

## MARXIST-LENINIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: EMERGING THINKING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

The relevance of Marxism, as a theory shaping development, has been questioned, especially with the end of the Cold War. But with the emergence of global problems, particularly those related to the vagaries of capitalism and neo-liberalism, there has been renewed interest in the application of the theory in international relations discourse. There appears to be highlights of the increased class struggle in the form of the “new world” and the “old world”, or, in simple terms, the developed and the developing societies. In an attempt to illuminate on these class struggles at the international level and explaining why events happen the way they do, insights have emerged from contributions by Marx, Lenin, and Neo-Marxists. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the relevance of Marxism in the study of International relations in the contemporary world. This is done in two ways, that is, the review of political-philosophical doctrine of liberation and the examination of the socio-economic components of the international political economy.

**Keywords:** Marxism; Leninism; International Relations Theory; Sustainable Development; International Political Economy

### INTRODUCTION

Like any other theory of renewed interest in international relations, the Marxist-Leninist theory seeks to provide a “comprehensive, coherent, and self-correcting body of knowledge capable of the prediction, the evaluation, and the control of relations among states and of condition of the world” (Wright, 1966). The authors are neither attempting to be neo-Marxists nor Marxist apologists. Rather, the aim is to prove the usefulness and applicability of the Marxist-Leninist theory in understanding the unfolding international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though some scholars in the field have doubted the existence of the Marxist theory of international relations, interestingly, in analyzing the contributions of classical Marxism and contemporary Neo-Marxists, one is made aware of the applicability of Marxists ideas, especially as it regards to imperialism, neo-colonialism, and current globalization trends, social conflict war, and the revolution (Evans & Newnham, 1990). Marxists view the international system as an integrated capitalist system in pursuit of capital accumulation (wikipedia.org, 2007). In the paper, the authors seek to examine the condition of the world today, particularly in developing countries, as they relate to the developed world. In essence, the authors contend that the Marxist theory has gotten into a fray

of renewed interest for political economists, as they seek to unpack the relationship between the developing and the developed world.

### **CLASS STRUGGLE AND MARXISM**

According to Marx, all history is the history of class struggle between the ruling group/class and the dominated class. As it relates to states [the key actors in international relations], Lenin divided them into two groups: the oppressed and the oppressor (Kubalkova & Cruickshank, 1980). In relation to international politics, the classes are not classes in the strict sense as they are understood in the national analysis, but they are classes amongst states. In this sense, states, themselves, assumed class-consciousness on the world scale (Kubalkova & Cruickshank, 1980). Thus the oppressed (the workers or the developing countries) continue to create value and the value is not returned to them, but appropriated by the capitalists. Thus, it is not the capitalist ruling class that creates wealth, but the workers (which are the developing countries). The capitalists at the centre appropriate this wealth to themselves.

This paper is inspired by critics who have blasted the Marxist theory. Like any other theory, the Marxist theory is of course not perfect in its entirety. However, in relation to international relations, much of the criticism has been unwarranted especially with some authorities going to the extent of dismissing the existence of the Marxist-Leninist's theory of international relations. Martin Wright, for example, has asserted that neither Marx nor Lenin nor Stalin made any systematic contribution to the international relations theory, adding, "Lenin's imperialism comes to such a thing, and this has little to say about international politics" (Wright, 1966). We do not intend to respond directly to such assertions, but this paper advances the importance of the Marxist theory with special regards to its usefulness in helping explain the causes of the lack of sustainable development in the South.

All societies serve to develop the productive forces, but there comes a time when these forces rebel against the constraints imposed upon them by the outdated super structure of society. A new class emerges from the womb of the old society, whose task is to overthrow the older and lay the basis for a new organization of society. Under capitalism, a world market has been created, which world has laid the material basis for socialism. Consequently, the working class is born, not only as a source of exploitation, but as a revolutionary class. Experience, through mighty battles, teaches the working class to become conscious of its role, by firstly developing class-consciousness and then a socialist consciousness. In other words, it is the task of the working class to overthrow capitalism and bring about socialism. In essence the "emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself" (Marx & Engels, 1848).

