

# SHOULD MARXISM BE FORGOTTEN?

*Assist. Prof. Dr. Umut ARIK  
European University of Lefke  
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences  
Department of International Relations  
uarik@eul.edu.tr*

*Abstract: Worldwide, the conventional truth today suggests that after the dismantling of the Soviet Union Marxism is no longer relevant. It is, however, also a fact that inequalities, conflictual relations and exploitative interaction continue both at the national and international level. While grand narratives are dethroned by postmodernists, systemic solutions are lacking and a simmering world crisis is continuing. It is, therefore, useful to remember the main precepts of Marxist theory as regards the basics and the international implications in summary fashion as reference material for the students of International Relations and Political Sciences.*

*Keywords: Marxism, World-System Theory, Frankfurt School, Postmodernity, End of History*

*Özet: Günümüzde dünya çapında kabul gören geleneksel kanı, Sovyetler Birliğinin dağılmasından sonra artık Marxism'in bundan böyle ilginç ve geçerli olmaktan çıktığı yolundadır. Buna karşın, şu da bir gerçektir ki, gerek ulusal gerek uluslararası düzeyde, eşitsizlikler, çekişmeli ilişkiler, sömürücü etki-tepki bağımlılıkları devam etmektedir. Postmodernler tarafından büyük ve genel teoriler aşağılanmakla beraber, sistemsel çözümler de bulunamamakta ve içten, içe kaynaklı bir dünya krizi devam edilmektedir. Bu nedenle, temelleri ve uluslararası sonuçları açısından Marxist teorinin ana ilkelerinin, uluslararası ilişkiler ve siyasal bilimler öğrencileri için kolay ulaşılabilecek referans bilgileri sağlamak amacıyla özet olarak hatırlanması yararlı olacaktır.*

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Marksizm, Dünya Sistem Teorisi, Frankfurt Okulu, Postmodernite, Trahin Sonu*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

If ideology is false consciousness as Marx has claimed, then at the end of the 20th century one such major foray into false consciousness has been the victim of an undeniable collapse of the attempt to put it into practice as the only way for the salvation of humanity.

The dismantling of the system created in and around the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics started with the fertilisation of the ideas of “détente” and “peaceful coexistence” accepted by Khrushchev and Brezhnev and culminated in total disintegration after the efforts of Gorbachev to introduce Soviet-style “perestroika/restructuring” and “glasnost/transparency”.

At that point, thinkers like Francis Fukuyama started to claim that something very fundamental has happened in world history. The unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism. Fukuyama further propounded that what was being witnessed was not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but *the end of history as such*: the end point of mankind’s evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1992). Like Hegel he believed that history culminated in an absolute moment - a moment in which a final, rational form of society and state became victorious. The early Hegel had been enthusiastic about the French Revolution, though later in life he moved towards more authoritarian approaches (Hegel, 1967).

But did not Marx also use the Hegelian way of thinking when he was dealing with the contradictions among classes that would drag history ahead and lead to the creation of a Communist World? Was this analysis to be sent to the waste-bin of political, economic and international relations thought completely?

In the meantime, with the lightning speed that was acquired in the transportation and transmission mechanisms in trade, services, finances, in the movement of human beings, and – most important of all – in the revolutionary developments in communications technology, the world was claimed to have become a “Global Village” (McLuhan 1962; McLuhan 1964).

Were we then required to leave aside the previous understandings about our world and develop new modes of thought? Or is what we are witnessing around us today nothing but more of the same conflictual and hierarchically patterned economic and political processes that have characterized capitalism from the beginning?

In the real world, surely, “the end of history” did not materialise. The world is in the throes of a simmering and at times burning economic and financial crisis. Marketisation and Americanisation are expressions that replace globalisation in many parts of the world. G 8 Summit Meetings, the IMF/IBRD and WTO reunions are being vehemently protested.

On this basis, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have published their ground-breaking book *Empire* and, utilising some of the analytical approaches of Antonio Gramsci as well as those of such major postmodern thinkers as Michel

Foucault underlined that what was going on was a grandscale exploitation of the “multitude” by the “Empire”. This was the “renewed” old world order. It is an international disciplinary structure that is extremely fluid and it permeates through states, societies and international institutions in a transstructural fashion and renders “power” relations to become a matter that takes place everywhere but can be pinpointed and ascribed to nowhere.

