

Criticism and Legitimacy of “Cultural Marxism”: Implications for Christian Witness in the Postmodern World

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a good deal of controversy regarding the use and definition of the expression “cultural Marxism.” Some consider it to be simply conspiracy theorists’ term for their fantasies; others consider it the best descriptor of the confusion of our current social discourse. This article critically evaluates the construction of “cultural Marxism,” especially its Marxist-postmodern connection. It concludes that while the expression is relatively improper, it is difficult to deny the existence of a Marxist cultural turn and its impact on the historical development of our society.

Keywords

Marxism, postmodernism, cultural Marxism, apologetics, Jordan Peterson, cultural turn

It has become impossible to discuss the current influence of socialist thought without the expression “cultural Marxism” appearing. For many conservative observers of our culture, there is a radical change at work in the media, academia, and the broader culture.¹ This change is explained through the conceptual lens of this expression, which is used—often carelessly and inaccurately—to describe the ideology promoted by left-leaning thinkers in their efforts to transform society. The critics see “cultural Marxists” as having a self-defined “responsibility to eradicate the last vestiges of Christian influence and white male dominance in America’s cultural institutions.”² For those who think this way, “cultural Marxism” traces an ideological line from Marxism to gender studies and critical race theory—often conflated with identity politics.³

The expression “cultural Marxism” is so contested that a mere mention suffices to discredit the author or speaker. Many are content to dismiss the notion that Marxism plays any kind of role in forming our society. Others accept it as an accurate descriptor of the nature of cultural change. One could simply choose to reject it or to accept it, but that should not be done without critical reflection.

I. Two Criticisms

Two common objections to the expression “cultural Marxism” are its conspiratorial tone and its reliance on a dubious association between Marxism and postmodernism that borders on caricature.

¹ Rod Dreher often reduces the issues of our society to the cultural influence of Marxism or neo-Marxism. See Rod Dreher, “Cultural Marxism: Enemy of Real Marxism?,” July 24, 2019, *American Conservative*, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/cultural-marxism-enemy-of-real-marxism/>.

² Jeffrey D. Breshears, “The Origins of Cultural Marxism and Political Correctness,” 11, 2016, *Aeropagus*, <https://www.theareopagus.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Origins-of-Cultural-Marxism-1-Article-Revised.pdf>.

³ Jordan Peterson has talked of the “Marxist lie” of “white privilege.” The latter expression is typical of critical race theory (CRT), so Peterson hastily traces a direct linkage between CRT and Marxism. See Jordan Peterson, “Identity Politics and the Marxist Lie of White Privilege,” conference given at University of British Columbia Free Speech Club, November 3, 2017, *Sovereign Nations*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofmuCXRMoSA>. See also Georgi Boorman, “How the Theory of White Privilege Leads to Socialism,” June 26, 2018, *Federalist*, <https://thefederalist.com/2018/06/26/theory-white-privilege-leads-socialism/>. The article mistakenly identifies Marxism and socialism. See also Sean Walton, “Why the Critical Race Theory Concept of ‘White Supremacy’ Should Not Be Dismissed by Neo-Marxists: Lessons from Contemporary Black Radicalism,” *Power and Education* 12.1 (2019): 78–94.

1. *Conspiracy of the Left*

The first criticism of the value of the expression “cultural Marxism” is that it is used to describe a conspiratorial project of the left; this evokes in the minds of the left images of right-wing and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.⁴ In fact, according to Galen Watts, the expression “has been co-opted by hard-right people to push a conspiracy-theory view of how universities, political life and liberty itself came to be denigrated by nasty intellectual invaders.”⁵ Anyone using “cultural Marxism” would be a hard-right conspiracist. To qualify those who see any value in the expression “cultural Marxism” as “hard-right” is an ad hominem argument that will never foster responsible and critical dialogue.

However, we must honestly note that the conspiratorial nature of the “cultural Marxism” narrative is not absent from conservative discourse. It is at times expressed by a conviction that whatever “the left” is saying, something deeper, darker, is at work. Under the guise of laudable objectives like tolerance, freedom, or equality, left-wing thinkers and politicians aim to “destroy traditional culture and thus create the vacuum needed to enable a popular mass revolution.”⁶ One of the outspoken critics of the emerging “cultural Marxism” is Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. Watts notes that Peterson “has gone so far as to say that Cultural Marxism threatens the very bedrock of Western civilization.”⁷ The secret goal of cultural Marxists is to radically change the culture. The transformation of culture is implemented through secret means: that is where the conspiracy lies.