Since the Seattle demonstration worldwide, an anti-capitalist movement has developed. Every time one of the big international capitalist institutions International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) etc meets, they are met with the protests of workers and youth from different parts of the world. In this section, we aim to provide an analysis of world capitalism, how it works, and where it is going. We also aim to offer reports on the various protests taking place. The 1990s saw a huge increase in poverty around the globe. The gap between the rich and the

poor is getting wider and wider. According to David Mitchell, if current trends continue, then it will be the year 2147 before areas, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, can hope to half the number of people in poverty (David Mitchell, 2003).

Regular statistics from the World Bank and the United Nations, paint an alarming catalogue of human misery, degradation, and death. That is the reality of capitalism in the developing world. Ironically, it is the very policies of institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, that are forcing whole countries to adopt the bankrupt and corrupt policies of privatization and the opening up of markets to the plunder of the multi-national companies that is making the situation worse. For the developing world, the 1990s indicates the lost decade of development as the policies that were adopted by some developing countries on the advice of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund exacerbated poverty. We argue that the working class, and by extension the masses internationally, have lost the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> because of the absolute failure of capitalism to advance the mass of humanity by refusing outright to entertain predominantly home grown policies that are sustainably, and, deliberately pro-poor.

The struggle against the neo-liberal policies being peddled championed and internationalized by the West or developed world represents a situation that confirms third world fears, that “globalization is a combination of colonization and corporatization” (Hellyer, 1999). This fits well with McPherson’s observation that “possessive market society necessarily puts in a dependent position not only wage-earners but also those without a substantial (and by the natural operation of the market, an increasing) amount of capital”. (C. B McPherson, 1968). Adopting the sentiments of Vekris and McGarry (1999), arguing along Marxist thought, the bane of the world today is:

*Neo-liberalism and its crafty scheme to continue exploiting the unprotected people of the world through high sounding concepts such as globalization, “free” trade, “free” investment, “free” enterprise, and the democracy of the US dollar.*

Capitalism, according to the Marxist-Leninist theory, creates all the problems being faced globally. It gives a rise to war to further its own ends. The conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, just to mention a few examples, bears witness to the hidden agenda to use ideological justification in “disciplining” the so-called rogue state that oppose the neo-liberal agenda, and thereby ultimately ensure access to oil in the Gulf and the Middle Eastern states. The move to control the oppressed state is imperialism and this is done through the creation of monopolies and financial capital spread across the world in search of new markets and resources (Kubalkova and Cruikshank, 1980). This task is being well served by the Bretton Woods Institutions and the World Trade Organisation.

Capitalism promotes the primacy of markets as the drivers of the economy, further detesting government intervention in the running of the economy save for a very narrowly limited, regulatory role. Competition is touted as a minimum requirement but without necessarily appreciating that the poor and dispossessed masses have no decent chance of competing with big capital. Indeed, at first sight some of the features of capitalism might seem to indicate progress, with supporters of capitalism-led globalisation adamant that it will eventually lead to better conditions for poorer countries. Resultantly, misleading adages like ‘Only winners, no losers’ continue to gain currency. Yet, in fact, the real object is to promote freedom for international

(mainly US) big business – via the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) – to do as it likes around the world.

With the advocacy for free enterprise in the globalization drive, capitalism does lose its free competitive element and is being rapidly replaced by a directly opposite capitalist monopoly. This creates large scale industries, replacing the small industries with the expansion of MNCs, serving the interests of their mother countries. The West, themselves the chief architects and also beneficiaries of a world capitalist organised society (especially with the end of the Cold War in 1989), will always predictably advocate for ‘free markets’ so as to perpetuate their control over the oppressed, and more importantly, to continue exploiting them. This leads us to conclude that the gospel according to capitalism is neither a panacea to poor societies’ development, nor is it proffered as a forward-looking model to ensure sustainable development, but is first and foremost a ploy to maintain the West’s privileged position.

Nothing other than the debilitating debt trap afflicting Third World societies helps unpack the unsustainable nature of capitalist structures. One can turn to Rob Lyon, who says millions of people can see clearly that the debt in the Third World countries is imperialist robbery, in most cases these countries have paid back their principle loans and are simply paying interest, which amounts to billions of dollars over and above what they originally owed. In this way, the countries of the ex-colonial world are creditors, as much as debtors. (Rob Lyon, 2005).

