
UNIT 13 CLASSICAL MARXIST TRADITION

Structure

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit you read about the Positivist / Empiricist view of history. Its main protagonists in history-writing were Ranke and Mommsen in Germany, Acton, Bury and Huckle in England and Coulanges and Taine in France, besides many others all over the world. It was the most influential school of historiography in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, its focus on political and administrative history was too narrow for later historians who wanted to explore other areas of human existence. Moreover, the historians in the twentieth century also visualised the past differently than what the Empiricist historians had done. This led to the adoption of Marxist view of history by a large number of historians. In fact, the Marxist approach to history became the most important in the twentieth-century historiography. In this Unit we will discuss the establishment of this tradition by looking at the works of Karl Marx himself apart from some others immediately following that tradition.

Karl Marx (1818-83) is famous for good many reasons. He is recognised as the founder of scientific socialism or communism. This is associated with his distinct philosophical position, which could yield an innovative understanding of history in terms of ceaseless interaction between the economic and non-economic forces of human social living and consciousness. Marx argued how the simultaneous action of all this would open up the probability of achieving a classless human society. Becoming free from all exploitation of man by man, a communist society ensures the elimination of all social causes accounting for alienation and human degradation.

13.2 UTOPIA AND SCIENCE

The socialist ideal has a longer tradition than what we have from Marx and Engels. The bourgeois revolutions in history had often aligned a mass following of working peasants and labourers who looked beyond the abolition of feudal order to a transformation not limited by the capitalist seizure of power and property. To cite one or two examples, we may remember the role of John Lilburne and his followers in the English Revolution of 1647. They were known as the Levellers consisting of small Yeoman farmers, shopkeepers, the less wealthy tradesmen, artisans and apprentices who stood for equality along with the plea for a broad-based democracy. Another group known as 'Diggers' and led by Gerrard Winstanley struggled not for political rights alone and were unrelenting in their demand for common ownership of land. Again, during the French Revolution of

1789, there was the example of Babouvism led by Gracchus Babeuf (1760-97) as an effort to reach a republic of equals for improving the condition of the working people.

Indeed, the goal of common land ownership featured as an ideal in the programmes of peasant uprisings even during the feudal period of Europe's history. The great peasant war (1515) in Germany found a leader like Thomas Munzer (1470-1525) who urged the rebels to establish "God's Kingdom" on earth, meaning thereby a classless society free of private projects and without any government. Thomas More (1478-1535) wrote a book by the name *Utopia* in 1516 during the reign of Henry VIII in England. Perhaps, till the end of the eighteenth century, it remained the most important writing on socialist thought. The Greek word 'Utopia' means non-existent or no place. More chose this to emphasise a still unattained social ideal thriving on communism, universal education and religious tolerance. While the image of an ideal human society had been well presented in More's narrative, the ways and means of realising such an ideal were left, in the main, to the working of a noble prince. Utopia is then unhistorical and could happen only as a miracle. Thus, the very word 'Utopia' acquired the meaning of an imaginary society which was never attainable.

Along with the development of capitalism, utopian socialist ideas rising in opposition appeared in various forms and complexities. Among such thinkers were Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Fourier (1772-1837), Proudhon (1809-1865) of France, Sismondi (1773-1842), a German Swiss of French descent, who was familiar with the economic conditions in England, Italy and France, Robert Owen (1771-1859) of England, Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) of Germany. Despite their differences, a common socialist bias was evident in the emphasis on the need for a social approach as distinguished from the pursuit of individual self-interest to achieve social well-being. Further, most of them shared some kind of distrust in politics and favoured different alternatives to ensure just and proper management of human affairs.

Their ideas about the nature of institutions for the conduct of such management were different. The Fourierists and the Owenites thought of covering the earth with a network of local communities, while the followers of Saint-Simon propagated for the transformation of nation-states into large productive corporations where scientists and technical experts should have effective power to do things for the widest social benefit. Wilhelm Weitling was a very popular figure among German exiles in places like London, Paris and Brussels. No less significant was his influence over German workers in their own land. He wrote a booklet by name *Mankind as it is and as it ought to be*. Weitling had no trust in intellectuals and depended, in the main, on poor-friendly homilies and adventurist anti-statism for his ideas of achieving socialism. Weitling had a preacher's style and his addresses to mass meetings were in quasi-religious terms.