Moreover, cultural Marxism denotes a large-scale project to revolutionize society through the abolition of Western tradition. One critic writes,

Cultural Marxism is the father of the Democratic Party’s identity politics and political correctness. It is the father of transgender insanity and racial polarization. It is the father of open borders and rights for illegal immigrants. And, yes, it is even the father

⁴ Paul Rosenberg, “A User’s Guide to ‘Cultural Marxism’: Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theory, Reloaded,” May 5, 2019, Salon, <https://www.salon.com/2019/05/05/a-users-guide-to-cultural-marxism-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theory-reloaded/>. See also Peter Walker, “Tory MP Criticised for Using Antisemitic Term ‘Cultural Marxism,’” March 26, 2019, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/mar/26/tory-mp-criticised-for-using-antisemitic-term-cultural-marxism>.

⁵ Brendan O’Neill, “Don’t Call Corbynistas ‘Cultural Marxists,’” March 27, 2019, *Spectator*, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/don-t-call-corbynistas-cultural-marxists->.

⁶ John V. Asia, “Cultural Marxism: Social Chaos,” *academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/24806338/Cultural_Marxism_Social_Chaos.

⁷ Galen Watts, “‘Cultural Marxism’ Explained and Re-Evaluated,” June 23, 2018, *Quillette*, <https://quillette.com/2018/06/23/cultural-marxism-explained-and-re-evaluated/>.

of the anarchy and nihilism that gives rise to mass shooters and to Hollywood movies that portray hunting human beings for sport as “entertainment.”⁸

No wonder many on the left see “cultural Marxism” as a propaganda tool used to denounce a supposedly evil scheme aimed at destroying society.

Others on the right side of the political spectrum point to the “left conspiracy” by warning that the left’s political activism hides a secret goal of transforming society by, for example, transforming academia. On the conservative theological side, some quote writer Jay Parini (from Dinesh D’Souza’s article, “Illiberal Education”) as evidence of such a hidden hostile takeover: “Now we have tenure, and the hard work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest.”⁹ While some young professors and philosophers really thought their part in academic life could lead to transforming society, this objective does not necessarily imply that there is a conspiracy. The desire to change culture through influence in academia is actually quite understandable—whether or not we agree with the proposed change. By implying that the “leftist” control of universities, in particular in the United States, is a telling sign of such a *conspiracy*, however, some conservative thinkers are undermining their own argument.¹⁰

However, even if conservative critics using the expression “cultural Marxism” do not construe it in conspiratorial fashion, thinkers of the “left” criticize them as being naïve, or even destructive, conspiracists. It is no surprise that they dismiss this expression with a wave of the hand as merely “a uniting theory for rightwingers who love to play the victim,”¹¹ as “anti-Semitic,”¹² or even as a “hoax” and “far-right bogeyman.”¹³ It is really not surprising to read, “A central concept in the contemporary genre of right-wing manifestos, Cultural Marxism is a term of art used to disparage the

⁸ James Veltmeyer, “The Cultural Marxist Attack on Western Society,” August 22, 2019, *Washington Times*, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/aug/22/cultural-marxist-attack-western-society/>.

⁹ Quoted in Dinesh D’Souza, “Illiberal Education,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1991), 57. D’Souza himself is not using this quote to argue for or against “cultural Marxism.”

¹⁰ This does not imply that there is no “leftist” ambition to transform academia and culture—for there is—but simply that it is not conspiratorial in nature.

¹¹ Jason Wilson, “‘Cultural Marxism’: A Uniting Theory for Rightwingers Who Love to Play the Victim,” January 19, 2015, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/19/cultural-marxism-a-uniting-theory-for-rightwingers-who-love-to-play-the-victim>.

¹² Bill Berkowitz, “‘Cultural Marxism’ Catching On,” August 15, 2003, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2003/cultural-marxism-catching>.

¹³ David Neiwert, “How the ‘Cultural Marxism’ Hoax Began, and Why It’s Spreading into the Mainstream,” January 23, 2019, *Daily Kos*, <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/1/23/1828527/-How-the-cultural-Marxism-hoax-began-and-why-it-s-spreading-into-the-mainstream>.

canon of Western Marxist thought as propagating a conspiracy to undermine presumably traditional Western values.”¹⁴

This criticism is partly warranted, but it concerns only a margin of the conservative discourse. Thus conservative social critics should be balanced as to how they argue their case, and it has not always been so, especially on social media, where caricature, on both sides, is common.

2. *Marxism's New Clothes*

The second criticism aimed at the expression “cultural Marxism” is the relationship it establishes between Marxism and postmodernism. In fact, “today, it is increasingly common in Anglo-American circles to conflate post-modernism and Marxism under the label ‘cultural Marxism.’ The most famous and articulate contemporary figure is, of course, Professor Jordan Peterson.”¹⁵ Peterson has indeed explained that identity politics is a direct consequence of Marxists morphing into postmodernists. Given his notoriety, many associate cultural Marxism with such a development. Peterson clearly states, “postmodernism is the new skin that the old Marxism now inhabits.”¹⁶ He continues that in the 1970s, “[the Marxists] rebranded themselves under the postmodern guise and that is where identity politics came from.”¹⁷ This is language that some scholars understandably find objectionable.

