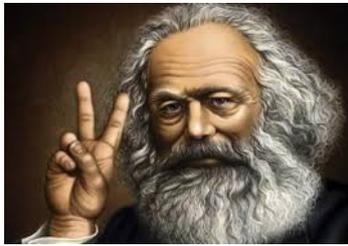


[Maybe Marx was right, just a little bit](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Friday 1 November 2013



One of the (many) things that Marx was insistent about was that the technology in use by a society determines the social relations in it. Of course, what he meant here was that in a capitalist system the capitalists would screw everyone else while in a system where the workers controlled everything all would be sweetness and light. But there's an interesting paper discussed by Alex Tabarrok here which seems to be saying that there might be at least a smidgeon of a point to what Marx [was saying](#) [3]:

The paper appears on the surface to be affirming the importance of cultural differences and to be agreeing with the kind of literature that stresses the idea of self-interest and individualism as western and contingent. Yet, in fact, the paper is suggesting that at a deeper level so-called cultural differences may not be transmitted down through the generations but instead are learned responses to very particular production techniques. Note that such learned responses may change rapidly as production techniques change and that the sea and lake villages are both unusual in the modern world in relying on just one dominant production technique with few other options for learning.

The basic point being highlighted is that lake fishing is more individualistic than sea fishing and lake fishermen are more willing to compete rather than cooperate than sea fishermen. And as Tabarrok points out that seems to be learnt behaviour. But that does mean that, to some extent at least, that Marx was right in that the technology in use does, at least to some extent, determine the social relations, the degree of competition or cooperation, in a society.

So, if the old philandering sponger off Engels was correct on this then should we listen to the modern leftists who insist that we should all be doing much more cooperating socially and a lot less competing in markets (and we'll leave aside my continual contention that markets are how people cooperate)? No, absolutely not: for what is being stated is that that level of cooperation or competition is emergent from the technologies in use.

That is, we can't directly effect the competition/cooperation model, we can only watch it be influenced by the level of technology that we have available. And if anyone wants to start thinking that we can control the technology there are several million inventors with bright ideas that the patent office would like to introduce you to. So what we end up with is that even if the old boy was correct on this point the wailings of his successors are still wrong. That technology determines the social structure does not mean at all that we can impose a social structure and thus create a technology to support it. Rather, it just means that we're stuck with the social structure enabled by our technology.

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