Around 1845-46, when their manuscript of *The German Ideology* had been nearing completion, Marx and Engels took initiative for setting up a Communist Correspondence Committee to act as the coordinator of various communist theories and practices which were then being evident in the European capitals. At a time when Marx was engaged in his understanding of history as passing through stages related to the interaction of productive forces and production relations, the other expressions of socialist thought like that of Weitling would appear to be extremely puerile formulations of an ignorant mind. Their differences were sharply manifest at a meeting in Marx's Brussels residence where he stayed with his family during 1846-47.

P.V. Annenkow, a Russian tourist, who was present at the meeting on Marx's invitation, gave an account of its proceedings. (*The Extraordinary Decade*, Ann Arbor, 1968). In his opening statement, Engels emphasised the need for a common doctrine to act as a banner for all those devoted to improving the condition of the working people. It was

especially necessary for those who lacked the time and opportunity to study theory. Engels was yet to complete his argument when Marx asked Weitling, ‘Tell us, Weitling, you have made such a noise in Germany with your preaching : on what grounds do you justify your activity and what do you intend to base it on in the future?’

Weitling spoke for a long time, repeating and correcting himself and arriving with difficulty at his conclusions. He tried to make clear that his aim was not to create new economic theories but to adopt those that were most appropriate, as experience in France had shown, to open the eyes of their workers to the horrors of their condition and all the injustices which it had become the motto of the rulers and societies to inflict on them, and to teach them never to believe in any promises of the latter, but to rely only upon themselves, and to organise in democratic and communist associations. (This summary is largely taken from David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, Macmillan, London (1973)).

Marx checked Weitling from speaking further and sarcastically commented that ‘in Germany, to appeal to the workers without a rigorous scientific idea and without positive doctrine had the same value as an empty and dishonest game at playing preacher, with someone supposed to be an inspired prophet on the one side and only asses listening to him with mouths agape allowed on the other.’

Pointing to Annenkov, Marx said that in the Russian motherland of their guest, a country not yet entirely free from barbarism, some people could still be found to care for ‘saintly’ observations like that of Weitling. But, ‘In a civilized country like Germany People could do nothing up to now except to make noise, cause harmful outbreaks, and ruin the very cause they had espoused.’

Here is a telling instance of Marx’s vehement emphasis on assimilation of socialist thought with what can be recognised as scientific understanding of history and society linked to their laws of movement and change. For Marx, unlike his utopian forerunners and also some contemporaries, socialism was not a morality play in which the virtues of love, kindness, and fraternity have to prevail over the vices of greed, graft and exploitation. Since the onset of the Renaissance in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, the growth of scientific knowledge and experiments had cumulatively added to human uses of nature and its objects for the expansion and improvements of social production. In Marx’s own world, science had already furnished the technical bases of the industrial revolution in west Europe. But the outlook for human consciousness and social relations was still subject to pre-scientific constraints.

On the other side the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality, though of immense importance for the demolition of the old order, were yet to satisfy the criterion of being really absorbed in the making of a society and state. The experience of the French Revolution could not fully uphold the theories and ideals of the Enlightenment philosophers. Nor did the Reign of Terror under the radical Jacobin leadership augur well for the foundation of popular sovereignty. Moreover, the transition from feudalism to capitalism and its economic climax in an Industrial Revolution brought about gross inequities and dehumanisation as they were manifest in the new form of capital-labour relationship.

An acute and intense awareness of those problems was expressed in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), also known as *Paris Manuscripts*. It was written in Paris where Marx was then living, exiled for his radical views and political position from Germany, his own homeland. The *Paris Manuscripts* was his first discourse linking up philosophical ideas and ideals with an explicit presentation of the economic aspect of social being. It contains Marx’s first analysis of alienated labour under capitalist exploitation. Subsequently, along with Engels, Marx was committed to a search for the

laws of historical movement and changes. Some such discovery was essential for placing the socialist ideal on a scientific basis. We know how strongly the point was emphasised by Marx in his argument with Weitling. We should sift and explain the principal ideas of the subsequent texts by Marx and Engels to have an understanding of classical Marxism.

