

Marx's Philosophy of History: Materialistic Conception of History

Karl Marx (b. 1818-d. 1883) was born in Prussia (Germany). He studied law, philosophy and history at Universities of Bonn and Berlin. He started his career as a journalist, and later moved to Paris from where he was expelled. Finally, he settled in London, where he died in 1883. Marx also formed First International-International Workman's Association, and remained a prominent figure of socialist movement. Many works of Marx are co-authored with his friend and companion Frederick Engels. Important works of Marx include (1) A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, (2) Das Capital (3 volumes; two of them were compiled by Engels after Marx's death), (3) Manifesto of the Communist Party (written with Engels), (4) The German-ideology, and-(5) Poverty of Philosophy.

It is said that Marx borrowed from German Philosophy through Hegel, English economy through Adam Smith (b. 1723-d. 1790, a Scottish philosopher, considered to be the father of modern economics) and David Ricardo (b. 1712-d. 1823; an English political economist), and French Socialism through Saint-Simon (b. 1760-d. 1825, utopian social reformist, and one of the founders of socialism), Charles Fourier (b. 1772-d. 1837, another French utopian socialist thinker), as well as from the ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach (b. 1804-d. 1872; a German philosopher and

anthropologist known for his atheism), and Robert Owen (b. 1771-d. 1858; a Welsh social reformer and one of the founders of socialism). In addition, Marx was also influenced by the Hebrew-Christian historical thought. He adopted its fundamental concepts like Universalism, Apocalypse, Providence and Periodization but essentially in their secular transformation.

Marx asserts that change is inherent in society. Changes occur in nature, society and human history through dialectical processes, for him, the mechanism underlying the whole human history, and the phenomenon manifesting regularities and recurrent occurrences is the dialectical process taking place in the realm of matter, that is, in material physical world, instead of in the realm of ideas, as Hegel had suggested. Therefore, it is referred to as "Dialectical Materialism". Engels himself called it a "materialistic conception of history. In fact, Marx applied the Hegelian Law of the Negation of Negation' or dialectic to the material foundation of society, or the economic infrastructure of society, which includes (a) the production system (also referred to as the modes or forces of production and exchange), and (b) the exchange relations (also referred to as the relations of production).

According to Marx, the modes or means of production and exchange constitute the basis of all social structure, and include (i) what is produced,

or the resources (e.g. raw materials), (ii) how it is produced, or the technology and skills, and (iii) how the products are exchanged. The modes of production and exchange determine the relations of production. The exchange relations or the relations of production include (i) how wealth is distributed, and (ii) how society is divided into classes according to the pattern of wealth distribution the relations of production result in the creation of two distinct classes in society, the haves (possessing) and the have-nots (non-possessing), and thus, bind human beings in a command and obedience relationship.

Marx believes that all past history, with the exception of its primitive stage, was the history of class struggles. Thus, he divides the whole human history into five distinct stages on the basis of their specific production system and their corresponding exchange relations. These stages include the following;

1. Primitive Communism (without any class struggle)
2. Slavery (with class struggle between slaves and slave-owners)
3. Feudalism (with class struggle between peasants and feudal lords)
4. Capitalism (with class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie/capitalists)

5. Advanced Communism (with a classless society in the final stage of human history which was yet to come)

Marx views all past history, with the exception of the primitive stage, as the history of class struggle. The French philosopher Saint Simon was the first to interpret French Revolution of 1789 as a class war, or a war between the rich and the poor. Marx further, argues that the second, third 'and fourth stages of human history represented distinct modes of production and exchange, and their corresponding relations of production. Moreover, according to him, the material foundation of society, or the economic infrastructure of society gives birth to a distinct superstructure, which includes law, morality, philosophy, political theory, forms and principles of government, religion, art, and culture, etc. So the five stages or human history represent distinct modes of production and-exchange, and relations of production and exchange and relations of production, as well as distinct superstructure.

