

# Does Marxism Offer a Viable Basis for Analysing the Causes of War?

Written by James Whitcomb Riley

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JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MAR 16 2008

*"I decided to study Marx really thoroughly...I had used him, I had had to use him, but it was a very superficial knowledge that I had. So, now I thought I really must examine whether his theory could be proved."* <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]-->-Karl Popper

Marxism grants social and political theorists a most realistic, dynamic, and comprehensive framework that allows the study of the causes of war in its 'totality'; which crosses the boundaries of each theory of international relations and encompasses the political, social, and economic aspects of the causes of war.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[2]<!--[endif]--> Marxist theory applied in conjunction with the 'three levels' of analysis, which are, the individual, the state, and the international system, is relevant and significant to the study of international relations. In particular, Marxism as an analytical tool has been able to evolve within and adapt to the altering environment of international relations, especially with concerns to global conflict. An examination of Marxism, from its rudimentary forms and its progression into its modern day applications proves that Marxism offers an extremely viable basis for analysing the causes of war.

Marxism accepts that capitalism, hence, the capitalist mode of production gives birth to two classes in society, the owning bourgeoisie and the working proletariat, which are inherently antagonistic towards each other's existence and prone to class conflict. Also, the capitalist states represents the interests of the bourgeoisie, and as the ruling class, the bourgeoisie controls the means of production, which is basically the states material power and economic foundations. Marxists embrace the materialist conception of history, which puts forth the idea that historically crisis and change between classes are inevitable; capitalism is just a means to society's economic development and socialism as opposed to capitalism is the ultimate goal and only through revolution will this social evolution be realized. Kenneth Waltz offers his interpretation, "War is the external manifestation of the internal class struggle, which makes the problem of war coeval with the existence of capitalist states".<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[3]<!--[endif]--> These basic tenets of Marxism offer the underpinnings of the analytical framework Marxists use to view conflict in world politics.

In addition, Marx and Engels' idea of dialectical materialism offers an extremely valuable approach to the individual level of analysis of conflict and warfare in world politics.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> Historically, events that have culminated into conflicts of social forces between one man and another, one class against another, or one society against another have all been driven by man's material needs. Material needs encompass any resources, the ability to exploit all resources, and essential physical security of the resources and these capabilities. Therefore, economic interests on a micro level, as well as a macro level, have always influenced the individual's actions and the actions of any collective group of individuals. For example, if landowner A is compelled to expand his/her territorial domain in quest of furthering agricultural land capacity, but peasant B wishes to continue exploiting this area and providing for himself/herself then these two actors will eventually clash. Hence, Marxism sees the contending actors as precursors to the fundamental class struggle and this struggle as the precursor to all out war and revolution. The Revolution of 1848 briefly established the Paris Commune and in terms of dialectical materialism this premature quasi-communist revolution serves as an early example of the perpetually increasing tensions between classes of individuals and the conflicts that result from the pursuit of self-interests.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]-->

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Furthermore, Marxist theory helps explain the state level of analysis, which examines the manner in which states act. Vladimir Lenin offers insight as to how socialism views the interests of capitalist states and their tendencies towards conflict with other states. Lenin proposed that class struggle within states materializes into war between states because capitalist states are bound to clash in pursuit of profits and political advantage. Lenin describes this type of state interaction as Imperialism. Michael Doyle articulates this with his statement, "Imperialism, as Thucydides had long before explained, was a rational strategy to enhance security, prestige, and interests (trade, population, territory, resources) when the costs of conquest were less than the gain." So, during the expansion of colonialism and annexation this perspective could explain the reasoning behind why states invaded and controlled other state's resources by coercive means. The capitalist states have the means to subject foreign nations to their rule; hence, capitalist states may bolster their national economy's interests and extend the capabilities of their power. Marxism views the causes of forcible actions taking by the capitalist states as inherent to capitalism's need to infiltrate new markets while securing the perpetuation of its interests and existence.

