

## Structural Marxism and the Challenge of Geographic Explanation

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### Abstract

*Radical geographers can play a decisive role in shaping the geographical enquiry that explains the ongoing sprouting pattern of space in process of lingering capitalist development. This paper assessed structural Marxism and the challenge of geographic explanation. It is aimed at examining the interface between the individual and the society by looking at the forces that form the society. It is also aimed at using the application of geographical investigation of social problems to assuage poverty and exploitation in capitalist societies. The paper relied heavily on the secondary sources of data and descriptive analysis thereby revealing the capitalist space and economy, contemporary geographers need to understand the part, impact and evolution of the institutions of capitalism. It concludes with recommendations that adoption of improved and more practical structural Marxism would be a complement rather than an isolated thinking from other components of geographical enquiry in shaping the environmental space.*

**Key words:** Structural Marxism, space, capitalism, geographic explanation

### INTRODUCTION

“It is now some 20 years since David Harvey commenced a debate between Marxism and geography — a debate which, if not itself revolutionary, had revolutionary implications for the direction of much human geographic research and teaching over the next two decades. In 1988, some 15 years after its first appearance, Harvey's influential work *Social justice and the city* was republished. Early in the following year Ed Soja's *Postmodern geographies* hit the

bookshops of the northern hemisphere (and filtered down onto the shelves of their southern hemisphere counterparts by mid-1989), as did a collection edited by Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear called *the power of geography*. It appears that the stature of human geography within the social sciences has changed dramatically over the last 20 years (Castree, 2003)". From its location as a field of study uneasily straddling the earth sciences-social sciences divide and whose contribution to debates central to the study of society were rather defensively limited to spatial impacts and effects, geography has become 'flavour of the month', especially within left social science discourse. This shift has partly been produced by others 'discovering' geography — Giddens and Foucault, for example. But more importantly, it has been produced by changes within the discipline itself, particularly those wrought by the marrying of aspects of Marxist and geographic theory and the incredible burst of vitality and productivity to which this gave rise. The work of geographers such as Harvey, Soja, Massey and Sayer is now almost as well known outside the discipline as within. Many of us have been surprised, and I suppose rather chuffed, by the way in which human geography has become more broadly validated. But even more surprising over this period has been the acceptance into 'mainstream geography' of significant elements of Marxist theory. Why and how did such a repositioning and acceptance take place? It was largely due to the critical and exploratory work of radical geographers beginning in the early 1970s and developing over the next two decades. In this respect, the publishing of David Harvey's *Social justice and the city* in 1973 was a crucial marker, and it is interesting to look back at that text from a point in time when the human geographical contribution to the analysis of society is bearing so much exciting fruit.

Structural Marxism was a methodology to Marxist philosophy founded on structuralism, predominantly linked with the work of the French philosopher Louis Althusser and his students. It was dominant in France all through the 1960s and 1970s, and also came to sway philosophers, political theorists and sociologists outside of France during the 1970s. Additional exponents of structural Marxism were the sociologist Nicos Poulantzas and the anthropologist Maurice Godelier. Similarly, a lot of of Althusser's students broke with structural Marxism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Structural Marxism arose in opposition to the humanistic Marxism that dominated several western universities throughout the 1970s. In contrast to Humanistic Marxism, Althusser maintained that Marxism was a science that studied objective structures, and he held that

humanistic, historicist and phenomenological Marxism, which was based on Marx's early works, was caught in a "pre-scientific humanistic ideology".

Towards the mid-1970s and all through the 1980s, Marxist philosophers started to develop structuralist Marxist accounts of the state, law, and crime. However, Structuralist Marxism had different opinion to that of the instrumentalist view that the state can be regarded as the direct servant of the capitalist or ruling class. Although the instrumentalist position maintains that the institutions of the state are under the direct control of those members of the capitalist class in positions of state power. The structuralist standpoint takes the position that the institutions of the state must function in such a way as to ensure current viability of capitalism more generally. Another way that Marxists put this is that the institutions of the state must function so as to replicate capitalist society as a whole.