This approach was confronted by a civilisational stance, negatively described by Samuel Huntington (1996) as *The Clash of Civilisations* and attempted to be given a positive mould in the international activity that is called “the Alliance of Civilisations”. Both angles, nevertheless, remain ineffectual and could not make an indelible imprint in the medium of political thought and international theory, particularly as *The Wretched of the Earth* remain to be wretched, a phenomenon so aptly described in 1961 by Frantz Fanon (2004).

One may, at this juncture, take the shortcut and go to Nietzsche (1967) and *The Birth of Tragedy* or to Foucault (1965) and *Madness and Civilisation* but it may also be deemed worthwhile not to forget the Marxist “Grand Narrative”, be it for nostalgic reasons, or, perhaps, as a reminder that our “Global Village” is still far from being a place of general contentment.

With this consideration, therefore, it may be deemed that for the students of political, international and economic thought a summary review of Marxist ideology such as below could be useful reference material.

## 2. MARXISM IN A NUTSHELL

In his many writings encompassing the period from the 1840s to the 1870s, Karl Marx first suggested that capitalism deprives people from their capacity as workers with free productive labour and turns them into a mere commodity-alienation. Later, he analysed capitalism in the class conflict and exploitation context. There are two classes confronting each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. The first are the owners of the production factors, i.e. the capitalist class, controlling the productive wealth. The second are the masses without property, selling their labour, thereby becoming wage slaves. The Bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat by paying much smaller wages than the value of what they produce through their labour and amass the surplus value as profit that becomes accumulated capital and productive wealth. As long as what is produced has use-value, i.e. is in demand, it will have exchange-value, i.e. price. Exchange value displaces use value in capitalism. Commodities must meet demand. In other words, they should be exchanged with other commodities. Thus they realise their use value and this leads to the exchange value. The ultimate commodity, therefore, becomes money as self-expanding exchange value.

With increasing profits, hence ever greater capital and productive wealth, capacity to produce expands and leads to overproduction. At this point, profits and, therefore prices will fall, leading to consecutive economic crises, stagnation, unemployment, etc. Ultimately, the result will be the concentration of the ownership of the means or factors of production as the less efficient producers will be bankrupt and capital will be monopolised in fewer hands. The losers will join the ranks of the

proletariat, making this class the overwhelming majority in a capitalist system (Marx and Engels, 1975-2005).

### 3. MARXISM GOES INTERNATIONAL

As limits of demand are reached at the national level, what will happen is defined in the 1848 Communist Manifesto prepared by Marx and Engels together:

*“The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations ... The bourgeoisie ... draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilisation.”* (cf. McLennan, 1977: 224-225)

The net result is the creation of a capitalist world market in which the interdependent actors are the nation-states which in themselves are the guarantors of exploitative bourgeoisie societies, involved in militarised inter-state conflicts, fanned by the military-industrial complexes. As the proletarianisation in nation-states increases, this situation will change: classes will be polarised and the class struggle will reach global scale. Eventually the proletarian world revolution will come about.

Prior to that, however, internationally the need for raw materials to be fed to expanding industries and the search for new markets supposed to absorb the ever-increasing production would demand political, military and economic control of overseas territories. This was observed in the colonisation of unindustrialised areas and the advent of *Imperialism* which, as Lenin (2010) suggested in 1916, was *The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. In this phase of worldwide capitalism, a global commercial, financial and industrial network transfers “surplus values” from the unindustrialised and less developed periphery to the developed, industrially and financially well-advanced, technology-generating core. The better-endowed classes in the periphery collaborate with the core even when it is contrary to local interests and become “comparadors”. In fact, the states system is complementary to capitalism and enables capitalist expansion and surplus transfer. The weakness of peripheral states is due to their inferior skills and low capital accumulation (Amin, 1976; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1967).

Thus, as summarised above, classical Marxism constitutes a more systematic attempt to analyse the changing geopolitical dynamics and tries to explain the crisis and breakdown of world order in terms of the changing dynamics of capitalism. On the other hand, the later generations of Marxists, however, deal with the “new imperialism”, “the colonisation of Africa”, “the arms race” and similar aberrations of the modern times that would finally lead to a world war. They claim that a profound transformation in the nature of capitalism will take place after a major slump in the rates of return across the capitalist economies that will come about as a result of global economic crises.