13.3 MARX'S DEVELOPING IDEAS

The century spanning the years 1760-1860 is known as the period of industrial revolution in England. It was distinguished by far-reaching cumulative changes in the technical bases of production and marked a peak point of Britain's capitalist transformation. The pace of capitalist development largely varied between the countries of Europe. To cite a few examples, the course of change was rapid in Holland and even more radical than that of England; while the French monarchy faced its doom in 1789, capitalist economic growth and political order did not come to have a sustainable pattern before the last quarter of the 19th century; prior to the unification of German territories in 1871, the course of capitalism in that land was subject to numerous obstacles and eventually its bourgeois transformation was mixed up with feudal residues and political autocracy, an experience which Marx described in his preface to the first volume of *Capital*.

‘Alongside of modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms. We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead, *Le mort saisit le vif!* (The dead holds the living in its grasp!)’

Born in 1818 in Trier, a prominent town in the Rhine province of Prussia, Karl Marx grew up amidst practically the last phase of capitalist transition in Europe. In the previous section of this study, we have taken note of the various socialist ideas and perspectives invoking mass support for the bourgeois struggle to supersede the feudal order, and later shaping into good many doctrines to defend the working people against the onslaught of capitalism in power. Along with the triumph and consolidation of capital's wealth and power in any country, its labouring people were inevitably ousted from any holding of their own means of production and had to seek their subsistence as wage-labour of capitalist entrepreneurs / employers.

While elaborating the nature and conditions of capital and labour in his *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx indicated three aspects of labour's alienation, viz. (1) that from the material, objective product of his work, (2) that from the labourer's work activity itself, and (3) that from other fellow human beings. Considering the date of the *Paris Manuscripts*, it appears that Marx did not consider the effects of capital-labour production relation (the term production relation not used in *Paris Manuscripts*), only in terms of the sphere of production. He pointed to its envelopment of the entire framework of capitalist social relationship (i.e. alienation of human beings from one another). Thus, capitalism brings about a kind of alienation that violates the very nature of man as a species-being. For Marx, all this had to be comprehended not merely as an image of capitalist evils. He was bent on arriving at a theoretical understanding which would clarify the reality of capitalism as a historical stage subject to its own contradictions. Such contradictions have to be appropriately resolved for any transition to socialism.

The historical course towards socialism would depend on discerning the nature of those contradictions and their bearing upon the negation of capitalism. There arises the need for a theory which can account for the experience of history passing through its various stages in terms of the relative weights of the actors and the factors influencing the pace, pattern and content of the changes. Our knowledge of how the present has emerged out of its past should enable us to recognise the incumbencies of acting for the future in an unceasing historical process. The truth of such knowledge can be constantly verified

in reference to the ever-growing evidence of men and women in society, their class positions and activities. Moreover, such knowledge can often gain in precision with more and more inputs from practical social experience. History is no independent metaphysical entity. It is purposeful activity of human beings. They make history on a creative understanding of circumstances surrounding them in real social life.

We have just noted the broad purport of Marx's view of history. It helps us to see the relevance of Marx's emphasis on scientific knowledge in his argument with Weitling. He places a large premium on the general character, universality, necessity, and objective truth – all this considered to be attributes of scientific knowledge – in the pursuit of historical reality. Before entering into further details of the Marxian theory, we may note the major influences of Europe's intellectual tradition (viz. German classical philosophy, especially of the Hegelian system, materialism of the Enlightenment philosophers, English classical political economy and the various versions of utopian socialism as already noted in the previous section of this study), which had their roles in the development of Marx's thought. Indeed, many of the components of Marx's theory can be best understood in the light of his acceptance/rejection of the ideas articulated by his forerunners/contemporaries about Europe's capitalist transition and the subsequent agenda of moving towards socialism.