Firstly, “rebranded themselves” implies a conscious and planned intent. While there was indeed a conscious rebranding of the old Marxism in the 1950s and 1970s, as seen for example in the history of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, its proponents could hardly be called “post-modernists” without serious qualifications. Some were merely neo-Marxists, and others were at odds with the postmodern rejection of objective reality. Similarly, some postmodern philosophers might have used and modified insights from Marxism, but even those cannot be called Marxists without serious qualifications.

A case in point is Michel Foucault. While Foucault acknowledged having gained some insights from Karl Marx, he repeatedly denied any formal

¹⁴ Marc Tuters, “Cultural Marxism,” *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 2 (2018): 32.

¹⁵ Matt McManus, “On Marxism, Post-Modernism, and ‘Cultural Marxism,’” May 18, 2018, *Merion West*, <https://merionwest.com/2018/05/18/on-marxism-post-modernism-and-cultural-marxism/>.

¹⁶ Joshua Philipp, “Jordan Peterson Exposes the Postmodernist Agenda,” June 21, 2017, *Epoch Times*, https://www.theepochtimes.com/jordan-peterson-explains-how-communism-came-under-the-guise-of-identity-politics_2259668.html.

¹⁷ Ibid.

connections with Marxism.¹⁸ Some have even said that “Foucault’s [project] was one of rescuing Marx from Marxism.”¹⁹ When he relied on Marx, it was not uncritically, even if he always had a sort of admiration for the German writer.²⁰ However, Marx’s influence should be read in light of Foucault’s own philosophical project and not of postmodernism’s subsequent history. Foucault relies mostly on the second book of Marx’s *Capital*, concerned with the genesis of capitalism.²¹ The Marxian insight Foucault adopted in his philosophy is the historical nature of reality—not first the issue of power or oppression. However, this influence does not justify applying the label of Marxist to Foucault.²²

Secondly, Peterson tends to reduce postmodernism to a certain set of “universal” ideas. One of the most radical Marxist insights incorporated into the postmodern worldview is that social life is articulated around the opposition between oppressors and oppressed—though identification of the oppressed is not through economic analysis but through the lens of “power.” Postmodern philosophers tried to further this issue in their own ways. The problem with Peterson’s argument is that he conflates “postmodernists” with the issue of power, a central theme for some postmodern thinkers (Foucault) and an important one for others (Jean-François Lyotard), but not necessarily for all. It could be asked whether “history,” not “power,” is the unifying theme of Foucault’s philosophy.²³ There is likely no single common theme uniting all postmodern philosophers—apart perhaps from the rejection of a universal system of truth. Peterson’s reductionist and caricatural view of postmodernism affects his argument and credibility.

¹⁸ Foucault said, “Do you mean to ask me what the relations are that I have myself established between my work and Marxism? I would tell you that I haven’t established any. ... The relations between my work and Marx are an entirely different matter. If you like I would say very crudely, to put things in a caricatural manner: I situate my work in the lineage of the second book of *Capital*.” Michel Foucault, “Considerations on Marxism, Phenomenology and Power: Interview with Michel Foucault; Recorded on April 3rd, 1978,” *Foucault Studies* 14 (September 2012): 100.

¹⁹ Mark G. E. Kelly, “Foucault against Marxism: Althusser beyond Althusser,” in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

²¹ Foucault, “Considerations on Marxism,” 100.

²² Mark Olssen, “Foucault and Marxism: Rewriting the Theory of Historical Materialism,” *Policy Futures in Education* 2.3–4 (2004): 475.

²³ Mark Olssen notes that for Foucault, “there is no guiding principle underlying structures or their emergence. Difference, then, is historical, and resists transcendence in all its forms, whether God, Cogito, Forms, Economy. There is nothing outside of history.” Olssen, “Foucault and Marxism,” 468.

This does not imply that the conclusion that there has been a cultural turn in Marxism from economy to culture is mistaken. It does not even mean that the Marxist insight about social opposition and oppression does not inform postmodern society. What it *does* mean is that Peterson’s facile tracing of influence from Marxism to postmodernism is not the best way of arguing for this evolution. The direct route he presents borders on caricature, and the simplification, necessary in a brief overview of the history of ideas, is misleading and does not always contribute to a just appreciation of what these thinkers have tried to achieve. This prevents Peterson from appreciating some positive aspects of postmodern and “Marxist” philosophers.²⁴

Peterson’s historical analysis is nonetheless not entirely flawed. There is a quite natural historical “line” connecting Marxism and postmodernism. A new philosophical perspective on social life neither emerges spontaneously from a philosophical void nor is created *ex nihilo*. New ideas and philosophical endeavors are critically formed by interaction with what precedes. There is *some* connection between *some* postmodern thinkers and *some* Marxists. The influence of Marxism in the decades immediately following World War II renders the historical connection between these two “schools” unavoidable; it reflects the natural formation of ideas. The question is whether it is possible to present the historical connection in a balanced and meaningful manner while preserving the complexity of the historical evolution of ideas.

