

Classical Marxism is based upon the nineteenth-century writings of Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95). Marx and Engels constructed a philosophy of history which singled out class divisions as the motor of history – this was what pushed history forwards. This is commonly known as dialectical materialism. For Marx, the type of society in which we live, including its politics, culture, art and literature, is determined by the ‘mode of production’. Within capitalism, the mode of production is divided into two parts: the **economic base**, made up of the ‘relations of production’, in other words class relations and the ‘forces of production’ – all the things from nature that we need to produce commodities. The mode of production also shapes the **superstructure**, the area of culture, politics and ideas (see Figure 2.1). In the Marxian analysis, people’s ideas and beliefs are determined above all by economic factors.

From the Marxian perspective if a group owns the means of production, it not only has economic power; it also has political power. The state is viewed as an institution that helps to organise capitalist society in the best interests of the bourgeoisie. The legitimacy of the capitalist system is maintained by the bourgeoisie, making working-class people victims of a false consciousness. Working-class people are said to hold values, ideas and beliefs about the nature of inequality which it is not in their own economic interests to hold. Their ideas are manipulated by the media, schools and religion, for example, institutions which regard economic inequality as fair and just.

The opening chapter of Marx’s most influential book *Capital* (1867) is about ‘The Commodity’, a concept that plays a key role in Marxian analysis. Any human creation can be a ‘commodity’ and the commodity contains

The mode of production

Superstructure:

the realm of culture, politics and ideas

the superstructure is determined by the economic base

The Economic Base is made up of two parts

- 1 the Relations of Production – this means class relations
- 2 the Forces of Production – made up of all the things from nature that we need to produce commodities

Figure 2.1 The key assumptions of the Marxian analysis

'value' – both use value, which is the personal value someone gains from consuming the commodity, and exchange value, which is the value in monetary terms: the amount that another person will give to own the commodity. Workers are the people who put the value into any commodity. Marx builds his theory of class exploitation upon these simple ideas.

What does Marx understand by the term 'class relations'? For Marx, capitalist society is a form of society in which factories, shops and offices are privately owned, rather than owned by the government. Within capitalism there are a number of economic classes, but Marx investigates just two: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production and the proletariat, who do not. These two groups have a structural conflict of interest: to make profits the bourgeoisie must exploit the proletariat, while to improve their own living standards the proletariat must reduce the profits of the bourgeoisie by transferring more profit to the workers as wages.

The labour theory of value

Marx sees the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as an exploitative one. The bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat. The theory that Marx develops to explain class exploitation is called 'the labour theory of value'.

Activity

Translate the text below into a flow chart, putting the following points into a logical order:

- 1 The capitalist starts with an amount of
- 2 commodity inputs, these are the

- 3 commodities, which are sold in the market place for
- 4 materials of production and
- 5 money, which is put into the purchase of
- 6 labour power, these come together in the
- 7 production process, to form
- 8 money

Write a short paragraph explaining why Marx started *Capital* with a discussion of 'the commodity'. You might want to begin by considering that the commodity contains 'value' – but where does the 'value' come from? Compare your answer to the paragraph below.

According to Marx, because the bourgeoisie buy the materials of production from other capitalists, who have a rational perception of their situation, these materials are bought at their true market value, so the source of profit for Marx can only come from exploiting labour power. It is extracting surplus value from the labour force that provides the difference between the amount of money it takes to set up the production process and the amount of money made at the end of the production process. But surplus value is not simply profit: it also includes the cost of setting up the production process again for the next production run.

In summary, the value of any commodity reflects the amount of labour power needed to make that commodity. In addition, workers are not paid the 'true' value of their labour power and this is what Marx means by 'exploitation'; workers are adding value to a commodity, but are only paid a fraction of the value that they have added.

The perceptive reader will have noticed that for Marx, if the capitalist replaces workers with machines, profits should fall. For the individual capitalist, this is clearly not the case. However, if large numbers of capitalists replace workers with machines, this will result in a fall in profits, because individuals will not have sufficient spending power to buy the commodities produced; this is referred to by Marxists as a **realisation crisis**. In these circumstances, capitalists have to find new markets or sources of cheap raw materials from overseas.