During his student days at the Bonn and Berlin universities, particularly at the latter, Marx was largely influenced by the method and range of Hegelian philosophy. He joined the 'Young Hegelians' whose interpretation of Hegelian philosophy and criticism of Christian thought presented a kind of bourgeois democratic thought and political interest. Friedrich Engels (1820-95) met Marx in 1844 and they became life-long friends and collaborators. Both of them were critical of the idealist philosophical position of 'Young Hegelians' and emphasised the need for investigating material social relations at the roots of the spiritual life of society. Earlier, Ludwig Feuerbach (1807-72) had pointed to the idealist weakness of the 'Young Hegelian' position. In his important book *The Essence of Christianity*. (First German edition in 1846, English translation in 1854), the formulation of human beings creating god in their own image was a significant step forward in materialist prevalence over idealist thought.

The Holy Family or the Critique of Critical Critique (1845), jointly written by Marx and Engels, launched a piercing attack on philosophical idealism. The 'Young Hegelians' were facetiously named the 'Holy Family'. The book upheld the position of the Enlightenment philosophers for their emphasis on empirical test of truth. At the same time, the dialectical method was rigorously applied to arrive at an adequate idea of changing social relations and also that of recognising the proletariat as the gravedigger of capitalism. Capitalist private property necessarily creates its own antagonist in the proletariat. And as private property grows, the proletariat develops as its negation, a dehumanised force becoming the precondition of a synthesis to do away with both capital and wage labour in opposition to each other.

The German Ideology was the next joint work of Marx and Engels. Though written in 1845, the book could not be published in their lifetime. It appeared for the first time in the Soviet Union in 1932. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx referred to *The German Ideology* (still unpublished) as an effort to settle accounts with their previous philosophical conscience. In addition to their critique of idealism, Marx and Engels exposed the contemplative nature of Feuerbach's materialism which failed to consider really existing active men as they live and work in the midst of any particular socio-economic formation. *The German Ideology* provided for the first time the ideas of historical stages in relation to class struggle and social consciousness to help our comprehension of movements in history.

Marx's *These on Feuerbach* (written in 1845) was found in his notebook and was first published as an appendix to Engel's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1888). Later it was also an appendix to *The German Ideology* when the latter had been released as a book. Altogether we have eleven theses commenting, step by step, on the limitations of idealism and earlier versions of materialism (that of Feuerbach included) for not properly understanding the kind of dialectical interaction between human social beings and their surrounding circumstances. The position of idealism is caught up in abstractions without appropriate cognisance of the realities of human social living. On the other hand, earlier materialism could regard human beings only as creatures of their circumstances, failing to recognise the role of human sensuous activity in the making of circumstances. Marx's position was memorably expressed in his eleventh thesis, which was as well the last aphorism of the series, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.'

We have already mentioned the Communist Correspondence Committee set up by Marx and Engels in 1845-46. Such committees started work in other places like London and Paris. A preliminary conference of those committees held in the summer of 1847 in London took the decision to unite in a body. A second meeting held in November-December, in London, named the united body as the Communist League and commissioned Karl Marx to prepare a manifesto of the Communist Party. It would then be published by the League.

The *Communist Manifesto* (1848) appeared to be jointly authored by Marx and Engels from the two names on its title page. Later, Engels pointed out that the basic thought belonged solely and exclusively to Marx and the actual writing was done by Marx. It has four sections. The first section, (viz. Bourgeois and Proletarians), gives a history of society as a succession of class societies and struggle. The laws of social development are manifest in the replacement of one mode of production by another. The second section, (viz. Proletarian and Communists), turns on the supersession of capitalism in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat led by the communists. The communists differ from other working class groups. But they are not opposed to such groups. The communists are distinguished for their being international and fully conscious of the role of the proletarian movement. Rejecting the bourgeois objections to communism, this chapter gives an outline of the measures to be adopted by the victorious proletariat after seizing power and mentions and need and relevance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The third chapter, (viz. Socialist and Communist literature), contains an extended criticism of the doctrines of socialism. The reactionary, bourgeois types are merely examples of feudal atavism and bourgeois and petty bourgeois manoeuvres masquerading behind some pretensions of socialism. Some utopian socialists may be sincere in their moral sentiments and disapproval of capitalism. But they are misleading in their search for a way out of the realities of capitalist exploitation. The fourth chapter, (viz. attitude of the communists towards the various opposition parties) sets forth the communist tactics in their dealing with the various opposition parties. This would certainly depend on the position of a party in regard to the stage of development of its particular country and society. The Manifesto concluded with the slogan- 'Working men of all countries, unite!' The distinction of Marx's thought is clear from the contrast in the tenor of this slogan from that of the motto— 'All men are brother'— used by Fraternal Democrats, and earlier international society including Chartists and European political exiles in London.

