

**The power of tribal narratives:  
Understanding the psychological appeal of Marxism**

**Joseph Paul Forgas  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney, Australia**

## **Abstract**

Tribal conflict ideologies represent a serious challenge for liberal democracies, and none more so than various neo-marxist theories in ascendancy today. Whereas liberal democracy is based on enlightenment principles assuming that rational and pragmatic considerations by individuals will produce gradual social progress, Marxism is a collectivist tribal ideology that insists on the inevitability of social conflict and revolution to bring about change. This paper surveys the origins and defining features of marxist and neo-marxist tribal ideologies. The psychological mechanisms that are responsible for the enduring attraction of Marxist ideology are discussed, appealing to people's evolutionary propensity to seek simplicity, epistemic certainty, positive group identity, moral absolutism, and utopistic idealism in tribal narratives. The strategies employed by populist tribal movements to gratify the psychological expectations of their followers are reviewed, and the reasons for the alarming spread of neo-marxist movements are considered.

Humans are fundamentally tribal creatures and derive deep feelings of comfort and security from membership in identity groups that offer simple and certain narratives to explain the complexities of life we all face (Forgas et al., 2023; Kruglanski & Ellenberg, 2023; see also Mikulincer & Shaver; Pyszczynski, , this volume). Perhaps the most successful such tribal conflict narrative for the past 175 years has been Marxism that still attracts many faithful adherents. Marxism is in some sense a perfect illustration of how tribal narratives, featuring consensual delusions about the nature of social reality can survive despite the lack of reliable evidence and countless tragic failures when trying to implement this ideology in practice.

Marxism is an entirely deterministic and collectivist ideology that maintains that history is driven by the conflict between economic classes, a conflict that will eventually lead to the overthrow of free-market capitalism and the establishment of communism. This simplistic view of history denies the role of individual agency and choice and other factors in shaping historical events (Dahrendorff, 1959). It is also a utopian theory that envisions the end of history in a perfect communist society in which there is no class conflict, no private property, and no exploitation, a vision that seems attractive to many wishing for a better world, but also at variance with most of what we now know about human nature (Buss, 2014; von Hippel, 2018; see Forgas, this volume).

Many well-meaning and compassionate people over the ages have been drawn to marxism to explain inequality and injustice in the world. Yet ultimately, marxist dogma has long been used to justify oppression, intolerance, and even violence against dissenting individuals and groups. This seems to be a direct result of the totalitarian nature of the Marxist narrative that justifies the centralization of power in the hands of a self-identified revolutionary elite. It is remarkable that despite these transparent shortcomings, the Marxist narrative continues to attract followers, many driven by idealistic motivations.

Marxists and neo-marxists consider their ideology to be certain and morally absolute and deny the legitimacy of an individual's right and freedom to question their narrative. In that sense marxism represents an archaic, collectivist and anti-enlightenment tribal ideology that emphasizes the absolute primacy of the group over the individual. There is now a growing recognition that Marxism has all the hallmarks of a secular religion. Raymond Aron called it 'the opium of the intellectuals' in 1957 (Aron, 1957). Marxism represents a paradigmatic case of a remarkably successful and carefully designed tribal narrative, and analysing its psychological features may shed light on the universal characteristics of the 'tribal mind'.

What follows is an attempt to outline the origins, history and psychological characteristics of this seductive consensual belief system. Unlike similar totalitarian, millennial ideologies, such as Nazism, Marxism continues to attract idealistic and often well-educated followers (Aron, 1957). So what is it about the psychological attractions of Marxist thought that accounts for its durability?

**The personal context.** This paper is partly informed by my experience of countless personal discussions with my friends and academic colleagues who espoused various versions of Marxist ideology. The issue is not merely of academic interest. I was born, brought up and educated in a communist dictatorship, Hungary, and had to study marxist thought (a compulsory subject for everybody at the time) during all my college years. The forced rote-learning and compulsory regurgitation of this ideology seemed rather bizarre at the time, since the narrative had no discernible connection with the dour and grey reality of a totalitarian communist society.

Eventually I escaped from Hungary (crossing the border into Austria in the boot of a hired car). I was surprised to find that the ideology I just risked my

life to escape from held great attraction for many of my academic friends in Britain, Australia, the USA and Germany. Trying to understand this puzzle is partly what this chapter is about. Marxism is a remarkable, but far from unique example of various totalitarian tribal belief systems and narratives that have dominated the way humans see the world throughout history (Harari, 2018). Such narratives often prevail over common sense and reality (Berkowitz, 2022).

Marxism offers an excellent contemporary example to help us understand the psychological mechanisms that make such tribal ideologies so appealing. There is also a political relevance to this discussion. In their contemporary guises neo-marxist conflict theories such as radical gender ideology, woke activism and critical race theory still seek to mobilize our potential for tribal animosity to bring about revolutionary change (Murray, 2022).