Structuralists view the state in a capitalist mode of production as taking a specifically capitalist form, not because certain individuals are in powerful positions, but because the state reproduces the logic of capitalist structure in its economic, legal, and political institutions. Hence, from a structuralist viewpoint one would argue that the institutions of the state (including its legal institutions) function in the long-term interests of capital and capitalism, rather than in the short term interests of followers of the capitalist class. Structuralists would thus argue that the state and its institutions have a definite amount of independence from particular elites in the ruling or capitalist class.

Furthermore, Structural Marxism is a relatively new continuum in geography. It is a post 1970 development that has taken its foundation in other disciplines before being introduced to geography. Structural Marxism is mostly concerned about societal forces unlike geography that put emphases on space and places. In contrast to other aspects of philosophy like the positivist science that imposes its view on the society in an objective way and humanism which places man at the centre of spatial meaning, structural Marxism examines the interface between the individual and the society by looking at the forces that form the society. Marxism as it is simply referred tries to examine the influence of societal structure on people. Therefore, structure is at the centre of the society. Marxist philosophy was advanced by Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) who was a German Philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. He studied at the University of Bonn and University of Berlin where he became interested in philosophical ideas of Young Hegelians. Marxism was upturned by capitalism,

but in fact, it holds a much wider set of questions than the economy. His full time revolutionary task started when he met his long-life friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels. Engels was also a German philosopher, social scientist, author, political scientist and a father of Marxist theory.

It started with the Paris Manuscripts (1814), where he and Friedrich Engels asserted that the expansion of the forces of production was the necessary historical functions of capitalism (Brewer, 1990). From Paris Manuscript onward, Marx operated with two scientific theories of capitalism: Bourgeois and Proletarian.

Karl Marx defined capitalism in terms of the relation between a class of free wage laborers and a class of free wage capitalists. (Brewer, 1990). It goes on to examine resentments that Marx claimed were arising in the clashes of interest between the bourgeoisies (the wealthy middle Class) and the Proletariats (the Industrial Working Class). He was truly acting in the interest of the proletariat to upheaval capitalist society and to replace it with Socialism.

The whole of Marx's work was organized to indicate the crucial role of the economic structure of capitalist society- in particular the various contradictions involving the productive forces and the relations of production as determinants of human consciousness and being. To some, this led to an interpretation that denied human free will and relegated culture and politics to status of dependent categories (Althusser, 1969, Althusser and Balibar, 1970).

Marxist focus was the understanding of capitalism rather than developing a guide for socialist and communist countries (Aitkin and Valentine, 2009). Thus, Karl Marx's work was aimed at enlightening the Proletariat concerning its plan objectives and potentially emancipatory role in history. Furtherance to this action, came up a great revolution of 1848 in Europe, where there were series of protests, rebellions and often violent upheavals.

## **THE DOMINANT EMPHASIS OF STRUCTURAL MARXISM**

Marxist study seeks to identify the processes operating in the infrastructure and to relate them to the patterns in the superstructure. This in human geography has to do with deriving general

theories of historical materialism that can account for particular patterns. The patterns themselves cannot be used to identify the processes even though they have the tendency to offer clues as to their contents (Johnston, 1991). This was reflected in Harvey (1969) work on social justice and the city when he attempted to link social structure and the city.

However, Marxist's work can be distinguished into four (4) main groups;

1. Writing that develops an all-encompassing theory of history (Historical Materialism) as a sequence of modes of production, in which changes in economic and class struggles plays a central role. Marx's explanation of materialism means "whatever exists depends on matter". The concern for nature-society relations was at the centre of Marx desire to develop materialist explanation of society. In his viewpoint, the first nature formed a materially necessary basis for human society, concerning food, shelter and clothing.

