

For the Elgar Concise Encyclopedia of Human Geography

Marxism

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1. Introduction

Marxism is an approach to analysing *and* changing human society, pioneered in the 19C by Karl Marx. The fundamental basis of Marxism is a moral and political aim: the emancipation of humanity from exploitation and oppression through creating a socialist society where all citizens can contribute to collectively planning their material lives and thus to individual self-realisation. This moral commitment marks off Marxism from other theoretical approaches to understanding society. Marxism analyses the capitalist system, which now dominates the world, as a coherent system of practices of production of things and reproduction of people. But it sees this system as riven by conflicts and contradictions. It involves the exploitation of the vast majority of the population by capital, so class conflict is endemic. The practices of capitalist production and reproduction systematically undermine themselves, resulting in disruption and crises. These open the possibility for popular struggles and collective solutions. Socialism is therefore not merely a moral ideal but grows out of capitalism and people's lives within it. Marxism is 'praxis', a combination of ideas and action.

Geography is an essential part of Marxism. All social practice happens in and through the space of the earth's surface. Whereas most mainstream social science ignores space, human geography highlights the roles of space in society. Because Marxism is materialist and historical, it is intrinsically concerned with space, not as a thing in itself but as an aspect or 'moment' of the social whole.

In section 2 I set out some basic principles of Marxism in a rather terse or 'abstract' form. You may find these quite difficult to understand. Their meaning will, I hope, become clearer in section 3, in which I use Marxism to examine four issues of importance in contemporary human geography, and contrast a Marxist approach with mainstream treatments of the issues.

2. Basic Marxist geography

1. Society is an integrated whole, a 'totality'. One can divide this totality into distinct spheres and distinct sets of social relations, but none of these is understandable outside of its place within the whole. Marxism therefore avoids the binary divisions which plague mainstream social science: consciousness/materiality; actors/ structures; discourses/ material life; individuals/ society; nature/ nurture – these are merely aspects of the whole. Similarly, in Marxism the conventional separate disciplines of 'economic-', 'social-', 'cultural-' and 'political-geography' are one. For example, most 'political geography' is shallow because it deals with government, parties and movements in themselves, as if they were a distinct sphere, ignoring their embedding in economy, social life and culture. Put philosophically, whereas in non-Marxist thinking distinct aspects of the society are separately constituted and then *externally* related, in Marxism they constitute each other and are *internally* related to each other and to the totality (Ollman, 1993).

2. All forms of exploitation and social oppression, and all degradations of humans and the Earth's ecology, are a part of the social totality, capitalist society.
3. The essential starting point for analysing capitalism is the reproduction of life through work. This includes both waged work in the formal economy and the unpaid work of reproducing and caring for people in social life. In contemporary high and medium income countries, 90% of the population relies on wages over their lifespan, and are 'workers' in the Marxist sense.
4. In capitalism, firms buy the ability to work, or 'labour power', of workers for a wage. The firm supervises and controls labour within the workplace, so as to produce more value than the wages paid, the process of exploitation. By selling the goods or services produced, firms thereby reap a profit, surplus value. This surplus value is stored by the firm, thus expanding its initial capital. The inherent dynamic of capital is to expand without limit, chewing up more and more of humanity and the ecosystem as it goes (Marx, 1972 ed.).
5. The power of capital over the working class depends in the first place on the suppression of small scale farming and artisan production, and the consequent need to be employed for a wage in order to survive. It also depends on the competition between workers to sell their labour power to capital, including competition organised across divisions of gender, racialised groups, age and location. These social divisions are therefore a crucial contribution to the power of capital over workers, and class relations are a crucial part of these social divisions.
6. The Earth's ecosystem ('Nature') and the built environment ('Second Nature') are necessary aspects of capitalist production and domestic reproduction. At the same time, they are transformed by production and reproduction work. Thus ecological destruction and problems of the built environment are internally related to capital accumulation and class oppression.
7. The spread of capitalist society across the world has involved ever-increasing flows of commodities, money-capital, production facilities and people, corresponding to capital's impulsion to expand without limit. These flows tend to create a unified global society. But these flows seek to use differences in capitalism across the world, and serve to further differentiate territories as much as to equalise them: both 'combined' and 'uneven development'. Uneven development is a product of different changes in basic class relations (for example pre-capitalism to capitalism) and differentiated forms of capital-labour relations (for example disciplinary versus cooperative), all affected by place-specific class struggles. Uneven development also reflects the capitalist class's investment strategies: sometimes to concentrate production to enhance productivity, sometimes to disperse production to lower wages and undermine strong labour organisation (Das, 2017).
8. The state and society (economy and social life) are not two separate systems: the state in capitalist society is embedded in socio-economic life, and arises from society's contradictions. The state is an aspect of class relations, and class struggle runs through it. It is an aspect of capital accumulation, organising crucial aspects of production and reproduction. But by the same token the state is subject to all the contradictions and conflicts of socio-economic life (Das, 2006).
9. Unlike previous class societies, in capitalism the capitalist class (corporations and their shareholders) are institutionally separate from the state (politicians, civil service, the military). This arrangement enables the state to attend to capital accumulation and class relations as a whole (Clarke, 1991). But to achieve its aims the state has to deal with particular corporations and particular sections of the working class, with the danger of corruption, special interest lobbying and clientelism, which undermine the coherence and effectiveness of state intervention. A strong