Activity

Below are a number of evaluative statements about the Marxist theory of class. Identify which comments are strengths and which are weaknesses and give a justification for your answer:

- 1 Marx provided a clever description of capitalism and class.
- 2 The Marxian conception of class cannot deal with automation, suggesting a fall in profits which does not happen.
- 3 Marx's labour theory of value is both sex-blind and race-blind. He does not take into account the race or gender of the bourgeoisie or proletariat.
- 4 In late capitalism 'ownership' of the means of production has become divorced from 'control' of the means of production - the bourgeoisie and proletariat no longer exist.
- 5 Marx has an informed theory of inequality, and its persistence.
- 6 Marx predicted that there would be a long-term tendency for the rate of profit to fall.
- 7 The labour theory of value has generated a great deal of research.
- 8 Marx has provided the motivation for working-class people to join together and improve their position in society.
- 9 Marx provided a justification for socialism.

Compare your answers to the points given below.

#### **Strengths of the Marxian approach**

- o Marx provided a clever description of capitalism and class.
- o Marx has an informed theory of inequality, and its persistence.
- o Marx predicted that there would be a long-term tendency for the rate of profit to fall.
- o The labour theory of value has generated a great deal of research.
- o Marx has provided the motivation for working-class people to join together and improve their position in society.
- o Marx provided a justification for socialism.

#### **Weaknesses of the Marxian approach**

- o The Marxian conception of class cannot deal with automation, suggesting a fall in profits which does not happen.
- o Marx's labour theory of value is both sex-blind and race-blind. He does not take into account the race or gender of the bourgeoisie or proletariat.
- o In late capitalism 'ownership' of the means of production has become divorced from 'control' of the means of production - the bourgeoisie and proletariat no longer exist.

#### **The dominant ideology**

For Marxists the dominant ideas of any historical period are the ideas of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie. A 'dominant ideology' is a system of

thought which is imposed upon the proletariat in support of capitalism. The Marxian conception of ideology is based upon a humanistic notion that consent should be based upon an authentic consciousness free from distortion. For Marxists, the term 'ideology' suggests that the bourgeoisie manipulate the way in which working-class people think about the world. The bourgeoisie create a 'worldview' for the proletariat; this is shaped via the mass media, the education system and organised religion, together with other institutions which are concerned with ideas. So the bourgeoisie distort the ideas of the proletariat by imposing 'false consciousness' upon them. Television's manipulation of the ideas of individual people is an often-considered example. Working-class people make use of this false consciousness to justify their own subordination within the capitalist system.

However, the Marxian analysis undervalues the role of the human agent. All Marxists assume that forces that are outside their control push people about. This deterministic assumption may not be correct. Marxists also have a very simplistic notion of 'representation' contained within the notion of ideology. As I have suggested, in the Marxian analysis, working-class people have their ideas and worldview manipulated. The bourgeoisie are said to be capable of taking any object or idea and giving it a new representation or meaning in the minds of the working class. This new representation is supportive of capitalism, justifies the position of the bourgeoisie and legitimises the exploitation of the working class. The problem here is that Marxists do not explain how this happens. What goes on, at a cognitive level, inside the mind of a working-class person for them to reject their own economic interests so fully and totally? How can the 'agency' - the ability to make decisions in our own interests for our own reasons - of working-class people be so completely destroyed without their revolutionary potential not also being destroyed?

The term 'dominant ideology' could mean at least two very different things. On the one hand, the term suggests that there is one ideology that all people accept because it is imposed upon everybody. In contrast, the term could equally mean that there is one dominant ideology and any number of non-dominant ideologies. The suggestion here is that any group of like-minded people could construct a set of ideas and beliefs in opposition to the dominant belief system. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the construction of new ideologies is one of the key activities of new social movements.

