

An answer to the question about the attributes of the “neo” in neo-marxism has to be broad, given the limited scope of this paper. Different definitions of the term “neo-marxism” exist. For example, the Biographical Dictionary of Neo-Marxism considers only those scholars neo-marxistic, who are nonmaterialist Marxists. Generally, though, all scholars and followers of Marxism who came after Karl Marx can be classified as Neo-Marxists, as only Karl Marx or scholars representing exactly his philosophy are true Marxists. This ought not to imply that Neo-Marxists are not really Marxists, but that they have applied Marxism to new problems and challenges in different contexts than Karl Marx himself.

The Biographical Dictionary of Neo-Marxism states correctly that “Marxism’s children have indeed gone their separate ways”. The legacy of Karl Marx’s radical critique of society has had numerous followers since its initial publication and history has seen a broad spectrum of Neo-Marxism. Examples are the Frankfurt school, a gathering of dissident Marxists and severe critics of capitalism, who were convinced that some of Marx’s alleged followers had come to parrot Marx’s ideas too narrowly, self-described Marxist governments (e.g. Laos, Cuba) or the new left, new social movements, even though they are often criticised on the basis of single-issuedness.

What all of Marxism’s children have in common are several irreplaceable blood traits, which form the core of Marxism, thus the minimum required of any individual calling him- or herself Marxist. As the short, and by no means enclosing, overview of the broad range of Neo-Marxists, from governments to the new left, rejecting any kind of government, indicates, each Marxist school philosophically justifies the required minimum according to its own logic.

There are several basic components Neo-Marxism has to adopt in order to remain within the family. If these basic criteria are not met, self-proclaimed Neo-Marxists are not what they describe themselves to be. In that case, the “neo” in “neo-marxism” has been overstretched, and an overstretched answer to the question “what is neo” in any Neo-Marxist philosophy negates the concept of it. If there were too much “neo” in “Neo-Marxism”, it would become something completely different. Concerning the necessary blood traits, the philosophy has to remain dialectical, which means that a fragmentation of reality into distinct levels and components, from which few or just one are emphasized for the theory’s needs, is prohibited (e.g. the fragmentation of world affairs in politico-strategic, politico-economic and political-social spheres). The understanding of totality is multidimensional and interpenetrating. Capitalism has to be decried as an alienating, exploitative system, subordinating human welfare to interests of hegemonic elites. Additionally, only socialism has to be treated as a form of human organization worth thriving for, as no other system maximizes the production’s “use” value instead of the “exchange” value, the value exploitative capitalists derive their profit from and refuse to shell out to their workers. Of course, the grounding of all Neo-Marxist philosophy has to be in Karl Marx’s writings. Just as the St. Peter’s church in Wellington advertises that it relates the preaching of the Bible to “all of life” (even including the Lions Tour), Neo-Marxists use the words written and spoken by Karl Marx to legitimize their social theories, whatever they may be. As his at times inconsequent writings allow varying interpretations (just as the Bible), many competing schools of Marxism have been inspired by his words, as relevant textual justifications can easily be found for theories based on empiricism, experientialism, reflective critique or revolutionary activism. Just as Christianity offers a simultaneous unity and diversity of varying religious beliefs, the same holds true for Marxism.

Each new Neo-Marxist social theory grounds itself on the aforementioned basic components of Marxism, but differs from non-basic components or applies the theory to new surroundings. For example, Max Weber and Sigmund Freud influenced the Frankfurt School, which helped overcome Marx’s theory of economic determinism / historical materialism. Even though Max Weber himself was far from affiliated to Marxism, his studies regarding the influence of religion on the development of societies were acknowledged by scholars of the Frankfurt School. They helped to add to the concept of strict historical materialism, which was thus negated. Max Weber also observed that even though social class is based on economic relationships to the market, status class is often based on non-economical qualities such as honour, prestige or religion. Such “life chances” added to the simplistic interpretation of social classes into the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Other scholars, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, grounded their works in the writings of Karl Marx, but applied them to an increasing North-South conflict in contemporary world affairs. The critic’s focus shifted from a mere critique of capitalism to one directed at the Western civilization in general. Under these conditions, Marx finding that “big industry creates everywhere the same relations between the classes of society” is not necessarily true. Not all countries industrialize and countries are marginalized by the world-economy, thus more engaged in an international North-South conflict than an internal class struggle, as the local bourgeoisie is missing – not all barbarian nations have been compelled, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production.

It is impossible to even scratch all Neo-Marxist social theories. In 1964, Herbert Marcuse criticised not only capitalism but also the Soviet model of communism (One-Dimensional Man), as both systems saw a parallel rise of social repression. The concept of “true” and “false” needs can be accredited to Marcuse’s writings, and most interestingly, he concludes that capitalism seemed to be able to avoid the inevitability of crisis, which would then be seized by the revolutionary proletariat, according to Marx’s forecasting. Marcuse also saw that capitalism or Soviet-communism can be non-integrating forces for marginalized (by choice or fate) people, which revokes Marx claim that big industry has finally drawn clear lines between two classes. His writings are still clearly Marxist, but the success of capitalism during its golden age up to the depressions of the 1970s animated him to different conclusions than Karl Marx during his days, which classifies Marcuse as a Neo-Marxist and ought to illustrate the difference.

In conclusion, Karl Marx’s original social theory is the Adam & Eve of Marxism. Each offspring of Marx’s philosophy is Neo-Marxistic, as it is no longer the work of Karl Marx. Certain traits of “Karl Marxism” can be found in all its offsprings, but everything besides these basic, mandatory components can be the “neo” of “Neo-Marxism”. History has forced Marxist scholars to adapt their social theories to new challenges Karl Marx himself was never able to foresee, whether Weber’s findings negating strict economic determinism or the apparent ability of capitalism to overcome its inevitable crisis. The children of Marxism have gone different paths, but their constant defence and articulation of their irreplaceable blood traits in ever-changing surroundings has kept the family intact.