‘progressive’ state favoured by social democracy (such as was common in the 1950s and 1960s) risks politicising economy and society, from which the state may retreat into weaker regulation, cuts to public services and weaker industrial policy (as under neoliberalism). These contradictions give rise to ever-shifting boundaries between the state, capital and civil society, as seen in recent shifts from government to ‘governance’ (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1996).

10. Capitalism is riven with contradictions (Harvey, 2014). Contradictions are not merely conflicts of interest (the pluralist, social democratic view) but arise from the combination of interdependence and antagonism between logically connected elements of the totality: capitalist processes undermine themselves (Ollman, 1993). One result is chronic crisis tendencies disrupting both productive accumulation and reproduction of people. These crises can reimpose the discipline of value onto workers and divide them, but they can also push workers towards collective action against capital and against the state to the extent that it expresses capital’s logic. As crisis tendencies also disrupt capital, they open fissures for these struggles to go forward.

11. Since exploitation, social oppressions and the destruction of nature are intrinsic to capitalist society, they can only be overcome by a socialist society in which the majority of productive resources are publicly owned, planned and managed collaboratively, and developed democratically. By the same token, socialism can overcome the particular contradictions and crises which arise from the logics of capitalist society.

In the rest of this chapter, I refer to these points as [11] and so on.

3. Marxism for resolving the multiple crises of today

The world today is in crisis. There are multiple visible catastrophes taking place before our eyes, and many which are hidden from view: many parts of the ecosystem; conditions of work, unemployment, poverty; collapse of public services; rightwing-populist authoritarian governments; chronic armed conflicts; the devastation of Covid. Human geographers seek to understand the roots of these problems and find strategies to address them.

Marxism is uniquely well equipped for this task. Most human geography (or ‘critical human geography’) focuses on a particular social, economic, cultural or political problem and proposes progressive policies to ameliorate or solve the problem. But the narrow focus of this work means that the analysis of the problem is superficial and the policies proposed are ineffective or even counter-productive. This is because the problem is not understood within its wider context: the capitalist system as a whole, the accumulation of capital through production, commerce and finance, and the relations between capital and the 90% of the population who have to work for a living [1 to 4]. If analysed in this way, the problem can be seen to be more than contingent, specific and local, but rather to have deep roots in society-wide processes. The progressive policies proposed do not address these roots, and are therefore derailed by them. Connectedly, the policies do not ‘join up’ with other policies, nor form part of an overall strategy to address the oppressions of the capitalist whole. I will illustrate this large claim by considering how human geography usually approaches four important problems, and how Marxism can provide a deeper analysis of and strategy towards them.

Ecological problems and crises

The last 30 years have seen a greatly increased awareness of diverse ecological problems, but also a worsening, sometimes exponential, of these problems, which now threaten the existence of human

and non-human life on Earth. The creation of these disasters by capitalism, and its inability to prevent them, shows the barbaric and irrational nature of this system. This is true of numerous disasters less well known than the climate emergency. For example, air pollution in cities seriously affects 80% of children, causing permanent brain damage, and results in millions of deaths a year from lung disease. Yet this horror scarcely appears in the media, let alone governments' policies.