It could be asked whether the expression “cultural Marxism” is not philosophically flawed. If its genealogy suffers from the oversimplifications we have mentioned, does that automatically discredit its legitimacy? Not completely, for one main reason: the questionable relationship established between Marxism and postmodernism is distinctly that of Peterson. It is not commonly held by many conservative thinkers who use “cultural Marxism” to describe the nature of our society. While Peterson overstates his case, this does not necessarily entail that the expression “cultural Marxism” itself suffers from the same philosophical caricature. It is the responsibility of conservative theologians and philosophers who make positive use of the expression to argue in a more complex and historically accurate manner.

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

II. A Legitimate Descriptor?

This debate over the Marxist origin of postmodernism takes us back to the question of “cultural Marxism” as a legitimate descriptor of contemporary society. Is there some legitimacy to this expression? Are there even some legitimate Marxist “insights” that explain the evolution of Western society? These questions invite a closer look at Marxism and its evolution.

1. Of Marxism

The first step is a basic definition of Marxism, even though to talk of a simple definition borders on the nonsensical.²⁵ Is it really possible to briefly define the main tenets of a social philosophy that has morphed many times in the past hundred and fifty years? No, but we have no choice but to try if we are to evaluate the notion of “cultural Marxism.” One could begin with the unforgettable beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”²⁶ Thus, Marxism has often been associated with a revolutionary goal revolving around “class struggle.” This explains why Marxism’s objective is often thought of as a mere social and cultural revolution.

Through encouraging the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Marxism attempted to transform the world into a better society. As Friedrich Engels wrote in a tentative “Communist Confession of Faith,” the aim of this new social philosophy was “to organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society.”²⁷ This is possible by the transformation of the so-called “bourgeois family” and dependence on a radically egalitarian central state.²⁸ Thus, the communist ideal demanded the removing of the dependence of children on parents and required dependence on the state.²⁹ This evidenced

²⁵ Charles Mudede, “Jordan Peterson’s Idea of Cultural Marxism Is Totally Intellectually Empty,” March 25, 2019, *Stranger*, <https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2019/03/25/39717444/jordan-petersons-idea-of-cultural-marxism-is-totally-intellectually-empty>.

²⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” [1848], pdf online, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>, 14.

²⁷ Friedrich Engels, “Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/06/09.htm>, 37.

²⁸ This comes again in Max Horkheimer’s *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Verso, 2012), 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

the classic Marxist’s need for a central power, which nowadays could be that of the state or that of cultural institutions.³⁰

Freedom is only possible as an outcome of class struggle, explained by Marx as the exploitative relationship between the bourgeois (“capitalist”) and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is identified with capital owners and wealth production. “By bourgeoisie,” Marx and Engels wrote, “is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live.”³¹ Based on this, Marxism is often reduced to the issue of the means of production, while clearly for Marx and Engels the means of exchange was also crucial.³² In fact, bourgeois society is nothing more than “the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.”³³ This exchange between labor and wages leads to a form of exploitation in the strict sense of the term. Exchange/exploitation is built into the basic fabric of the capitalist society, and modern society revolves around this notion.³⁴ For Marx, “exchange,” and not primarily “means of production,” is the key to understanding society and promoting its transformation.³⁵ He was quite clear that his social analysis is not a case of economic determination. This notion of exchange is crucial to the Marxist worldview and Marxism’s cultural turn.

While Marx was not merely concerned with economics, and did not argue for an economics-only social determinism, later Marxism became obsessed with economic analysis, maybe to the point that economy was seen as the single most influential factor in the constitution of society. For Marx, and a large part of Marxism up to the 1950s, the superstructure of society (what we could call “culture”) was molded by its economic structural base. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote,

³⁰ Karl Marx, “The Paris Commune” [1871], *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>, 58–59.

³¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ Exchange value “reflects the value of commodity when one commodity is exchanged for another.” Rob Sewell and Alan Woods, *What Is Marxism* (London: Wellred Publications, 2015), 115.

³⁵ However, in their historical analysis, Marx and Engels considered the means of production as an essential interpretative tool: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.” Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 16.