2. Followed by the knowledge that society has changed, reshaped and modified nature and consequently has formed a second nature, like our present-day world. (Aitken and Valentine, 2009). Meanwhile, structural Marxism saw production as the activity of human beings working in the natural environment to transform it to meet their needs. Marx argued that production is always social and noted that each place and time is categorized by a major mode of production in a socially ordered way in which humans can provide for the material basis of their existence by coordinating production with the social relations necessary to support it. Marx held that any mode of production is an essential mover of the society where that mode prevails. For instance, the origins and rapid development of capitalism in Europe and its slow infiltration in Asia were the result of differences in their preceding modes of production in these areas (Brewer, 1990). He also wrote on development of a more comprehensive political economy of capitalism as a mode of production, using the labour theory of value to explore its underlying contradictions. Marx insisted that materialism must be both dialectical and historical. The idea of historical materialism holds that any such mode of production has internal contradiction that can undermine it, thus, according to historical, instead of accepting global capitalism as a utopian end-state in which markets optimally allocate society's wealth amongst its members, Marx sought to identify its contradictions and potential limits in order to improve the capitalist state. Moreover, Henderson and Sheppard (2006) noted that identifying these underlining contradictions and potential limits and to a lesser extent project on how these limits could be reached and how capitalism can be overthrown.

3. Dialectical Philosophy as used by Marx centres on examining the associations between things, rather than the things themselves. Dialectical materialism focuses on interactions between the material world and our idea about it, opining that each shapes the other, but that the human mind at all times remain reliant on material procedures supporting human life. This is at variance from the main stream of science although these try to explain the world by decreasing it to an unwavering and well-defined objects linked by stable causal dealings. In fact, Castree (2003) lauded this geographical adventure stating that, it was an exercise that quite a few Marxist- inspired geographers have undertaken in lively fashion in recent times.

4. Development of political theory. Political theory encompasses a wide array of inquiry of current events, frequently designed to explain broader theories, and a mass of journalistic writing for various newspapers. Marx tried to advance a political theory grounded on the working class, resultant in a social political theory. His political theory was connected to structural paradoxes and class conflict (Jessop and Wheatley, 1999). Through his political theory, Marx tried to elucidate the mechanisms of the capitalist social system, seen as a historically developed structural totality, the mobilization of the working class in an effort to upheaval that structure.

## **PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH OF MARXIST GEOGRAPHY**

Marxist geography is far-reaching in nature and its primary criticism of the positivist spatial science centered on the approaches which failed to demonstrate or account for the apparatuses of capitalism and exploitation that motivate human spatial arrangements. As early Marxist geographers were overtly political in promoting for social change and activism; they sought through application of geographical analysis of social problems to assuage poverty and exploitation in capitalist societies. Marxist geography makes exegetical claims regarding how deep-seated structures of capitalism acts as a factor and a constraint to human agency. Most of these thoughts were advanced in the early 1970s by displeased quantitative geographers. Therefore, in order to achieve such philosophical objectives, these geographers rely greatly upon Marxist social and economic theory, drawing on Marxian economics and approaches of historical materialism to demonstrate how the means of production control human spatial distribution in capitalist structure.

## **MARXIST GEOGRAPHY**

It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Marxism first became an imperative theoretical stimulus in geography. Geographers of that era were not contented about the central idea of geography of that time. The idea of geography at that period was technocratic, positivist spatial science. Among the identified gaps were that geographers found out that geography had a focus merely restricted to spatial patterns; it failed to take into account the social practices which produce the inequalities in those patterns; the subject was technically tinted and also apparently unbiased geographical techniques and analyses often were served in practice to enable and perpetuate countless relations of domination and that laws which were created and advanced by spatial analyst were generated from industrialized western societies. On the basis of the listed challenges in geography hitherto the work of Marx was developed. The theory of Marx was dialectical, focused at political openness, as solution to exploitation and inequalities and at internationalist. However, the theory of Marx formed a foundation for a critical geography. The aim was to comprehend and tackle the production of uneven geographies. The above explicate the meaning of Marxist Geography which is a component of critical geography that uses the theories and philosophy of Marxism to study the spatial relations of human geography. In Marxist geography, the relations that geography has traditionally analyzed-natural environment and spatial relations are reviewed as outcomes of the mode of material production. To understand geographical relations, on this view, the social structure must be examined. Meanwhile, Marxist geography attempts to change the basic structure of society. It critically examines the relations between society and the natural environment.

