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A Comparison of Liberal and Marxist Revolutionary Thought

By Chad Stoughton

Liberalism and Marxism are two of the most influential ideologies of the modern era. Generally analyzed in the context of their criticisms of one another, they are rarely examined through the lens of revolutionary thought and action. Both ideologies have a clear interpretation of revolution, and both are fundamentally revolutionary, both in origin and in outlook. This paper will examine how liberal and Marxist ideology shaped how revolution was understood by their respective adherents, and how that understanding contributed to the success or failure of their revolutionary movements to create lasting polities that adhered to their ideological principles.

“All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

-Ho Chi Minh, September 2, 1945

The twentieth century bore witness to what was arguably the greatest ideological struggle in the history of mankind. Three ideologies entered this struggle, and by the century’s end only one remained to lay claim to what Francis Fukuyama called in 1989 “The End of History.” Fukuyama’s use of that phrase to describe the triumph of western liberalism was deliberate. The concept of history as a deterministic process with a finite end was first proposed by G.W.F. Hegel and later propagated by Karl Marx. The Hegelian theory described the point at which the contradictions of human consciousness would be rectified. It marked the end of the ideological dialectic that had been playing out through war, struggle, and revolution since the dawn of humanity. Marx believed that the Hegelian End of History would take the form of global communism, and it was on that basis that he constructed much of his political thought. Yet the sole survivor of the twentieth century’s ideological struggle was not communism. It was Western liberalism. Three contenders participated in the twentieth century’s phase of the human dialectic. Liberalism, the oldest, entered the fray with established democracies dominated by market capitalism. Fascism, a relative newcomer with an emphasis on authoritarian, statist, and racialist nationalism, was late to enter and early to leave in the global competition for human consciousness. Having emerged only after the First World War, it all but disappeared with the end of the second. Marxism, the third contender, was theorized in the nineteenth century and saw several attempts at implementation in the twentieth. But the collapse of the Soviet Union in the century’s last decade, and the subsequent decay of the Soviet sphere left liberalism as the world’s only remaining major political ideology. Liberal ideas of democracy, market capitalism, personal property, and individual rights soon made their way into formerly communist states. Though other ideologies have since gained traction—including “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” first articulated by Deng Xiaoping, political Islamism, and Juche, North Korea’s unique form of hyper-nationalism—liberal ideas are gradually becoming the zeitgeist of human political thought. If there is an end of history, western liberalism is the closest thing we have seen to it.

Perhaps it is because of this fact that liberalism is generally no longer considered a revolutionary ideology. It is establishment, bourgeois, and old fashioned. But liberalism, like Marxism, is fundamentally revolutionary. It was inspired by revolution, it inspired revolution, and it was put into practice through revolution. It is unusual to see Marxism and liberalism compared in the light of revolution, and indeed their conceptions of revolution are quite different. Nowhere is that contrast more apparent than in the differing ideas of the American Revolution of the late eighteenth century, and the Marxist revolutions of the twentieth. Where Marxists focused on social revolution as a driving mechanism for history, liberals, particularly American liberals, saw revolution only as a means to correct the failings of government. Examining these differences in ideology and methodology can yield a greater understanding of revolution as an act and can help explain why revolutionary liberalism has tended to produce more stable and successful results than revolutionary Marxism.

— I. On Political Theory —

Before addressing their respective thoughts on revolution, it is prudent to discuss the philosophical bases of liberalism and Marxism. This serves to both clarify the terms themselves, and to provide an ideological context in which liberal and Marxist revolutionaries acted. Both ideologies emerged as a reaction to dramatic socio-political upheaval. For early liberal thinkers, that upheaval came in the form of two political revolutions. For Marxists, that upheaval came in the form of the Industrial Revolution.

