest how it might be changed for the better. But the social world is a complex terrain comprised of both material and discursive or ideational elements. Ideas are an important part of the social world and Marxism itself constitutes a set of ideas. Thus Marxism must confront itself and subject its own ideas, claims and status to critical scrutiny. If elements of Marxist social theory are found wanting, then these too must be subject to transformative action. Although this book tries to hold back on most of its criticisms when introducing different Marxist theories, the final two chapters are more consciously critical. In the conclusion, a number of suggestions are made as to where Marxist ideas are problematic and where they should be challenged.

However, although this book ultimately adopts a critical stance, it is necessary to state that this is a Marxist book – or at least it attempts to stay within the Marxist framework. It rejects the post-Marxist idea that we have to pass through Marxism in order to resolve social theoretical issues. It may well be considered unfashionable, but the argument here is that Marxism continues to provide the best possible framework for understanding the social world. It is also the only social theory that succeeds in combining a theoretical account of the social world with a practical attempt to change it. In today's postmodern climate, Marxism also stands out in advocating a social scientific approach that believes that we can make intelligible claims about the social world. The key issue for this book, therefore, is not whether or not to adopt a Marxist framework, but what sort of Marxist framework to have. It therefore sets out the different schools of Marxism – classical, structuralist, critical and so on – in order to determine the most appropriate ways to understand the social world. These different schools vary quite considerably and indeed this may pose the question as to whether these can all be considered to be variants of the same species. For a Marxist might be broadly defined as a follower of the ideas of Karl Marx. But then among these followers are followers of other followers – Leninists, Trotskyists, Luxemburgists, Gramscians, Althusserians, Habermasians and many others. Then again, if there are problems with the ways these different Marxists have interpreted Marxism, the answer is not simply to go back to Marx and find some pure form of his ideas. Marxism should always remain true to its critical spirit and should continue to criticise its own claims. It should move on from its claims about the world to see if the world itself is changing and if those theories that attempt to explain this world are themselves in need of change. Marxism is at its best when it is doing social theory. It usually runs into difficulties when it tries to incorporate this into some grander philosophical scheme of things. Or else it runs into difficulty when clinging dogmatically to some old ideas when they are no longer able to explain the way that things are. Marx's own theories were developed during an earlier stage of capitalist development. The world has changed since Lenin theorised imperialism. Marxists usually describe themselves as historical

materialists. That means we have to see Marxist ideas as being historical products themselves. As time passes, so theories need to be adapted or developed. Rather than simply trying to impose a Marxist conceptual framework onto the social world, the Marxist who is true to the critical spirit of Marx will examine the complex interplay between the social world itself and the concepts we use to try and explain it. This is the difficult task faced by Marxists today. But it is to Marxism's great credit that it is still capable of responding to the challenge.

The Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 of this book explores the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of Marxism and the originators of most of the ideas discussed in this book. It starts with their early work and the emergence of Marxism out of classical German philosophy (particularly the work of Hegel) and their attempt to understand the issue of human estrangement or alienation. This emphasis eventually leads Marx to a study of the importance of the economy and the way in which alienation results from the private ownership of property and the nature of the production process. The Marxist theory of ideology starts with the notion that the ruling ideas in society are the ideas of the ruling class. But it develops to account for the way that capitalist relations of production and exchange produce a misleading or fetishised form of consciousness that treats human relations as relations between things while bringing to life the commodified form of social objects.

Marx's economic theory introduces such things as the labour theory of value and the way that exploitation within the capitalist system is founded upon the extraction of surplus value from the worker. The working class is defined by the non-ownership of the means of production. In working for a wage, they produce more value for the capitalist than they receive back in wages. However, these conditions of common exploitation produce among the workers a growing class consciousness. The relationship of the working class to the production process gives them the potential to transform the system through collective action.

This leads to a discussion of political action and forms of class struggle. It also opens up the question of how to confront the power of the state. This in turn raises the issue of the role of the state and how it fits into the social system. Traditionally, Marxist theory has understood the role of the state in terms of the base-superstructure model whereby the economic base gives rise to a legal and political superstructure. Subsequent chapters challenge this model.

Chapter 3 considers classical Marxism and explores how the immediate heirs of Marx and Engels provided a very rigid and mechanical interpretation of their ideas. Their philosophical and historical views try to explain social

change but end up making complacent claims about its inevitability. This in turn generates a more 'revisionist' approach whereby the leaders of Marxist parties could get on with the day-to-day business of practical politics even if this included supporting the First World War. Such a capitulation led to a strong challenge from Lenin and Luxemburg and new debates over forms of political party and revolutionary activity. It also led to new theories of world politics and the notion of imperialism. Lenin's view was that imperialism reflected new pressures to expand markets and that this opened up an era of wars and revolutions. Economic rivalries would break out among the big powers, while other parts of the world were being hastily developed by overseas capital. This created new conditions in those countries that might allow a revolutionary situation to develop. This process was theorised by Trotsky as uneven and combined development.