The Marxist narrative is also relevant because it represents perhaps the most serious challenge to the fragile legacy of the Enlightenment, individualism and universal humanism. Neo-marxist identity politics still emphasize the primacy of the group at the expense of the individual and denies the legitimacy of liberal democracy as racist, colonialist and patriarchal (Jost, 2020; Moane, 1999). These neo-marxist ideologies promote a biased and negative view of our world and may contribute to serious mental problems in young followers (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Should they triumph, the unprecedented improvements in the human condition that Western civilization has produced in the last few hundred years may be in danger, and we may well return to our long tradition of tribalism and violence that have characterized most human societies since the Paleolithic era (von Hippel, 2018).

So what is it about this ideology that seems so attractive even today? To answer this question, this discussion will be organised into three sections: we will (1) consider the basic tenets of Marxism, (2) discuss the psychological mechanisms that account for its enduring popularity, and then (3) consider how and why current neo-marxist narratives continue to attract followers.

## I. What is Marxism? Origins and history

Marxist ideology was developed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to explain the dramatic inequalities produced by the newly emerging capitalist system. Marxism is an all-encompassing grand theory linking economics, history and politics into a single 'scientific' system, featuring a messianic message about an imminent and achievable communist utopia. Marx, born in Trier, Prussia in 1818 was the oldest son of Heinrich Marx, a Jewish lawyer, who converted to Lutheranism in 1816 to advance his career. Marx studied law and philosophy at the University of Bonn, and at the University of Berlin, where he was expelled for his political activities. He then moved to Paris and met Friedrich Engels, his lifelong collaborator. In 1848, Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, which outlined their revolutionary vision for the inevitable rise of a communist society.

Following Hegelian dialectics, Marx argued that history is also a dialectical materialist process, driven by conflict and contradiction, where conflict between social classes is the driving force of progress. Following the French utopian socialist thinkers Saint-Simon and Proudhon, he saw capitalism as an exploitative system that necessarily leads to the pauperisation of the proletariat and the inevitability of proletarian revolution leading to the emergence of an ideal communist society. He derived this prediction from his understanding of capitalist economy, arguing that the objective, material circumstances of capitalist production necessarily determine people's consciousness and will inevitably produce a revolutionary movement.

His system called historical materialism argues that the material conditions of people's lives, such as their economic status and their relationship to the means of production necessarily determine their thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Marx and Engels published their most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto*, in 1848 calling for the overthrow of capitalism and the

establishment of a communist society, in which the means of production would be owned and controlled by the working class.

His core prediction was the necessity of violent class struggle between the bourgeoisie who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who must sell their labor in order to survive. Marx proposed that the key feature of capitalism is in the [exploitation](#) of [labor](#), whose unpaid work is the ultimate source of [surplus value](#). The coming revolution will usher in a communist utopia, a classless, stateless society in which the means of production are owned in common and everyone works according to their abilities and receives according to their needs.

### **Determinism and scientific credibility**

Marx went to great lengths to claim that his ideas of 'scientific socialism' are based on unassailable scientific evidence, and his conclusions have the status of incontrovertible truth. This kind of appeal to scientific certainty is a common feature of many recent tribal ideologies. Nazism also relied on a vulgarised form of social Darwinism, claiming scientific status for the idea that Aryans are a superior race destined to rule over others. More recently scientific certainty has been claimed by advocates of various COVID measures (Atlas, 2022; Frijters et al., 2021) as well many radical climate-change activists. Of course, epistemologically no scientific theory can ever reach the status of absolute certainty (Ridley, 2015).

The scientific pretensions of marxism received a serious blow following the work of Karl Popper who showed that the theory is epistemologically unscientific because it is unfalsifiable. As Popper demonstrated, Marxism is formulated in a way that is unfalsifiable because it is always possible to explain away any evidence that contradicts it, as its followers have indeed done since its inception. Popper characterized Marxism as a form of historical speculation. Its prediction that history is predetermined to follow certain laws

that Marx claimed to have discovered leading inexorably towards a communist utopia is essentially a matter of speculation.

Decades after Popper, societies based on Marxist dogma produced uniformly disastrous results, but this did not vanquish the theory. Every instance of falsification could indeed be readily explained away by die-hard Marxists just as Popper predicted who maintained that the 'real' revolution is yet to come.

As an alternative to Marxist determinism Popper argued for *critical rationalism* and an open society, based on the idea that all knowledge is provisional and that it can only be improved through open and critical debate and the testing of hypotheses. Rather than predicting inevitable conflict-based historical changes, Popperian critical rationalism proved superior to Marxism in practice because it allowed for the possibility of trial and error and gradual, cumulative change (Scruton, 2019). Yet despite its real-life failures, Marxism continues to attract enthusiastic and often well-intentioned followers, a paradox that owes a great deal to the simplicity and epistemological certainty of its claims (Aron, 2011; Dahrendorff, 1959).