Marx wrote *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) in French. The book was directed against Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65), a French political figure, philosopher, sociologist, and economist, who considered the history of society as the struggle of

ideas and believed in achieving ‘just exchanges’ between capitalist commodity producers through the device of an ideal organisation. The book gave a definite impression of Marx’s unrelenting effort to have a fuller understanding of the capitalist mode of production. He was engaged in looking for a theoretical result that would combine the structural observations of classical political economy with dialectical comprehension of a society changing under the pressure of its contradictions in the process of history.

Among many other assignments and responsibilities including the day-to-day work of the Communist League to organise the working people of Europe, Marx never neglected his project for the critique of political economy. He could see its necessity for bearing out the rationale for scientific socialism. This is where the seven notebooks written by Marx in 1857-58, now known as *Grundrisse* (Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy) — first English edition in Pelican Marx Library, Harmondsworth, England, in 1973, trs. Martin Nicolaus – bring out the precious point that the question of historical transition from capitalism to socialism can be answered in all fitness by formulating Ricardo’s ideas of political economy with Hegelian language and Hegel’s ideas of historical movement with Ricardian language. (Martin Nicolaus, ‘The Unknown Marx’ in Robin Blackburn ed. *Ideology in Social Science*, Suffolk 1972, p. 331). In his analysis of capitalist economic development Ricardo discovered ‘the disharmonious’ tendencies in the processes. But for him, capitalism was an immutable natural system, which could not be changed under any circumstances. On the other hand, Hegelian dialectics had a dynamic view of society, but could not discern the real core of contradiction in the material life of society. Marx combined Hegelian dialectics with his critical study of political economy and arrived at an understanding of historical supersession of capitalism by socialism. For Marx, such a fusion of economic and philosophical thoughts started with the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844. In *Grundrisse*, it reached the point of articulating that the politico-economic interpretation of capitalism is fulfilled in the proletarian praxis of revolutionary transformation.

In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx made an elaborate statement of his creative theoretical comprehension of historical movement and social change. It was not very long, but immensely significant, as the following excerpt will bear out :

‘My investigation led to the result that legal relations such as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in the material conditions of life, the sum total of which Hegel, following the example of the Englishmen and Frenchmen of the eighteenth century, combines under the name of “civil society”, that however the anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows: In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the

productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and, new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines, we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production as so many progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism.’

Following the point of arrival in his articulation of historical materialism, Marx’s immediate concern was to interpret the contradiction of the capitalist social formation. No doubt, the veracity of a new theory of social change is closely linked to the evidence of the present as history. The economics of the capitalist mode of production is the subject matter of Marx’s *Capital*, which Marx considered to be his lifework. Its first volume was published in 1867; the second and the third volumes were posthumously published in 1885 and 1894 respectively, under the editorial supervision of Engels. The first volume gives us a logical elaboration of capital-labour relationship at a level of abstraction and in analytical forms that can best crystallise the most significant structural characteristic and dynamic tendencies of the capitalist system. The second and the third volumes deal with the realities of capitalism on a much lesser level of abstraction and in terms of concrete things and happenings. Their areas are circulation of capital (vol. 2) and then the process of capitalist production as a whole (vol. 3). The *Theories of Surplus Value* (1862-63) (often mentioned as the fourth volume of *Capital*) turned upon the historical substantiation of Marx’s theory in the light of other earlier and contemporary writings on Political Economy.