## **WAR**

The Marxist theory expounds that capitalism uses war to further its ends to the extent that even the possibility of clashes amongst capitalist states exists. Evans and Newnham (1990) noted that the capitalist states will move towards political and military control of sources of raw materials. This results in a general capitalist scramble for colonies. Colonialism took so much time of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and claimed three quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Today, neo-colonialism has taken place of the earlier colonialism. It is also extremely difficult to separate colonialism from present day globalization. The parallels are too closer for Marxists’ comfort. According to Nkrumah, this type of colonialism ensures that the relationship between the once colonized and the colonizer remains largely the same. The use of war to further capitalism has and continues to be largely visible. For instance, the Gulf War (1990 to 1991) was used by the USA to ensure that it pacifies countries in the Middle East in order to remain accessing oil in the Gulf region without hindrance. Such wars are also exported to Third World countries and Africa, in particular. Such could be said about the DRC conflict (1998-2000) and, generally, the hostilities in the Great Lakes region, which the West has used, to ensure it continues to access the resources in the region.

The theory also posits that conflicts may arise amongst the capitalist states, themselves, as they jostle for spheres of influence and ownership of territories. World War One is a case in point. This war, according to Knusten (1992), was a war for the division of the world for partition and repatriation of colonies and spheres of influence. Thus, according to the Marxist theory, war is a result of capitalism. War is the weapon that the capitalist classes apply against the double enemy; that is, the capitalist of other territorial sates and against the proletariat of their own country. This was demonstrated by the demonstrations staged by thousands of people in the West outside the margins of such institutions, like the WTO or IMF

meetings or summits. For example, they demonstrated against the activities of the WTO, which represents the widespread interests of the corporations and elites and seeks to marginalize the poor through eroding state autonomy, enabling institutions for business, whose primary motive is profit making, not the welfare of the citizens (Ndlovu, 2000). It is also true that with other states, wars have been fought in order to maintain capitalist states and structures. Such could be said of the wars in Vietnam, Korea, and the Cold War, in general.

The solutions to these problems of conflict, war, and underdevelopment, as a result of exploitation and subjugation, according to the theory, is that the impoverished workers will carry out a revolution to its worldwide triumph of the poor and exploited masses of the Third World. As a theory of liberation, the Marxist- Leninist theory has been applied in most Third World countries and has brought about political independence and triumph over domination by capitalist and imperialist states. On the international arena, the problems of continuing international conflict and hindrances to the establishment of international peace can be healed by elimination through a revolution of the capitalist state. As a normative theory, the Marxist-Leninist theory envisaged that a peaceful world order could be only achieved through attacking domestic economic systems of states, thus the world proletariat revolution is the means to effect this change (Evans and Newnham, 1980). The revolution will then establish socialism with an international parliament of a socialist movement that envisions peace and harmony as the natural state of properly managed affairs.

The emerging society would be that of socialists, which Lenin termed the “world socialist economic system”, which means “a tendency towards the creation of a single world economy, regulated by the proletariat of all nations, as an integral whole and according to common plan” (Volkov, 1985). This is, then, expected to usher in a moral economy reminiscent of pre-capitalist agrarian class based societies, which did not cross the bounds set by the principle that, “everyone has the right to basic subsistence” and sought to demonstrate that the principle was undermined by colonial capitalist relations (Wilson, 1997). Thus, the new system will represent an economic relation of a new type founded on complete equality, national independence, sovereignty, and fraternal mutual assistance and cooperation. The socialist international system opposed to the capitalist system, marred by conflict and war, and will coordinate the interests of each country with interests of the entire socialist community and the relevant adjustment of national and international economic components (Volkov, 1985). The relevance of this idea can be seen in the light of, and therefore as a counter to, the dominance of the world today by capitalists through globalization, only to the advantage of the few rich, who have established a capitalist international system, which has the “internationalization of communications and commerce, the development of a global division of labour, and emergence of a class struggle at a world scale” (Marx & Engels, 1848). Thus the answer, according to the theory, rests on an international socialist system of states, which would be free of conflicts, since the socialists agree on basic questions of resource allocation and are not tainted by militarism, which characterize capitalist relations.

Ownership and control of resources, especially land, as well access to markets, has been the basis for both political and economic power. Because of the ultimate dependency of the capitalist economic system upon such markets and natural resources, international conflict is endemic in a world of capitalist states. Capitalist states, by virtue of their political and economic systems, are said to enhance the livelihoods of conflict (Dougherty & Pfatzalgraf, 2001). The emergence of the

Third World has necessitated the attempt to provide an explanation for endemic poverty. According to Andre Gunder Frank (1969), underdevelopment was, and still is, generated by the very same historical process, which also generated economic development.