The revolution in Russia was described by Gramsci as a revolution against Marxist ideas. He believed that by taking matters into their own hands the Bolsheviks had acted against the idea that history has to follow a certain course of development before social revolution can take place. Gramsci is an advocate of praxis or human action. Chapter 4 looks at how praxis Marxists like Gramsci, Lukács and Sartre oppose the mechanical approach of orthodox Marxism and instead emphasise human subjectivity, class consciousness and class struggle. There is also a renewed emphasis on the concept of alienation (or in Lukács's idea of reification, the transformation of relations between people into relations between things). Lukács and Sartre pay a lot of attention to overcoming this and to the development of consciousness. Gramsci offers more in the way of concrete theory by developing the concept of hegemony to explain how class rulership has to be constructed and how it is necessary to win the consent of the masses. The revolutionary party must engage in a hegemonic struggle to gain influence in civil society and build a power basis to stake a claim for state power.

The approach of Althusser and Poulantzas draws heavily upon Gramsci. However, their structuralist Marxism rejects the praxis approach and switches attention from social agents to social structure. At the same time Althusser wishes to challenge the way Marxist theory sees social structure through the model of economic base determining political-cultural superstructure. He offers an alternative that gives relative autonomy to the political, cultural and ideological and he focuses on the unevenness of social development which is described as being overdetermined. Althusser contributes greatly to the Marxist theory of ideology while Poulantzas does important work on the existence of class fractions. However, both are criticised for downplaying the role of human agency as well as their 'theoreticist' or 'scientistic' approach to Marxist social theory.

The final school of Marxism that is covered here in Chapter 6 is that of critical theory. Like the structuralists they criticise some of Marxism's assumptions about the role of the economy and the inevitability of socialist transformation.

Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse examine the changed conditions of advanced capitalism where developments in technology allow for the material satisfaction of the working class while the culture industry provides for their cultural needs. The workers are kept in a state of blissful ignorance, no longer capable of playing a radical role. Instead Marcuse turns to the new social movements for inspiration. However, Adorno and Horkheimer are more pessimistic, believing that society has become totally integrated and dominates over individuals. Their negative view of the rationality of modern society is perhaps a product of the 1930s and the twin triumphs of fascism and Stalinism as well as the commercialisation of the United States and is challenged by the later critical theory of Habermas. But Habermas's optimism is founded upon the potential of human communication and mutual understanding and thus moves a long way from the traditional focus of Marxism.

Having examined the different schools of Marxism, Chapter 7 is an examination of some areas that have presented particular challenges to Marxist analysis. Marxism has made a tremendous contribution to a wide range of social theories from anthropology through to film studies, so this chapter selects four areas that have seen considerable contemporary discussion. The issue of feminism has been selected because it receives little coverage in the main theories discussed in this book and yet it is one of the most problematic issues in Marxist theory. Given that Marxism lays so much stress on class relations, how should feminism's concern with gender divisions be understood? Is gender exploitation an issue that can simply be reduced to women's place in the capitalist system, or is there a separate basis for the oppression of women? This raises the issue of whether socialism can do away with gender divisions as a site of oppression. A similar question emerges in relation to national divisions – another issue selected because of its controversial nature. How should national movements be understood in relation to socialist movements? Can nationalism be used for progressive purposes? This section challenges the complacency of many Marxists who tend to regard the national question as a secondary issue when compared to the struggle for socialism.

Debates over the national question entail debates about the Marxist theory of history. Since theories of historical development are so fundamental to Marxist theory, this section confronts the issue of whether history should primarily be understood in terms of class struggle or economic development. The latter is raised by G.A. Cohen's functionalist account of how social development is driven by the productive forces. This is compared with approaches like Richard Brenner's that instead emphasise the role of class struggle as the main historical factor (in this case in the transition from feudalism to capitalism). This section also looks at the debates between Perry Anderson and E.P. Thompson concerning the nature of the English Civil War and to the attempts to apply Gramsci's concept of hegemony to historical developments. Gramsci's ideas can also be applied to economic theory and Chapter 7 concludes by looking at how Gramsci's ideas have led to debates over Fordist

production and forms of economic regulation and state intervention. These issues have provoked very important contemporary debate and they raise the question of the relation between the social and the economic that is discussed in the Conclusion.

Some Marxist Categories

The majority of the book is organised according to different schools, but it is also important to consider Marxist social theory according to major themes and concepts. The concluding chapter picks out some main areas of concern – Marxism’s theory of history, the focus on the economy, the concept of ideology, Marxist views on class and the state and finally, Marxism’s commitment to emancipation. It examines these debates by looking at the different schools of Marxism, but also by employing the critical realist philosophy that is discussed in Chapter 8.