Marx points to the source of profits in a competitive capitalist economy. The value of a commodity is determined by socially necessary labour time necessary to produce it. Labour power is a commodity as well as exchanged for wages. The value of labour power (i.e. wages) is equal to the value of what is needed for the subsistence and maintenance of a worker and his family. The peculiarity of labour power as a commodity is that it can create more value than what is paid in wages as its value. This difference between the values produced by labour power and its wages is surplus value. Surplus value accrues to the capitalist employer and here lies the source of profits. Larger and larger accumulation out of these profits is the main aim of capitalist production. More and more accumulation results in the advance of productive forces and increased

productivity. It also leads to centralisation of capital. In Marx's words, 'one capitalist always kills many'. Many capitalists are knocked out by the working of competition. All this is associated with cumulative increase of misery, oppression, slavery and degradation. The conditions become ripe for the revolt of the working class. The advance of productive forces can no longer be compatible with the insatiable urge of capital to maximise profits at the expense of the proletariat. The tendencies towards a falling rate of profit and also that of overproduction (i.e. inadequate market demand for what is produced) appear as symptoms of capitalist crisis. The issues relating to profit rate and overproduction are analysed in some details in the third volume of *Capital*.

13.4 MARX AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Marx was not merely a theoretical philosopher. He was engaged in the foundation of the Communist League in 1847 and then in writing the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Again, Marx was the most active and influential member of the International Working Men's Association (the First International) established in 1864. Around the 1850s, the countries of Europe were in different stages of reaching the capitalist system, indicated by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*. In his numerous appraisals of such historical situations, Marx put emphasis on the relative strength and weakness of a country's bourgeoisie. There were circumstances in which he had called upon the working people to help in the achievement of a bourgeois democratic revolution, since that would take a society nearer to the socialist transition.

Marx also encountered historical situations where the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class was not yet prepared to seize political command. The complex plurality of classes in such circumstances was the subject of Marx's incisive analysis in his essay on 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' – the instance of French history when Louis Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon I, assumed the position of an emperor as Napoleon III after his *coup d'etat* in 1851.

Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune in 1871 is important in many respects. A large number of manual workers were among its elected members. Most of them were also members of the International. It was not a revolution that would fit in with the Marxian theory of historical change actuated by the advance of productive forces outpacing some existing production relations in a society. Still Marx underlined its significance and highly appreciated its democratic and decentred exercise of political power.

Marx's comments on non-European countries (e.g. North America, China, India) were for the most part influenced by his thoughts on Europe's historical experience of passing from feudalism to capitalism and then, as Marx saw it, to socialism achieved by a class-conscious proletarian revolution. His ideas about the Asiatic mode of production were largely derived from ideologues of British empire. They were often emphatic in their portrayal of India as a static, barbaric society whose only means of redemption obtained in submission to the 'civilising' rule of imperial Britain. Marx considered that the forced inception of capitalism in India would act as an unconscious tool of history for bringing the country up to the path of its capitalist transformation. Despite all the sordid consequences of all this, the conditions would open up the perspective of a socialist transformation in the subject country. Its probability must have a necessary connection with socialist transformation of the ruling country. For China also Marx wrote of the need for the assertion of western civilization by force. (Introduction and notes by Dona Torr, *Marx on China 1853-1860*, London, 1951). In the last decade of his life, Marx appeared to go for newer investigations, perhaps with a view to further probing into the

issues of non-European countries and their paths of social change in history. We shall come to that point at a later stage of this presentation.

As regards America, Marx interpreted the civil war (1861-65) as a struggle between two social systems – slavery versus free labour. All his support was for the north and betrayed no concern for the popular element in the resistance of the southern small holders. No doubt, the favourable attitude of the English ruling classes towards the southern slave owners and efforts to cast the same ideological influence on their own workers as well had influenced Marx's position in the matter.