The first political revolution that would sow the seeds of liberal thought was the Puritan Revolution in England, which began in 1642 and continued for nearly a decade. The trial and execution of Charles I in 1649 marked the first time in English history that a monarch had been tried and executed. It implicitly called into question the idea of monarchy which, predicated on the idea of divine right, should have been infallible. It was Thomas Hobbes's reaction to this event that laid the foundation of what was to become liberalism. Hobbes is not generally considered a liberal. His staunch support of absolutism and his grim view of human nature contrast sharply with the writings of later liberal thinkers. Nevertheless, he did provide the basic philosophical building blocks that would be used to construct liberal thought. Hobbes was the first political writer to attempt to place humanity in a political vacuum as a thought experiment designed to discern the nature of human political organization. Hobbes concluded that in the absence of overwhelming power to reign in their destructive tendencies, mankind was doomed "to the condition of a War of every man against every man."¹ Though his conclusions were grim, they were predicated on the idea that "Nature hath made men so equall [sic], in the faculties of body, and mind... when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable."² This idea, that every individual is essentially and naturally equal, was to form the basis of liberal thought.

While the English Civil War provided the basic philosophical materials of liberal thought, it was the reaction to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that would shape liberalism into a fully formed ideology. The remarkable characteristic of the Glorious Revolution was relative passivity. There were only a few military clashes in England that preceded the total collapse of the Stuart dynasty. William and Mary came to power largely through the political and financial support of the English nobility. Unlike the English Civil War, the transfer of power was relatively swift and bloodshed relatively rare. The English had chosen a monarch. It was John Locke who distilled the ramifications of these events into a political philosophy. One of the earliest writers associated with liberal thought, Locke would become a primary inspiration for many American revolutionaries. He took the Hobbesian conception of the intrinsic equality of man and used it to construct a model of government in which "the end of government [is] the good of the community," and in which power was derived from the consent of the people.³ This model of government, derived from the state of nature and based on the idea of the natural equality of individuals, is the quintessence of liberal ideology. This interpretation of the role and purpose of government would go on to substantially influence the liberal understanding of revolution.

Karl Marx witnessed a vastly different kind of revolution. Unlike the political revolutions of witnessed by

1 Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. reprinted from the edition of 1651. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909. 127

2 Hobbes 86

3 Locke, John. *Second Treatise on Government*. ed. Thomas Hollis, London: A. Millar et al., 1764. § 163

Hobbes and Locke, the political revolutions of Marx's day were largely unsuccessful. Rather, Marx witnessed a primarily economic revolution, the emergence of an industrially-driven capitalist economy. The last vestiges of serfdom were dying in Europe, and industrial wage labor was becoming the primary mode of human existence. Dissatisfied with existing political and economic models, Marx developed a new political and economic theory to explain these developments. Borrowing the Hegelian concept of the forward march of history, Marx suggested class struggle as the driving mechanism behind historical progress. *The Communist Manifesto* opens with the assertion that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles... oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another."⁴ These classes, according to Marx, were organized in various formulations of a structure generally similar across all societies. The producing classes generate value through labor. The owner class controls the means of production by which that labor is performed. There are two kinds of labor performed by the producing class: necessary-labor, which is the labor needed to sustain the existence of the worker, and surplus-labor, which generates value in excess of what the worker receives for his labor. This surplus-value is "extracted from the actual producer, the labourer" by the owner class in the form of profit.⁵ This is the mechanism of class-exploitation in the Marxian view, and it is this relationship that drives class struggle. To Marx, the industrial revolution represented the overthrow of one form of class exploitation, that of feudal relationships between lords and serfs, for another, the relationship between bourgeois capitalists, and the laboring proletariat. He saw the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth century as bourgeois revolutions, in which the current exploiting class overthrew their exploiters to establish their own form of class exploitation. In this way, class struggle drove historical progress, and just as the once exploited bourgeoisie overthrew the feudal nobility, so too would the proletariat overthrow the bourgeoisie in a revolution of their own. This understanding would lead Marxist thinkers to understand revolution fundamentally differently, and perhaps more radically, than their liberal counterparts.

