

The strengths and weaknesses of the marxist theory of Revolution

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What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist theory of revolution?

The Marxist theory of revolution must be evaluated in two lights in regards to its strengths and weaknesses, first how it was relevant in Marx's era, second how it was relevant after his death. The two conclusions that could be reached by assessing his theories in relation to the two different eras could be expected to reach quite disparate resolutions. Marx had the belief, inherited from Hegel that the evolution of society was a valid philosophical topic, therefore he wrote his utopian ideals of revolution with this in mind. That is the greatest strength of his theory, that it can be altered dependant upon the society of the day. The fact that most of his writings are only relevant to the world as he knew it does not obscure the fact that some of his meta narratives are still relevant and thus strong in theory. However, while some of the salient points in Marx's theory were once relevant and simply became out dated, it could be argued, and has by several authors, that some of his points were never particularly strong, based as they were on inaccurate information.

The Manifesto was written on two levels, one which analyses the tendencies of society, the patterns and historical points of interest, where they examine the underlying tendencies of a phenomenon, i.e.

world society. This specific analysis was based in economics. The other level of analysis, this one hypothetical, which finds the existence of actual impurities in the model in the form of political and social factors which are in some way independent from, or interact with the economic model. This manner of theory was strong, however it was one which needed constant revision. They themselves in their introduction to the German edition of the Communist Manifesto asserted that its 'general principles' were still correct, although their 'practical application' depended 'everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing'. It could be argued that the need for revision was also its strength as it remained, at least past the two authors life times, relevant.

Even in Marx's time other revolutionary groups, such as the Anarchists, argued that Marx's theories were flawed, but these were his rivals and so their criticisms could in a sense be taken with a pinch of salt; however, they are still worth mentioning. The Anarchists claimed that his revolution would result in a new state and a new kind of class society, with exactly the same values that they were attempting to overthrow. To a certain extent, history has proved them right, in countries where Marxism is still followed, there is indeed two classes of society and a new system. It is not truly accurate to place the blame on Marx's theory, the countries which follow Marxism have generally deviated from his true intent.

Marx's writings had a mix of both truth with tangible evidence and some less well founded arguments. For example, his writing:

"What I did that was new was to prove..."

There was nothing new in what Marx proved, merely his interpretation of the data that was new. This meant that his theories were valid in the sense that they did have the base of solid rationale, but they had Marx's assumptions altering them slightly. For example, Marx showed that classes were shaped by changing social circumstance. However, in order to carry this obvious point to his own conclusion, that class struggle lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, he could only rely on his own deduction for evidence.

As A MacIntyre points out, much of Marx's information and data that he used to write the 'Communist Manifesto' and 'Capital' was gathered from Ricardo and Smith, economists of the time.

Whilst Marx took their information verbatim, later critics have

mentioned that neither man was considered a good economist. The two economists ignored the

economic trend, preferring to study static economy. This meant that the 'communist Manifesto', a pamphlet ideally supposed to be malleable enough to fit to any sociological change, fell down when capitalism altered in an unexpected manner. T Carver considers that Marx's theory was entirely dependant upon this economic data, and therefore totally inaccurate. However, other critics and devotees of Marxism are not so quick to completely disregard the theories. Alex Callinicos, self described as one of the last true Marxists, insists that while Marx's theories were economically based, they are not dependant upon the economic data and therefore relevant even allowing for inaccurate data. Either way, the fact that his theory was so fundamentally flawed is an obvious weakness, however, the fact that Marx's prediction of the downfall of capitalism were correct apart from two major facts suggests that his theory does support the view that communism was not entirely based upon Marx's view of economy.

Aside from the theories on the proletariat and economics, Marx's theories on the nature of capitalism were also highly relevant to his overall view of the necessity of communism. He considered that capitalism had the tendency to self-destruct and create the necessary conditions for a socialist society. However, while this was applicable in his era, the world did not alter as he expected. Capitalism developed at different speeds in different countries. It was also more antagonistic and resilient than he had supposed. Plus, the working class did not live up to the hegemonic expectations he had of them.

In his expectation of the collapse of capitalism and a proletariat revolution, Marx had not considered either the rise of trade unions or the discovery of new capitalistic markets, colonialism. Both of these factors had a great impact, both upon the manner in which capitalism functioned in society and the manner in which communism functioned in society. Capitalism became more complex and communism suddenly lost one of its major standing points, the role of the proletariat. In Marx's era neither of these was a factor, his initial judgement had been based upon the world as he knew of it. Both of these factors however have been very important in the continuation of capitalism. It could be said that Marx was partially correct in his assessment of capitalism, being proven in the 1929 depression and the subsequent other, smaller, market crashes such as that in the mid eighties.