Many ecological campaigners, most governments, and much social science and human geography, see the origin of these problems and the solution to them in two ways:-

(a) Humans wish to dominate nature, and are indifferent to the integrity and beauty of nature. They lack knowledge and understanding of large scale eco-systems, and do not think about the well-being of humans and the natural world in the future. The solution is then to educate the public about ecological deterioration.

(b) Firms are unable, or unwilling, to think about their 'externalities'. The solution is to nudge investment and consumption into better paths through state regulation, subsidies and taxation.

Marxists critique these two approaches:-

(a) Blaming the population ignores the social position of workers within capitalism [4]. They lack knowledge of the impacts of production on nature because they lack any control over production decisions. Many consumption decisions such as use of cars are dictated by the goods and services developed over long periods by capital. The pleasures of consumption are compensation for workers' disempowerment in production.

(b) Many government policies are too weak (e.g. too many carbon credits) or too narrowly focused (e.g. not counting carbon of imported goods and air travel) to be effective. Technological solutions are often themselves heavily polluting (diesel cars, electric cars). Governments do not act strongly against the interests of business for the following reasons:-

1. In capitalism, jobs and the supply of goods and services depends on the profitability of capital, as does government revenue [3,4]. Governments therefore challenge corporate profits at their peril. For example, to tackle urban air pollution would mean reducing the profits of the car, petrol and building industries.

2. Polluting products and processes are embedded in massive fixed capital (machinery, transport systems, buildings) which, once installed, are extremely hard to change. Urban air pollution, for example, is embedded in the entire built environment of cities and means of transport; tackling it requires enormous new investment, and complex politics to deal with the immediate losers.

3. A rational response to this problem would be for every new product and process to be examined for its possible ecological and health impacts *before* it is invested in, and damaging ones banned. But no states have ever done this comprehensively, because a central dynamic of capitalism is product and process innovation for competitive advantage and expansion [4]. Thus in the recent past dozens of new damaging commodities have been introduced or have greatly expanded without any challenge, from palm oil to SUVs to space tourism.

4. Workers in polluting industries usually resist policies which would wind them down. To avoid this resistance, those workers need to be re-employed in new industries *in situ*. But this requires the state to become a large scale investor in industry, thus limiting the freedom of capital.

5. The consumption of the super rich, almost entirely unnecessary luxury, accounts for around 30% of pollution. To address this obscenity would require a 99% reduction in their income, only achievable by social control of the corporations whose profits provide their income. But this is socialism.

6. Both the problem of workers' ignorance and the problems of controlling capital can only be addressed by the collective organisation of the whole population to control major investment decisions. But capitalist rule is based on the fragmentation of workers [5]. And popular collective control of investment negates capitalist control, the very basis of capitalism [4].

The problems of ecological destruction, then, are rooted in capital accumulation without limit [2, 4, 6], and the disempowerment of workers within capitalism [4, 5,7] (O'Connor, 1998; Foster, Clark and York, 2011; Moore, 2015). The ecological movement cannot succeed unless it is based on the collective organisation of the 90% against capital, to impose ecological necessity over profits. The end point of this politics is the collective organisation of society for the good of humanity and nature, that is, socialism [11].

The search for a 'good capitalism'

A large part of human geography consists of a search for a 'good capitalism', a 'high road' in contrast to the 'low road' of neoliberal capitalism dominant in the contemporary world. 'Good capitalism' seeks to foster enterprises and collections of enterprises which are productive and innovative, competitive in selling their goods and services, provide good jobs with workforce participation, are locally embedded, and which are stable in the long term. Since the 1970s, popular forms have been the social economy (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011) and pragmatic forms of intervention and coordination at the local level (Gough and Eisenschitz, 1996). A very popular form of 'good capitalism', much discussed by human geographers, has been the policy of fostering industrial districts: agglomerations of small to medium enterprises in a locality or region with close mutual linkages, using 'flexible specialisation' methods to produce varied and changing products with a skilled labour force. This can take the form of an 'innovative', 'high tech', or 'thick regulation' region. All these approaches promise good, stable and involving jobs in a capitalist environment. Politically, they are social democratic (centre-left), an alternative to neoliberalism (rightwing).