Since Marxism is such a broad school, it is worth outlining some of these major themes at the beginning. Perhaps the Marxist theory of history is the most important issue as this contains all the other issues in it. It starts from our basic need to produce that which is necessary to keep us alive and moves from this material issue to the historical question of how such processes of production are organised. Historical materialism, therefore, is the focus on the reproduction of the material conditions of social life and on the particular historical forms that this takes.

This moves us to Marxism’s focus on the economy. Marxism addresses the historical form of the production process through the concept of mode of production. The economic system is particularly important in explaining the mode of production. The capitalist mode of production is explained in terms of generalised commodity production, the ownership and non-ownership of the means of production and the sale of labour-power by the working class. The issue to be addressed throughout this book is the extent to which social and historical explanation can be provided by a focus on these economic conditions and the extent to which we need to bring in other factors.

One such factor is ideology, another key focus of Marxist social theory. Marxist theories of ideology tend to fall into two categories. The first is straightforward – the view that ideology represents a false set of ideas spread by the ruling class. To put this less crudely, we could say that ideology relates to the beliefs of different social groups. However, the second approach to ideology focuses on the notion that such beliefs, rather than coming from any particular social group, are generated by the social system itself. Marx gives us the theory of commodity fetishism or the coming to worship commodities as things in themselves rather than as products of human labour. The wage form also generates ideology in making us believe that we are receiving a fair wage, hiding the real process of exploitation that is taking place. In both these cases

it is processes – the labour process and the process of commodity exchange – that creates ideology, rather than any particular individual.

The focus on class is one of the best-known aspects of Marxist theory. Put simply, class is based on the relationship to the means of production. Under capitalism there are two main classes – the bourgeoisie who own the means of production and the working class which does not and therefore has to sell its labour-power to the capitalists in order to survive. But as subsequent debates show, from this starting point all sorts of issues emerge with regard to whether classes can be defined so straightforwardly, or whether further social divisions exist.

The Marxist theory of the state is a controversial topic. Many Marxists follow the view put forward in the *Communist Manifesto* that the state is an instrument of the ruling class and that under capitalism it is used to support the process of economic exploitation. However, other approaches move away from the view of that state as a class instrument and see it instead as a factor of social cohesion both in the sense of it bringing different social groups together, and in co-ordinating the relations between the different parts of the social system.

Finally, Marxism sets out a theory of emancipation. This is a complicated issue and somewhat embarrassing for a book such as this. To what extent is Marxism *merely* a social theory? Is the purpose of Marxism simply to analyse society? Is it possible for non-Marxists to take up the best aspects of Marxist social theory to explain issues that cannot otherwise be explained? Or does Marxist social theory necessarily entail Marxist political practice? Does the fact of describing the world in a certain way compel us to commit ourselves to try to do something to change it? Marx and Engels' own commitment to the revolutionary cause is quite clear even if the commitment of later Marxists is more questionable. For Marx the whole point of interpreting the world is in order to change it. By trying to explain the workings of capitalist society, Marxist theory makes us better equipped to try and bring about social change. Without such a commitment to social change, it is questionable whether we are still discussing Marxism.

The Conclusion, as will be seen, examines these different areas and offers some criticisms of various Marxist assumptions. These criticisms include, in the respective areas, the use of the base-superstructure model, the tendency towards economic determinism, the issue of whether ideology is a necessary social feature, the need for a more stratified conception of social class, as to whether the state can be reduced to its class form, and finally the need to re-examine the relationship between social theory, philosophy and emancipatory action. But despite these difficult questions, the book concludes by affirming the importance of Marxism while advocating a critical approach to Marxist social theory. It rejects the need to move beyond Marxism, but recognises the need for greater flexibility and an openness to new ideas. Marxism attempts to provide a theory of the social world, but is at the same time a product of the

very things that it is trying to describe. A critical approach to Marxist social theory is essential if it is to move on and attempt to explain changing socio-historical conditions. In turn, a Marxist approach to the social world is essential if we want to be able to criticise this world and do something to change it.

Further Reading

There are many introductory books on Marxism. The best known and most interesting are Kolakowski's three volume *Main Currents of Marxism* (1981) and MacLellan's *Thought of Karl Marx* (1971) and *Marxism After Marx* (1998). Ralph Miliband's *Marxism and Politics* (1977) is a very good read. Perry Anderson's *Considerations of Western Marxism* (1979) takes a more polemical approach. Alan Swingewood's book *Marx and Modern Social Theory* (1975) is interesting in relating Marxist theory to the broader sociological tradition. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (1991) edited by Tom Bottomore is a very useful resource. The Marxist internet archive <http://www.marxists.org> has a huge amount of material.

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