13.5 CLASSICAL MARXISM AND ITS TRADITION

By now, we should have formed an idea of the content of Marx's thought. Admittedly, it has been a summary presentation avoiding some complexities of the theory and practice of Marxism, which have been a part of the historical experience over nearly two centuries. For our present purpose classical Marxism consists of ideas received directly from the writings of Marx and Engels. The point of any divergence between Marx and Engels are set aside for the present. It is well-known that Marx and Engels worked in close collaboration for a long period and often engaged in jointly writing such important texts like *The Communist Manifesto*. Let us make a point by point resume of the content of classical Marxism.

Marx adopted the logic of Hegelian dialectics as his method for understanding the dynamics of social change and transformation in history. He did not go by Hegel's philosophy of idealism. Marx held that in the relationship of being and thought, the former is the subject and the latter the predicate. Hegel inverted this relation to its opposite, setting thought as the subject and being its predicate. The materialist philosophical position taken by Marx was however different in a very important sense from the mechanistic materialism of the Enlightenment and other earlier types. It focused on the reality of mind and consciousness and did not consider human action as being a passive product of material circumstances.

Economic structure and activity are to be understood in terms of its conditions, productive forces and production relations. The **conditions of production** are set by a society's geographical location, its climate and demographic features like the size and composition of its population. **Productive forces** comprise tools, machinery, technology and skills. **Production relations** refer to the nature of property in a particular society and its forms of social existence of labour which, in their interaction, conduct what to produce, how to produce and for whom to produce, thereby deciding upon the items and quantities of production, technology deployed, and the distribution of final output.

All this goes to constitute the economic structure of a society, its **mode of production**. Marx considered the legal, religious, aesthetic, philosophic and other ideological elements as being rooted in the economic structure of society. So is the state and the political disposition of a society. Class conflict is a common feature of all social stages (excepting the primitive communist formations) indicated by Marx in regard to the history of Europe. Such stages are ancient slavery (Greece and Rome), the feudal order and capitalism. Class conflicts and struggles result from the social division between those who own the means of production and those who do not. There is the key to the contradictions within a mode of production and for that matter the thrust for changes from one mode to another.

A mode of production can be sustained as long as its relations of production are compatible with the advance of corresponding productive forces. In course of time, a mode of production may reach the stage when further advance of productive forces is

no longer workable within the existing relations of production. Thus, the property systems allied with the particular pattern of production relations and enjoying the legal sanction of the state in power, become a fetter on the growth of productive forces. This, in Marx's words, marks the beginning of an epoch of social revolution whereby a new class, which can act as the protagonist of newer production force, comes to achieve its social hegemony and political command. Equally posed against any utopian leap or shoddy conformism, Marx put some decisive emphasis on the sufficiency of material conditions for the transformation of a socio-economic order :

‘No order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured, in the womb of the old society itself’.

In Marx's comprehension, the revolutionary triumph of the proletariat leads to the beginning of a classless society free from alienation of man from man. As a propertyless class (i.e. proletariat) brings about the abolition of capitalism, society no longer harbours private property of any kind. The root cause of alienation is removed. The success of the proletarian revolution liberates all men/women from alienation and absence of real freedom.

As already noted, this study has taken the theories, ideas and comments found in the works of Marx and Engels as classical Marxism. It marks a departure from the usual sense of the word ‘Marxist’ to comprise thoughts and practices supposedly derived from the ideas of Marx. The ideas which can be directly found in the works of Marx and Engels are then earmarked as ‘Marxian’. Such a distinction was evident even during Marx's own lifetime. We may recall what Engels wrote to Bernstein, a leading figure in the German Social Democratic Party, in a letter of 3 November, 1882, ‘The self-styled “Marxism” in France is certainly a quite special product to such an extent that Marx said to Laforgue “This much is certain, I am not a Marxist.”’