The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence (which) determines their consciousness.³⁶

This also leads to the notion of culture. During the 1950s and the two following decades, Marxists did not explain “production in material life” primarily in terms of economics but of *culture*, as the conceptual key to understanding the “reproduction of life.”³⁷ Thus, only a change in the capitalist nature of economic reality could transform society.

This Marxian certainty was contested in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. David Cheney summarizes this crucial change well:

Using the old-fashioned terms of the Marxist framework, culture is no longer seen as a superstructure generated by a socio-structural base, but rather as a general term for the sea of discourses and regimes of signification through which we constitute lived experience.³⁸

If Marx was never merely about economics, even in the old classical sense, it did play an enormous role. However, after the 1950s it became increasingly obvious that if economics was a viable tool for social analysis, the reality was far more complex. Thus the supposed “cultural turn” of Marxism.

2. *Marxism's Cultural Turn*

The argument in favor of the meaningfulness of the idea of “cultural Marxism” concerns the evolution of Marxist thought since the 1970s. To conservative thinkers, there is a direct link between Marxism and essential components of our culture. Watts warns, “Tracing the emergence of Cultural Marxism is a complicated and controversial affair, and there is much disagreement over who has had the most influence in shaping its contemporary expressions.”³⁹ Determining the specifics of Marxism’s “cultural

³⁶ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” [1859], pdf online, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1999, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy.pdf, 4.

³⁷ “According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimate determining element in history is the production and reproduction of life. More than this neither Marx nor myself have asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract and senseless phrase.” See “Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg,” in *Marx-Engels Correspondence 1890*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1999, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Engels_Correspondence.pdf.

³⁸ David C. Chaney, *The Cultural Turn: Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1994), 191.

³⁹ Watts, “‘Cultural Marxism’ Explained and Re-Evaluated.”

turn” is a daunting task, but several threads can be seen. Note the influence of the Frankfurt school of social theory and its philosophers—among whom Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. There is also the work and evolution of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, also known as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Others point to the influence of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci.

These thinkers wrestled with the reappropriation of aspects of Marx’s heritage. While they neither held to a common Marxist philosophy nor valued the same dimensions of his philosophy equally, one common trait was attention to cultural criticism. While this evaluation might smack of a Petersonesque conservative argument, there is a “well-documented ‘cultural turn’ in social theory, where culture involves ‘making meaningful—it is through culture that everyday life is given meaning and significance.’”⁴⁰ This Marxist turn to culture led, in the 1970s and 1980s, to a fundamental reworking of how society ought to operate.

But not all such statements come from those in line with “hard-right” or “conservative” thinkers. Judith Grant, professor of political science at Ohio University, opines in the same direction: “The Frankfurt school and its fellow travelers are largely responsible for Marxism’s turn to culture,” which occurred in the mid to late twentieth century.⁴¹

Grant explains that the Marxist turn to culture was crucial to the development of a modified version of Marxism because culture, in particular art, “would be crucial in helping the proletariat to see its place in the totality.”⁴² Thus, culture and art were considered a “mediating” tool that helped the proletariat perceive reality. In fact, the overall goal of Marxism, the emergence of better material social conditions, can explain the central importance of cultural analysis in the Marxist tradition of the 1960s and 1970s. One of Marxism’s main insights is that truth does not exist apart from material reality. Marxism could consider truth as an unchanging set of statements disconnected from social reality. In very concrete ways, truth had to “become real.” Therefore, the change of material social conditions was a waypoint in the emergence of a new and better society. Reaching that goal necessitated a mediating tool. For this “new” Marxism, this was

⁴⁰ Kate Nash, “The ‘Cultural Turn’ in Social Theory: Towards a Theory of Cultural Politics,” *Sociology* 35.1 (2001): 77.

⁴¹ Judith Grant, “The Cultural Turn in Marxism,” in *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 132. Grant was the Director of Gender Studies, and the Director of the Center for Law, Culture and Justice at Ohio University. Previously, she chaired the Gender Studies Program at University of Southern California, and was the Director of the Center for Feminist Research from 1990 to 2003.

⁴² Grant, “The Cultural Turn in Marxism,” 137.

culture. This explains why “Marxist cultural studies, as manifested in German Critical Theory, centered around the overall possibility of radical transformations through culture. Culture was the repository of imagery yet to be realized. In culture, there was hope.”⁴³ Thus, to say that Marxism has influenced the development of our society is not a conclusion unique to conservatism. It belongs with the Marxist ideal of changing society for the better.⁴⁴

Culture is crucial since it is where meaning becomes concrete, where identities can be developed and construed. A new look at “culture” could lead to social truth and, in turn, to the emergence of a new and better society. In fact, the cultural turn follows the idea that “the culture of the literally vulgar, the marginalised and the excluded could be re-evaluated by being seen as forms of resistance and subversion.”⁴⁵ Cultural knowledge and attitudes were seen as indicators of the dominant bourgeois forces. Now, a change in traditional and conventional forms of cultural knowledge is seen to be the best and necessary way to implement innovative thought.⁴⁶