— II. On the Nature and Practice of Revolution —

The origin of the liberal understanding of legitimate revolution can be found in Locke, who saw revolution as a correctionary measure against the abuses of power. "Revolutions," he argued, "happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs," but as the result of "a long train of abuses."⁶ This understanding is predicated on a liberal understanding of the nature of government; that government exists to secure the rights of the people, and that a government that is destructive to that end is illegitimate. The purpose of revolution is therefore to restore respect for the rights of the people. Locke advocated for limited revolution; The dissolution of *society*, he argued, was only possible through foreign invasion, and that the object of revolution was the dissolution of *government*.⁷ The Lockean conception of limited revolution was wholly embraced by American revolutionaries and was a contributing factor in their success.

⁴ Marx, Karl, Engels, Frederick. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Translated by Samuel Moore in cooperation with Frederick Engels, 1888. via Marxists Internet Archive. 14

⁵ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887. 153

⁶ Locke. § 225

⁷ Locke, § 211
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/uhj/vol2/iss1/3>
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The earliest calls for American revolution came from Boston. Throughout the late 1760s and early 1770s, Bostonian merchants began to mobilize against the increased interest of Great Britain in its North American colonies. Samuel Adams was amongst the most prolific writers of the period, and played a crucial role in establishing in the general consciousness the existence of Locke's "long train of abuses" in Britain's treatment of the colonies. By the mid 1770s, the loose collection of complaints and grievances that had circulated around the colonies began to form into a coherent call for revolution. It was ironically an Englishman, Thomas Paine, who most succinctly made that call, and in so doing shaped the early narrative of the American Revolutionary dialogue. In *Common Sense*, one of the most famous and influential political pamphlets of the revolutionary period, Paine laid out what had by that time become the classic liberal argument for the legitimate origins of power and contested that none of them could be found in hereditary monarchy. Unsatisfied with the mere assertion that royal power was philosophically illegitimate, Paine also lays out specific and concrete grievances with British governance. "No man was a warmer wisher for reconciliation than myself," he said, "before the fatal nineteenth of April 1775."⁸ Payne was referring, of course, to the Battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, the first shooting engagements of the American Revolution. Ratified a little over a year later, The American Declaration of Independence, perhaps the most concise statement of American revolutionary thought, consisted almost entirely of a list of grievances, and made no mention of changing the nature of society, only of altering or abolishing governments that have become destructive to the natural rights of their citizens.

While the writings of American revolutionaries were much more concerned with immediate grievances and the logistical concerns of fighting a war, Marxist revolutionaries seem to have been much more self-aware of their role in a revolutionary movement. Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro all wrote extensively on their contributions to the theory of revolutionary Marxism. Perhaps this difference can be explained by the emphasis on revolution as a mechanism of social progress in Marxian thought. In this view, class struggle has only one of two possible outcomes, "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."⁹ In contrast to the Lockean view of limited revolution, the object of Marxist revolution is the total overthrow of the exploitive, class-based social system. Revolution is not a means to correct the ills of governance, but a necessary and pre-determined means of driving human progress. Revolution therefore takes on a grand significance in forging the destiny of humanity, and an understanding of this significance is reflected in the writings of Marxist revolutionaries.

Most theories of applied Marxism can be traced back to Vladimir Lenin. Lenin was not overwhelmingly concerned with specific grievances or correcting the errors of the Czarist state. Rather, the total eradication of the state was the object of revolution, and "Revolution alone can "abolish" the bourgeois state."¹⁰ That the abolition of the state was just was taken for granted by Lenin's ideology, which assumed the Marxian position that human progress was driven by class-struggle, and that the sole productive mechanism of class-struggle was the revolutionary overthrow of the existing social order. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski criticized this element of Marxism, and argued that to imagine the genesis of a post-revolutionary society totally different

8 Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. 1776. Reprinted by Signet Classics, New York. 2003. 32

9 Marx, *Communist Manifesto* 14

10 Lenin, Vladimir. *The State and Revolution*. 1918. via Lenin Internet Archive.

from the one that spawned it “would amount to believing that human communities are capable of getting rid of their past history.”¹¹ Lenin recognized this fact, and argued that the purpose of the first wave of revolution would preserve the bourgeois state, and place many bourgeois institutions in the care of a proletarian vanguard party while eliminating the bourgeoisie itself.