The West is accused of keeping poor countries in a position of subordination, dependency, and bondage by limiting investments to the extractive industries and by westernizing, subjugating, and bribing the new elites, who have an interest in modernizing their societies. In essence, the West always seeks new forms of keeping the peoples of economically underdeveloped countries in a state of permanent dependency.

In fact, several forces work within the capitalist system to reinforce the subordination of the poor to the rich countries. The rising elites in poor countries are persuaded to emulate the consumption patterns of the bourgeoisie in the rich countries and to create a demand for the importation of western goods. Also, the western capitalist system can be criticized for creating a labour aristocracy in the poor countries by paying a smaller number of skilled workers higher wages, rather than paying a larger number of unskilled workers lower wages (Evans & Newnham, 1990).

Meanwhile, we do not pretend that an alternative society would be entirely peaceful. Of course, the notion that socialist states are peaceful and cannot engage in militarism is a myth. Many critics have noted the clash between the Soviets and Chinese. The Sino-Soviet conflict of the 1950s and the 1960s was just as bitter as the conflict between capitalist states (Evans & Newnham, 1990). But this is not to lose sight of the close cooperation between Socialist countries against capitalism and imperialism, particularly those in the Third World and the link between the liberation struggle, with wider and large entities, which were socialist, like China, USSR, Romania, etc.

Some critics have noted that the theory largely attaches economic factors as the real cause of international conflict, thereby marginalizing the most important variables, for example, ideological, cultural, religious, personal, psychological, and political. Such could be said of World War 2 as well as the Cold War and lately, the situation in Kosovo in explaining international conflicts that have erupted not necessarily due to the class factor, but rather ethnicity and boundary struggles. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea may clearly show this dimension.

Another criticism that has been levelled against the theory is that it appears that in Marx and Lenin's thinking, socialist countries and states will not be imperialist. The existence of USSR has largely been imperial and, with the end of Cold War, independence of some colonized states was visible. Struggles were fought over spheres of influence and, thus, Marx's idea of peaceful co-existence has not been forthcoming.

However, despite all this criticism, the theory remains important in explaining international relations, especially in the contemporary discourse. According Groom and Light (1994), the paucity of the Marxist theory of international relations is quite high, especially as it relates to socialist states and liberation movements, social democratic parties and governments, liberation ideologies, counter-revolutionists, and US policymakers. All these have been exercised in relation to foreign policy involvements by influence or reaction to Marxist thought, hence bringing relevance to the Marxism and Leninism has been

used in explaining the relationship of Marxist thought to the foreign policy of countries, which utilized the Marxist derived approaches to develop ideological perspectives which shaped both domestic and foreign policies. It can be applied to the Bolsheviks' foreign policy, China, Yemen, and Nicaragua and other small states' revolutionary foreign policy. It is also still available in the speeches and the writings of some leaders, like Che Guevara, Juargan, Kim, Castro, Nkrumah, and Mugabe. Credit can be given to the theory because it provides the key to the scientific understanding and control of the subjective factor in life (Kubalkova & Cruikshank, 1980). Marxist ideas have largely influenced many a theorist in international relations; in fact, Kubalkova & Cruikshank have emphatically noted that:

*Contrary to what many international theorists may assume, Marx's ideas on international relations were no altogether sterile and, albeit in a very rudimentary way, many of the discoveries were advocated for by Marx, Engels and Lenin before international theory as a discipline was taught*

Thus, in essence, one can claim that, "We are all Marxist". A link can actually be found with other theories of international relations, especially in relation to the concept of dialectical materialism. It is evident in David Easton's systems theory and John Galtug's structural theory of aggression, which is based on particular characteristics in structure of relationships among social entities, mainly divided into top dog and underdog, which equates to the Marxist-Leninist aspect of class (Kubalkova & Cruikshank, 1980).