According to Marx, change is inherent and inevitable in history. Change becomes inevitable when modes of production and exchange, and relations of production are antagonistic, or come in clash with each other. As a result of change, a new stage or history with new modes or production and exchange, and new set of relations of production commence. Citing empirical evidence to support his argument, he maintained that in the

present capitalistic stage of history, the mode of production is in conflict with the relations of production. The contradiction between socialized production (mass production of goods in factories by the workers; who are alienated from their products, which are offered for sale and are not meant for the workers own consumption) and capitalistic appropriation (only a handful of capitalists earning huge profits on goods produced by the workers) has manifested itself as the antagonism of proletariat (the working class) and bourgeoisie (the capitalist manufacturers, factory-owners). Important characteristics of capitalistic stage of history include private ownership of property, unbridled competition among producers, accumulation of wealth by the capitalists, and misery of the proletariat. Therefore, time is ripe for a change, which will result in the inception of a new stage of history, that is, Advanced Communism. That is why, it is said that the Marxist philosophy of history has a deterministic element in it.

Marx's philosophy of history envisions ideas about the future course of history. According to him, a final stage of human history will come in future, which he refers to as Advanced Communism, when there will be no private property, and hence, no classes in the society. To Marx, state is an instrument used by the haves for their own ends. In the final stage of human history, i.e. of Advanced Communism, which according to Marx was yet to come in future, there will be no private property, and all resources

and assets will be communally-owned. There will be no classes in society, and hence, there will be no need to have a state. In other words, the institution of state will altogether become redundant, In fact, the concept of state based on reason in Europe was completely collapsed, and Marx had got disillusioned with the concept of state. After the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror, marked by violence and political executions, was initiated in 1793-94, and later a despotic state was established under Napoleon Bonaparte (b. 1769-d. 1821) in France. Moreover, one of the primary functions of a state is conflict resolution. Marx argues that in the stage of Advanced Communism, there will be no conflict in society, and hence no need to have a State at all.

Marx claims that he raised socialism to scientific status, and therefore, labeled it as Scientific Socialism, as opposed to Utopian and Christian Socialism, because of two discoveries: (i) Theory of Surplus Value (the difference between the cost and the price of a commodity, which is called profit, and on which capitalistic production and accumulation of capital is based) and (ii) Materialistic Conception of History (the concept that matter or material conditions are more important than ideas in bringing about a change.)

The interpretation of history by Karl Marx is explicitly anthropo-centric and humanistic, without the slightest hint of any role of the divine,

metaphysical or supernatural factors. Being disillusioned with religion, he calls it the opium of the poor, since the rich keep the poor satisfied and pacified, making the latter oblivious of their own misery, while the former secure their own interests and achieve their domination over the latter.

The Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history are perceived to be diametrically opposite to each other. Hegel asserts the primacy of ideas instead of matter, whereas Marx asserts the dominance of matter rather than ideas. Marx also realizes that he countered Hegelian position, and that is why he states that Hegel turned everything upside down, and Hegelian philosophy is standing on its head, and he (Marx) makes it stand on its feet. In this way, Marx asserts the primacy or dominance of economic factors in history. Towards the close of his death, he made it clear that economic factors were one of the most important factors that determine change in history, and not the sole cause for historical change.

The critics of Marxist thought assert that the idea of a stateless society is very idealistic. The Soviet Revolution of 1917 was largely inspired by the Marxist or Communist ideas, but the critics of the Revolution assert that if Marx were alive in 1917, he would have disowned the whole revolution, since after 1917 a highly centralized and authoritarian state was established by Lenin (d.1924; the first head of the Soviet Union) and Stalin (d. 1953; leader of the Soviet Union after Lenin). Moreover, at that time,

unlike Britain which was capitalistic, Russia was feudalistic where the Communist Revolution took place. According to the Marxist linear concept of history, the revolution should have come in Britain and not Russia, where capitalism had not yet gained ground.

In a nutshell, Marx tries to establish the primacy or dominance of economic factors over other factors in history. He counters the Hegelian assertion that ideas are the moving force behind history. Marx's thesis or the Marxist perspective is one of the most powerful and compelling ones. A plethora of empirical and theoretical literature has appeared on the subject, applying, verifying and contributing to his theory. Notwithstanding the criticism Marxist perspective has received, it remains one of the most convincing and forceful theories for explaining and interpreting history and historical changes.