

So You Say You Want a Revolution: Marxism, Leninism, and Capitalism as the Basis for Factions in *Divergent*

Amanda Wilson

English

Faculty advisor: Sonya Sawyer Fritz

Veronica Roth's young adult novel, *Divergent*, is set within a dystopian Chicago of the near future. Roth creates a world divided into five factions. Each faction has its own attribute—Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent). On Choosing Day, all sixteen-year-olds must select the faction of which they will be part for the rest of their lives. But protagonist Beatrice Prior is divergent: she does not fit perfectly into any specific group; she has attributes for more than one. On the surface, *Divergent* is the story of a seemingly stable and harmonious system with an unseen undercurrent of dissent. In her quest to become Dauntless, Tris discovers a growing unrest within the Erudite faction that wishes to destroy the Abnegation faction, the faction that governs the city, and take control of the government. Why is Roth setting up a faction system; what purpose do the factions serve? In this paper, I argue that the purpose is to help the audience understand that there have always been extreme differences in the ways that people believe societies will succeed and what will cause them to fail. Roth is using the faction

system as a framework in which she can address historical socio-political ideologies that have led to conflict and revolution.

In *Divergent*, the Abnegation faction is the "ideal" of Marxist theory. Karl Marx envisioned a classless, stateless, oppression-free society that used the strengths of individuals to create a society in which all people were equal. Within the faction system, Erudites represent the Capitalists who are opposing the communist system represented by Abnegation. The Erudite faction wants to assume control of the government because they resent being forced to distribute the city's resources equally among all residents. They additionally want to profit more directly from the technology they create. In portraying this tension, Roth's novel is making note that, throughout history, people have attempted to create more perfect societies based on theories and ideologies, and they fail because they become exclusive. They most often fail to take into account that people are multi-dimensional; humans are divergent. Tris becomes a threat to the faction system because her personality is flexible in whatever the situation is in which she finds herself. She can be selfish and want what is best for her (Capitalist), but she can also see that she can do things that are beneficial for others (Marxist).

The Abnegation feed the impoverished dregs of society because, in their Marxist ideal, no person is left behind; Erudites are capitalist because they are more focused on themselves and they do not wish to share goods and resources with those who do not produce. Thus the entire faction system is a Leninist failure. Roth did not necessarily set out to write a fictional world based on historic socio-political theory; it is simply the consequence of creating a culture based on separation by individual tendencies. Any time there are ideas that are completely oppositional, there will be some type of revolution, which is where the first book of the series ends—on the

brink of war between Abnegation and Erudite. Many young adult readers may view the novel as a teenage love story set in a dystopian society on the brink of war; however, in reality, *Divergent* is not just a love story but a story of revolution.

When thinking about the theme of revolution in *Divergent*, it is important to understand the history of Marxist Communism, Leninist Communism and Capitalism. In 1848, Germany and much of Europe were on the verge of revolution due to poor working conditions. The industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries had created a near-permanent underclass. The workers labored under horrible conditions for low wages and had no political representation. It was in this context that Karl Marx presented his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. The failure of the student- and worker-directed revolts led Marx to make a few changes to his work, but its essence remained unchanged in the final printing. The basis of Marx's argument is that a more perfect society can be created when all people work to the best of their abilities and pool all of their resources for the good of all people. When all people are equal, there will be no need for war or revolt. A classless society, free of oppression, is possible when people are not under the rule of a regimeist government, thereby creating a more satisfied populace. Marx believed that moving the focus from "self" to "group" would erase any tension. The heart of Marx's theory is seen in the Abnegation faction. Abnegation is viewed as incorruptible because they do not desire individual wealth; their work is for the good of every person. Members of Abnegation work on community projects, manage the government, and feed the factionless, those who do not reside in any group. They live plain lives committed to the betterment of everyone around them. This is Communism at its very best. But Marx knew the truth, that Communism is a wonderful

concept with one inherent problem—humans. Marx believed that, no matter the circumstance, human beings have an insatiable desire to enjoy the fruits of their individual labor and not share them with others completely. In Roth's novel, the faction Abnegation is a tweaked version of what Marx presented in his *Communist Manifesto*. While Roth is not expressly stating Marx's theory, she is presenting it to the audience in undertones.