Subsequently, Marxism in its modern day applications allows theorists to consider the implications of the nature of the international system level and the eventuality of conflict on a global scale. Marxism explores the super-structural causes of war within the global capitalist system, which views socio-political conflicts as events bred by the very structure of interaction among states. As Hobden and Jones emphasize, "Moreover, it is the location of these states and classes within the structure of the capitalist world-economy that constrains their behavior and determines patterns of interaction and domination between them". In particular, Marxism accepts the fact that there are numerous established states and that there's no overarching authority to arbitrate conflicts and that there is an incentive for each state to autonomously pursue its interests. These interests on an international level are basically driven by states' material needs and imply there will be inevitable collisions resulting in war. Wallerstein's world system theory puts forth the idea of the system being broken up into three areas; the core or mature capitalist states, the semi-periphery or developing states, and the periphery or lesser-developed states. The core has invested interests in advantageously positioning itself opposed to the semi-periphery and the semi-periphery does in contrast to the periphery, thus, this form of posturing leads to outbreaks of conflict. Lenin explains these sharp antagonisms clearly:

'Therefore, in the realities of the capitalist system...alliances, no matter what form they may assume, whether of one imperialist coalition against another, or of a general alliances embracing all the imperialist powers, are inevitably nothing more than a "truce" in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the grounds for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on one and the same basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics.'

Socio-political and economic factors may determine the likelihood of both war and peace between nations; however, these factors will always ensure conflict on some level and to some degree. So, Marxism proposes that on an international level states interact within a global capitalist system, which causes the eventful mishap of both military aggression and reluctant economic cooperation.

Nevertheless, international relations theorists criticize Marxism as a viable analytical tool partly because of the failure of socialist states to abolish the capitalist's wars and also, the inability of the class struggle to commence in a world revolution as predicted by Marx. Marxists-Leninists have always considered war and thus world revolution as a necessary means towards a utopian end even though this catalytic crisis hasn't been realized. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union does not discredit Marxism as a theory. In hindsight, many Marxists may view Communist Russia as a socialist experiment not its realization; more like a mature and longer lasting version of the Paris Commune during the Revolution of 1848, while other Marxists did not view the Soviet Union as absolutely Marxist in general.

Marxists may propose that Stalinist despotism of the Soviet Union had doomed international communism and any

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real prospects of a Marxist led Socialist state from its beginning. Stalin's legacy of terror and bureaucratic repression allowed leaders from Khrushchev to Gorbachev to stray further and further from "true" Marxism through repression, then revisions, and then reforms, which made a collapse of the Soviet Union more likely. The revolution of 1917 wasn't as Marx's had envisioned the advent of communism. Many could argue the Soviet Union's time was not right and its leadership was at fault. Amos Yoder offers an example of this logic when he writes, "Gorbachev broke with Leninist tradition" that "led to erosion of Communist one-party control and to the break up of the empire..."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]--> He further comments, "the communists themselves did not take their ideology seriously...this erosion of ideology...was of major importance..."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[16]<!--[endif]--> To Marxist this was viewed as a historical tragedy, but in a sense the beginning of a new chapter. This new chapter makes Marxism even more pertinent in the post cold war order. The late Francois Furet epitomizes this belief:

But the end of the Soviet world in no way alters the call for another society, and for that very reason we have every reason to believe that the massive failure of communism will continue to enjoy attenuating circumstances in world opinion, and perhaps even renewed admiration.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]-->

In that vein, we may witness how other so-called communist controlled governments like the Peoples Republic of China have heeded the morals and lessons from the Soviets deviation from Marxism-Leninism. Long after Mao condemned Khrushchev for discrediting Stalin's crimes against humanity the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party is to revive and promote the teachings of Marxism. As of January 2006, "Cheng Enfu, executive president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' new Academy of Marxism, said Communist Party (CCP) leaders have never been so keen to push Marxism forward."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[18]<!--[endif]--> The fact that China is continuously experiencing unprecedented economic growth and is increasingly being looked at as a model for development by other neighboring nations is critical to the existing world order and re-invigorates Marxist predictions that the tensions between capitalist and socialist state are ever looming. According to this report, "Beijing aimed to modernise Marxism by building a theoretical system...this would contribute to advance and modernise the ideology worldwide."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[19]<!--[endif]--> If the CCP sees itself as the last bastion of hope for the Marxist camp and the role that China plays in international relations continues to grow, then the value of studying Marxism may help determine in which direction this nation is headed and the possibility of conflict between the CCP and the West. Regardless of its shortcomings in predicting the fallibility of the leadership and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxism should not be thrown into the historical dustbin because the legacy of the cold war lives on.

