

Sample Economic Theory Essay: Marx and Capitalism



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Marx argues that communism must develop out of the womb of capitalist society. If so, what are the conditions of capitalism that will give rise to communism? Is modern law one such condition?

By closely examining several of Marx's mature works it is obvious that his theories of historical materialism and the dialectic relationship between base and superstructure in conjunction with his conceptualisation of 'history' indicate that the seed of communism can only be planted and developed within the previous socio-economic structure of capitalism. His analysis of previous societal structures, or 'historical epochs' such as the Asiatic, classical, and feudal structures reveal that each epoch did not develop out of isolation but as a result of the dialectic relationship between the base and superstructure in the previous epoch. Once the preconditions had been satisfied at the level of the social classes and technology, the result in the superstructure were rapid and revolutionary. This same presupposition can be applied to capitalism and communism and it is the purpose of this essay to identify these necessary conditions that will precipitate the required change into communism. Modern law will be examined generally as a component of the superstructure and its role in the transitory stage of socialism will be discussed in order to better understand the role of law in Marxist theory.

There are several allusions in the *German Ideology* to communism and postulations on how this transition can take place. However, before examining the *German Ideology* and the *Preface to the Critique of the Gotha Programme*, it is important to first glance at the seminal *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (hereafter the '*Preface*'). However, this is not done so as to provide a crude historical materialist interpretation or to fall victim to a strictly 'orthodox' and monocausal interpretation of Marxism. I will be considering the *Preface* only to the extent that it highlights the first hints to a shift in Marx's analysis from humanist philosophy to economics and how it is in these economic and productive forces we see the seeds of antagonism and revolution develop and occur. Thus, Marx's theory of historical materialism can operate as a research paradigm and assist in identifying the necessary conditions found in capitalism that can possibly give rise to communism.

As explained by Marx in the *Preface*, social revolution in each epoch was a result of the tensions within the base components of social classes and technology with the superstructure that ultimately results in rapid change in the superstructure. Once the material productive

forces of society comes into conflict with existing relations of production and property relations, there is a fundamental shift to a new epoch via the phenomenon of social revolution.¹ With change affecting the economic foundations of the society, the subsequent repercussions are felt in the superstructure. This assertion is justified by Marx with his analysis of historical epochs preceding capitalism where he argues that the conditions giving rise to the development of ancient from Asiatic societies or bourgeois from feudal societies arose only when the ‘material conditions of its solution already exist(ed) or are (were) at least in the process of formation’.² This is further supported by Marx’s claim that no social order ever disintegrated without prior satisfaction of existing preconditions, that is, before the development of all productive forces. Similarly, new higher relations of production cannot appear before the ‘material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself’.³ He concludes in the *Preface* that the bourgeois relations are the last antagonistic form of social process of production that simultaneously creates the necessary productive forces to solve this antagonism.⁴ Once this is completed, the ‘prehistory’ of human society will give rise to a proper ‘history’ of human society with the existence of communism.

Furthermore, this increase in productive power and high degree of development must be universal on what Marx describes as a ‘world-historical’⁵ platform as the success of communism depends on its universal acceptance by all nations and the abrogation of any risk of isolated examples of local communism imploding from lack of support and the pressure emanating from the world market. Thus, it is necessary that communism occurs simultaneously and universally so as to become a dominant force of intercourse. In addition, the ‘propertyless’ proletariat class, whose existence is seen as another condition to communism that is a direct result of bourgeois-capitalist economics and socio-political structures, and who experiences the most direct disenfranchisement from the capitalist system, must also exist ‘world-historically’. An already existing element in capitalism that can allow this form of intercourse on such a scale is civil society. As stated by Marx, ‘civil

¹ Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Tucker (ed.) (1978) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed, New York, Norton as reproduced in (LAWS 2311) *LAW AND SOCIAL THEORY Vol. 1 Reader & Materials*, pp 43.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, pp 52.

society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces'.⁶

Thus, we see that productive forces and relations of production, as well as the existence of a 'propertyless' proletariat class are necessary ingredients in implementing change and revolution. From this perspective, it can be seen that the development of technology and equipment for production that can only be achieved within the capitalist system can satisfy the contingent conditions that can give rise to communism. However, whilst this happens, people remain alienated and dominated by economic forces they themselves had initially created but now appear to operate independently. Hence, the division of labour also becomes an important focal point for analysis for Marx in the *German Ideology*.⁷ Even though he is critical of the division of labour and the consequent effect it has on individuals by forcing upon them the constraints and alienation exacerbated by the natural society rather than what is voluntary, he acknowledges that this division of labour is necessary for the development of society.

We can arguably postulate that this division of labour and 'specialisation' of individuals' labour capacities actually allows the development of technology and equipment for production. Despite his criticism of the division of labour as an obstacle to the overcoming of alienation and the attainment of self-realisation, it is ironic that this same specialisation of labour power (and its consequent technological and productive advances) and alienation can also be seen as a condition within capitalism that can give rise to communism in the manner it is able to assist the creation of new higher relations of production and the creation of more refined and effective equipment of production.

