

Article for Kulturshock

## **Marxism and relativism: Their different foundation and application**

*"Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies?"* - [Mao Zedong, 1963.](#)

This article refutes the contemporary academic critique of Marxism while introducing the meaning and history of Marxism as a theoretical paradigm. The article's latter half applies the methodological insights of Marxism to critique the paradigm of theoretical relativism.

### **Marxism has been misunderstood.**

It is often thought that Marxism is an antiquated or dogmatic school of thought that somehow passed away in the last century, that it collapsed due to its own weight, stemming from many inadequacies and disabilities inherent in it. Socialism or communism could not be realized, it was a too far fetched idea without connection with reality, it is said. All attempts of realizing these "Utopian" ideals were all terrible mistakes that only led to historically unprecedented dehumanization, suffering and death of millions upon millions.

Not only were the leaders of socialism wrong, when they "put their far fetched Utopian goals above immediate moral standards", also the theoreticians, the writers, intellectuals, not to mention Marx and Engels themselves were all wrong, when they simply reproduced erroneous traditions of eurocentrism, modernism, orientalism, universalism, positivism etc. But their gravest mistake was their Marxism itself. No other position is as erroneous and laughable as Marxism, with its bold (and unrealistic) ambition to liberate all of humanity.

If you resonate with some of the above statements, I recommend you to first study what Marxism is by reading texts by many of the [Marxist thinkers themselves](#). And secondly to study the history of socialism, preferably not only from anti-communist writers but also from non-bourgeois sources.

To get things straight, Marxism is not any more an ideology<sup>1</sup>, than positivism, relativism, Confucianism, Aristotelianism, Cartesianism, Freudianism, Foucauldianism etc. are ideologies: They are primarily theoretical scientific paradigms, or traditions of thought, and secondly only then ideologies, in as much as comprehensive thought traditions inevitably seep out to the general consciousness of the people, and thus becomes varied forms of ideologies that can go under a few terms.

### **Utopianism: Marxist or liberal?**

In reality, Marxism is not utopian, it does not simply put an utopian idea of how society should be organized up, and brutally destroys, transforms and forbids everything that does not live up to the requirements of this utopian ideal. Marxism is not utopianism, in fact Marx and Engels themselves put a lot of effort into critiquing [what they called the utopian socialists](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, conflating Marxism to positivism, eurocentrism, etc. is as wrong as simply conflating relativism with nihilism.

While proponents of liberalism or capitalist democracy critique Marxism for being utopian, we should ask: Isn't the radical abstract ideal of a free market, entirely an utopianism itself? On the one hand liberals accuse Marxists of putting an ideal before reality, on the other hand it is entirely liberals themselves who commit this mistake.

The reason why is simple: their way of understanding is trapped in idealism -- the reliance on ideas rather than objective material realities as the source of knowledge. In this sense, liberalism is still stuck in a mode of epistemology that belongs to the early 19th century.

Liberalism just as capitalism is a dead man walking, a zombie still haunting humanity today, long been surpassed by scientific, technological, social and economical advancements. Materialism, brought in by the advancement in the natural sciences, has yet to be fully accepted by bourgeois social sciences.

### **The idealism and actual meaning of socialism**

But what about Marxism? Isn't the idea of communism the biggest idealism of them all? The truth is that Marxism cannot entirely escape ideas, and neither should it or any other good mode of thinking. The difference however is what primacy one's epistemology relies on: Is ideas or reality that is most important? Is it idealism or materialism?

Marxism puts forward the guiding idea of socialism, but it does so only in the light of the existing reality, termed capitalism. The idea of socialism is something that should help us move beyond the limitations of capitalism. Socialism only makes sense to us if we are able to understand capitalism, because the very meaning of socialism is at its very essence itself just the negation of capitalism.

Socialism is not a fixed form of governance, or a particular political system. Socialism is the post-capitalist mode of organizing production where political and economic power is not in the hands of a small group of people, but in the hand of the vast majority of people --- the same vast majority that under capitalism is denied political power, and whose labor is exploited for the sake of the minority. With the understanding of socialism clarified, who would really want to be against it?