### **Economics: the marxist theory of value**

The Marxist system consists of a set interlinked ideas that coalesce into a grand theory integrating economics, history, and politics with firm predictions about the future. Marx's economic theory of value, adapted from David Ricardo is the core component of this edifice. Marx believed that it is axiomatic that only live labour can produce value. However, as [the proportion of capital invested necessarily increases over time](#), workers must become more and more exploited as capitalists try to maintain capital's share of profits. [The result is the necessary pauperization of the masses, producing the inevitable revolution.](#) This core prediction turned out to be false already in Marx' time, and [the spectacular progress of automation and productivity growth since then made the labor theory of value completely untenable by now.](#) Already in



Marx's time the workers in every capitalist country have become steadily better off.

Without this discredited 'general law of capitalist accumulation' (Marx, Vol 1, p. 644) none of his derivative political predictions can survive. Although the economic foundations of Marxist theory proved to be entirely wrong, the overall narrative survived as have many similar tribal consensual delusions throughout history. Instead, reality has been re-interpreted to conform to the theory. The ill-fated Bolshevik putsch in quasi-feudal Russia in 1917 had none of the predicted hallmarks of Marx' ironclad theory. One of the reasons why the Soviet Union failed so abysmally economically is their rigid adherence to the Marxist theory of value. Their central planners never really recognized the value and opportunity cost of capital expenditure, wasting huge amounts on projects that made no economic sense.

### **Class consciousness**

This kind of economic determinism also asserts that human consciousness must reflect the underlying realities of economics and class relations. Accordingly, workers must accept the inevitability of forming a revolutionary class. There is no scope here for individual freedom or choice – either you accept your assigned class identity, or in Marx's terms, you suffer from 'false consciousness', misled by the bourgeois media and propaganda. It is in this sense that marxism constitutes an inherently totalitarian tribal ideology, rejecting any possibility of individual choice that deviates from the tribal imperatives. The bizarre idea of 'false consciousness' has found new followers by some social psychologists as 'system justification theory' (Jost, 2020). Marxism offers a closed and unfalsifiable tribal ideology, with a complete denial of any individual freedom or choice in shaping one's fate and consciousness.

### **A theory of history**

Unburdened by false humility, Marx also claims to have understood for the first time what drives all human history: it is recurring class conflicts, punctuated by inevitable revolutions that bring progress, only to be replaced by further revolutions. According to Marx, class struggle is the central force of social evolution, claiming that the history of all hitherto existing human society is the history of class struggles (Marx & Engels, 1848). According to this view, feudalism was swept away by bourgeois revolutions, the bourgeoisie will be swept away by the inevitable proletarian revolution, and this will then usher in an ideal communistic society and the end of history. This rather simpleminded idea of tribal conflict completely ignores the historical role of ideas, discoveries, exchange, cultural evolution, scientific progress, human ingenuity, the development of technology and communication or any other factor in driving human history (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019; Pinker, 2018; Ridley, 2010, 2015). There is no scope in Marxism for the role of ideas or discoveries such as the Enlightenment in changing how we live. At heart, Marxism is a romantic utopistic credo that simplifies the complexities of human history in order to claim the re-emergence of a romanticised communist utopia (Rousseau, 1779/1950; Sowell, 1985).

## **Politics**

Marx' economic theory and his simplistic view of history find their most clear and prescriptive expression in his political writings (Dahrendorff, 1959). If workers are universally exploited as a fundamental feature of capitalism, as he claimed in his theory of value, then they must turn into a revolutionary force, driving progress and indeed, history. The fact that this actually never happened anywhere does not seem to diminish the political fervour of true believers.

Conspiracy narratives are a common feature of the politics of tribal movements like marxism, helping to explain away facts that challenge moral certainty and offering a sense of privileged knowledge and significance to believers (Koestler, 1952). Marxists often blame bourgeois brainwashing to

explain false consciousness and the refusal of 'proletars' to identify with their assigned class and revolutionary destiny (Jost, 2022). The remarkable endurance of conspiracy theories, such the 'great re-set' by capitalist elites, or theories about Jewish conspiracies are good examples, recently re-activated by Hungary's Orban accusing George Soros of heading a financiers' conspiracy to subjugate Hungary (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019; Kreko, 2023). Recent neo-marxist woke activists even see all science and especially evolutionary theory indicating the heritability of human qualities as a patriarchal conspiracy to serve reactionary interests, privileging white men and disempowering other 'knowledges' (Murray, 2022; Ridley, 2010). Given these challenges, why do so many people, who really should know better, still subscribe to the Marxist tribal narrative?