A solution to this irony can perhaps be the manipulation of the benefits of the division of labour, the high degree of development and the creation of new forces and relations of production to be done first and the overcoming of alienation and rejection of false consciousness to be confronted second. What is further ironic is that this same market which generates the highest point of alienation can assist in the rejection of ideology and false consciousness and help revert the individual⁸ into a social being. Capitalism and the consequent creation of civil society and higher forms of technology have resulted in

⁶ Ibid, pp 53.

⁷ Marx, *The German Ideology*, in Tucker (ed) as above in Note 1, *LAW AND SOCIAL THEORY Vol. 1 Reader & Materials*, pp 51.

⁸ Here the word 'individual' is to be interpreted as 'any man or woman' rather than the atomised individual.

individuals being more alienated and atomised than before yet also objectively more social than ever with connections occurring on a greater regional and global scale, that is, on a 'world-historical' scale through technological advances such as the internet and telecommunications industry. Furthermore, these relations transcend the State and the individual's locality and make a world revolution all the more plausible. Thus, this rejection of false consciousness and ideology is another condition that needs to be satisfied in order for communism to eventuate. Through the attainment of self-realisation, human beings can be emancipated from the forces that dominate them and be able to steer themselves collectively. Communism is described by Marx as able to strip human beings from their 'natural' (that is, a state induced by alienation) character and subjugate them to the power of united individuals.⁹ This stage is described by Marx as imminent since 'the task itself always arises when the material circumstances to its solution already exist'.¹⁰

Once these conditions created by production and intercourse have reached maturity within the capitalist system they will be treated as fetters and will further instigate a revolution due to the conflict that will exist between the productive forces and the form of intercourse.¹¹ By revisiting Marx's initial theory of historical materialism, we can see that ideology as a systematic analysis of world structures is problematic and hinders man's ultimate emancipation and freedom and should be confronted so as to give rise to the necessary consciousness that will precipitate communism. Furthermore, we can see historical materialism's triumph over the idealist discourse of emancipation developed by the Young Hegelians.

Thus, the conflicts that occur within the economic base will, in turn, influence the superstructure and result in rapid change. In this instance, the vehicle for rapid change is the phenomenon of social revolution. However, the relationship between the base and superstructure is dialectic and the causal connections are complex. This conceptualisation is further supported by Engel's interpretation of Marx's historical materialism.¹² Within this normative framework we are able to determine the role modern law plays in the relationship between base and superstructure. Even though it is not a condition to communism since it does not form part of the economic base, it does play an interesting role in Marxist discourse

⁹ Ibid, pp 63.

¹⁰ See Note 1.

¹¹ Ibid, pp 64.

¹² Engels to Bloch, in K. Marx and F. Engels (1953) *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, pp 394-396 as reproduced in (LAWS2311) *LAW AND SOCIAL THEORY Vol. 1 Reader and Materials*, pp 74.

in the transition of capitalism to communism. Engels' 'determination of law in the last analysis' can be viewed as a more faithful interpretation of Marx's theory of law than the crude historical determinism or class instrumentalist discourses. Thus, from a general perspective of law, law and politics interact reciprocally with the economic base in a dialectical way yet maintains some level of relative autonomy.¹³ However, under communism, the tripartite division of social spheres will be amalgamated into one and the superstructure and base will also merge into one sphere of communism where individuals will directly relate to each other without the use of intermediary institutions. Thus, modern law, as a component element of the capitalist superstructure, will eventually be rendered superfluous and, along with the State, disappear. This will occur when the proletariat's seizure of state power will replace the 'government of persons with the administration of things'.¹⁴

However, Marx acknowledges that during the transitory stage from capitalism to communism, law will still maintain comparative relevance.¹⁵ Under this transitory stage of socialism or 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat',¹⁶ law will remain relatively important yet this 'equal right' arguably espoused in law remains quintessentially a 'bourgeois right' with bourgeois limitations.¹⁷ Hence, aside from general criticism levelled at law for its preservation of economic exchanges and inequalities, Marx remains critical of law within this specific stage as well.

In conclusion, it can be seen that communism can only come into fruition after a period of incubation within the capitalist system. The development of productive forces and relations of production, the increase in productive power and the existence of highly developed technological advances and equipment for production are necessary conditions. Furthermore, the rise of the proletariat class on a world-historical platform and existence and subsequent rejection of the division of labour and false consciousness and ideology are also requisite elements needed and located only within the capitalist societal system that will give rise to communism. Modern law, on the other hand, plays a limited role in the transitory stage and

¹³ Engels to Schmidt, as above, pp 77.

¹⁴ Engels (1954), *Anti-Duhring*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, pp 306-309 as reproduced in (LAWS2311) *LAW AND SOCIAL THEORY Vol. 1 Reader and Materials*, pp 82.

¹⁵ Marx (1974), *Preface to the Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in *Political Writings*, Vol. 3, The First International and After, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp 346-77, 355 as reproduced in (LAWS2311) *LAW AND SOCIAL THEORY Vol. 1 Reader and Materials*, pp 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp 85.

¹⁷ See Note 15.

will be absolutely abolished under communism. Moreover, it is not seen as condition in itself giving rise to communism. Nevertheless, its position within the superstructure/base relationship is acknowledged, as is its relative autonomy and the ability it can have under transitory stage of socialism to provide some structure to the radical change occurring.

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