

Postmodern Theory and Karl Marx

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[News](#)
[Music](#)
[Humor](#)
[Biographic](#)
[Technical Information](#)
[Links](#)
[Miscellany](#)
[Contact](#)

A note to those of you who managed to get here without reading the preamble on my Writings page: When I HTMLized this document, I found myself categorically unhappy with the format of the citations. I should get around to making them presentable at some point (I promised this a long time ago, I know, but I haven't as of yet). In the interim, if you want more information on my sources or want to send me some commentary, please [e-mail me](#).

The emergence of postmodernism stands as the most important paradigmatic change of the past half-century. In providing a critique of positivism and macrotheory, postmodernism has established an intellectual tradition that has challenged a variety of intellectual viewpoints, most notably Marxism. By arguing for subjectivism and microsociological analysis, leading postmodern thinkers have instituted a theoretical and practical shift away from the once dominant Marxist tradition. For traditional Marxist thinkers, this shift has necessitated a reestablishment of thought regarding the fundamental structure of theory, the construction of discourse, the theoretical approach to social phenomena, and the nature of reality. Through an examination of the debate between traditional Marxist thought and the thought of the postmodernists, many of the ramifications of the recent shift dealing with theoretical considerations, both inside and outside of Marxism, can be seen.

Postmodern theorists have traditionally concerned themselves most fundamentally with an attack on positivistic, macrophenomenal theory. According to these theorists, attempts to construct "grand theory," as identified by C. Wright Mills(**), necessarily dismiss the naturally existing "chaos and disorder" of the universe, placing it in an arbitrary framework which, in the words of Michel Foucault, fails to "respect...differences" (**). Employing a Nietzschean, perspectivist approach, postmodernists argue for the existence of a multiplicity of theoretical standpoints, addressing the relationship of the individual to the phenomenon, rather than trying to place either into a broader schema. In this way, postmodernist thought emphasizes the need for microtheory dealing with the nature of "difference," rather than holistic macrotheory.

For Karl Marx and traditional Marxists, microtheory, though useful in describing epiphenomena, does not ultimately address the needs of a historical model of change. Relevant social theory, for Marx, gives primacy to the macrosphere, dealing with major socio-historical change. The employment of philosophical materialism in this setting separates him from postmodern thought, as Marx affirms a necessary connection between the material conditions of existence and the content of individual cognition, a more positivistic assertion. Ultimately, Marx argues for an "soft" economic determinism, asserting that the socio-political institutions and abstractions addressed by postmodernism form a superstructure, primarily contingent upon activity in the economic sphere, though able to effect change within it. This can be seen in Marx's argument that:

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 class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (**).

Ernest Mandel's extension of Marxist theory deals with postindustrial society in this light, arguing that the realities of modern industrial practice permeate every social sphere, reshaping the context in which capitalism is understood(**). Fredric Jameson continues this theoretical standpoint, asserting that postmodernism stands as a "corresponding cultural style" to postindustrial society(**), placing it in the historical context of late capitalism, rather than as a "historical rupture," as Baudrillard has suggested (**). Postmodernism, as a microtheoretical construct, becomes, at best, a means for describing in more detail phenomena, such as alienation, which stem from macrotheoretical concerns. In many cases, however, postmodernism is perceived by Marxists as a continuation of the ideology which obfuscates the exploitive practices of postindustrial capitalism.

This conflict in theory manifests itself in a sharp division between the discursive construction of Marxist and postmodern thought. Postmodern discourse, in emphasizing perspectivism and difference, establishes an orientation towards history and knowledge that denies both the

existence of material truth, and the existence of an evolutionary telos. Traditional Marxism opposes this trend, arguing for a radically different relationship between history, knowledge, and society, establishing a discourse dealing more directly with material relations and social action.

Central to Marxist theory is the notion of ideological control by the dominant class, implementing a framework that supports "the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships" (**). The postmodern construction of power, in this sense, deviates from the Marxist viewpoint through a definition of "truth" as an exertion of power, attempting to restrict and/or subvert the "plurality of discourses" existing in society, identifying "truth" in the same light as the Marxist conceptualization of "ideology" (**). For Marxists, the "social construction of reality" employed by phenomenologists like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (**) misidentifies the nature of social construction and ignores the relationship between material circumstance and discourse. Marxist theory seeks to explore discourse in the context of philosophical materialism, dealing with both the nature of truth, and the creation of discourse in society.

Though not an economic determinist, Antonio Gramsci provides a meaningful modern extension of Marxist theory in his development of hegemony. Hegemony, as "cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class," is internalized by the general population, permeating the entirety of consciousness (**). Acting as a mechanism of ideological control, hegemony allows for the ruling class to guide the praxis of the proletariat without directly intervening in personal affairs. In this way, the existing social order is affirmed in a manner that appears to be natural and transcendent of institutions. As a result, hegemony provides a vehicle for the constant assimilation of change and necessity in culture, appropriating the discourse of social movement while promoting the agenda of the dominant group.