Marxism, without the imperative of socialism, ceases to be Marxism. The moment socialism is abandoned, any post-capitalist option is also abandoned, and what instead is accepted is a continuation, or a reform of capitalism.

This continuation of capitalism itself is utopian, it is an impossible and irrational option, as it relies on the continued exploitation, death and suffering of billions of people, as well as the continued degradation of our planet. All of this for the continued enrichment and subsistence of a small parasite class, known as the bourgeoisie. This class does not produce the majority of its wealth, but relies entirely on others to do so, whether that be the office worker in Germany, the sweatshop worker in Bangladesh or the copper miner in Zambia.

## **The essence of Marxism, and the reasons for its downfall**

At a time Marxism was one of the most powerful and influential academic positions, but why did it disappear or die out? Was it a natural death and did it really pass away? Let's take a closer look.

It is often neglected that Marxism is an extremely diverse tradition. It includes a large variety of thinkers all over the world, who often disagree but who all build their thinking in relation to the scientific discoveries of Marx and Engels as well as other Marxist thinkers who helped develop the tradition.

At the center of Marxism, stands the question: What is capitalism? This all encompassing and contemporary phenomenon can hardly be understood without the contributions and discoveries of the large tradition of Marxism, itself always connected to past and present scientific advancements in almost all disciplines.

It is thus strange, surprising and contradictory that Marxism as a legitimate tradition of thought is so discredited, discarded and misunderstood in large parts of the western academic world. This fact however, becomes easy to understand as we embrace some of the theoretical insights that Marxism gives us.

Marxism gives us the ability to see the academic field of knowledge creation, as one that is deeply embedded in the existing political and social system of any society, however free this society claims it is. As long as any tradition of thought possesses itself as a serious threat to the very same society that shelters and nurtures it in its universities, school and research institutions, it becomes natural and necessary to neutralize the threat.

The best way to do so, is through a scientific and academic critique that obliterates its foundation, or at least appears to do that. It thus becomes clear to us that it was eliminated because of its danger to the bourgeois establishment in the west.<sup>2</sup> Let's take a closer look at how it was done.

### **Counter-paradigms: The bourgeois attempt to replace Marxism**

During the whole period of the existence, growth and development of Marxism as a critical tradition of thought, the bourgeoisie as a class, have produced [a great number of new theoretical paradigms, new -ism's](#), which ought to critique, replace or depoliticize Marxism, by making the tradition of Marxism unnecessary.

What we can do today to better understand these counter-theories, is to examine both their content and historical background closely. By looking at the latter, something which most bourgeois scholars neglect today, we find how all of these new theoretical strains of thought have always been welcomed, embraced and promoted by parts of the bourgeoisie itself, if not the whole establishment.

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<sup>2</sup> We must not forget too that the destruction of socialism in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries, played a very significant role in weakening the intellectual camp of socialism, and thus also Marxism as a legitimate theoretical tradition.

If we understand the history of Marxism in the world, we see that it is a history of constant attempts at repressing it, also in the Global North, the so-called free world. The channels of funding, the prospects of employment, the application of juridical means, and lastly the direct attacks from philosophers, historians and journalists representing the establishment towards Marxism, have been well applied methods of control and suppression which to a large extent have proven very successful.

It is thus clear that Marxism was neutralized in the western academia because it was too dangerous and intolerable for the bourgeois class which Marxism critiques and unmasks. However Marxism still lives on, specially outside of bourgeois academics, and outside the west.

Let us take a closer look at some of the theories that challenge Marxism, for this article we will look primarily at relativism, but also postmodernism which is the ideological umbrella term that encompasses it. A good way to understand Marxism is to apply it. In the following section I will do so to forms of understanding that are very familiar to the readers of [Die Kulturschock](#). The critique will be targeted directly on some of the theoretical positions expressed in this journal by Felix Keilhack.