### **MARXIST CLARIFICATION OF SPATIALITY**

To understand the capitalist space and economy, contemporary geographers need to understand the part, impact and evolution of the institutions of capitalism. Under capitalism, which is a historically and spatially specific forms of social organization, the individual and collective forms of this transformation, social and physical nature is characterized by a fundamental social division between those owning the means of production, the capitalists and those offering their labour to the capitalists in exchange for means of survival (Ron et al, 2003). The dynamics of these social class relations take particular geographical and ecological forms and lead to a series of processes, contradictions, and social struggles that subject capitalism geographically and historically dynamic, but inherently unstable (Swyngedouw, 2005).

Therefore, structural Marxism relies on the societal forces in shaping the society. It seeks to explain production, and reproduction of real material goods and services. However, due to the

lack of spatial context in Marxism, it was difficult to visualize how to operationalize the philosophy to explain geographical phenomena. To achieve this however, Marxism employs social formation in looking at the effects of production and reproduction on spatial quality. This is because social formation helps to determine the forces of change. The social formation are capitalism, socialism and feudal social formation. These various formation determines how people relates among themselves in the society. Structural formation is the beginning of the attempt to explain society exchange and production. However, Marxists are more concerned about the capitalist social formation which has two types of structure:

- Sub-structure
- Superstructure

The superstructure is the real base and power in the society. The super structure supports the sub-structure to the extent that rules and laws supports process of the capitalist structure. This determines the access to power and resources. Therefore, the way to bring Marxism to geography is by looking at the structural formation in the capitalist system by looking at the following:

- Mode of production
- Mode of economic integration;
- Social surplus

A cynical look at the capitalist mode of production realizes that it favours some classes to the detriment of others. For example, the upper and the middle classes are always favoured. Hence capitalist mode of production lead to disparity and uneven wealth distribution. Also, while it is not possible to produce everything in the capitalist system, this therefore encourages integration between different producers that lead to exchange of their goods. The three major types of integration or exchange in the capitalist system that further create disparity in wealth distribution are:

- Reciprocal exchange
- Redistributive integration
- Market exchange



Reciprocity is unique in communal society, where exchange produce to ensure a sustained and functional society. This type of exchange often engender equitable distribution of wealth but this is not possible in a capitalist society. Ranked or stratified society is a feature or product of redistributive integration. Therefore, societies with strata are more likely to have the redistributive exchange of economic integration. There is this flow from the weak to the strong, in favour of the rich. Therefore, those who have the means manipulate the economic to their own favour. For example, the exchange between Africa and their colonial masters. It was more in favour of the colonial masters. Trade by batter is another example. Redistributive exchange makes it possible to have inequality in space and this explains why Europe is develop, and Africa underdeveloped. This is what Marxism seeks to explain that the geographical world is not equal.

Market exchange is the contemporary form of integration across the world. Under this system, monetary values are assigned to every goods or services exchanged. In the case of buying and selling, there are price-fixing markets. The markets are controlled by major powers, boards, companies and buyers. It also employs international agreements to support exchange. There are also financial markets, stock exchange, monetary markets that facilitates the process of exchange. There are inequality in the process of buying because of these money boards etc. the beneficiaries are those big markets in Europe that determines the terms of trade and not those who sell goods in Africa. Market exchange does not only exist between the developed and developing countries but between the urban and rural areas. It is the inequality and contextual flow of surplus that affects spatial inequality. This leads to less resources to put infrastructural facilities in place while those who gain build better roads, hence the difference between space and spaces. Inequality between spaces in terms of facilities.