In February 1917, a revolution took place in Russia. Czar Nicholas II was overthrown and a provisional government was put in place along with the Petrograd Soviet. The Petrograd Soviet (meaning council) represented workers and soldiers in Petrograd, modern day St. Petersburg. The council generally supported the idea of at least a limited democracy. It was in October of 1917 that The Bolsheviks realized that they could not maintain power in a system that was based, even partially, on free elections. They understood that elections would mean that they would likely have to share power with other parties that might have an ideology with which they may not agree. The democratic process was completely abandoned in January of 1918 and the Bolsheviks declared themselves representatives of "a dictatorship of the proletariat". The Russian Civil War began in the summer of 1918 and lasted until October 1922.

Vladimir Lenin was the leader of the Bolshevik party, and he essentially took Marx's ideal of everyone working together and creating a society where no one is better than anyone else and bastardized it into a society where everyone works and the government distributes resources to the lower classes. Marx's argument is that the greatest problems in society were created by the bourgeoisie's poor treatment of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie are the ruling class, owning the means of production and employing the

workers. The proletariats are the working class that produces goods for the bourgeoisie. The proletariat must sell their labor because they do not have the means to produce goods independently. The proletariats are dependent on the bourgeoisie for their livelihoods; for Marx, the crux of the problem is when one group takes control over another, which is exactly what Lenin and the Bolsheviks did in Russia: the Russian Parliament became the new bourgeoisie and the workers and laborers became the new proletariat. Goods that were produced were still distributed, with one glaring difference: the government kept the profits and workers were only given a stipend for their labor. The governmental faction system of *Divergent* is an example of Leninist Communist theory, while the traditional Marxist Communism ideal is represented within the Abnegation faction.

In *Divergent*, as in early Communist Russia, the government is made up of a council that consists of fifty Abnegation members. The other factions have only representatives that “can speak in the meetings on behalf of a particular issue, but ultimately, the decision is the council’s” (33). Much like Leninist communism, one governing body holds all of the power with no benefit of democracy. Understanding the Russian Revolution and its impact on a great deal of the world for many decades aids in the understanding of the faction system created by Roth.

At the Choosing Day ceremony, Marcus, the head of the governing council, explains why the factions were created:

Decades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality-of humankind’s inclination toward evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that

sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world's disarray. (42)

Similarly, the Bolsheviks sought to eradicate what they believed caused disarray: democracy. Roth is explaining that conflict arises when government systems become exclusive as opposed to inclusive.

If Communism is on one end of the spectrum, then the opposite end of the spectrum is Capitalism. Examples of Capitalism have been seen as far back as the Middle Ages. Before the fourteenth century, most cultures were based on a manorial system. The manorial system was an economic and social system in which all of the power belonged to the lord of the manor. The manor was supported by the serf population that worked the land and paid their obligations through labor or produced goods. In the 1300s, there were two great crises that prompted the end of the feudal system, the Great Famine and then the Black Death. Both tragedies caused a drastic and rapid decrease in population. With high death rates, peasants were not able to work the land effectively and the manors began to fall into ruin. Farmers began to look for ways to sell their goods and services in a free market. The first free market system was known as mercantilism and it is the precursor to Capitalism. The fundamental mercantile theory is that the amount of the world's wealth should remain constant and that a state could only increase its wealth at the expense of another state, as exemplified in the colonization and subjugation of other races for economic gain. In the early 1600s, two very prominent companies began to expand the scope of trade, the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. Merchants that had only worked in small areas were able to invest in the trading companies and increase their individual capital. With the spread of trade and colonization, the

accumulation of wealth and labor grew exponentially. At the time of Karl Marx, the world was in the midst of an industrial revolution that saw the rise of a factory system and mass manufacturing with a distinct division of labor. The growth of factories and mechanization led to a financial system that is still in use today. The Capitalist economic system is characterized by private ownership of goods and services. Capitalists promote the ideology that individuals, not governments, have the right to determine how goods are produced and transported. Profits are set by competition in a free market system. Two significant events have led to a discussion about the validity of Capitalism, the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression in the United States.

In *Divergent*, Capitalism is represented by the Erudite faction. Oxford English Dictionary defines Erudite as having or showing great knowledge of learning. In the novel, the Erudite are described as teachers and researchers. They feel that Abnegation is working too much for the greater good and not allowing people to make their own choices and acquire their own wealth. This is exemplified by the accusations thrown at Tris's mother by a member of Erudite on Visiting Day in the Dauntless compound:

Do you know who she is? She's a council member's wife is what she is. She runs the 'volunteer agency' that supposedly helps the faction-less. You think I don't know that you're just hoarding goods to distribute to your own faction while we don't get fresh food for a month, huh? Food for the faction-less, my eye." (184)

Later in the novel, Jeanine explains to Tris and Four why Erudite is starting a war with Abnegation: "We are tired of being dominated by a bunch of self-righteous idiots who reject wealth and advancement"

