

Is Tyler Durden a Marxist?

The film *Fight Club* is many things. It is a social commentary on the robbing of masculinity in contemporary society. It is a character study in schizophrenia. It raises questions about the values of violence. It is innovative in its approach to movie-making and the importance of cinema. But most importantly, it is undergirded by the repeated philosophical musings of Tyler Durden's own strain of Marxism. Marxism, of course, encompasses the economic and political theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed in the mid-1800's. These theories assert that all of human action is predicated on economics and that class struggle will inevitably lead to the triumph of communism over capitalism. The heavy influence that Marx clearly had on Durden is evident throughout the entire movie and, despite the problematic Project Mayhem, it is the driving force behind many of Durden's ideas.

Much of Marx's philosophy was based on the idea that man is his labor. If man is not producing for himself, but is rather working for an employer who reaps profit off his labor, then man is not fully human. According to Marx, man can only attain and maintain his humanity by producing for himself. At one "fight club" meeting Tyler opines:

Man, I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see squandering. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. (Uhls)

Although Tyler expands Marx's argument to a lamenting of consumerism and adjusts the unit of analysis from class to gender, the basic premise stays the same: men are "working jobs [they] hate so [they] can buy shit [they] don't need." Marx believed that the lack of meaningful labor in society would inevitably lead to the proletariat revolution. There is no question that Marx would also look on in disgust at "an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables..." and although Marx was primarily concerned with the menial laborer, he would no doubt agree with Durden that the bourgeois are "slaves with white collars." It is this estrangement of man from his labor that deeply concerns both Marx and Durden. Albeit stated far more crudely, many of the views Tyler espouses throughout *Fight Club* are fundamentally Marxist in origin.

At the beginning of the movie, upon the imminent destruction of credit card buildings, Tyler says to Jack: "Think of everything we've accomplished, man. Out these windows, we will view the collapse of financial history. One step closer to economic equilibrium." The ideal of complete economic equality is the underlying theme throughout all of Marx's work. There is also substantial significance in Durden's urging Jack to "Think of everything we've accomplished." The credit card companies have not spontaneously blown themselves up. And neither is moving towards "economic equilibrium" an act of pure, nihilistic anarchy. To Tyler this is an *accomplishment*, his crowning glory, just as it would be to Marx.

In continuing the delineation of his Marxist philosophy, Durden makes a revealing comment when Jack is on the phone with the detective conducting the arson

investigation. Tyler urges Jack to “Tell him, the liberator who destroyed my property has realigned my perceptions.” According to Marx, property was a bane on society. In fact, in Chapter 2 of The Communist Manifesto, Marx writes “The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” (68). When Tyler waxes philosophic on how the destruction of property can realign one’s perceptions, he is echoing Marx’s idea that the world would be a far better place without private property.

Marx’s influence on Durden’s view of religion is also evident. Marx believed that people used religion as a crutch to escape the absolute truth of material reality. In his A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, he termed religion “the opium of the people” (1). Durden echoes this in a pivotal scene in which he is inflicting Jack with a chemical burn:

Tyler Durden: Shut up! Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God?

Jack: No, no, I... don't...

Tyler Durden: Listen to me! You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you. This is not the worst thing that can happen.

Jack: It isn't? (Uhls)

While it is not clear whether Tyler is atheistic or deistic (it would seem the latter is more likely), he certainly agrees with Marx that people are dependent on religion and asserts that it is naïve to assume that if there is a God he is merciful and just. To Marx and Durden, religion is a mist which blurs people’s vision and obstructs their reality.

Despite the clear similarities between Marxism and Durdenism, there are those who would counter that it is incorrect to trivialize the changing of the unit of analysis from class to gender and that thus *Fight Club* is in fact more about masculinity than it is about labor. In the same vein, they would assert that Durdenism, because of Project Mayhem, is more grounded in anarchy than it is in communism.

Marxism was grossly distorted by men such as Lenin and Stalin and was wrongly propped up as the basis for their fascist ideologies. An important question to ask then, is whether or not Project Mayhem, which is the focus of the last quarter of the movie, is an extension of Durdenism or a departure from it. In other words, did Tyler Durden ironically “go insane” or was the Project consistent with his philosophy about men, labor, and property? If Tyler went insane it would seem that Durden was a Marxist gone awry and that Durdenism is indeed fundamentally Marxist. If in fact Project Mayhem is rooted in Durdenism—if Project Mayhem was a *continuation* of Durdenism—then this delivers perhaps a fatal blow to the idea that Durden was a Marxist.

Marxism is inextricably linked to the idea of collectivity. The power of collectivity is what will lead the unified force of the proletariat to conquer the bourgeois and it is what will dictate the lives of Marx’s communist society. The importance of collectivity is the central theme of the initial fight club. The fight club provides disillusioned and repressed men with an opportunity to come together and release their aggression in a violent, but ultimately fulfilling manner. The soon-to-be franchised fight clubs are grassroots Marxism—through inevitable collective action a hopefully peaceful revolution is sparked.

Project Mayhem, however, demands a vast departure from the collectivity which is integral to the fight clubs. Project Mayhem’s goal is to disrupt—to deconstruct. It

essentially seeks to redress its grievances with society by infusing it with chaos and anarchy as opposed to the more internally meaningful fight clubs. Project Mayhem calls for the destruction of buildings, art, and corporate stores. The Project justifies holding an innocent man, the pathetic store employee Raymond H. Kessle, at gunpoint. Indeed, a member of Project Mayhem is needlessly murdered during an assignment. Durden himself puts his life, and thereby Jack's, in danger, when he challenges oncoming traffic in the name of having "a near-life experience." All of this is inconsistent with Marxism. Although Tyler still rationalizes his actions with Marxist philosophy, as was seen with the attack on the credit card companies, he contradicts the intended mission and philosophic foundations of Fight Club.

Notably, Project Mayhem was the brainchild of Durden, as opposed to the joint endeavor that was the original fight club. Furthermore, there are no fighting scenes after the inception of Project Mayhem. All this points to the fact that Project Mayhem really has very little to do with the goals of the fight clubs—the two ventures are completely distinct from one another. In fact, fight club, cannot remain intellectually honest and simultaneously co-exist with the chaotic Project. It is clear, then, that Tyler Durden lost sight of his goals and that the Project was not a continuation of Durdenism. Durdenism is a philosophy which found expression in Fight Club, but was lost and distorted in the anarchic Project Mayhem.

It has been established that Durden was in full agreement with Marx in regard to the bane that is property, the virtue of economic equilibrium, the estrangement of man from his labor, and the harmful effects of religion. According to Durden, these four things directly contributed to a profound loss of meaning in society. It is that phenomenon which led Tyler and Jack to found Fight Club. It has also become apparent that the chaos-driven Project Mayhem is not consistent with Durdenism or the fight clubs. Therefore, Durdenism was certainly, somewhat paradoxically, a Marxist.

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