## **II. The psychological attractions of marxism**

Tribal ideologies like Marxism exploit the fundamental human evolutionary tendency for collectivism (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; see also this volume, Chapter 1). Since the paleolithic, group cohesion was the main prerequisite for survival and the development of our prodigious intellectual capacities was driven by the cognitive demands of group integration (Buss, 2014; Dunbar, 2018; von Hippel, 2018; Tomasello, 1999). Human thinking is mostly superficial, fast, automatic and intuitive (Gigerenzer, 2015; Kahneman, 2014) and is well suited for spontaneous group coordination. Marxism appeals both to our evolutionary vulnerability to tribal communalism, and our cognitive propensity to prefer simple and certain explanations.

### **Simplicity**

Humans are lazy information processors and our thinking is shaped by a preference for simplicity, certainty, and consensus. Given the limits on human cognitive capacity, simple, familiar and emotionally satisfying explanations often dominate, especially if they are also shared by others (Kahneman,

2014). In contrast, our desire to understand history, the functioning of our social systems, human nature, not to mention our ability to predict the future presents immensely complex cognitive challenges. Marxism offers seductively simple answers to these enormously complex questions by identifying inevitable class conflict rooted in economic circumstances as the driving force of history, the main source of social progress, and the harbinger of a futuristic utopia (Dahrendorff, 1959).

The quest for cognitive simplicity and coherence also drives the common *confirmation bias*, the human tendency to seek out and remember information that supports our pre-existing narratives and maintain a coherent and integrated belief system (Festinger et al., 1956; Krueger & Gruening, this volume). There is also a universal human tendency to see agency behind complex and naturally unfolding events (Ridley, 2015), and marxism neatly satisfies this inclination. Simple explanations also tend to be emotionally satisfying by providing an illusion of understanding and competence while avoiding the cognitive strain and frustration involved in explaining very complex processes at their true level of complexity. Simple explanations are also easier to communicate and more readily lend themselves to persuasive and politically effective communication (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). Marxism succeeds by exploiting such common failures of human inductive reasoning by offering simple explanations for immensely complex problems (Krueger & Gruning, this volume).

### **Epistemic Certainty**

Marxism is an excellent example of a tribal ideology carefully designed to offer the illusion of epistemic certainty. It claims to be scientific, yet its assertions are unfalsifiable by either empirical or historical evidence (Popper, 1945). Classic marxist narratives claiming that all profit is theft and that only labour produces value are appealingly simple but also wrong. The marxist theory of

history as a series of class conflicts and revolutions offers such doctrinaire certainty commanding progressive forces to advance the inevitable.

Self-delusion, confirmation bias and tribal coercion then replace understanding. Once the epistemic certainty of revolutionary marxism was challenged by history and the horrors of the Soviet communist system in particular, many marxists turned to postmodernism, or 'critical theory' as a safe haven from the potential risks of falsification. Cultural marxism combined with postmodernism remains attractive precisely because it offers epistemic certainty by denying the possibility of proof. Woke notions like 'critical race theory' or 'oppressive patriarchy' simplify very complicated social phenomena to simple-minded all-encompassing tribal explanations (Loury, 2023; Murray, 2022; Sowell, 1985). Claims about a patriarchal conspiracy, inherent white racism or universal Western colonialism offer no obvious explanatory or discriminatory utility, but serve well as a simplistic tribal rallying cry.

Epistemic certainty makes rational discourse impossible and indeed superfluous. Tribal ideologies like marxism are dangerous precisely because they appeal to those craving certainty above truth. In contrast, the liberal preference for free exchange, open debate and gradual improvement lacks the psychological attractions of theories like Marxism (Mill, 1859/1982; Scruton, 2019). Given the authoritarian culture and pseudo-certainty of tribal ideologies, the very possibility of open debate and free communication are endangered (Jussim et al., 2023).

An interesting feature of circular tribal ideologies like Marxism is an endemic disrespect for the truth. As reality is complex and uncertain, but followers demand certainty and simplicity, tribal narratives must override reality. 'Big lies' are often persuasive because of their very audacity (Berkowitz, 2022; Crano & Hohman, 2023). In marxist dictatorships, truth is always secondary to propaganda, and obvious lies remain unchallenged for decades. Followers

readily excuse lies as long as they are consistent with shared tribal delusions and are seen as uttered in the common cause.

### **Moral Absolutism**

Marxism also excels in providing adherents with a sense of moral superiority and moral absolutism as unquestioned champions of a better world. Virtue signalling and representing 'the people' appears incontestably moral, rendering all opposition not just misguided, but positively evil (Forgas, 2021). Marxist tribalism explicitly rejects the Enlightenment values of open, rational exchange, denying the moral legitimacy of any opposition and free speech. The desire to claim high moral status has deep roots in human evolutionary history, accentuating the appeal of ideologies that offer the benefits of virtue-signalling (Buss, 2014). Followers of neo-marxist movements such as cancel culture or woke-ism often seek to outdo each other in attacking those seen as deviants in a righteous display of moral fervour.

