

## **Marx's Gravedigger's Dialectic:** *How it Relates in a World of Transnational Corporations and Mass Militaries*

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The ideas proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their Communist Manifesto became a revolutionary new way to look at and decipher the hardships and inequalities that the working class was facing in a newly industrialized world. At the time of the Manifesto's conception, workers were flocking to the cities to find work in the brutal conditions of Europe's post-industrial revolution factories. While the working class during this time period were likely aware of class inequalities between owners and owned, managers and producers, and oppressors and oppressed, the Manifesto – designed as a handbook to be distributed to workers – sharpened and honed the awareness of these inequalities, and provided working class citizens with a group to blame their terrible working conditions on.

Paradoxically, the group upon which most of the blame is put for oppressing the workers, the bourgeoisie, is the group which Marx believes will eventually tip the scales in favour of a working class or proletariat revolution. Arguably one of the most famous and contested notions Marx and Engels put forward in their manifesto, was the theory of capitalism being its own “grave-digger(s)”<sup>1</sup> and the rise of the proletariat after capitalism has died off; Marx and many future academics in the Marxist tradition propose these two happenings as “inevitable”.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will argue that Marx's grave-digger's dialectic is not inevitable as he, and some current Marxists, believe. This is due in part to the unforeseen rise of transnational corporations, and the fervent willingness of capitalist states to protect their corporate interests with powerful and seemingly undefeatable military and intelligence complexes.

I will structure the argument in this essay by discussing why Marx's prediction of the destruction of capitalism through capitalism has not proven to be correct. I suggest that the reasons behind Marx's prediction not occurring derive from circumstances that Marx could not have predicted during the time period he lived and wrote from. I will argue that transnational corporations have provided a method through which capitalist states can control most forms of resistance from the workers, even if they have reached the point at which they desire a revolution. I will then suggest that Marx also underestimated the willingness of capitalist states to protect these corporate interests with military and intelligence power. After providing my argument, I will discuss how I believe Marx may have responded to my thesis and the main points he might have raised, were he still alive. I will finish by countering Marx's possible objections and will provide a brief conclusion to my argument. Periodically I will refer to points made in lecture and the Communist Manifesto itself. I will start by providing a short preface to my argument.

It is evident throughout the Communist Manifesto that Marx draws heavily from the state of Europe during the time period he is writing from or in other words, the Manifesto is "very much of its own time".<sup>3</sup> Just as many who saw the Nazi regime as a welcomed return to order from chaotic post World War I Germany could not have predicted the outrageous atrocities they would commit, Marx would have been hard-pressed to predict the extent to which future massive transnational corporations would take over production. That is not to say that Marx was blind to the centralization of workers within major companies. His theory of globalization is a compelling and often referenced argument. I am arguing that he could not have predicted the sheer size of the massive, modern corporate conglomerates that we are so familiar with today.

As the Marxist hypothesis suggests, the gravedigger's dialectic has "turned out not to be inevitable...so far, but many

Marxists argue that...it is becoming more likely as inequalities increase globally”.<sup>4</sup> While it would be difficult to argue that inequalities are not increasing globally as the hypothesis states, I suggest that along with these globally increasing inequalities are the equally increasing abilities of capitalist countries to suppress the discontent required for large-scale revolution. Along with this increase in ability to suppress discontent, the ability and willingness of military and intelligence complexes to intervene to protect capitalist corporate interests has also increased in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To represent this, I will refer to notions of imperialism and capitalist dominance presented in John Bellamy Foster's article “Naked Imperialism”. I will now discuss how transnational corporations are able to control and censor discontent.

One of the most destructive traits of transnational corporations is evident in the first half of the name, the fact that they are transnational. The significance of this is often simplistically underestimated. Yes, their transnational nature means that they are usually large companies who have expanded internationally, but the significance lies in that they have the ability to select the cheapest possible country to produce their products in, and the ability to pick up and move if they feel there will be resistance from the workers in their factories. Marx predicted that globalization would eventually bring people from all sectors of the working class together in large factories and this would result in the sharing of common traits such as a dislike for the capitalist system and a desire for change. Marx likely could not have predicted the ability of these corporations to close shop and move with the ease that they do.