Whilst Marxists and liberals may disagree on why a revolution should be undertaken, they do have some agreement on how to conduct one. To many contemporary Marxists “Mao [Zedong] stands on the shoulders of Lenin as firmly as Lenin presumably stands on the shoulders of Marx.”¹² Mao wrote a great deal not only on the theory of revolution, but on its mechanisms. He subscribed to the Marxist idea that “revolutions and revolutionary wars are inevitable in class society, and without them it is impossible to achieve any leap in social development.”¹³ Mao’s tactics however, show a keen understanding of the conditions of revolutionary warfare. Maoist military strategy drew inspiration from Sun Tzu, whose work would have likely been unknown to American revolutionaries (*The Art of War* was not translated into any European language until 1772 and was not translated into English until the early twentieth century). Yet many of the conclusions Mao drew about the asymmetrical nature of revolutionary warfare were similar to those reached by American military leaders during their war for independence. Though American revolutionaries were not nearly so self-reflective as Mao, the application of strategies similar to those of Mao can be seen in the actions and correspondence of the American revolutionaries: “Attack dispersed, isolated enemy forces first...take big cities last...do not make holding a city or place our main objective... make good use of the intervals between campaigns to rest, train and consolidate our troops.”¹⁴ These were some of the main principles of what Mao labeled “People’s War,” and the application of similar tactics is evident throughout the American Revolution. Perhaps the most notable application of all of these principles was summarized by George Washington in a letter to Ishmael Putnam following the American victory at Trenton. “General Howe advanced upon Trenton which we Evacuated... then march’t for Princeton which we reacht next morning... there was three Regiments Quarterd there of British Troops—which we Attackt and Routed... After the Action we immediately march’t for this place—I shall remove from hence to Morristown—there shall wait a few days and refresh the Troops.”¹⁵ In this single instance, Washington’s strategy embodied the key principles of People’s War. He attacked a dispersed, isolated target at Trenton, opted to evacuate rather than hold the city, then repeated the process at Princeton, and took advantage of the resulting confusion to rest and consolidate his troops. These tactics may simply be the product of the realities asymmetrical warfare, but they do show a similarity in the character of liberal and Marxist revolution on a strategic level, and it is at the strategic level that liberal and Marxist revolutions have seen similar levels of success.

11 Kolakowski, Leszek. *Marxist Roots of Stalinism*. 1977

12 Meisner, Maurice. “Leninism and Maoism: Some Populist Perspectives on Marxism-Leninism in China.” *The China Quarterly*, January 1971, 2-36. via Jstor

13 Zedong, Mao. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. 1996 reprint. 119

14 Ibid 183-9

15 “From George Washington to Major General Israel Putnam, 5 January 1777,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified March 30, 2017, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-07-02-0416>. [Original source: The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 7, 21 October 1776–5 January 1777, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville:

<http://scholarworks.umass.edu/undergrad-ehj/vol2/iss13/> 535–536.]

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— III. On the Construction of Polity —

At the completion of any revolution it is necessary to build a polity to replace the one that has been overthrown. This leaves revolutionaries with the question of how to reconcile the ideology on which the revolution was predicated with the realities of governance. It is difficult to make a direct comparison between the application of liberalism and the application of Marxism, as any new polity will necessarily reflect the extant conditions of the society it is meant to govern. As Kolakowski pointed out, “no society has ever been entirely begotten by an ideology.”¹⁶ Perhaps the closest comparison that can be made would be between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each represents the first long-term successful attempt at applying their respective ideologies, inasmuch as they resulted in stable, lasting polities.