Of course, Marxism is not unique among tribal ideologies in having these benefits. On the political right, religious, nationalistic or ethnic belief systems are just as likely to be imbued with moral fervour. Nationalism is worn as a badge of moral superiority in dictatorial regimes such as Orban's Hungary, as well as among Putin's and Trump's followers (Forgas, 2021).

Marxism's appeal to moral absolutism was already evident in the Bolshevik ('majority') putsch in Russia, defining dissenters as enemies of the people to be vanquished (as many were). Fascists and marxists share the same 'ends justify the means' totalitarian moral ideology of true believers. Neo-marxist social justice movements (Black Lives Matter, Antifa, etc.) see *their* violence as noble and justified and neo-marxist 'woke' cancel culture is committed to personally attacking and silencing (de-platforming) people they disagree with (Murray, 2022). Remarkably, fascism now has few credible adherents, yet

despite its totalitarian character, cultural marxism still retains a puzzling attraction for many intellectuals (Aron, 1959).

Mocking, denigrating and personally attacking those who disagree is a common feature of many tribal narratives. Within this totalitarian mindset, even *reserving* judgment is unacceptable. Bizarre slogans such as '*silence is violence*' seen at Black Lives Matter rallies symbolize this kind of totalitarian intolerance for any deviation. Neo-marxist ideologies represent a fundamental threat to democracy precisely because they deny the legitimacy of any view other than their own.

### **Positive Group Identity**

Human evolutionary success owes much to our unparalleled ability to form and manage cohesive social groups (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023). Tribal ideologies exploit this propensity by offering belonging, status and significance to followers, often reinforced by tribal rituals (Warby, 2022). It is the unique human capacity for symbolic thought that allows shared fictional belief systems to define tribal group identity (von Hippel, 2018; Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). Tribal attachment can be especially desirable when lack of personal achievement or traumatic group experiences require a narrative explanation based around grievance, victimhood and betrayal (Forgas, 2021; Golec de Zavala, 2022, this volume).

Marxism excels in offering its adherents a strong feeling of belonging, attachment and identity (Koestler, 1952). The universal need for positive identity is convincingly demonstrated in Tajfel's 'minimal group' experiments that found that people will readily engage in intergroup discrimination even on the basis of random assignment into meaningless groups (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). The desire for group affiliation is even stronger in individualistic mass societies where opportunities for meaningful primary group contacts are scarce (Durkheim, 1997).

The quest for positive group identity can also lead to *collective narcissism*, when groups claim illusory virtues and fictitious achievements (Golec de Zavala, 2023; this volume). Historically, marxists often claimed such an elevated identity status as champions of social justice and progress. Tribal identification becomes even more secure when infused by a post-modernist, deconstructionist ‘critical social justice’ view that denies the relevance of objective evidence, relying on subjective claims of ‘lived experience’ instead.

The totalitarian nature of marxism is perhaps best exemplified by the claim that even individual consciousness is merely a tribal product, objectively determined by economic circumstances and class membership (Althusser, 2014; Jost, 2020). False consciousness and exclusion from the tribe is the fate of those who fail to develop the ‘right’ consciousness based on their pre-assigned class identity (Koestler, 1952). Neo-marxist ‘social justice’ movements similarly insist that identity group membership must define a person’s thinking, status and values. Any deviation from assigned class identity is unacceptable. Accordingly, a gay person who criticizes LGBTQIA+ ideology is not really *gay* (e.g. Douglas Murray), a feminist who questions gender orthodoxy cannot be a real *feminist* (e.g. Germaine Greer) and a black person who is conservative (e.g. Thomas Sowell) is not really *black* (Murray, 2022).

### **Utopistic promises**

Marxism, like many other tribal ideologies, is also characterized by *utopistic and messianic ideation*, promising a perfect communal future that gives meaning and significance to followers. Marx believed that communism would reinstate the idealized communalism of our prehistoric past, representing the return of modern society to a higher form of communalism.

Propheying a perfect utopia such as a ‘thousand year empire’ (nazism) or a communist bliss (marxism) has a powerful psychological appeal that liberal



incrementalist ideologies have great trouble competing with. The rational hope of gradual improvements doesn't have the emotional appeal of millennial populist promises (Scruton, 2019). Marxism, like other tribal ideologies taps into the all-too-human quest by many well-intentioned people for an achievable perfect state. Many religions also offer individual salvation in an afterlife, but Marxism is rather unique in envisaging a collective heaven of pre-defined characteristics.