#### 4. WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY

This approach brings us to the “World-Systems Theory”, which has been developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, in continuation and expansion of the earlier work by André Gunder Frank and Fernand Braudel. This theory draws on the classical Marxist theories of imperialism and dependency already referred to above. Its objective is to provide a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the entire history of the capitalist world-system. It analyses the world economy by looking at it as an integrated structure defined by an international division of labour based on varying types of labour control, observed in the form of wage labour, share-cropping, serfdom or slavery in multiple states. The strength and geopolitical location of states within the world economy as “core”, “semi-periphery” and “periphery” correspond in descending order to their labour regimes. States are, in this outlay, hierarchically tied into a system of unequal exchange maintained by their different capacities and power that govern politically set monopolistic terms of trade. As already mentioned, this unequal exchange leads to the transfer of surplus from the periphery to the core, consolidating the political hierarchies and differences in development.

André Gunder Frank (1998) dates it as early as the 3rd Millennium A.D.; Braudel (1993) suggests that this “Modern World-System” originated in the thirteenth century. Others, namely Wallerstein (1974; 1980; 1989; 2010), attribute its creation to the sixteenth century due to regional specialisation and division of labour with high-skilled manufacture in Western Europe, low-skilled agriculture in Eastern Europe and raw material production overseas. The Western European states thus incorporated the Eastern European semi-periphery and the overseas periphery into a world-system in accordance with their interests and will, imposing to the areas continuing economic underdevelopment and political dependency. This modern world-system is capitalist as, outside the “core” countries, economic activity is profit-oriented production for the world market. This organisation of international capitalism on a global scale tends to maintain itself through self-reinforcement. The states system is a precondition for the rise and continuing reproduction of capitalism since different sovereign presences are needed for the transfer of surplus from peripheries to cores through competition among states – in an imperial formation, though, surplus would be directly absorbed by the center.

Changing hegemonic states alter intra-core hierarchies and rearrange and realign geo-commercial core/semi-periphery/periphery relations. Contrary to realist hegemonic theory based on military-political capacity, in the present context hegemony is based on innovations in capital-intensive production systems which, in turn, would lead to commercial and financial superiority, and place hegemonic states at the apex of international division of labour. Hegemonic change takes place through intra-core interaction between rising challengers and declining status quo powers, e.g. the USA and Britain.

At the center of the World-Systems theory, capitalism is depicted as a worldwide commercial network continuously transferring surplus from the periphery to the core. The general acceptance of the monopolistic and inter-regional character of capitalism is used to explain all four historical systems, diversely known as merchant capitalism, mercantilism, free-trade capitalism and regime-regulated capitalism.

Similarly, state interests are reduced to the interests of trade-oriented ruling classes – overlooking diverse strategies of reproduction that may allow alternative geostrategic structures. The strength of a state in the World-System is simplistically based solely on the high or low skill of its labour – high skill leading to capitalist strength and core hegemony, low skill to weakness and less capitalisation in the periphery.

In this approach, the states system itself is deemed to be a structural feature of the capitalist world economy. Proponents of the World-System analysis suggest that both are the two sides of the same coin.

## **5. TRANSNATIONAL HISTORICAL MATERIALISM**

A more refined approach is to be found in the neo-Gramscian international political economy which is also called transnational historical materialism. Based on the analyses of Antonio Gramsci (1979), it suggests that the hegemonic superiority of the “core” projects its “structure of accumulation” to the global level through transnationalisation of the hegemonic class and the creation of international mechanisms for increasing the efficiency of exercising their hegemony - as seen today in the cases of IMF, IBRD, WTO, etc.

At the regional level, attempts to increase the efficiency of hegemonic capitalism are also being made through the implementation of models of integration, the most successful contemporary example of which is to be found in the European Union, while others such as the Organisation of the American States, the ASEAN etc. trail behind.

In contrast to Realism, which introduced the notion of international hegemony based on the concentration of material power in one dominant state (Gilpin 1981), neo-Gramscians claim that liberal international hegemonies are based on the universalisation of particular state-society complexes, maintained primarily by consensus formation between hegemonic and hegemonised states rather than crude power politics, with coercion in the offing though not actually used (Cox 1987; van der Pijl 1998)

## **6. THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL**

Further novel approaches to Marxism and its classical analyses were developed by the Frankfurt School – or Critical Theory - best propounded by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. Their thoughts are a blend of Marxist political economy, Hegelian dialectics and Freudian psychology that led to the New Left, imbued with the young Marxian “alienation” outlook, as well as anarchism, phenomenology and existentialism. The common themes were the rejection of “conventional society/the System” as oppressive, disillusionment with the working class as the agent of revolution, and, a commitment to personal autonomy and self-fulfilment in the form of liberation with a preference for decentralisation and participatory democracy.