While workers may have a small chance to organize to express their discord with brutal hours, bad conditions, and small wages, the company simply needs to move their manufacturing operations to a different country and with many underdeveloped countries desperate for employment opportunities, these corporations will likely have no trouble in finding a cheaper

producer which they can exploit to an even further extent. During the time period that Marx lived in, if companies could not afford raises in labour costs or the lost profits associated with a strike then it would often mean shutting down.

It is interesting to note that while transnational corporations are often exploiting the producers of their products, this is not what the consumer sees. The consumer likely sees a large corporation, which may hold a massive share of the market, but also has morals and values and may even donate to different charities or sponsor community welfare interests within the consumer state. This may be true in the capitalist state where they are selling their products but they are often connected to the producing companies indirectly or through a series or system of vague contracts and connections which allows the company to claim it did not know about the brutal conditions and wages if these things are somehow revealed. In Marx's lifetime, large conglomerates likely owned factories within the consuming state that had the company name emblazoned over the front of the building. It is hard for the proletariat to rise if they are not even seen or heard from, and the connection between the corporations and the producers is often hard to see by the general public in the capitalist state.

I will continue my argument by providing a hypothetical example of the type of situation I suggest above. Imagine a large multinational technology company which I will call Global-Tech for the purpose of this argument. Global-Tech specializes in portable notebook computers for travel and work. The manufacturers of these computers were at one time located in the capitalist state where Global-Tech originated from but have since moved to a developing country to reduce manufacturing costs. If one were to examine Global-Tech's website, there would likely be a story in its "about us" section that describes how the company started in the capitalist state but moved elsewhere in order to bring consumers better products; there is nothing mentioned here about labour costs. The company hangs on to its identity as a

manufacturer of goods in line with the values of the capitalist country, which is the side that the consumer sees. In reality, however, it relies on cheap labour from exploited workers in brutal and substandard working conditions to produce its products through a series of contracts and subcontracts which leaves little to no connection between Global-Tech and the producer except for the fact that the producer's products are ending up on Global-Tech shelves or in large technology retail stores. Now if discontent over the working conditions and treatment of workers in the factories that Global-Tech is associated with reaches a tipping point where a strike is inevitable, Global-Tech will likely give the company an ultimatum stating that the factory management has the choice to either end the strike, or Global-Tech will move to another manufacturing company in another country. Managers will likely agree to crack down on the strike, often violently, and this can involve military and police intervention by the state, if it is a state-owned company, as may be the case in countries where most of the market is nationalized. This example shows how transnational corporations hold power over their producers and can suppress any attempt at a proletariat rise. Even though, as Marx predicted, the transition to factory work would build "conditions of communication and association among the workers",<sup>5</sup> the ability for this new found class awareness cannot move beyond the factory for fear of losing what is often the only form of income the workers have and the prospect of being met with violent suppression.

Now that I have discussed my argument concerning how transnational corporations affect the proposed inevitability of Marx's "gravedigger's dialectic," I will discuss the second part of my argument regarding the willingness of capitalist states to intervene with their military and intelligence complexes to protect or promote capitalists interests abroad. This can be considered another method capitalist states use to deny the Marx's "gravedigger's" theory from taking place. As I suggested in the case of transnational corporations discussed above, capitalist

countries had militaries during Marx's time and it was not uncommon for states to go to war for capitalist or more commonly imperialist interests. What has changed, and what I believe Marx could not have predicted, was first, the size of the standing militaries that many capitalist states keep, and second, the willingness of these states to deploy overwhelming military power in circumstances which may not even be considered armed conflicts. As John Bellamy Foster suggests in "Naked Imperialism," capitalist states – like the U.S. – are not even trying to hide their imperialist nature anymore; they suggest that dominated states must fall in line with their capitalist objectives or face destruction, sold as "preventative" or "preemptive" wars to the public.<sup>6</sup> The other side of this overwhelming military power is the ability of capitalist states to use their intelligence services to aid capitalist interests and prevent the working class from its supposedly inevitable rise. The United States has many well documented events that I will use as examples for the following argument; however, other capitalist countries have participated in similar activities.

