theories of international relations: radical approaches

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our starting point: *marxism*
why marxism?

we need to begin with marxism for a simple reason: it is the source, either directly or indirectly, of essentially all radical (and post-positive) approaches in the social sciences, including international relations.

- it is, therefore, an essential foundation, but it is also seriously—and frequently—misunderstood.
  - we can readily see this in the writings of even very established scholars …
... as stephen walt wrote, marxism and neomarxism were “largely discredited before the Cold War ended. The extensive history of economic and military cooperation among the advanced industrial powers showed that capitalism did not inevitably lead to conflict. The bitter schisms that divided the communist world showed that socialism did not always promote harmony.”

marxism, in short, is dead
(and has been dead for a long time)
what is Marxism?

before we can determine whether Walt is right, we need to understand what Marxism is (and is not),* and what it says about international relations …

* most the material here is not covered in the textbook; in addition, I draw from my other lectures on this topic, so my apologies to students who have seen some of this material before
what is **marxism**?

**starting points**

1. marxism is a **theory of history**: it’s a theory of how history unfolds and of the primary forces that shape history

2. marxism is a **theory of capitalism**: it’s a theory about the dynamics, logic and implications of capitalism

3. marxism is a quintessentially **structural theory**, but unlike realism, it is a **historical** structural theory

4. marxism is **not** a theory of international relations per se, but it can tell us a lot about the motivations and actions of states
what marxism is: a **theory of history**

- marxism’s theory of history is premised on the concept of **historical materialism**
  - basic **meaning**: “history” is defined or shaped by the material (or economic) basis of society; moreover, as the material basis of society changes, so does history
what marxism is: a **theory of history**

put another way, marxism tells us that …

**material forces** are the “**engine of history**”
what marxism is: more on historical materialism

- historical materialism is based on a fundamental “fact”: in order for human beings to survive from generation to generation, it is necessary for them to produce and reproduce the material requirements of life

- this basic insight has profound implications: for one, it tells us that societies are governed by the forces of production

- key implication: those who control the forces of production, control society
what marxism is: back to history

- **history** is a movement from **one historical stage** (or era) to another
- each historical era is different, each has its **own dynamic** and **logic** based on the dominant mode of production: primitive society was one stage, feudalism another, and …
... capitalism is the latest stage of historical development

- capitalism, however, is also just a stage, which means that it, too, will come to an end—eventually
what marxism is: a **theory of history**

an important **implication**

- Marx also argued that, with a particular historical era, material forces directly shape **every significant** aspect of human society, from culture, to the political system, to the legal and judicial systems, to the educational system, and so on.

- This view is encapsulated in Marx’s concept of **base** and **superstructure**

keep in mind: in this conception, the **base** is more important than the superstructure
the educational system of capitalism is designed to produce a mass of good, disciplined “worker bees”

religion is the “opium of the masses”; designed to keep workers docile and obedient

“the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”

“the oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them”

the justice system protects “private property” first; police, courts serve the interests of the dominant class

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the justice system protects “private property” first; police, courts serve the interests of the dominant class
most importantly, the base creates a particular type of political authority—the modern state—that is focused on protecting, defending, and promoting the interests of the dominant class within society: the capitalist class.

we’ll return to this issue shortly
what marxism is: a **theory of capitalism**

marx’s views on are not as simple as is generally thought; indeed, while he was extremely critical of capitalism, in one respect, marx might also have said …

I ♥ **capitalism**

how is this possible?
what marxism is: a **theory of capitalism**

- marx didn’t really love capitalism, of course, but he understood that capitalism was the **most productive** and **efficient** economic system in human history

- **key point:** it was capitalism’s productive capacity, in marx’s eyes, that would make **communism possible**, for communism requires a material base that would allow for the emergence of a society based on the principle of “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”

*Only capitalism is productive enough to fulfill all of our needs, to make it possible for an equalitarian society. This is why I love capitalism!*
what marxism is: a **theory of capitalism**

- yet, while marx understood capitalism as tremendously productive, he also understood that it had certain **inherent flaws** and contradictions that made it unsuitable as the ultimate foundation for human society

what were these flaws?
what marxism is: a theory of capitalism

- the most salient flaw: while tremendously productive, capitalism is unavoidably oppressive and exploitative
- the oppression and exploitation of capitalism are most clearly seen in one of its most salient manifestation: the division of society into distinct social groups or classes
- marx talked mainly about the division between _______ capitalists and _______ workers, but other marxists have identified additional divisions …
another view of class divisions in capitalist society

combined with notion of base and superstructure

capital sits on top of the pyramid, even above the leaders of states

this is one salient point of difference between marxism and realism ...
what marxism is: a theory of capitalism

- for marx, capitalism as an economic system depends on the ability of the capitalist class to exploit the working class—to extract surplus value for the labor power of workers