Projects of 'good capitalism' can have local successes, at least for a while. But these are always unstable because they cannot escape the capitalist pressures towards cost cutting, deskilling of labour, intensification of work, and mobility of capital [7]. For example, the industrial districts in central Italy, held up as a great example, have been severely weakened in recent decades by removal of production to Eastern Europe (Hadjimichalis, 2006). Moreover, not every locality can pursue this path. Most world industries are dominated by corporations which use low skill labour with no participation or influence, and sometimes ecologically destructive methods.; many localities have no choice but to accept such production. 'Good capitalism' therefore does not provide a strategy for the whole world (Gough, 1996; Eisenschitz and Gough, 1996). This requires the removal of the economic power of capital and an economy run in its entirety by democratic assemblies of working people and citizens [11]. 'Good capitalism', free of illusions in its generalisability, and with socialist vision, can be a stepping stone in this direction [10].

Social oppressions and capitalism

Since the late 1960s the women's and black movements have led to a massive social science literature analysing sexism and racism in their many forms, including their geographical forms. Some of this literature has been Marxist. But the majority in the last two decades has been within the framework first developed by the sociologist Max Weber. Each social oppression has distinct origins, and these are separate from class. 'Intersectionality' is concerned with the overlaps between these. Opposing and overcoming social oppressions other than class is understood as having two distinct aspects, what Fraser (1995) terms 'recognition' (respectful attitudes, egalitarian ideology) and 'redistribution' (money). The political implications are:-

- (i) Each socially oppressed group has to fight its own particular fight (though possibly with contingent, specific and temporary alliances).
- (ii) The fight for 'recognition' can be carried out as a series of ideological/cultural struggles, with no particular connection to economic or class struggles. This has largely been the case in the recent global movements of the women's marches against Trump, MeToo and Black Lives Matter.
- (iii) The economic disadvantage of socially-oppressed groups can be rectified by redistribution of income to the specific group, usually by the state. Racial economic injustice is thus addressed through quotas of jobs, money for black or women's business formation, or restitution.

Marxism provides a very different approach to understanding social oppressions and combatting them. Gender oppression is rooted in the internal relations and mutual dependency of the waged and unpaid spheres of work, the economy and social life [3] (Vogel, 1983). Gender relations *meld* sexist, misogynist and homophobic attitudes, the gender division of labour, and the low income and lack of resources of women; these cannot be unravelled from each other. Combatting the oppression of women and LGBT people therefore involves a simultaneous, inextricable fight against *both* ideology *and* material deprivation, not two distinct struggles. And the struggle against women's material disadvantages cannot be achieved through *redistribution* of resources from men to women, but requires a fundamental change in *social relations* - the abolition of the distinction between waged and unwaged work and gender divisions of labour.

Similarly, racism arises from the uneven and combined development of the world economy: the poverty of the Majority World, and the consequent migrations from and within it impelled by both those migrants' needs for employment and capital's profitable exploitation of their labour power [7] (Sivanandan, 1990). Racial disadvantage within, say, the US, is produced by the *combination* of racist attitudes and ideologies *with* the exploitation of all workers, and the inadequacy of housing and public services for all workers. The struggle against these economic aspects is also in the interest of white workers. The struggle against racism is then not for a zero-sum redistribution from white to black workers, nor for whites to 'admit their privilege', but a common struggle against capital which acknowledges and combats the particularly dire situation of many racialised groups.

The theoretical point, then, is that class and social oppressions are not separate, parallel hierarchies, as in Weberian, dual system or intersectionality theory, but rather *constitute* each other at the deepest level [1] (A.Davis, 1981; McNally, 2015).

The multiple problems of housing

Housing is a major topic in human geography and urban studies. In every country in the world there are acute problems of housing quality and price, and in cities in the Majority World most people live in slums or grossly inadequate housing. Poor housing has enormous negative impacts

on social life, physical and mental health, and on the ability to obtain and hold onto jobs. In turn, housing has major impacts onto the supply of labour to business, and can have major impacts on the financial system [1] (Rolnick, 2019).