### **Emotional Experiences**

Effective tribal narratives must also be capable of eliciting strong emotional responses, and Marxism is no exception. Affective states influence all human social behaviour, and feelings such as anger, fear, disgust or envy play a crucial role in motivating tribal thinking and behaviour (Al-Shawaf, 2022; Bar-Tal, this volume). The emphasis on victimhood, grievance and threats against the group produce cohesion and anger against outgroups. The Marxist slogan 'proletars of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains' is a good example of such an emotionally rousing message. The prediction of inevitable pauperization activates the evolutionary tendency for fear, and promotes cohesion and preparation to fight. Revolutionary Marxist parties, clubs and associations enforce very strong norms on members and insist on strong punishments for noncompliance (Koestler, 1952).

Righteous *anger* is also an important product of neo-marxist movements (BLM, Antifa) resulting in a narrowed cognitive focus, tunnel vision and often motivating aggression. Marxism emphasizes a narrative of injustice and hatred and demands for retribution. In extreme cases, fear, grievance and anger can lead to *disgust* — a powerful emotion that in our evolutionary past signalled contamination and the need for cleansing and even violent elimination. Marxist history is full of examples of ruthless violence and genocide against those seen as enemies (kulaks in Stalins' Russia, almost everybody in Mao's cultural revolution, educated people in Cambodia, etc.).

### **III. Re-inventing the tribal narrative: The remarkable rise of neo-marxism**

Classical Marxism focusing on a proletarian revolution lost some of its lure after the second world war, but the attractions of the simple-minded Marxist conflict-and-revolution narrative proved enduring. The proletariat has obviously refused to turn into a revolutionary class as Marx so confidently predicted. Instead, workers everywhere embraced life's comforts provided by capitalism and joined the bourgeoisie instead. The theory of pauperization proved to be a Marxist delusion. Instead with better production, inventions and productivity workers everywhere (except, paradoxically, in Marxist countries) became ever more affluent themselves (Pinker, 2018; Ridley, 2015). Instead of developing a revolutionary consciousness, they avidly joined the middle class instead.

Rather than abandoning its predictions, a cult-like, closed and unfalsifiable tribal ideological system like Marxism needed to find an alternative explanation in a typical exercise of theory saving that Popper (1945) so clearly foresaw. The neo-marxist approach advocated by the Frankfurt School and by Antonio Gramsci that emerged after 1945 sought to re-define the conditions for the long-predicted revolution by focusing on “cultural [hegemony](#)” instead of crude class conflict (Althusser, 2014; Jost, 2020; Waldrep, 2023). Cultural hegemony refers to the dominance of the worldview of the ruling class as the cultural norm (Althusser, 2014; Gramsci, 2021).

Cultural hegemony, disseminating ‘false consciousness’ and a system justification bias can explain the absence of the predicted Marxist revolution (Jost, 2020). In true Marxist fashion, cultural hegemony was defined in a way that makes the concept inherently ambiguous and unfalsifiable. It refers to an all-encompassing, ubiquitous and largely undetectable cultural and psychological influence that distorts people’s ability to clearly see their

revolutionary destiny that Marx predicted for them – basically, an all-embracing fog that produces false consciousness.

Neo-marxist theoreticians searched for an alternative strategy to bring about their revolution without a revolutionary class. They advocated “[the long march through the institutions](#),” a neo-Marxist stratagem to generate revolutionary conditions by a top-down method. By the gradual take-over of powerful institutions that maintain the hegemonic cultural “oppression” such as universities, the legal system, education, public service and the media, they hoped to mobilize public opinion to promote the conditions for a revolution (Murray, 2022; Swain & Schorr (2021).

This strategy seems to work admirably so far, and gave rise to a variety of essentially neo-marxist narratives, such as critical race theory (CRT) and the idea of intersectionality. These tribal storylines are elaborations on the original Marxist notion of group conflict producing progress. If the masses fail to see the historical necessity of revolutionary change, this is because their vision has been clouded by ‘cultural hegemony’. Accordingly new ways must be found to persuade them to fulfill their revolutionary destiny, by weaponizing all forms of identity-based inequality, whether illusory or genuine. These strategies can be remarkably effective precisely because they appeal to our evolutionary propensity for tribalism.

Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or disability can all be mobilized to promote inter-group conflict. Intersectionality defines any form of disadvantage using the dialectic of privilege and oppression based on identity group membership, promoting organized group conflict and revolution. The concept of intersectionality was advocated by the Marxist lawyer and advocate of Critical Race Theory, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). Her 1991 [article](#) for the Stanford Law Review describes intersectionality as a circular ideology that offers a flexible way to constructing any number of disadvantaged identity categories that can be mobilized against their opposite, ‘privileged’ oppressors. Intersectionality, applied socially, is designed to get people to think of how

they are constantly oppressed, in any variety of ways, in any given situation, to promote social divisiveness (Waldrep, 2023).