### **The critique of the ideology of relativism: The link between capitalism and nihilism**

Keilhack writes that the critique of relativism is based on the idea that relativism might lead to nihilism. The truth however is that the problem with methodological relativism is not only that it can lead to nihilism, as Keilhack points out. But more so that despite the legitimacy of the philosophical approaches and methods of relativism in terms challenging habituated and dogmatic modes of thinking, philosophical or methodological relativism today easily becomes an ideology that resonates with the ever present relativism and anarchism of capitalist modernity.

The academic relativism surging today, easily corresponds to the demand for it as an ideology, a worldview that reflects the lived reality under an increasingly [irrational imperialist stage of capitalism](#). It is under this lived reality of capitalist modernity that the values, cultures, traditions, moralities and institutions are being [swept away](#), thus the demand becomes clear to us. Relativism as an ideology easily substitutes former ideologies under capitalism, such as the traditional bourgeois morality in Europe, within it containing Christianity, liberalism, cosmopolitanism and later nationalism.

Relativism as an ideology is in the final analysis the implication of the relativisation of reality, including values and culture, but in its radicalized form ultimately the meaning of life, or the value of life (morality). In this form, it is clear that relativism as an ideology does not have much in difference with nihilism -- the direct worship of the nothingness itself. Nihilism and relativism have already been part of a bourgeois intellectual, philosophical and cultural movement since at least the mid 19th century, and has taken a great number of forms, from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, through the bourgeois modernist and existentialist traditions, till today's so called postmodernism.

That said, while relativism as an ideology contains these characteristics, methodological and philosophical relativism should not be discouraged as a comparative and innovative mode of thinking and asking questions. Here it is important to distinguish epistemology and ontology, even though one easily leads to the other, and relativism thus itself can become the universalist approach to reality, to all forms of judgment and ultimately to a stage where being itself is relativized,

### **Relativism and Modernism**

"An example of Systemic Thinking's execution is the rational thought pattern, which is considered as an outdated paradigm of modernity and enlightenment (...). The so-called rationality entails the tendency to quantify the environment and determine an absolute, universal, objective truth through causality. Ethnocentrism (Eurocentrism) is inherent to rational thinking. The rational thought pattern of modernity sought to confirm itself and the propagated singularism. This thought pattern reached its peak during colonialism and is no longer beneficial for science in the present day."

Keilhack claims that the "paradigm of rationality is outdated", it is not noticed that the idea of something being outdated is the very essence of the modernist ideology (that relativism claims to critique), the constant promotion of novelties in form. What is new is perceived to automatically be a qualitative value in itself. This perception implies that the development and progress of reality becomes more and more complex, and thus older forms of ideology, art, culture and scientific approaches become out of touch with the new levels of complexity.

Secondly, relativism's demand for us to give up on the idea that we can systematically understand the world also means giving up on the idea of being able to reach a universal or common understanding of the world. Thus, in this sense it becomes clear that relativism as an academic ideology, reproduces the alienation and atomism of capitalist modernity.

It has to be noted that the dominating postmodernism understanding of progress of humanity is not a self-contradiction, but instead an unformulated ideological assumption inherent in postmodernist ideology, which also gives legitimacy to itself as a scientific position that ought to conquer a position of ideological and scientific power in society.

Thus what appears as a contradiction is not: The so-called progress that dominates in postmodernism is first of all radically perceived as non-linear and subject to change, while the humanity of postmodernism is radically perceived as non-universal and non-homogenic. Postmodernism thus embraces and inherits the concepts of progress and humanity, while they alter these concepts to fit its own ontology, that is their radical perception of totality as atomised.

### **The roots of aesthetic thinking and the idealist essence of postmodernism**

The notion of aesthetic thinking versus rational thinking brought up by Keilhack, has connections and similarities to the different epistemes proposed by Foucault in his work *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966). Foucault talked about

epistemes in the past, radically different modes of thinking, mobilizing these modes of thinking to challenge the dominating modes of thinking in contemporary society.

It is interesting to observe that postmodernism, in its quest for new understanding, seeks out to the past as a source of inspiration. It cannot be denied that the past is a rich source of inspiration, a perfect place to seek out radically different modes of understanding.