- indeed, the extraction of surplus value—i.e. “profit”—is what makes the capitalist system go ‘round

it is important to note that marx did not consider capitalism unique with regard to class exploitation: in fact, to marx, all previous economic systems were even more exploitative, unequal and oppressive
what marxism is: a *theory of capitalism*

the *logic* of capitalism

- to understand the logic of exploitation and oppression, we need to understand that capitalism is a system based on *profit*: capitalists must accumulate capital to stay in business, to survive *as* capitalists—this is an unyielding logic of capitalism

- further we must understand how *profit* is made or how capital is accumulated

so, how is capital *accumulated*?
what marxism is: a theory of capitalism

the basics of capital accumulation

- stepping up the intensity of work, so that with same labor power and machinery, more goods are produced (i.e., increasing productivity)
- keeping the costs of production low (including or especially wages paid to workers) relative to the value that is produced (other costs: taxes, regulations, real estate, capital equipment)
- creating new efficiencies through technological innovation--e.g., assembly line. “just-in-time” delivery system, communication revolution
what marxism is: a theory of capitalism

the logic of capitalism: competition

- another key element in the logic of capitalism is competition
- in a world without competition, capitalism would grind to a halt (consider what happened in the former soviet union)
- yet, it is because of competition that capitalism must exploit and oppress workers

consider the tale of the “kind-hearted” capitalist
theories of international relations
radical and post-positivist approaches

marxism and international relations
marxism and international relations

- so far, we have learned that the world, according to marxism, is dominated by the capitalist class, who control not only the means of production, but the instruments of governance in their respective societies

  - these instruments include, most prominently, the state and all its agencies (e.g., the military, the police, the courts), but also the media, educational institutions, dominant religious organizations, etc. (more on next slide)

image: “to protect and serve” … the capitalist class and their interests!
Marxism and international relations

- To understand IR, in short, one must recognize that much of what happens in the world, domestically, internationally and globally, is an expression of the interests and power of the dominant classes.

- In this view, Marxists tell us that the state is a mere puppet of the dominant class!

- There is no such thing as the national interest; there is only class interest.
marxism and international relations

- marxism also tells us that capitalists, while often in competition with one another, can and do form transnational alliances: global capitalism means an alliance of globalized capitalists (so there, stephen walt!)

- critics of marxism do not appreciate the power of capital to adapt: capitalist wars proved too destructive, so capital developed new strategies of domination (it is fair to say that early marxists also misunderstood this point)
marxism and international relations

- Critics of marxism also do not understand that the emergence of ostensibly “communist” regimes in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere was, in large, measure an illusion: remember, the “stages of history”

- Still, the attempt to create an alternative to capitalism could not be tolerated: in this view, the Cold War, the extraordinary postwar alliance of capitalist powers, the continued use of military power in the third world (especially by the United States), the creation and development of the CIA, and so on can all be clearly explained from a marxist perspective.
marxism and international relations: some caveats

- most contemporary marxists are careful not to reduce everything to class interest and power.

Most recognize, for example, that states are not purely instruments of the dominant class, but must at some level, exercise relative autonomy from dominant class interests (in other words, states sometimes act in their own interests and occasionally in the interests of ordinary citizens).
marxism and international relations: some caveats

- in the complex capitalist societies of today, marxists also understand that class interests are rarely defined in black and white; thus even among capitalists, interests can diverge in dramatic ways…

  this means that state policy may, at times, appear to be inconsistent and even contradictory—it may even appear to be driven by non-class forces (but appearances can be deceiving)
marxism: closing remarks

- as a theoretical framework, marxism has **enduring significance**

- karl marx may be dead and buried, but marxism is **decidedly not dead**: some of its “predictions” were wrong, but the same could be said for realism and other major theories

- indeed, one can argue that marxism has an awful lot of things “right”: marx predicted the **collapse of the soviet union** and china’s embrace of capitalism before either country existed!
marxism: **closing remarks**

moreover, when one looks around the world today, one can find plenty of concrete examples to demonstrate the continuing **validity** of marxist analysis...

- the **failure of the soviet union** was, in an important sense, “predicted” by marx and also by contemporary marxists

- the **continuing exploitation** and poverty of much of the world: 2.7 billion people live on less than $2.00 a day, and wealth is becoming more and more concentrated—in 2002, according to the world bank, the **richest 50 people (!)** in north america and europe had the same income as poorest 2.7 billion people **combined**
marxism: closing remarks

- the **decline of living standards** for workers in “advanced” capitalist economies due, in part, to outsourcing, downsizing, transnational mergers, and the like; the **income gap** is also growing in the richest countries, and **while the rich get richer** …

- everyone else **fights in wars** started by the rich and for the benefit of the rich (when’s the last time you saw an army of CEOs/COOs, wealthy investors, and corporate board members take up arms?)
marxism: **closing** remarks

- In sum, marxism remains a relevant and importance perspective for understanding and explaining international relations.

- This said, marxist inspired analysis has never stopped moving forward: one of the most influential new theories is known as **world systems** theory.