In summary, the Marxian analysis of ideology contains a very simplistic view of 'representation'. Representation is concerned with how something we see or hear reminds us of something else: for example a heart shape may remind a person of love and romance, while a smile is a representation of happiness. These are issues of 'cognition', meaning that something happens inside our brain (the process of cognition) which suggests that we think about a person, place or thing when a representation of it presents itself to us. In the Marxian analysis of ideology, people have their ideas manipulated. This means that the bourgeoisie are able to redefine meaning for us. The bourgeoisie are said to be capable of taking any object,

idea or belief and substituting a new representation in our consciousness, a representation that supports capitalism, is against our own interests, and legitimises both the position of the bourgeoisie and the exploitation of the working class.

How can the bourgeoisie intervene in the processes of cognition, substituting representations and planting new meanings in our heads?

**Activity**

Below are a number of evaluative statements about the Marxian concept of ideology. Briefly explain if you agree or disagree with the comment and state at least one reason why.

Evaluative statement	Agree	Disagree	Reason
1 The concept explains why a revolutionary working class has not emerged within capitalist society.			
2 The structure of the argument is 'functionalist' in nature.			
3 The argument places too much emphasis on shared values and beliefs.			
4 There is an overemphasis upon class interests.			
5 It is not clear if the bourgeoisie accept the dominant ideology or simply impose a set of known false beliefs upon the proletariat.			

**Marxism: modernist perspectives**

For Ralph Miliband (1974), there is a coherent, well organised capitalist class, who hold top positions in both industry and the state, most of whom were privately educated before going to Oxbridge. These privileged individuals use the state as an **instrument** for continued bourgeois domination.

In contrast, Nicos Poulantzas (1973) argues that the class background of individuals in top state positions is unimportant. The structure of society is capitalist, and the role of the state is to maintain that structure. The state must have a high degree of autonomy, or independence, from individual capitalists in order to choose effectively between the competing demands for state action by different capitalists. In other words, the state is always functional to the needs of capital, even though individual members of top state institutions do not come from a top class background.

**Marxism: Theorising Capitalism**

Antonio Gramsci (1957) rejected the economic determinism contained in the type of argument that Poulantzas is putting forward. Writing from his prison cell in the 1930s, Gramsci made a distinction between two parts of the state:

- o **political society**, which contained all the repressive state institutions, such as the police and the army; and
- o **civil society**, which contained all the institutions, such as the mass media, which attempt to manipulate our ideas.

The state rules by consent although it has the ability to use force if necessary. However, the state would always prefer to use negotiating skills to produce a compromise. The state attempts to form a historic bloc, which involves making compromises with different groups, in an effort to maintain solidarity. Consent is maintained by **hegemony**, a body of ideas which becomes part of our consciousness and which we accept as right. Capitalism can only be overthrown by challenging and reformulating hegemony and establishing a new historic bloc.

David Coates (1984) has built upon this analysis by Gramsci, and suggests that the state must make compromises with various bodies both at home and overseas. New forms of ideology have to be created in an effort to maintain legitimacy; Thatcherism may be an example. Thatcherism was populist: it attempted to appeal to the people by identifying similarities between key elements of common sense and Thatcherite ideology.

Abercrombie, Turner and Hill (1980) reject approaches that overemphasise the ideological aspects of state power. There are numerous studies, claims Abercrombie, which show that working-class individuals reject a dominant ideology. Paul Willis's study *Learning to Labour* (1977), for example, shows how a group of working-class 'lads' attempt to import masculine shop-floor culture into the classroom in an effort to reject the dominant ideas that the teaching staff attempt to impose. Abercrombie and his colleagues argue that it is economic factors such as fear of unemployment that form the key factor in maintaining the structure of inequality within capitalism: many people fear to rebel, as this might result in the loss of their job.

**Marx on Ideology**

For Marx the relationship between a person's economic interests and attitudes could be one of two types:

- o A person could have 'true' consciousness - this is where a person is aware of their economic interests, and their attitudes support those interests. An example is a factory owner guided by their own interests, such as the need to make profits.