Rather than focusing on universal human rights and equal opportunities for every *individual* according to Enlightenment values, critical social justice ideologies emphasize tribal identity categories as a means to motivate collective action and group conflict (Fukuyama, 2018). These ideas have now gained institutional ascendancy in the form of DEI units that labour tirelessly to rectify disadvantage focusing on identity groups, rather than individuals. The Diversity-Inclusion-Equity narrative is entirely in line with Marxist theology: ‘*Equity* enables one to gain control over resources; *diversity*, control over hiring; and *inclusion* control over speech and association. Diversity officers become embedded commissars and inquisitors’ (Warby, 2023, p 6).

### **Features of contemporary neo-marxist narratives**

As is the case with many tribal ideologies, neo-marxist movements deny the importance of individual views and see superimposed group identity as all important (Fukuyama, 2018). Neo-marxism explicitly questions individualism and [enlightenment rationalism](#) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and also challenges universally accepted norms of truth and rationality. In an effort to avoid any risk of falsification, subjective and anecdotal “lived experiences” of marginalized groups are emphasized instead of objective facts and data. For example, the idea that [almost everything is or can be racist](#) is a useful approach if one wishes to create a [critical consciousness](#) leading to group conflict and revolution.

When members of marginalized groups dare to deviate from the ideological framework assigned to them (displaying ‘false consciousness’ and ‘system justification’), they are often labelled as psychologically abnormal, as ‘phobic’ or ‘deniers’. Exactly the same strategy was used in the Soviet Union to diagnose with mental illness and incarcerate those who questioned communist dogma (Sharansky, 2006).

“Critical Theories” also endorse a deep hostility to liberal democratic norms and the enlightenment values of rationality, individualism and humanism. Postmodernism plays an important role in advocating a relativist epistemology that denies the possibility of objective truth and sees all social phenomena as manifestations of power as suggested by the likes of Derrida and Foucault. It is remarkable that many old-style marxists, originally believers in a rigid and deterministic and ‘scientific’ narrative, found refuge in postmodernism once their beliefs became untenable. The common ground is the relentless advocacy of group conflict, and distaste for individualism and the reigning liberal order.

The often incomprehensible narratives of postmodernism and deconstructionism have all the hallmarks of many previous tribal ideologies in history that relied on obscurantism and vacuous jargon to serve the maintenance of the power and privilege of elite groups (Ridley, 2015), especially in academia. The humanities, not having much direct contact with reality, provide particularly fertile ground for this kind of navel gazing (Sowell, 1985). The pretensions of meaningless postmodernist verbiage have been brilliantly exposed by the physicist Alan Sokal and others ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal\\_affair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair)) by publishing intentionally meaningless text in postmodernist academic journals (Pluckrose et al., 2018; Sokal, 1996).

Wokeism is an incoherent, circular ideology, appealing to tribal identity that focuses on “lived experience” rather than objective reality, manipulating the language of “vulnerability” “harm,” and “trauma” to shut down discussion and eliminate rational debate. Just like Marxism, its enemies and causes keep changing as opportunities arise, all in the service of seeking power and fostering conflict. Yet joining such a movement can be deeply satisfying to our tribal instincts. There is a heady glamour in collective displays of moral outrage and cancelling enemies.

In contrast, rational liberalism offers none of these benefits, indeed, it requires real effort to combat our tribal instincts (Scruton, 2019). It is remarkable that simpleminded tribal narratives can be seductive to a highly educated younger generation, but then the attraction of totalitarian ideologies to intellectuals was already observed in the 1950s (Aron, 1959). The real concern is that a small but committed and zealous minority can achieve real political success against the quiet conformism of the reasonable majority (Albright, 2018).

### **Tribal narratives in contemporary psychology**

Neo-marxist tribal theories are in direct conflict with the classical, enlightenment ideology emphasizing rational inquiry and universal humanism. The Critical Social Justice (CSJ) movement proposes to alleviate disadvantage on a tribal, group basis, a view that is now also adopted in psychology (Forgas, 2023a.b). For example, the APA's definition of racism was officially changed from internal prejudicial beliefs and interpersonal discrimination, to a view informed by critical race theory, as a "[system of structuring opportunity](#)." These critical ideologies emphasizing systemic failures undermine beliefs in individual agency, and promote despondency and hopelessness (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019).

It is clear that open scientific inquiry cannot coexist with committed social activism, yet these powerful neo-marxist tribal narratives are now making serious inroads into the sciences, including psychology. A recent special issue of the American Psychologist argues that neo-marxist conflict ideology and advocacy should guide psychology to achieve radical social transformation (Waldrep, 2023). Psychology is criticized for "failing" to focus on structural power dynamics and for not creating "lasting social change", calling for "a public psychology that is more disruptive and challenging than simply aiming dominant, canonical, and mainstream psychological research and practice outward" ([Eaton, Grzanka, Schlehofer, & Silka, 2021](#), pg. 1211).