(429). It is not just about the wealth, but about feeling controlled. The selflessness of Abnegation is an insult to the superior intelligence that Jeanine feels Erudite possess. One downside of Communism is the refusal to allow people to be self-directed. If every action is done for the good of everyone, there is little room for independent decision making. Jeanine believes that Erudite has been under the thumb of Abnegation for so long that the only way to break free is by creating an army of Dauntless soldiers and declaring war. She feels that once Abnegation is eliminated, the other factions will fall into line. Jeanine has a plan for creating her more perfect society: "Currently, the faction-less are a drain on our resources. As is Abnegation. I am sure that once the remains of your old faction are absorbed into the Dauntless army, Candor will cooperate and we will finally be able to get on with things" (429-430). One description that has been used to explain Capitalists is that they are arrogant and greedy; Roth uses those exact words through Tris when she is speaking to her brother Caleb to describe Erudite: "these people are arrogant and greedy and they will lead you nowhere" (354).

At the end of the novel, Roth spells out the foundation on which each faction is built, clearly stating the directive of each group in much the same way that Karl Marx wrote his manifesto in 1848. The Abnegation Manifesto states:

I will be my undoing, if I become my obsession.

I will forget the ones I love, if I do not serve them.

I will war with others, if I refuse to see them.

Therefore I choose to turn away from my reflection. To rely not on myself, but on my brothers and sisters, to project

outward until I disappear. (Some members add a final line: "And God remains." That is at the discretion of each member and is not compulsory.) (35)

Abnegation are willing to work in cooperation with others to create harmony and achieve success, for the greater good. In the novel and in reality, the Communist ideal was a great plan. Everyone helps everyone else and everyone is happy and prosperous. But the truth about Communism, both Marxist and Leninist, is that it remains one of the most horrific times in history. Marx did not want people to be oppressed, but ultimately the human desire to obtain wealth and control distribution of goods and services took over and ended in atrocities that are only coming to light in recent years.

The lengthy and detailed Erudite manifesto expresses that:

"Ignorance is defined not as stupidity but as lack of knowledge"

"Lack of knowledge inevitably leads to lack of understanding"

"Lack of understanding leads to a disconnect among people with differences"

"Disconnection among people with differences leads to conflict"

"Knowledge is the only logical solution to the problem of conflict"

Therefore, we propose that in order to eliminate conflict, we must eliminate the disconnect among those with differences

by correcting the lack of understanding that arises from ignorance with knowledge". (43)

Marx believed that if people felt equal, conflict would be avoided. The Erudite further expands the idea of conflict avoidance by expressing that conflict stems not from economics, but from lack of knowledge. Jeanine, as representative of Erudite, breaks her own faction's manifesto by rejecting differences between factions and promoting war as a way to achieve individualism and economic success. Like many other socio-political theories, Capitalism is another way to oppress those who have less through governmental control. The factions are another way of exerting control over entire groups of people. The council uses the threat of war to keep the faction system intact; ultimately it is the displeasure with the faction system that leads to the revolution at the end of *Divergent*.

Author and historian Mihail Neamtu makes a note that is important to the position of political ideology within *Divergent*: "We have to understand the motivation for surviving under, resisting against, or pro-actively cooperating with the totalitarian system" (10). Neamtu also poses the questions: "How did the transfer from utopia to dystopia take place? Must we not try to comprehend the incomprehensible and don't we have to talk about the past in order to prevent the repetition of similar horrors in the present or in the future?" (10). These are the exact questions that Roth is posing to her audience in a way that will connect with them meaningfully. Young readers are an increasing population of consumer in today's world, and Young Adult Literature remains a growth industry (Cappella 2). It was imperative that Roth write her novel in a way that closes the distance between the past, present and near future. To write a strictly historical socio-political book would likely have dissuaded

adolescent readers. According to Patrick Murphy, "By definition, then, the writing of a novel generically as a dystopia formally foregrounds cognition as part of the conventions of its reading and implies an authorial position that literature can effect social change by altering the consciousness of its readers who will act in the world differently as a result of their new understanding" (27). Certainly Roth's book will urge teen readers to consider the world around them. Hopefully in understanding the devastation caused by the faction system, readers will have a clearer understanding about the harmful effects of inequality and the loss of individual progress. Roth creates the faction system, complete with individual manifestos, as a basis in which historical socio-political ideologies that have led to conflict and revolution are attainable to adolescent readers. Roth gives her readers a revolution wrapped in a teenage love story.

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