I will start by discussing the size of standing militaries in capitalist states today. In Marx's time and even up to and including World War II, it was common for countries to keep militaries between wars, yet when the countries went to war or began an imperial conquest against a foreign nation, units were often raised to increase the military's size to something that could achieve victory. Today, the military in capitalist states functions as almost a state within a state. It has its own set of rules and laws, its own police forces, its own driver's licensing branch, and military bases so large that they often appear as sprawling cities. Greg Easterbrook is quoted in Foster's "Naked Imperialism" as stating that current U.S. military forces are "the strongest the world has ever known...stronger than the Wehrmacht in 1940, [and] stronger than the legions at the height of Roman power".<sup>7</sup> While there have been some cutbacks recently to military spending after the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, no longer are units simply

disbanded after they have served their purpose in a conflict. They often still train and prepare to deploy in the name of national security.

Another example of a change in the willingness to deploy overwhelming military power to aid capitalist interests is military force being deployed for events that fall outside of the definitions of war or when deployed in conflicts, protecting capitalist interests above all else. An example of militaries being deployed outside the definitions of war could be how the United States often deploys large naval fleets to conduct show-of-force exercises; these occur in the vicinity of South Korea or Japan when countries such as China or North Korea make territorial claims. The reasons for these are not only for the protection of allies. Rather, it is likely that South Korea and Japan hold many American business interests. Another somewhat clichéd example of militaries protecting capitalist interests would be the American invasion of Iraq. The rationales for the conflict's beginnings is too lengthy to discuss here, however the initial days of the invasion provide an example of the focus on capitalist interests above all else. In the first few days of the invasion – and in some cases before the official invasion began – American military troops captured key oil facilities owned by Iraq. Now a popular counter-argument for this would be that troops had to capture these facilities or risk the potential of another environmental disaster like the last American-Iraqi conflict where Saddam Hussein's troops destroyed oil wells. I would argue that although this theory holds some weight, it does not give an explanation for why offices of the Iraqi oil industry were some of the first to be captured in Iraq's capital at a time when some of Iraq's most treasured landmarks and museums were being looted and destroyed. These two examples demonstrate how capitalist countries increasingly use their militaries to protect capitalist interests and intervene when they feel that these interests are threatened, even if this perceived threat does not occur as a result of war. As Rashid Khalidi describes in his article "Resurrecting Empire", America risks being perceived, through its

invasion of Iraq, as “stepping into the boots of western colonial occupiers who are still remembered bitterly throughout the Middle East”.<sup>8</sup> Foster’s “Naked Imperialism” argues that this return to colonial styled imperialism is not only accepted in the U.S. but is also intentionally included as part of their foreign policy.

The other side of this intervention by capitalists, to protect their interests, is the operations of capitalist intelligence services to serve interests other than protecting the general public from harm. It seems fairly logical that intelligence services have a duty to protect business interests, concerning the state abroad, in the form of counter-intelligence; however many capitalist intelligence services do not engage in counter-intelligence alone. There is a tradition among intelligence services in the Western world of intervening, usually covertly, in the political affairs of foreign nations to achieve outcomes that suit capitalist interests in that country regardless of how those capitalist interests suit the desire of the foreign nation’s people. A famous example of this is the CIA intervention in Iran in 1953, which took the democratically elected Prime-Minister Mossadegh out of power, and replaced him with a more totalitarian leader in order to advance capitalist interests in Iran’s oil industry. This is certainly not the first or last time that the CIA has been instrumental in a regime change. Changes such as this have occurred recently in the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2001/2002 and in the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003. The CIA has entire sections devoted purely to political intervention and regime change. This indicates the capability and willingness of capitalist states’ intelligence services in participating in political intervention to advance capitalist interests in foreign nations.

The next part of this essay will focus on the possible counter-arguments that Marx may have suggested to my thesis if he were still alive. It is important to note here that there are no absolutes in this counter-argument; this is only how I *imagine* Marx might have objected to my argument. The first counter-



argument I believe Marx may have suggested is that the length of time needed for capitalism to destroy itself is extensive. Transnational corporations and the willingness of military and intelligence complexes to defend capitalist interests may be just a link in the processes required for the inevitable rise of the proletariat. In their article “Marx and Engels: In Praise of Globalization,” authors Susan M. Jellissen and Fred M. Gottheil propose that the internationalization or globalization of the world economies forces the working men of the world to have “no country” making “national differences among them increasingly vanish”.<sup>9</sup> Contextualized in my argument, this could actually propose that the increase in transnational corporations could be helping to advance the inevitable rise of the proletariat and simply needs more time to reach this point.