- o A person could have a 'false' consciousness - the person is unaware of their economic interests and therefore may hold views that contradict their true interests: for example working-class people who are hostile to the trade union movement.

### The Frankfurt School

The scholars who made up the Frankfurt School were all directly associated with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and, later, Jürgen Habermas. The school accepted the central assumptions of the Marxist analysis, but wanted to reconcile Marxist theory to the changed economic and political conditions of the twentieth century. The work of the school became known as 'Critical Theory'.

Critical Theory was one of the most significant developments in Marxist theorising. The Frankfurt School adopted an interdisciplinary approach to understand the 'industrialisation' of culture, claiming that culture was becoming commodified, standardised and massified. In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno explains that within capitalist societies, language, in the form of 'jargon', is a key factor in maintaining the class division. By 'talking down' to people in an effort to humiliate them and raise our own standing, we manipulate language to further the needs of capitalism.

If we are to create a more open and equal society this problem of communication has to be overcome. People should be able to open their minds, become receptive to new perspectives on the world and communicate their own personal truths. For this to happen we need to break down the structures and institutions of what became for the Frankfurt School the 'culture industry', which propagated and maintained capitalist ideology through stereotypes, advertisements and lies. It was by manipulation of the culture industry that the Nazis were able to make their inhuman programme appear reasonable.

However, it is easier to outline the notions of culture that the school reject. They did agree that artistic culture should be regarded as something more than simply the reflection of class interests. For the director of the school, Max Horkheimer, culture originated in the organisational basis of society. The Marxist approach - which regarded culture as something that simply emerged from the economic base - was rejected as too simplistic. In *The Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer argues that in modern society *reason* came to be defined as **rationality**. Moreover, we have moved away from the use of 'objective' reason, which places a great deal of emphasis on the search for right or wrong by reference to universal truth, and towards 'subjective' reason in which the personal, unsubstantiated opinions of the individual and the situation they are in are given greater emphasis. Subjective reason makes it difficult for people to identify and remove delusions. Therefore, we need 'critique' to maintain our freedom and safety.

The Frankfurt School believed it was important to develop a sociology of 'mass culture', in order to fully understand the changes that had taken place since the 1930s, such as:

- o the emergence of the 'mass media';
- o the emergence of an entertainment industry;
- o the manipulation of culture by the Nazis.

All these factors pointed to significant changes in patterns of culture. The school focused on assessing how ideas were transmitted by the culture industry, and how this influenced our personal and private life. Horkheimer and Adorno rejected the idea that 'culture' could arise spontaneously from the masses. Culture was not something which emerged from the demands of people: it was brought about by manipulation. Local and folk cultures are destroyed in this process. The culture industry, via commercial entertainment, aims to gain an attentive but passive welcome from the masses. The culture industry reproduces and reinforces the dominant interpretations of reality. At the same time the audience responses are standardised, as each product contains cues as to the appropriate response, for example 'canned' laughter to induce laughter from the audience. The culture industry was said to prevent individual people from developing into independent individuals capable of critical thought. The media develops a state of dependence and weakness, which helps to reinforce the status quo. David Held (1980) gives the following summary of one of the leading figures in the school, Herbert Marcuse on the culture industry. 'The development of mass culture', he wrote:

- o establishes a (false) harmony between public and private interests
- o reinforces privatisation and consumption orientations
- o spreads an advertising aesthetic
- o undermines indigenous working class culture
- o increases the domination of instrumental reason, and
- o manipulates sexuality - leading to general pursuit of false and limited wants and needs. (Held, 1980: 108)

The Frankfurt School argued that the culture industry has a significant effect upon the formation of our identity. Again Marcuse suggests that the individual, as understood by Freud, is likely to become extinct. According to Held this is because:

- o severe limits are placed on ego development
- o there is a decline of the position of the father
- o individuals do not develop an autonomous conscience
- o values and prohibitions become less central to the individual's concerns and reflections
- o there is a transference of the ego ideal to a group ideal - now itself being undermined
- o repressive desublimation reinforces social control. (Held, 1980: 138)