The absolutist moral position of neo-Marxism is also used to justify illegal behaviour. Flynn et al., (2021) question the value of nonviolence and encourage psychologists to think critically about the effects of privileging certain acts of civil disobedience, suggesting for example that property destruction may be justifiable as a form of civil disobedience (pg. 1220). Similarly, violating [APA Ethics](#) may also be justified to dismantle “systems of oppression...authorizing clandestine methods of civil disobedience to contest injustice (e.g., deception, evasion) when methods maximize benefits and minimize harm” (pg. 1224).

Once captured by a tribal ideology, rational science is fatally compromised (see also Fiedler; Jussim et al., this volume) and any means are acceptable to promote the cause. [Grzanka and Cole](#) (2021) argued that even maintaining rigorous methodological and scientific standards is problematic if they constrain the radical political agenda for transforming society: “*we contend that ... ‘good’ psychology ... gets in the way of transformative, socially engaged psychology /like/ critical psychology and includes liberation psychology, African American psychology, feminist psychology, LGBTQ psychology, and intersectionality*” (pg. 1335).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Tribal narratives throughout history have exerted a strong influence on how people saw reality and the meaning of their existence (Harari, 2018; see also Pyszczynsky, this volume). Such consensual delusions, irrespective of their validity, can have a powerful adaptive function in keeping a group closely integrated, even at the cost of defying reality (Berkowitz, 2022; Murray, 2019). Few tribal ideologies in our time can match the enduring influence of Marxism on public policy and political action.

This chapter argued that Marxism has all the features of a secular religion and attracts many of the same people who are inclined to religious absolutism (Aron, 1959; Ridley, 2015). Its attractiveness owes much to its appeal to serve

essential human tribal needs, as well as its promise of moral righteousness, security and idealism to improve the human condition. For a consensual belief systems to succeed, it typically needs to satisfy a set of interdependent criteria, such as offering a narrative that is simple, certain and provides moral superiority, tribal affiliation and utopistic promises. Many successful tribal narratives have some or many of these features, but Marxism is exemplary in ticking all the boxes at once (Benedict, 1989), probably accounting for its enduring influence.

The popularity of marxism is especially intriguing when considered against the backdrop of its manifold shortcomings, including lack of scientific credibility, simpleminded explanations, and devastating social and economic consequences whenever it was put in practice (Popper, 1945; Dahrendorff, 1959). Rather than suffering abandonment as happened to similar totalitarian narratives such as fascism, Marxism survived and re-emerged in new guises after the second world war (Albright, 2018).

The rise of the cultural Marxist narrative, and its eventual fusion with post-modernist critical theories produced a range of neo-marxist movements such as critical race theory, radical feminism, woke activism and the like (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These ideologies share many of the key features of classic marxism – simplicity, certainty, moral righteousness, group identity and an explicit political action plan, often appealing to decent people intent on improving the human condition.

Interestingly, utopistic predictions about what happens after liberal democracy is destroyed seem mostly absent in neo-marxist theorizing. Instead, these narratives seek to mobilize the age-old human tendency for tribalism, representing a serious challenge to the liberal, individualist narratives of the Enlightenment. The totalitarian character of Marx's ideology of historical materialism and scientific socialism focusing on identity groups and denying individual freedom is remains a key feature of neo-marxist programs (Murray, 2022).



At this juncture, one cannot be sure of the outcome of this latest tribal challenge against the norms and demands of rational individualism that shaped Western civilisation for the past few hundred years (Swain & Schorr, 2021). The rejection of the successful liberal market system as colonialist, patriarchal and racist by neo-marxist ideologues is puzzling given the undeniable benefits of this system in producing unprecedented human flourishing (Pinker, 2014; Ridley, 2015). It is the denial of observable reality and the triumph of totalitarian consensual delusions that is perhaps the most fascinating feature of the rise of critical theories (Berkowitz, 2022). Yet throughout history, people often believed unreasonable ideas, as long as these beliefs served the purpose of generating a shared sense of group identification (Harari, 2014; Benedict, 1989).

We live in interesting times when tribal ideologies are once again on the rise. As we have seen, many currently popular 'progressive' movements share the fundamental Marxist narrative of generating conflict between identity groups to achieve social progress and revolution. The ideas of the Frankfurt School and Antonio Gramsci have proven highly successful in creating a top-down revolution by subverting leading institutions such as universities, the media, law, public service and even corporations. It remains to be seen whether once again, as so often in human history, consensual delusions will triumph over common sense and rationality.

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