A Critical Essay on Niall Ferguson’s Treatment of Marxism and Capitalism in *Civilization: The West and the Rest*

Emma Blankenship
Dr. Richard Janet - HS 1500
6 December 2013
Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest* is both a history of the Western world and an exploration of the ideas and institutions which have allowed Western civilization to dominate the rest. It is separated into six chapters, each of which describes a “killer application” that rocketed the West into superiority. Competition, science, property, medicine, consumption, and the “Protestant work ethic” are all cited as killer apps. This essay will focus on an aspect of the Consumption chapter, in which Ferguson attempts to prove that the power of the consumer society has historically given the West an advantage. In the process of making his argument, he embarks on a fiery endorsement of capitalism, as well as a denouncement of Karl Marx and Marxist theory. In his attack on Marxism, as well as his defense of capitalism, Ferguson allows his ideologies to cloud his presentation of the material, which is slightly jarring and certainly leaves something to be desired.

Ferguson’s criticism of Karl Marx in *Civilization* is, quite simply, biting. Before ever addressing any of Marx’s philosophical ideas, he opens with a scathing paragraph filled with personal jabs. According to Ferguson, Marx is “an unkempt scrounger,” an adulterer, he had terrible handwriting, and was incompetent at playing the stock market.\(^1\) Obviously seeking to discredit Marx based on his personal life, Ferguson’s job nearly amounts to an *ad hominem* attack. Reading between the lines, one can easily see a thinly veiled promotion of Ferguson’s own philosophies. As Michiko Kakutani, a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic for the New York Times, comments, “Mr. Ferguson does little to mute his own strong ideological views: He denounces Marx as ‘an odious individual’ [and] disdains what he calls ‘a lumpenproletariat with

vices’ like drinking gin and engaging in street fights. . .”

The crux of Marx’s character flaws, for Ferguson, seems to be that he was an unemployed freeloader, and that he “bit the hand that fed him.” Since Ferguson fails to provide more facts on Marx’s life or more rationale for his position, one has to wonder about his logic. It would seem that Marx’s familiarity with both the life of privileged classes as well as the life of the poor and unemployed would make him perfectly suited to write about issues of class, but Ferguson uses this information to discredit him. In the end, the attack on Marx comes off as a little bizarre. Earlier in the book, Ferguson dismissively says that Marx is all but out of the picture in current economic debates, which are largely between “the followers of Adam Smith and those of John Maynard Keynes, with a few die-hard devotees of Karl Marx still plugging away.” If this is the case, Ferguson’s vilification of Marx is grossly out of proportion, and more severe than necessary if he really believes that Marx is so peripheral. In reality, of course, it is clear that Marx is one of the most important economists of all time and still highly relevant. After all, many European countries still incorporate elements of socialism (influenced by Marxist ideas) into their economies. This includes the Nordic countries, which are known for their high living standards. In spite Marx’s continued influence in the world’s economic and social systems, Ferguson still rejects him and even implies that he changed the world for the worse.

---


3 Ferguson, Civilization, 207.

4 Ibid., 7.


6 Ferguson, Civilization, 217.
Character assassination isn’t the only way Ferguson dismisses those with whom he disagrees, however. He also uses an “omission” tactic. For example, he gives ample airtime to the ideas of the economist Adam Smith, of course, which is perfectly logical since Smith is commonly thought of as the great champion of capitalism (and Ferguson is clearly enamored with him). Additionally, as previously mentioned, he spends a great deal of time criticizing Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Although the criticism is done in a distasteful fashion, it too is contextual because Marx and Engels are the founders of communism. However, there is one economic theorist who is suspiciously scarce in *Civilization*. John Maynard Keynes is mentioned only a handful of times in the entire book, and briefly each time. Ferguson refers to him as “the cleverest economist of his age,” a description which hardly does justice to Keynes’ influence on Western civilization.\(^7\) “. . . the influences of Keynes’s work on domestic fiscal and monetary policy, on the international financial system, and on development policy. . . cannot be denied.”\(^8\) Ferguson’s way of dealing with Keynes appears to be to acknowledge that his recommendations “made sense,” and then to subsequently ignore him. Although he spends pages attacking Marx, he hardly addresses Keynes at all. Even though, as previously addressed, Ferguson himself acknowledges that modern economic discourse is between the followers of Smith and Keynes, it is Marx instead of Keynes who gets the majority of his criticism and discussion during his defense of free-market capitalism. Perhaps Ferguson would argue that Keynes was simply later in history than the time he wished to discuss, but the reality is that he does speak a great deal about the 20th century in the Consumption chapter and it seems that he

---

7 Ibid., 230.

tries to present Smith-esque classical liberal capitalism as the only meaningful alternative to communism.

Again and again, in each chapter of Civilization, Ferguson promotes the idea that Western power has historically been synonymous with progress, despite the occasional negative outcomes (which he refers to as the “shadow side[s]”). For example, in the Property chapter he admits that the Salem witch trials were problematic but emphasizes that “dissent and diversity” created an environment of religious toleration in early American history. Additionally, in the chapter on Medicine he can’t ignore the downsides of European imperialism such as the racial biology practiced by Germans, but he ultimately concludes that the benefits of imperialism outweighed the damage. The Consumption chapter is no different. Ferguson’s discussion on consumerism grossly understates the problems that come along with industrialization. There is a passage where he concedes to Karl Marx the idea that economic inequality did increase because of the Industrial Revolution, but he says little of the “exploited workers and ruinous environmental conditions” which come as the consequences of industrialization. Furthermore, after his concession Ferguson goes on to loftily assert, “Capitalists understood what Marx missed: that workers were also consumers.” However, as Jeff Roquen of LeHigh University notes:

Ferguson’s claim that capitalists were aware of the role of their employees as consumers is certainly debatable. If true, why did many (if not most) large businesses depress wages and freely lay-off workers for long, seasonal stretches? Extended periods of

9 Ferguson, Civilization, 114.
10 Ibid., 174.
12 Ferguson, Civilization, 210.
unemployment or underemployment often contributed to underconsumption, overproduction and ultimately – recession.\textsuperscript{13}

On that note, of course, the reader ends up right back at the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, who promotes the idea that the goal of government should be full employment. In order to do that, however, Keynes says government needs to step in and manipulate interest rates. Carrying Keynesian ideas too far, though, would be to violate Ferguson’s free-market ideology and its “business knows best” maxim. The generalization Ferguson makes about capitalists understanding the common worker better than Marx is senseless. History is full of examples of capitalists taking advantage of and exploiting underprivileged workers, concerned only with profits. Ferguson is simply projecting his own opinions onto these 19th century capitalist business owners. Indeed, this is yet another area where Ferguson’s political persuasion causes his narration to go slightly awry.

There is no doubt that Niall Ferguson’s style is engaging, and it clearly contributes to his success as a writer and television personality. However, there is an unfortunate consequence to such a style. The reason it is so captivating in the first place is that Ferguson \emph{isn’t} afraid to wear his politics on his sleeve. He is extremely provocative, he appears to be authoritative, and he makes controversial claims with an exceptional level of confidence. This isn’t necessarily a positive thing, though, because it can be certainly distracting to the reader. Additionally, the incendiary style Ferguson employs makes him seem like less of a balanced and scholarly voice. This essay has emphasized a few of the ways in which his personal philosophies created a problematic presentation of the criticism of Marxist theory and the advocacy of capitalism.

\textsuperscript{13} Roquen, “A Civilization Without Discontents.”
Ferguson will likely never change his approach--after all, it’s working for him--but it seems

certain that he will end up alienating a more than few readers throughout his career.
Bibliography