Moreover, Marxist analysis is still alive and critically useful in examining the driving forces behind non-state actors that make up popular nationalist movements and terrorist organizations. For example, John B. Judis exclaims, "Al Qaeda and its terrorist network were the latter-day products of the nationalist reaction to Western imperialism. These Islamic movements shared the same animus toward the West and Israel that older nationalist and Marxist did".<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[20]<!--[endif]--> Marxism influences many of the more violent radical political movements of today, like, Sendero Luminoso of Peru.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[21]<!--[endif]--> Also, what are the implications of newly elected Hamas officials in Palestine? Like the Bolsheviks were, Hamas is a well recognized terrorist organization, which might have gained more political legitimacy due to the elections. So, by using the framework of Marxism we may better analyze and anticipate the implications of these types of organizations and conflicts. Marxism presents theorists with a useful approach to analyzing the causes and implications of the 'War on Terrorism' and pre-emptive intervention, as in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Saddam's Iraq.

In conclusion, Marxism as an analytical tool may be more relevant than ever because norms that shaped world politics are changing drastically, and neither, Realism or Liberalism provide the myriad of compliant frameworks of comprehending these conflicts as Marxism does. Marxism sees Realism's emphasis on state actors and power as too narrow for an all-inclusive analysis of the causes of war and Liberalism's contentions that world politics bounded by economic cooperation is the path to perpetual peace and end of war as politically naïve. Marxism is more realistic in terms of the hidden truths that influence and instigate state's actions, which include social, political, and economic factors simultaneously.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[22]<!--[endif]--> War is a global economic phenomenon that in truth is in humanities' worst interests, on the one hand, and regrettably benefits few on the other. A basic cost-benefit analysis would leave some guessing as to why states go to war, but Marxism gives those still guessing a ground zero to build an analysis upon and the ability to anticipate the causes of war.

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]--> Bosetti (1997), p. 18; A response by Karl Popper, an established critic of Marxism, to a question asked by Giancarlo Bosetti.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[2]<!--[endif]--> Hobden and Jones (2001), p.204; 'First, all the theorists discussed in this chapter share with Marx the view that the social world should be analysed as a totality'.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[3]<!--[endif]--> Waltz (2001), p. 126; Waltz also states, 'The component parts of the Marxist analysis are so well known that it is necessary only to state them in summary form'.

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> Neumann (1971), p. 156; Neumann states, 'What Marx and Engels called their dialectical approach to historical phenomena is nothing but this all-inclusive and dynamic view of the socio-political forces at work in the modern world'.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]--> Neumann (1971), p. 106; Neumann states, 'In light of such an interpretation, the rise and fall of popular movements of 1848 were in the last analysis determined and conditioned by economic causes'.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[6]<!--[endif]--> Lenin (1915), p. 95; Lenin states, 'We (Socialist)...understand the inevitable connection between wars and the class struggle within a country; we understand wars cannot be abolished unless classes are abolished...'

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[7]<!--[endif]--> Doyle (1997), p. 343

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[8]<!--[endif]--> Judis (2004), p. 55; Judis states, 'Imperialism endured during the Cold War, but as a subtext of the struggle between the free world and communism'.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[9]<!--[endif]--> Judis (2004), p. 55; In reference to the Spanish American War of 1898, Woodrow Wilson's conflict with Mexico's General Huerta's role in the assassination of Mexico's President in 1913, and the role of America in overthrowing the government in Iran and restoring the shah in 1953, Judis states, 'Washington sought to dominate these countries' economies and keep friendly governments in power—through quiet subversion or, if necessary, outright military intervention'.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[10]<!--[endif]--> Hobden and Jones (2001), p. 202-206

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[11]<!--[endif]--> Waltz (2001), p. 159

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[12]<!--[endif]--> Doyle (1997), p. 485

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[13]<!--[endif]--> Lenin (1916), p. 9

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[14]<!--[endif]--> Earle (1971), p. 329; Earle states, 'Soviet Leaders since Lenin have constantly warned that...war between...states was to be expected and prepared for.'

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]--> Yoder (1993), p. 50

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[16]<!--[endif]--> Yoder (1993), p. 250

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]--> Furet (1999), p. 502

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[18]<!--[endif]--> Huang (2006), p. 6

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[19]<!--[endif]--> Huang (2006), p.6

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[20]<!--[endif]--> Judis (2004), p. 56

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[21]<!--[endif]--> Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) is a left-wing insurgent group based in South America and is well known for its brutal attacks on the government of Peru.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[22]<!--[endif]--> Hobden and Jones (2001), p. 202

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*Written by: James Riley  
Written at: Kings College London  
Date written: 2005*