The literature on housing in high income countries is focused on (i) house prices by geography, and their determinants; (ii) the allocation of the given housing stock to different income groups (middle class, working class, the poor) and ethnic groups; and (iii) homelessness. But underlying these issues are deeper processes analysed by Marxists: how workers reproduce themselves within capitalism, the capitalist production of housing, the private ownership of land, and the role of finance [3, 6].

Whereas before capitalism most people built their own housing, people now have to pay for it out of wages. Housing is the most expensive single item of consumption, and this cost becomes relatively higher over time. Despite the development of industrialised methods, house building remains labour intensive and productivity rises slowly, so in the long term the cost of housing tends to rise compared with other goods. The total price of housing in urban areas tends to rise even faster because of ever-rising land prices, as landowners reap profit from urban agglomeration. The result is a permanent shortage of housing relative to need.

The high cost of housing, and workers' lack of capital to buy a home outright, has resulted in two main tenures: renting from private landlords, and freehold ownership using a mortgage. Private renting has systematic problems. Housing shortage enables landlords to charge rents which give them a high rate of profit, to give insecure tenancies, and to provide a low-quality fabric. Working class pressure may sometimes be successful in getting national or local government to regulate in order to lower rents, provide security, and force repairs to be done. But where this regulation is successful, investment in privately-rented housing declines, and shortage becomes worse. As so often in capitalism, flows of private capital undermine state regulation [8].

Partly because of these problems, during the 20C, owner-occupied housing increased in many countries. It was promoted as a way for workers to become 'little capitalists', and provided the possibility of capital gains in the medium term. The reality is in many cases the opposite, as house owners are forced to work long hours or for more years in order to pay the mortgage and for repairs. Home owners also become vulnerable to the vagaries of the (increasingly international) finance system. A rise in interest rates can make mortgage repayments unaffordable; but, in a double whammy, house prices drop and so a sale does not pay off the mortgage ('negative equity'). This can then rebound onto the finance system, as in the 2007 world financial crash, which was initiated by mortgage defaults in the US. In countries where owner occupation dominates, housing became a major barrier to people moving to more prosperous areas, as these have higher house prices; and workers who grew up in these areas are forced to move out in order to buy a home; this then causes recruitment problems for businesses [3]. Where states promote owner-occupation by giving subsidies, these typically lead to rises in house prices; for buyers, these more than cancel out benefit the subsidy, and waste public money in the process. Markets again sabotage state initiatives [8].

These problems with both private renting and owner-occupation have produced pressure on the state from workers to provide affordable housing, sometimes supported by employers who wish to reduce their wage costs and recruitment problems. States may therefore commission and own housing for rent; because governments do not need to make a profit, can borrow at low interest rates, and can spread rents over their whole housing stock, rents are lower than in the private rental sector. Public housing is nevertheless constrained by the need to purchase land, and by pressures to

limit state debt. State provision comes up against political pressure from house builders and private landlords, and from workers seeking to own property [9].

Overall, then, housing causes chronic problems for both workers and employers in high income countries. But the logics of profit on capital (money, buildings, land), and the limitations of the state in capitalism, prevent the problems from being solved [10].

Much of the literature on housing in the Majority World has focused on self-build or squatter housing, including the sociology of squatter settlements and resistance to eviction. Marxists have put squatter settlements in a wider context, by analysing their roots in the waged economy and the ways in which the poor survive (M.Davis, 2006). They have argued that self-build housing has been in the interests of business because it allows wages to be held down. Marxists have also analysed the roots of the chronic failure to build decent formal housing for the majority, in the profit requirements of building and land capital in relation to low income renters or purchasers. These barriers are, however, sometimes countered by flows of capital into the property sector because of low returns elsewhere (Harvey, 2014), by governments' wish to create new opportunities for the building industry, or by clientelism [8,9] (Celik, 2020).

I hope that these four examples suggest the usefulness of a Marxist approach, both in analysing problems and in developing effective strategies to address them. A Marxist approach can both deepen your understanding and provide a guide to becoming politically active around issues that matter to you.

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