Another argument that I imagine Marx might provide is noted within part one of the Communist Manifesto itself. It is the section in which Marx proposes that “when the class struggle nears the decisive hour...a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat”.<sup>10</sup> Marx specifically points out that this mobile section of the bourgeoisie is made up of ideologists who understand “the historical movement as a whole”.<sup>11</sup> I believe that Marx would argue that while inequalities have increased, the tipping point or “decisive hour” has not yet been reached and will depend on further globalization to reach the point at which differences between the working class truly disappear and bourgeoisie ideologists or a “small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift”.<sup>12</sup> Only then, I believe Marx would argue, could the rise of the proletariat and the destruction of the capitalist system become inevitable.

At this point I will provide my objections to the counter-argument presented above. I will start by saying that Marx as well as the authors Jellissen and Gottheil bring up compelling arguments in their respective works. I believe that the Marxist notion that inequalities are increasing as globalization spreads

capitalist interests across the world is correct, however I do object to these inequalities making Marx's gravedigger's dialectic inevitable as Marx and some current Marxist's may suggest. The increasing inequalities suggested would have the ability to increase resentment among those exploited by capitalist interests; I believe, though, that capitalist transnational corporations have demonstrated that they can out manoeuvre and over power any form of resistance from the proletariat. Their ability to simply pick up and move to a new manufacturing location of lower labour costs in the face of any form of resistance means that resentment will be suppressed even while the proletariat is being brought together and is sharing ideas and views on their exploitation.

The other side of my objections to the counter-argument noted above regards the capacity for capitalist states to use their overwhelming military force to control and protect capitalist interests abroad. If as Marxists propose, the rise of the proletariat is inevitable, how does the proletariat plan to deal with the massive military and intelligence complexes held by many capitalist nations that will do anything to protect capitalist interests? One has only to look at the way that capitalist states will deploy military forces for events that are not even considered war, or at the way that intelligence services can implement regime change – to suit capitalist interests – to realize that there are serious hurdles in the proletariat rising. Capitalism cannot be expected to destroy itself when its corporations and militaries extend a form of such absolute power over the proletariat. The working class in many countries faces no choice but to accept the brutal factory conditions they are presented with because the alternative is to not work at all, and face the prospect of having little to no income.

In this essay, I have discussed why I believe that Marx's theory on capitalism destroying itself is not realistic due to circumstances that Marx could not have foreseen during his lifetime. I argued that the rise of massive transnational corporations, and particularly their ability to move to

manufacturing plants located in different countries, leaves the workers free to be exploited by the corporations through brutal working conditions and low wages. Yet, the consumers of these products in the capitalist states rarely get to see this side of the large corporations. The other reason, which I argued made the inevitable rising of the proletariat class unrealistic, is the willingness of capitalist states to use their large militaries to protect and advance capitalist interests in foreign states. I have suggested that war is no longer a prerequisite for these military deployments. After presenting my argument, I discussed a brief counter-argument on how I believe Marx would object if he were still alive today, using excerpts from the Communist Manifesto, and an article discussing how globalization relates to the unification of the working class and working class ideas. After presenting this counter-argument, I discussed my objections to why I believe that transnational corporations and massive capitalist military – and intelligence complexes – would be able to defeat even the strongest desire by the working class for changes to their working conditions.

Both Marx and current academics in the Marxist tradition present very compelling arguments on globalization and the eventual rise of the proletariat, but they underestimate the sheer power and will of capitalist countries to keep their system alive and protected.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> David McLellan, introduction to *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> James Tully, *Final Essay Questions*, POLI 202: Introduction to Political Theory, University of Victoria, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> John Bellamy Foster, “Naked Imperialism”, *Monthly Review* 57, no.4 (2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, “American Power Moves Beyond the Mere Super”, *New York Times*, April 27, 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> Rashid Khalidi, “Resurrecting Empire”, *The World Today* 60, no.11 (2004).
- <sup>9</sup> Susan Jellissen and Frederick Gottheil, “Marx and Engels: In Praise of Globalization,” *Contributions to Political Economy* 28, no.1 (2009).
- <sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.