The US Constitutional Convention, held in the summer of 1787, can be seen as the stage on which the debate about how to create a liberal state was first held. The questions raised by the convention were remarkably in line with the ambiguities of liberal thought. How can government be used to reign in the destructive tendencies of humanity without stifling liberty and society? How can a state be designed to contain the contentious factions of its people? Of little concern to the founders was what Hannah Arendt called “the social question.” Rather, “the power of government was supposed to control the passion of social interests and to be controlled, in its turn, by individual reason.”¹⁷ That is to say that the revolution, true to its liberal origins, did not seek to overthrow society, but simply create a government to manage it. American liberals rejected the idea that human consciousness would eventually be reconciled with itself in any form. As James Madison wrote, “as long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed.”¹⁸ These differing opinions were driven by status and by passion, and it was “the passions ought to be controlled and regulated by the government.”¹⁹ The revolution did not destroy or transform society, merely create a more just means of governing it.

The Soviet system, initially created in the years following the 1917 revolution, was based on Leninism, which held that “communist society will be a nonlegal social order,” and that achieving that will require a transitional period which will require, “both in the short and the long run, a complete rupture with the political and legal institutions of bourgeois society.”²⁰ In contrast to American liberal revolutionaries, Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries saw the polity they must construct as a temporary institution, created with the ultimate end of eradicating bourgeois society. Taken together with the Marxist understanding that communism was the dialectic end of human contradiction, this resulted in a “failure to develop a civil society able to provide and sustain processes for handling social conflicts.”²¹ Rather than contain the contradictions of society by creating a government that could regulate them, the Soviet system was designed to change society itself, with the presumed end of eradicating contradictions entirely. This result never materialized, and the Soviet Union remained a

16 Kolakowski, Leszek. *Marxist Roots of Stalinism*. 1977.

17 Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Viking Press, 1963. Reprinted by Penguin Books, 1990. 229

18 Madison, James. *Federalist No. 49*. 1788

19 Madison, James. *Federalist No. 10*. 1787

20 Law and the Constitution of Soviet Society: The Case of Comrade Lenin, 22 *Law & Soc’y Rev.* 575, 578 (1988) via Westlaw

21 *Ibid.*

transitory dictatorship of the proletariat until its eventual collapse and return to bourgeois statehood.

— **Conclusion** —

It is ironic that Marxian ideas would ultimately fail in the grand human dialectic process that they championed. To be sure, Marxist theory contains valuable insights into the nature of labor, of capital, and of the relationship between the two. But its deterministic understanding of history and projections for its future course have not come to fruition. Its grandiose conception of revolution as a driver of human progress that would result in the overthrow of society and all the exploitations contained within it never came to fruition. No revolutionary Marxist thus far has achieved the communist end described by Marx - Bourgeois society remains. The Liberal understanding of revolution is much less radical than that of Marxists. Based on the Lockean idea that revolution is incapable of fundamentally transforming society, liberal revolutionaries sought instead to remove abusive governments. Governments were not temporary, and revolutions not central to human progress. Rather, they were tools to be used on rare occasion to alter or abolish governments that had deviated from their original purpose. They required a long series of abuses and failings on the part of the government to be overthrown, and they were not to be undertaken lightly. This understanding of revolution has resulted in more tempered polities, understanding of and capable of handling the contradictions of faction within their populations. It is perhaps less transformative, but Lockean revolution has been successful. The one area where the two ideologies seem in agreement, the conduct of revolutionary action, is the area in which both have seen success. Marxist revolution has succeeded in revolutionary action, that is to say they have overthrown their governments, but they have failed to reinvent their societies, and their emphasis on doing so has undermined their efforts to build stable governments consistent with their ideological principles.

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