For many scholars, this cultural turn began with the Frankfurt school, which dedicated itself to the study of culture not as a side phenomenon, nor merely as the product of economic forces, but as a constitutive dimension of reality.⁴⁷ The “new” insight was that culture production is more crucial to influencing the tension between classes than the classical Marxist focus on economic production and exchange. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer applied Marxian insights to the critique of the “culture industry,” itself a concrete manifestation of the dominant cultural forces of society. For Douglas Kellner, a reputed a third-generation “modifier” of the Frankfurt school, “the Birmingham scholars were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁴ If that were the only thing meant by the expression “cultural Marxism” there would be a real legitimacy to the expression.

⁴⁵ Chaney, *The Cultural Turn*, 38.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ For some critics on the left, even the use of the term *Frankfurt school* is anti-Semitic in nature; however, this argument is not valid. For instance, none of the conservative references used in this study, including the one in *The American Conservative*, show any sign of connecting the Frankfurt school to the Jewish origin of its philosophers. Contra Scott Oliver, “Unwrapping the ‘Cultural Marxism’ Nonsense the Alt-Right Loves,” February 23, 2017, *Vice*, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/78mnny/unwrapping-the-conspiracy-theory-that-drives-the-alt-right>.

⁴⁸ Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Marxism and Cultural Studies,” *UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies*, October 28, 2018, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/culturalmarxism.pdf>.

Along similar lines, other “neo-Marxist” thinkers developed what came to be known as “critical theory,” held to be a necessary instrument in the liberation of human beings from the ravages of capitalism. The emergence of “critical theory” has often been tied to the Birmingham School of cultural studies. Like the Frankfurt school, scholars associated with this philosophical tradition concluded that mass culture played an important role in integrating the working class into existing capitalist societies and that the consumer and media culture formed a new mode of capitalist hegemony. An alternative cultural stance was considered to be the best way to resist the “mass culture” typical of capitalist hegemony. As Kellner explains, “the initial project of cultural studies developed by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson attempted to preserve working class culture against onslaughts of mass culture produced by the culture industries.” This explains why, along this path, “cultural studies came to focus on how subcultural groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities.”⁴⁹ Cultural change is the best strategy for oppressed groups to follow so they can reclaim their identity and work towards social freedom and equality.

To many on the conservative side, this is a clear sign of the leftist, Marxist-informed agenda to transform culture. And in a way, it is. There is nothing surprising there. In fact, any philosophy or worldview that aims at the betterment of society will seek to transform it. We might disagree on whether current social trends are moving toward a better society, but we should nonetheless recognize that even self-defined Marxist (post-Marxist, or postmodern) thinkers do not want to destroy society out of pure spite but aim at what appears to them to be a better world.

III. *Apologetic Implications*

In this last section, we will explore the implications of our discussion, focusing in particular on three areas: Marxism and postmodernism, the social construction of reality, and the nature of social order.

1. *Marxism and Postmodernism*

To begin with, we need to revisit the relationship between Marxism and postmodernism, noting that it is easy to assume a historical linkage between them. As Matt McManus remarks, one left-wing postmodern school can be more or less explicitly tied to Marxism. In fact, among postmodern

⁴⁹ Ibid.

theorists, “most are self-identified Marxists or post-Marxists. Representative thinkers include Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Neil Postman and Jacques Baudrillard.”⁵⁰ However, another left-wing postmodern school is much more critical of the common post-modernist denominator: its stance on truth claims. McManus explains that “the primary theoretical position that unites many post-modern thinkers is skepticism towards the claim that we can achieve absolute certainty in our scientific, philosophical, and moral reasoning.”⁵¹

A first issue is that, on both left and right, on both progressive and conservative sides, the contemporary philosophical landscape has been reduced to postmodern expressions. This explains why Peterson erroneously considers postmodernism a descendant of Marxism. However, postmodernism is not the only influential philosophical tradition. Post-Marxism itself is often an alternative to prevalent postmodern thought. Transhumanism too is a non-postmodern alternative, focused on the scientific achievement of human potential.⁵² A second issue is the identification of postmodernism as a set of specific beliefs. However, this is hardly possible, the exception being the rejection of a unifying grand theory of truth.