Hegemony assumes the role of "power" established by the postmodernists, acting as a social construct that promotes the existence of the group employing it. The concepts of "archaeology" and "genealogy," used by Foucault and other postmodernists, continue the postmodern conceptualization of power, reflecting Marx's concept of dominant ideology and identifying the role of the dominant group in shaping thought (**). However, while orthodox Marxists limit the use of power to the instillation of oppressive, "false" consciousness, postmodernists identify any macrotheoretical description of thought as "hegemonic," limiting the full expression of perspective. The deconstruction of every form of cognition as a perspective is seen by Marxists as a *reductio ad absurdum*, reflected by the evolution of the non-absolute, anti-polemicist stance employed by many postmodernists into absolute, polemic attacks on positivistic theories, indicating both the existence of hegemony within the discourse of postmodernism and the utility and viability of a causative model based on an affirmation of truth at some level.

In Marxist theory, the affirmation of truth is contingent upon a clear perception of an "object of consciousness" (**). The "textual difference" emphasized by postmodernism is contingent upon the identification of an object. As Roger Gottlieb argues:

Conceiving of reality and personal identity as endlessly interpretable texts ignores the crucial structural differences between texts and other parts of the world. Texts, for one thing, are not only systems of meaning capable of interpretation. They are also physical artifacts which are produced, exchanged, and owned under particular social relations (194-195).

Marxism argues against the notion of subjectivity as a necessary precondition of philosophy and social theory, as members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno and Edmund Husserl, have argued, since a philosophy ungrounded in historical and material phenomena cannot provide transformative, descriptive social theory (**). As Gottlieb further argues, "the metaphorical extension of reading, talking, and interpreting into the rest of human life ignores the actual material contexts of reading, talking, and interpreting (195)."

This inability to relate social phenomena to material circumstance limits the ability of postmodernism to describe social patterns. While postmodernists ultimately identify elements that exist throughout society -- differing perspectives, hegemony, social texts, etc. -- they fail to identify principles to explain either their meaning or their ubiquity. For traditional Marxists, the existence of general social patterns allows for the construction of a historical model of change, tracing an evolution through four stages of development: primitive communism, antique slavery, feudalism, and capitalism (**). The historical model of "class struggle" (**) provides a basis for studying social transformation, a study leading to the development of an economic "crisis theory" (**) supporting the eventual emergence of socialist and communist political states.

Ultimately, while postmodernism attempts to deconstruct macrotheoretical models, it fails to account for phenomena of social change the models were constructed to analyze.

Inconsistencies in the postmodern approach to theory can be seen in the attack of many postmodern theorists on metatheory. The attack on "grand theory" which attempts to present a viewpoint that is widely applicable is ironic and contradictory, being waged by a theoretical perspective that concerns itself with work in the fields of psychology, sociology, history, literature, and many others. The deconstructive process of postmodern theory itself is widely applicable, dealing with the entirety of consciousness and social activity. Arguments dealing with the need for the deconstruction of traditional models in order to create truly "creative," rather than "reflexive" (**), work are similarly flawed, with the majority of postmodern work attending to a rebuttal of traditional theory. The general goal of postmodernism is, in fact, a type of metatheoretical practice, concerning itself with the context in which theory is developed and the ways in which it is communicated, identified by George Ritzer as "metatheorizing as a means of obtaining a deeper understanding of theory" (512). Ultimately, metatheory exists as a necessary component of social thought, a need affirmed by the postmodernists' own attack on metatheorizing.

The importance of context in formulating theory can be seen clearly in the current "increasingly interdependent global system" (Giddens 16). While modern political activity has allowed for the recognition of a variety of social divisions, the increased interaction between social units has created an environment in which the considerations of integration and change must be met. Postmodern theory, while detailing the extent to which fragmentation dominates the modern world, fails to address the increasing impact of "influences no one living in the world today can any longer entirely escape" (**). The globalization of economy, politics, and social activity must be addressed by contemporary theory.

Marx anticipates changes in the economy, in part, in his "The Possibility of Non-Violent Revolution," an address of the First International in 1872. While not as extreme as Andre Gorz's "non-class of non-workers" (**), Marx does address the possibility of accessing "the institutions, mores, and traditions," supporting socio-economic power through non-violent means (**). This possibility, and the recognition of difference in institutions between nations, suggests the possibility of change in the global environment, facilitating a reorientation to revolution on a global scale. In the context of the global system, greater interaction within the proletariat (and third-world, proletarian countries) exists throughout the world, solidifying their position as the "grave-digger" of capitalism (**). Ultimately, the material conditions of postindustrial capitalism lend themselves to the extension of a Marxist theory of political and socio-economic transformation.

The relationship between postmodernism and Marxism has been a largely antagonistic one, creating great debate over the viability of macrotheory and global discourse. The critique of the Marxist paradigm has provided great insight into the limitations of traditional Marxist thought. Despite this, many of the views of Karl Marx and his intellectual heirs remain tenable, effectively addressing the advent of postindustrial society and its cultural concomitants. The revision and clarification of Marxist doctrine fueled by the challenge of postmodernism also, however, underscores many of the limitations of postmodern theory, including the need for more attention to broad social movements and the tendency towards contradictory polemicism. Ultimately, both Marxism and postmodernism allow for great insight into the nature of theory, discourse, and their relationship to society.