Marxism-Leninism has enormous influence on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century world. The charge that western capitalism and imperialism, deliberately suppressed the economic development of underworld, is often irresistible as a model of socialist revolution and the idea that full development can only occur after the introduction of central planning modernization and the politicization of masses (Evans & Newnham, 1990). The fact that the Marxist-Leninist theorist have shifted away from the sovereign state towards an emphasis on non-state actors, especially of economic variety has rendered the theory even more valuable. Marxist ideas do help in understanding the behaviour of non-state economic organizations, such as the IMF, World Bank, WIPO, WTO, and MNCs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One needs to note, after analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist-Leninist theory, that Marxism may not, of course, amount to a theory of international relations, but its observations on world politics have succeeded in restructuring the focus of the discipline to the extent that to a very significant number of scholars, historical materialism is one of its central paradigms. No one can hide from the fact that Lenin's analysis of imperialism is a backbone to the Communist theory of international relations. Although modifications have been made in the face of the changing patterns of world politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> through to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Marxist view is likely to remain as a theoretical prism through which socialist states and like minded states view the outside world.

The history of what is now generally termed the Third World, which is also called variously, but chiefly as the 'developing world' is predominantly a history of slavery, colonisation, dispossession and annihilation at the hands of the imperial North. At the very same time, these societies, especially in Africa, had been traditionally organised along communal, redistributive and centralised modes of production. This form of organisation was thoroughly compromised, and potentially, effectively

ended upon the painful interaction with the imperialist societies from around the 15<sup>th</sup> Century with far reaching implications for sustainable development. Not only were powerful, supranational and international organisations created along the course of this sad history but a host of other systems and structures have come into place that virtually make it impossible for the poor countries to influence their own domestic affairs significantly enough.

The Marxist theory of international relations comes in handy in attempts to explain contemporary international relations in many ways. The international division of labour that defines the core (North)-periphery (South) relations is definitely not in the interests of the poor societies and runs opposite any spirited efforts at sustainable development. When one looks at the profit motive within the context of environmental exploitation and the whole climate change debacle for example, especially as it relates to its debilitating effects on poor farmers of the South, it is hardly conceivable that poor societies have begun the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on a promising footing. Yet the most worrying aspect of all is the continued, relentless push for market-led development on Third World, including, African governments. Whereas such approaches work so well in affluent Western societies due to the sheer strength of their functional economies, expecting the same models to work anywhere else, especially in African societies where relevant, prerequisite structures and institutions are either weak or non-existent at all, is only working to confuse the development agenda. Capitalism thrives on inequality, between and within societies.

Marxism, as a theory, rests on the bedrock of advocating for a strong state and centralised economic planning. This would theoretically make it possible to deliberately influence resource control, mobilisation and distribution to ensure non-exploitation of the weak by the strong. However, an undeniable outcome of the last few decades has been the declining authority of states, with far reaching implications for sustainable development in the developing world. Gradually, capital is determining not only policy, but the rate of resource exploitation and of course distribution of wealth. The activities of Trans National Companies (TNCs), for example, bring out this clearly. Such agents of big business have entrenched interests in economics, politics, sociology and international relations. Besides the accelerating pace of technological change, there has been an escalation in the capital cost of most technological innovations – in agriculture, in manufacturing and the provision of services, and in new products and in new processes (Wallerstein, 1996). The implications have been dire for poor societies dependent on sophisticated Western technology. It turns out that technology transfer as a development approach has since not been embraced by the West and there is no deliberate attempt to capacitate poor societies to launch their own technological revolution. Poor societies have to give up so much to get technology from the technological North. That is not sustainable in the medium to long-term and will certainly erode ability to independently escape poverty. The declining of the state is very useful in the Marxist theory of explaining international relations.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, a theory of international relations is a theory that examines the economic, political, ideological, legal, diplomatic, and military relations among nations, states, and system of states, basic social economic and political forces and organizations acting on the world arena. Marxist-Leninist theory has tried to eloquently explain some of these aspects. The theory can be used to explain world politics today as the world moves towards globalization and as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. Despite several criticisms that are levelled against the theory, especially that it only offers



economic explanations, one needs to know that theories of international relations, are like planes, flying at different altitudes and in different directions and in way it cannot be oversimplified. Otherwise, there is, in the first place, the vastness of the subject and its inherent difficulties from which all, Marxist and non-Marxists alike, have suffered from and which have frustrated the assaults on both sides, even at the level of explanation. One can thus wrap up by saying Marxism-Leninism may be defunct as a political movement, but this does not detract attention from its continuing validity as a major analytical school within political economy. The historic mission of capitalism was to lay the foundations of a new world order, on the basis of the world market and the world division of labor. It has now become fetter of further development of society, and it is rotten ripe for transformation as the 2008 global recession seems to imply.

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