Christian theologians should not assume that all philosophers are of the postmodern kind, especially on the left—a mistake easily made, as in the case of Peterson. If everything on the left were postmodern, and if everything on the left were Marxist, then there would indeed be a clear connection between the two. That would be the case if the history of ideas were linear and homogenous, which it is not. Reformed theologians, who put a particular emphasis on the history of redemption, should be wary of historical simplifications. As people anchored in time, we are largely dependent on the epoch in which we live, though not determined by it. Historical realities are part of who we are and part of what society has become. Recognizing that humans belong to their local material reality invites accurate representation of the historical evolution of ideas. This is a demanding task, especially because “the development of ideas and their links to the movements they generate or justify is often a messy process.”⁵³ This is a necessary

⁵⁰ McManus, “On Marxism, Post-Modernism, and ‘Cultural Marxism.’”

⁵¹ Matt McManus, “What Is Postmodernism? (Part One),” March 8, 2018, *Merion West*, <https://merionwest.com/2018/08/03/what-is-post-modernism-part-one/>.

⁵² For more on transhumanism, see Yannick Imbert, “Transhumanism: Anthropological Challenge of the Twenty-First Century,” *Unio cum Christo* 3.1 (April 2017): 201–18.

⁵³ Robert S. Smith, “Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?,” *Themelios* 44.3 (2019), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-marxism-imaginary-conspiracy-or-revolutionary-reality/>.

implication of the Reformed emphasis on creational reality and the historical deployment of God’s redemptive purposes in a fallen world.

Attention to the historical evolution of ideas is also crucial to Christian witness. In the long run, oversimplifications and caricatures will hurt Christian witness. The more we simplify our understanding of the current condition of society, the more we risk proposing an apologetic that will be aimed at the wrong target. While simplifications may be legitimate, they must aim at clarifying the current state of the world. This will not be achieved without taking into account the complexities of the created reality we inhabit.

2. Common and Converging Threads

The confusion about “cultural Marxism” comes, in part, from the common threads that run both in contemporary culture and in (neo-)Marxism. “Cultural Marxism” explains the existence of such common threads in a simple genealogy, for example, in a similar criticism of the traditional institutions of society, such as marriage. Some will note that there is a Marxist tendency to reject traditional marriage. Some Marxist thinkers have explained marriage as a construct echoing the nature of society. For Horkheimer, “monogamous marriage, but with the exclusion of incest, is the mark of the modern western civilization” and should be abandoned.⁵⁴ The current pressure against a biblical view of marriage could easily be seen as an example of Marxist lineage. However, this is far from obvious. Other factors should be considered, like social theories of knowledge and biological studies.

A second common thread is the fluidity of language. McManus notes,

Post-modern thinkers ... noted that many of us use language, either in speech or writing, without ever really reflecting on the often mysterious nature of the words we use. We often want to believe that the words we use have a clear meaning, without recognizing that many of them are open to a surfeit of interpretations.⁵⁵

Language is fluid, and so are the concepts it embodies, notably gender, which has come to be considered a social construct. As part of this Marxist cultural turn, some more or less clearly identified Marxist thinkers have argued in a similar fashion. Louis Althusser thought that the subjective self could be “contradictory, and it can change within different situations and

⁵⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Verso, 2012), 86.

⁵⁵ Matt McManus, “What Is Postmodernism? (Part One).”

in response to different kinds of address.”⁵⁶ Some critical theory and gender studies writers make a similar point. Language is fluid, gender is fluid. Poststructuralist and feminist philosopher Judith Butler has had a significant influence arguing in that direction. For Butler, it is impossible to define gender independently from the “cultural intersections” that “produced and maintained” it over the course of human history.⁵⁷ Gender is constructed, personally and socially. The reconsideration of gender in Marxism and contemporary culture has been explained in terms of philosophical kinship. However, this is *not necessarily* the case. For example, Butler cannot easily be qualified as a Marxist.⁵⁸

The fluidity of language is a common trait of postmodernism and what is often labeled “cultural Marxism.” It also explains why a superficial commonality between Marxist and postmodern insights exists. Both locate the possibility of finding alternative identity in cultural construction. Discourses and cultural engagement are the main means of affirming one’s identity and exercising individual and social power. In this there is the seed of the social construction of personal identity and of victimhood. That is not to say that some individuals have not been targeted merely for belonging to such or such ethnic or cultural group. That is indeed the case. The problem lies with the underlying ideological conviction that a person belonging to a dominant group is *necessarily* an oppressor or belonging to a minority group means being subject to oppression.

Conclusion

Whether the expression “cultural Marxism” has any value is a legitimate question. For those who deny any value to the idea of cultural Marxism, to even pronounce the terms “cultural” and “Marxism” as one conceptual signifier is preposterous. To many it denotes a caricature not even worthy of critical reflection. Because the implication that our culture has become Marxist sounds ridiculous to many on the left, the impulse is to dismiss it without hesitation. But that is a mistake. To dismiss Marxist influence on

⁵⁶ Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6–7. In this same book, Butler explains that “gender” is performed, a complex interplay of social and personal interactions. In *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), she explains further the “regulation” of gender.