Herbert Marcuse (1964), for instance, portrayed the advanced industrial society as an all-encompassing system of repression, subduing argument and debate and absorbing all forms of opposition in what he deemed to be repressive tolerance. Against this one-dimensional state/society he proposes total personal and international liberation. In this connection, for the forces of revolution he puts aside the conventional Western working class lost in its heavy unionisation and full integration into the capitalist hegemonic system. He looks at such groups of students, ethnic minorities, women, and the ordinary people and workers in the third world.

## 7. POST-MODERN INCREDULITY

Following Marcuse, however, post-modernists such as Jean-François Lyotard (1984), go even further and reject “the grand narrative” of Marxism, including its theory of dependency and world capitalism. They claim that reality is constructed by discourse and it is never coherent. It cannot be universalised; it defies essentialist, totalised understandings. The real world is always a world of ambiguity, disunity, discrepancy, contradiction and difference. There cannot be one grand theory or one power system to explain it. Foucault (1980) says that the endeavour to know how and to what extent must not be legitimising what is already known, it might be possible to think differently. To paraphrase Anthony Burke’s words, if your paradigm is killing you it is also killing us.

## 8. A TOKEN OF TRUTH

Herod asked what truth was; was knowledge truth or false or was it relative? At this point of analysis are we going to search objective, subjective or evolutionary truth?

Whatever the case may be, it still remains to be true that Marxism puts the stress on the relationship between power and knowledge; insists that immutability of certain structures constrains human freedoms and well-being; propounds a moral vision where knowledge may be universalised and economic constraints on humans may be lifted.

As Marxist analysis suggests there are variable rates of regional and class developments and yet no global remedy has been found to cope with them appropriately. Furthermore, to prove correct the views of the Marxists, myriad public demonstrations against the existing order continue.

History, therefore, is alive and well. Difference, dialogue, debate should always be welcome in search of truth for finding the means to solve the problems of humanity. A single class orientation may have been too narrow but also the assertions of an “end of history” would be too facile.

*Gramscian and/or Foucaultian variations of the diverse human struggles at all levels and strata, to further understand, evolve, liberate and always continue to*

***hope in a never ending intellectual fluidity, flowing towards greater emancipation should never be forgotten.***

In the meantime, more obviously structured, broad-brush ideologies are still a must for shaping the flow of history and this flow will continue to mould much human thought, hence, necessitating the continuing evolution of ideology.

Future analyses, therefore, could and should discuss how Marxism may continue to be used, and/or evolved, for the solution of the hard-core issues of global poverty, neo-colonialism, growing instability in global economic and financial structures and increasing inequalities emanating from the so-called global interdependence .

In a world seen by many as obviously teetering beside an enormous economic and financial black hole, modern day neo-Marxist ideologues should continue working on the precepts they believe in and try to prove the validity of their theory in the face of the assault they are confronted with through such claims as “the end of history.”

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*Born in 1938, Dr. Arık graduated from the Ankara College and the Faculties of Political Sciences and Law of the Ankara University, undertaking his master studies in the Political Sciences Faculty. He entered the Turkish Foreign Service in 1960. He also continued his post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics, Panthéon/Université de Paris, and the Tokyo Soka University, where he obtained his doctoral degree. He served as the Special Assistant to the Secretary General in the OECD, Director General for Economic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, President of the Turkish International Cooperation Administration and, as Ambassador of Turkey to Saudi Arabia, Japan, Italy and Australia. After retirement he served as Secretary General of the Democratic Party. At present he is Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations of the European University of Lefke.*

*1938'de doğan Dr.Arık, Ankara Koleji ve Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler ve Hukuk Fakültelerinden mezun olmuş, Master çalışmalarını SBF'de yapmıştır. 1960'da Türk Dışişleri Bakanlığına girmiştir. Lisans üstü çalışmalarına, London School of Economics, Panthéon/Université de Paris ve, doktorasını aldığı Tokyo Soka Üniversitesinde devam etmiştir. OECD'de Genel Sekreter Özel Yardımcılığı, Dışişleri Bakanlığı Ekonomik İşler Genel Müdürlüğü, Türk İşbirliği Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığı ve Suudi Arabistan, Japonya, İtalya, Avustralya'da Türkiye Büyükelçisi görevlerinde bulunmuştur. Emekliliğinden sonra Demokrat Parti Genel Sekreteri olmuştur. Halen Lefke Avrupa Üniversitesinde Yardımcı Doçentdir.*