The fact that none of the depressions, the large one in 1929 included, produced a revolution is in part due to the fact that there were two factors involved which Marx had not considered in his

theory. The first was that in times of trouble, a nation tends to pull together in nationalistic sympathy, rather than fight each other. The second was that capitalism had advanced to such a point it could actually buy its way out of the depressions and recessions. Although this really was non-existent funds being spent, it succeeded in moving the money around the country once more.

Capitalism has not had entirely the effect Marx prophesied on another level. The class system has not been widened further so as to become the masses as the proletariat and only a few rich capitalists. Quite the contrary has occurred with the distinction becoming blurred. How much of this could be accredited to Marx himself is beyond estimate. Whether the degree of blurring would have occurred without Marx's impact there is no telling. Still, it must be argued that Marx failed to take into account in his theory that power becomes more important than profit. Also, Marx failed to take into account the importance of the 'middleman' who makes capitalism work. With the advance of capitalism comes the increase of the middle class, creating the class which actually runs the capitalistic society. Another great weakness of Marx's theory of revolution was his omitting to consider that as a capitalistic society becomes richer, the

proletariat profit. The more advanced capitalist countries are also those which have the highest standard of living, which runs directly contrary to Marx's theory.

These mistakes in the estimation of capitalism has cost Marxism a great deal of credit. The fact that capitalism still works, granted some theorists, mainly Marxists, propose that the system is in a downward spiral, eventually to destroy itself, means essentially that Marx was wrong, his theory was too weak. This viewpoint however would be inaccurate, much of what Marx prophesied in his era would have occurred, should the situation have remained static. If the system were ever to break down to such a level as it was in Marx's time, it would be safe to speculate that Marx's theories would at least in part have some tangible evidence to back them up.

Marx only considered the human factor in his theories in an abstract sense. The proletariat only became a factor in his theory of revolution quite late on in his writings and philosophical life. The fact that Marx was writing his manifesto for the proletariat, not the majority of the populace at the time, suggests one of two things. The first was that he perhaps changed his view that economics was the most important dynamic factor in the evolution of society, affecting the people and instead began to consider that the proletariat was in fact the dynamic force; or there is another more substantiated theory.

The fact that the 'Communist Manifesto', as previously mentioned, was not written for a proletariat majority, must have been recognised by Marx. It could be assumed therefore that Marx felt that in order to restore balance to the socialist movement, he must focus completely on one aspect and not deviate. In that sense, the theory was very strong, as he indeed did not deviate from his views even in the face of evidence against them. The manner in which Marx wrote the 'Communist Manifesto' could be considered evidence of a strength, he judged his readers well. It was written in an emotive manner, designed to imbue the proletariat with, as J Townsend comments, 'a confidence in, and an awareness of, its own historic destiny'

As AJP Taylor comments, the theory of revolution ignores cases where rivalry occurs between nations or factions of more or less equal strength. The proletariat could work against each other in much the same manner as the capitalists worked against each other. Marx seemed to consider that conflicts only appeared between classes, thus forming a revolution. He never considered that conflict could also arise within a class. This ran counter to all the economic experience, save that of Ricardo and Smith. One of the greater faults at the basis of Marx's theory was his lack of understanding of nationalism, he instead sought to discredit those backing national freedom, his revolutionary rivals.

The main strengths of Marx's argument for revolution is that history has proven him correct on two counts. His foretelling of capitalism and the proletariat were both accurate. The fact that he failed to grasp the complexity is not really relevant. In his era he was correct simply because the complexities did not occur then. Capitalism was as simple as his theory. The manner in which capitalism worked in Marx's day was indeed doomed. The employer believing he could only survive by paying his employees a very low wage for many hours work is used only in the poorer countries. The advances that capitalism has taken were completely beyond Marx's theory.

Although Marx's theory is seriously flawed, as the above shows, there were also some very significant strengths. The greatest evidence of this is that Marxists still follow his philosophies and his thoughts are taken seriously, granted with some modification. The strengths of his theory are mostly based in the historical sense, where it can be shown

he was right for his era or mostly right by today's standards. All politics is now tinged with Marxism, free schooling is more or less directly Marx's work. One on four people live in a government that describes itself as a Marxist government. While these are in the poorer

countries, this is not necessarily a sign that Marxism would not work; Marx himself stated that communism and socialism could only be achieved in a society which was sufficiently rich.

One of the greatest strengths, and weaknesses, of Marx's theory of revolution, as the above has shown, is how translatable to the readers ideal it is. The fact that several disparate governments, both historically and contemporary consider themselves to follow the bible that is the 'Communist Manifesto' shows this. Marx's theory of revolution is open to interpretation, its true meaning is often difficult, if not impossible, to divulge, especially with his later works. In the end only speculation can determine what the true strengths and weaknesses of Marx's theory of revolution are; whether Marx would have ultimately been right had his era continued as he foresaw, and only the future can prove whether he will be right should capitalism collapse under its own weight.

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