⁵⁸ Rachel Aldred, “In Perspective: Judith Butler,” *International Socialism*, Summer 2004, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2004/isj2-103/aldred.html>.

our culture is to be blind to the far-ranging vision of its founder and the persistent influence of the oppressor-oppressed model as a tool for understanding the structure of society. To consider the expression “cultural Marxism” as the tool of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is an irresponsible and dismissive ad hominem argument, as is the idea that those who see cultural change as “cultural Marxism” take any kind of social progress to be inherently evil.⁵⁹

On the other hand, to consider Marxism as the key influence that taints every new social debate is to be blind to the complexities of cultural formation. Is every theory of social divide between oppressor and oppressed necessarily of Marxist inspiration? While it can certainly be the case, the *necessary* link remains in part unconvincing.⁶⁰ In like manner, the similarities are evident between critical race theory and the neo-Marxist interpretation of class struggle, but they do not necessarily imply a common conceptual formulation or ascendancy.⁶¹ They should, however, make us pause

The expression “cultural Marxism” is not the best conceptual tool to use. In fact, it is often misleading and borders on the caricatural. “Leftist thinkers,” if we can speak that way with no derogatory connotation, are not Marxist wolves in postmodern guise in the flock of conservative sheep. “Leftist thinkers” might be influenced by some Marxist insights. They might even be self-identified Marxists. That can at times be the case, but that alone hardly suffices to legitimate the expression “cultural Marxism” as a universal descriptor of every “leftist thinker.” That said, we must recognize the distinct Marxist influence that can be traced back to Marxism’s cultural turn that neo- and post-Marxist thinkers acknowledge.⁶²

Are we then left with only two choices, either of adopting this expression without a deeper understanding of its meaning and relevance or of rejecting it? In the current social and political situation, it might seem so. Confessing Christians are pressured by social context to choose a side and to disparage

⁵⁹ Andrew Woods, “The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Thrives in Bolsonaro’s Brazil,” October 16, 2019, *Fair Observer*, <https://www.fairobserver.com/insight/cultural-marxism-conspiracy-far-right-jair-bolsonaro-brazil-latin-america-news-00054/>.

⁶⁰ Contra Boorman, “How the Theory of White Privilege Leads to Socialism.”

⁶¹ See, for example, Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua, eds., *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), and its discussion of the complex relationship between “critical race theory” and Marxism through a specific focus on Foucault. See Mike Cole, *Critical Race Theory and Education: A Marxist Response* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), for a more critical interaction between the two “movements.”

⁶² Jonathan Church, “Jordan Peterson Is Not Entirely Wrong about ‘Postmodern Neo-Marxism,’” January 9, 2020, *Areo*, <https://areomagazine.com/2020/01/09/jordan-peterson-is-not-entirely-wrong-about-postmodern-neo-marxism/>.

the “other side” by ready-made simplifications. This is the case on both the progressive and conservative sides.

The Christian apologetic ethos is founded on the word of truth, Christ himself (cf. John 14:6). The desire for truthful *and* accurate analysis should be a vital dimension of the manner in which we interact with other “belief systems,” philosophical, religious, or social. There are admittedly worrisome aspects in the current state of society. The polarization of social and political discourse, the individualization of knowledge, single-sense interpretations, and the prevalence of critical theory and gender studies are signs of a societal evolution that can hardly be encouraging. Apologist Os Guinness makes the following assessment:

Our Western nations have both forgotten God and forgotten where they have come from. Now they are attempting to complete the process of severing the roots of Western civilization, destroying its root system, poisoning its soil and ruining its entire spiritual, moral and social ecology.⁶³

However, this need not be argued through the framework of “cultural Marxism.” Christians should reject the expression “cultural Marxism,” but they need not do so in a disparaging manner, as some have.

The claim that the expression “cultural Marxism” is relatively improper is a call for wisdom, to be “strangers and exiles on earth” (Heb 11:13). It is a call for practical, alternative, and Spirit-inspired wisdom. Even if we witness a social evolution that creates anxieties, we must not give in to such fears. Guinness exhorts us, “Let us then determine and resolve to be so faithful in all the challenges and ordeals the onrushing future brings that it may be said of us that we in our turn have served God’s purpose in our generation.”⁶⁴

A Christian ethos demands that we act with kindness, patience, and honesty, working for the common good of a society that needs to hear the good news of salvation. As Al Mohler aptly notes, “we must remind ourselves again and again of the compassion of truth and the truth of compassion.”⁶⁵ The current debate over the expression “cultural Marxism” does not demonstrate that Christians live with a different ethos. Unfortunately, too often they image society rather than being a light in the world (Matt 5:14).

⁶³ Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 222–23.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ R. Albert Mohler, *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), 151.