Surplus is at the heart of urbanism. Urbanism is the products of the process of social surplus within and around the cities. They determine the ambient for growth and development. How the surplus is used will shape and determine urbanism because it is only when you have surplus product that you can invest infrastructural facilities. Because surplus product does not favour many spatial unit, there is flow in terms of food supply and raw materials from the rural to the urban. Even within the urban areas, some areas are better than others in terms of infrastructural presence. This creates different settlements. It is therefore possible to explain geographical space from the perspective of flow of surplus which is inherent in Marxist work.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF STRUCTURAL MARXISM IN GEOGRAPHY**

An acceptable contribution of structural Marxism in geography is the fact that it offered a convincing explanation for understanding societal structure. For this purpose even though there exist several criticisms against the philosophy, however, Marxism in geography has taken us a step further by its explanation of some historical processes of society, structure and production.

Prior to Marxist work in geography, it was not possible to find theory that explain inequality of spatial patterns. Hitherto, geography had a focus only limited to spatial patterns; without any account for the social processes which produce the inequalities in those patterns. Substantiating this assertion Eyles (1980) noted that widespread dissatisfaction with the hitherto dominant observation mode of areal differentiation led to the development and introduction of the utility of Marxism in geography. Therefore, one obvious benefit associated with the birth of structural Marxism in geography is the development of political theories to demonstrate how the forces of society often propelled by the mechanisms of government and those that control the means of production that shaped the society. According to Jessop and Wheatley (1999) Marx political theory was tied to structural contradictions and class conflict. Structural Marxism can be conceptualized to explain space. It explains inequality in space, rural-rural inequality, inter-urban inequality, and regional inequality, inequality between nations and among others. Also, the uneven development in Nigeria can be established using structural Marxism by conceptualizing how surplus has been circulating over time, from production to surplus, Marxism therefore is highly beneficial in understanding human geography. The introduction of structural Marxism in geography has helped to develop theories in regional geography, accounting for spatial differentiation and the forces and processes that produced the regional structures. This however, hitherto was a problem in regional geography. These theories and other new approaches of geographical studies associated with them offer better explanation to the previous traditional modes of analysis.

In the course of 1970s-1980s, Marxist methods were leading methods in critical human geography. It was involved in debate about underdeveloped countries. Marxist geography is fixated on the analysis of geographical conditions, processes, and outcomes of socio-economic systems, primarily capitalism, using the tools of Marxist theory (Gregory *et al*, 2009). Marxism added to the development of geographical theories of worldwide capitalist economy in the following ways:

Development of assistance of Western countries to African countries today could be seen from a Marxist perspective. By improving the economic system of the countries, the Western countries try to help the African countries to start their individual production of goods; they also try to introduce an unbiased government, to form a kind of political sincerity; it also helps to reduce the inequalities between countries.

Eyles (1980) while x-raying the role of Marxism observed that why geography or even the entire body of social science, cannot be Marxist in the sense of accepting a form of Marxism that is regarded as complete and true, he however warned that no geography or social science can be complete without Marxism. In other words, they must be Marxian. This is more than a play with words. Marxism provides a set of fundamental insights, and background for geographical ideas, but he advised that these must be reexamined in the context of social reality.

Structural Marxism helps to project the inherent consequences of the different modes of production and the relationship in the modes of production that form the outcome of the different patterns of development. In particular, structural Marxism is more emphatic of the capitalist mode which according to Marx does not support the individual to achieve his societal goal. This according to Cox (2005) described as politics of difference as it is experienced in its racial, gender, ethnic, national and other varieties, without it, such would not exist. Capitalism builds on ideas of difference in the world inherited from pre-capitalist modes. In addition, the capitalist mode of production sets up a world of greatly intensified social risk. For the immediate producer, these are the risks of the labor market; the risks, of losing a job, having to take work at a lower rate of pay, of the loss of sense of self, the sense of failure in terms of the hegemonic bourgeois values that entails. In addition, there is the fact that the vast majority of workers are, necessarily, treated as replaceable parts, to be ordered, watched over, and managed and then replaced by another worker, by a machine; historically, a quite extraordinary situation. Therefore, Marx emancipation struggle to overthrow the capitalist mode of production.