However, idealizing the modes of understanding of the past is also a dangerous endeavor if we do not properly understand the societies that created these forms of thinking. It is exactly the historical understanding of societies which is something that postmodernism as an universalist ideology is good at ignoring. This lack of understanding leads to the idealization of the past epistemes or the idealization of the epistemes of indigenous people, as containing themselves the direct answers or solutions to the problems today.

This lack of understanding is due to the inherent idealism that lays the foundation of postmodernist epistemology: Foucault focuses on the ideas and modes of thought of the past, not on the historical and material conditions that produced the conditions of these ideas and modes of thought. While ideas of the past might be attractive for the radical, slave society, feudalism or earlier stages of industrial capitalism should not appear as attractive alternatives for those who possess historical understanding.

It's easier to pursue radicality, when remaining in an idealist mode of thinking. What is more, just like with the modernist idea of the new, the very idea of radicality itself becomes a positive quality to pursue according to this same idealism. Thus according to the idealist logic of postmodernism we can reach the conclusion: If your ideas are newer or more radical than your predecessors, then that is automatically good in itself.

### **Is capitalism rational and democratic?**

Keilhack writes that "rationality, capitalism, and democracy constitutes the three fundamental pillars of Western societies"<sup>3</sup>. While it might appear true, if you ask the thinkers and ideologists who uphold these societies, it is clear from an under-the-surface analysis that capitalism is really not that rational, nor that democratic.

On the contrary it is in fact [irrational and undemocratic on almost all levels](#), such as when it denies the basic human and political rights of billions of people, or when it destroys millions of tons of food and useful commodities in order to sustain profit rates, or when it engages in imperialist wars to expand and maintain the hegemony of the market. It is precisely the goal of socialism<sup>4</sup> to eradicate the irrationalism and anti-democratic nature of capitalism.

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<sup>3</sup> For example the German Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse argues that capitalism is both constituted by rationality and irrationality; that on it's appearance it tries to convey an image of rationality and control, but that a closer look reveals that this rationality is purely technical, and that even this technical rationality is dominated by irrationality. See his famous work [One Dimensional Man](#) from 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Capitalism is not superior to socialism, a small glance on history proves this. Capitalism is not efficient if compared to the capacity of production and fulfillment of the needs of socialist societies. Inefficiency is the very core of capitalism. Irrationality is the very core of a system that has been outdated for 200 years.

Thus the direct conflation of rationalism to capitalism is far-fetched and without ground in reality. The article by Keilhack tries to draw connections between the two, but ends up not fully grasping either. Rationalism is not the reason why capitalism is not working, rather the opposite, a rational capitalism would cease to be capitalism.

Editor's Disclaimer: Rationality as a term has multiple definitions. In everyday language, it describes a methodical and efficient approach, connoting reasonable behavior. Adrian's critique addresses rather this term of rationality. Another definition, which Felix Keilhack adopts from Roger Ames, refers to rationality as an umbrella term for an ideological way of thinking during the European Modern era, where knowledge was constructed and justified using logic and causality, among other methods.

### **Pursuing totality: Communism or relativism?**

Communism is a normative idea, it is one that is only achievable with the view of the totality; thus it cannot be said to be constructing socialism if only a limited number of people are seen as having the right to be equal participants in the construction of socialism.

This is not an argument against the idea of "socialism in one country", but instead of the prevalent idea of an existing "socialism" in the [imperialist Global North](#), that is sustained at the direct expense of the majority of oppressed and exploited people around the world.

Communism is thus a universal movement as it sets out to achieve the equal fundamental rights of all human beings. On the other hand it is relative in the sense that the strategy, nature and progress of this movement is relative to the actual historical, economical and cultural conditions at each given geography where it develops.

Furthermore Marxism is a theoretical paradigm whose goal is to understand our society through applying a total perspective, a perspective that is constituted by scientific empirical observations, as well as by the theoretical epistemological foundation known also as [historical materialism](#), and finally through the practice of engaging with and transforming society.

All of these moments are not "objective" or "value-free" in the positivist sense, which is ultimately an illusion, but instead all are influenced by socialist values, for example the belief in the equal rights of all, or the idea of building socialism for the people and by the people (democracy), etc.