Structural Marxism has also helped us to understand the underlining relationship between social structure or formation and how space are constituted. In the context with geography, social formations are interwoven with how we use space and the environment. This is because, for every social formation, certain organized principles are in place which determine the pattern of spatial relation. For instance the existence of industrial zones or complexes in Nigeria is not by accident, but tied to the existing social formation. Therefore, knowledge of structural Marxism equip us this salient relationship.

In terms of Dependency theory using Burgess Concentric Model: vision Marxism theory was used to explain the notion that resources flow from a periphery of poor and underdeveloped states, that is, the Inner hemisphere to the urban periphery (the transitional zones) where wealthy individual live, enriching the latter at the expense of the Formal. Poor states getting poorer and rich ones enhanced by the mode poor states are assimilated into world system. Poor Nations make available natural resources, cheap labour; a destination for dated technology and market, with poor standard of living. Actually the core can be seen as proletariat.

Affluent nations keenly perpetuate a state of dependence by various ways, for example, involving in politics, banking, media control, education and sport. The periphery exploits the core as the Bourgeois exploits the Proletariat.

Early all through the colonial era, main regions in the world dominated mainly African and Asian countries for their personal economic benefits. Nowadays states have still their economic interests that influence the political decisions they make. Marxist Geography is committed to applying classical Marxism to: a redefinition of human geography; a redefinition of classical interest in place and space, as well as geographical elements which create a geopolitical system; differentiation and connection into themes of geographically uneven development, colonialism and territorial restructure.

### **CRITICISMS OF STRUCTURAL MARXISM**

Most of the criticisms razed against the philosophy of structural Marxism are from the supporters of humanistic geography. Surprisingly, much of the criticism rapt at Marxists has arisen from the humanistic fold (although humanistic geography is itself seen as lacking for failing to account for behavioural constraints enacted by social structures). Foremost supporters of humanism include (Ley, 1980; Heidegger 1971 and Husserl, 1913). Their major concern with the Marxist ideology was its alienation of man which they say is supposed to be at the centre of geographic studies. On specific grounds, the following are some of the criticisms against the structural Marxism.

Marxism was deeply condemned for its deliberate attempt to put aside people and society in its geographical discuss. Ley (1980) while emphasizing the pitfall of structural Marxism argued that human consciousness, value and culture are a destruction and therefore place active role in shaping the society. For this obvious reason, structural Marxism should be criticized for according a mechanical view of society and a passive view of man.

Marxist geography's emphasis on constraints of structure upon human agency has been criticized extensively as deterministic, as not allowing for human agency and autonomy. The overemphasizing of the power of structure and the forces of society as shaping the historical world is absolutely unnecessary. This invariably implies less interest in how people think, feel, or behave generally. The immediate question begging for answers is that if this human agency can be ignored as suggested by the Marxist approach without the rethink that people are the players which eventually create this structure. Another heap of criticism of Marxism was its failure to institutionalized societal action despite the constraints of society. Social actions should exist in society.

Marxist geography is likewise subject to appraisals of historical materialism and its applicability to modern day post-industrial and capitalist societies. The prominence placed by Marxist on the notion of class is also subject to appraisal.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Structuralists view the state in a capitalist mode of production as taking a precisely capitalist form, not because particular people are in powerful positions, but because the state reproduces the logic of capitalist structure in its economic, legal, and political institutions. Hence, from a structuralist perspective one would argue that the institutions of the state (including its legal institutions) function in the long-term interests of capital and capitalism, rather than in the short term interests of members of the capitalist class. Structuralists would thus argue that the state and its institutions have a certain degree of independence from specific elites in the ruling or capitalist class.

From the discussion above, this paper recommended that despite the criticism of structural Marxism, it should be undoubtedly stated nevertheless, that the gap that Structural Marxism has come to fill in geography is noticeable. Marxism is about the only philosophy that has given much attention to the relationship between society, societal structure, social class and development across different spatial surfaces. Thus, structural Marxism is relevant in the field of geography, but not to the detriment of other philosophies. Therefore, structural Marxism should be seen as a complement rather than an isolated thinking from other components of geographical enquiry.

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