Neither the fundamentalism of relativism or universalism, both idealist in their nature, is sufficiently powerful to build an epistemology that is able to free the human being by the relations that oppress them. Their weakness lies precisely in their starting point; they start from the idea of either the relative, or the universal itself, and only then begin to approach reality as such.

While Marxism starts with examining the historical, political and economic conditions<sup>5</sup>, in order to determine the causes for humanity for not becoming free, the causes for socialism not developing.

When relativists negate the idea of a totality, they already put forward an abstract idea of a totality that is splintered and diversified, and in the end impossible to grasp or understand.

Relativism makes us give up on the idea of understanding the world in its totality, and thus it disables us from changing the world in its totality; The only thing we can ask for is perhaps to change "the small world". And thus develop the cultivation of micro-studies in established academia, reflecting the state of despair of the leftist academic.

### **Conclusion: The Marxist critique of relativism**

Relativism, just like universalism is an idealism, it bases itself on the abstract idea of relativity, instead of on concrete reality itself, and hereby lies its weakness and strength. The strength of relativism is that it can be applied as a methodology to gain different forms of perspectives that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, due to the fact that relativism is to a limited degree able to transcend some of those cultural prejudices and perceptions that are embedded in each of us through our socialization.

The weakness of relativism is outside of this sphere of cultural studies, how can larger scale phenomenon such as extraction of natural resources, production and consumption of commodities, exchange and market economy, social classes and their reproduction, international relations, parliament and state institutions, etc. be understood by operating only with a theoretical framework that allows us to look at cultural phenomena?

Such a theoretical apparatus will easily adopt or align with the dominant theoretical paradigms, such as (bourgeois) economics, sociology, psychology, political and social sciences etc. And thus, as relativism for its proponents and students appears as radical and challenging to the status quo, this is at its essence merely an illusion proven by the fact that it is welcomed and applauded by the same bourgeoisie which values and prejudices the worldview it claims to critique.

Many wish to throw out ideas, concepts, etc. that have a long history, with the excuse that these are old and outdated, these ideas or concepts have been tried out in history and failed, they are also not very useful anymore, as today's reality has changed so much that they no longer apply, the concepts are not deep enough or are not complex enough to understand the complex reality we are in. Capitalism, class struggle, imperialism or socialism are often the concepts that are attacked for this.

The fact is that these concepts have been used again and again many times throughout the 19th and 20th century, and they are still being used more and more. However, these concepts were at some point so popular that their meanings have entered daily language.

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<sup>5</sup> They start examining reality, while at the same time possessing subjective values of socialism: the wish of improving and helping society. Marxist never just start by observing reality without possessing any kinds of values or subjective positions, such an idea is perceived as undoable. We are all human and we engage with science from the position we hold. A view from nowhere is not possible.



They have been used by agitators and politicians who have simplified or slightly changed their meaning for their own purpose, simply because these concepts were popular and resonated with the experience of exploited people all over the world. Their popularization naturally made them an easy target for critique for those social classes that have access to education and resources.

If we look at reality itself, we can see that we cannot give up on these concepts based on these simple misinterpretations or because of the idealistic need for something new. If we understand the concepts of capitalism, class struggle, imperialism and socialism properly, we will understand that these concepts have never been outdated in themselves, but rather that the common understanding of them in the western world have changed due to their misuse, but also due to the deliberate attack and discreditation of them by rivaling bourgeois theoretical currents.

How can relativism understand and help us solve the problems of capitalism?

Maybe this is not an important question for those who pursue relativism, as they most likely belong to the global bourgeoisie and already live in affluence and without much oppression. Naturally, there is no need to understand or overcome something that does not appear as a problem for those who benefit from it.

Unless of course the bourgeois intellectual is able to go beyond oneself, and recognize the common humanity of his fellow being. And more than that, be able to go beyond the powerful ideology that protects their consciousness from the uncomfortable truth of the real world. Studying the contributions of the Marxist tradition is a step in this direction.