There are reason for our present decision to treat only the body of thought developed by Marx and Engels as classical Marxism. It should better enable us to discern the subsequent influences of a tradition set forth by classical Marxism with its combination of historical materialism and proletarian class struggle for abolition of capitalism. On account of the very methods of classical Marxism, it could never endorse an absolute submission to the set of all its original propositions in their entirety. We must be ready to face the hard fact that a sound inference and direction valid for one particular historical context, may lose its veracity in a different situation, although in both cases, the phenomena of class struggle, capitalist contradiction and the need for cohesive oppositional move towards socialism remain quite pertinent. Let us then look at some directions of classical Marxism, as we have indicated its position, and the issues coming up during the late nineteenth and the entire twentieth centuries, in respect of policies and praxis of socialist movement (e.g., the strategy and tactics of a socialist revolution, the maturity of conditions for a socialist revolution, the kind of party necessary for the movement of the proletariat, nature and working of imperialism)

In the wake of the defeat of the Paris communards in 1871, the workers movement in Europe was subject to confusing pushes and pulls from a number of ultra-left sects and anarchists. This was the background of the move to shift the headquarters of the International to New York. It was eventually dissolved in 1876. The statement regarding the dissolution contained, among other comments, the following remark, ‘Let us give our fellow workers in Europe a little time to strengthen their national

affairs, and they will surely be in a position to remove the barriers between themselves and the workingmen of other parts the world.' During the period between 1848 and 1876, there were many twists and turns of the European history. All said and done, the main feature of this complicated process appeared in various instances of consolidation of capitalist power, in some countries even by forging alliance with feudal elements, against the forces of toilers' revolt having the perspective of moving to the goal of socialism.

Marx died in 1883. Six years later the Second International opened in Paris in July 1889. Bringing together 391 delegates from 20 countries, it was still then the largest international gathering in the world labour history. Almost as a parallel event, there was another international labour conference in Paris at the same time. This was a gathering of those trade unionists and legal Marxists who believed in achieving socialism through some alteration of the bourgeois legal framework. Any coalescence of such forces was opposed by Engels, even though there were proposals for such a merger in both the conferences. In any case, the merger was effected in 1891 at the Brussels conference.

Following the historical twists and turns we have already mentioned, the growth of capitalism resulted in increasing number of wage labourers in more and more countries of Europe. Similar trends were seen in North America and later by the end of the century in Japan. Correlatively, a big expansion of the trade union movement occurred throughout the capitalist countries. Moreover, in the more advanced capitalist countries, especially in Britain, the rise in productivity and also the gains appropriated from imperialist exploitation prompted a new kind of manoeuvre among the bourgeoisie to differentiate a part of the workers from the rest of the proletariat through payment of higher wages and some other concession. Reflecting on this tendency, Engels wrote in a letter of 7th October, 1858 to Marx, '.....the English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois.....For a nation which exploits the whole world, this is of course to a certain extent justifiable.'

The *Communist Manifesto* declared the path of realising its aim by a forcible overthrow of the whole obsolete social order. Armed struggle may not be a necessary element of forcible overthrow. Marx held the view that in countries like Britain and Holland where the working people constituted the majority of the population and capitalist transformation was associated with the inception of democracy, the attainment of universal adult franchise might provide a sufficient measure for having political power to achieve socialism. In the *Principles of Communism*, Engels commented that the abolition of private property by peaceful methods is extremely desirable. Communists always avoid conspiratorial methods. However, if the oppressed proletariat is goaded into a revolution, communists will immediately rush to their support.

In his preface to the 1895 edition of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, Engels remarked that the new techniques of military operations put up larger obstacles to the ways of barricade fighting in the traditional manner of people's revolutionary action. This was a note of caution against adventurist actions, and not an advice to abjure armed insurgency in all circumstances. But in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Engels' formulation was time and again used by a section of the leadership in support of gradual, peaceful, and parliamentary tactics for achieving socialist objectives.

Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) was a leading proponent of peaceful methods. He rejected the classical Marxist position regarding armed revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Also, Bernstein disagreed with the classical Marxist views on

industrial concentration, inevitability of economic crises and increasing working class misery. He was inclined to upholding the cause of socialism on ethical grounds. As a social democratic member of the Reichstag, he voted against war credits during the First world war and called for peace settlement. Another important leader of the German Social Democratic Party and a leading figure of the Second International was Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), whose understanding of historical materialism was cast along the lines of a natural evolutionary scheme of things analogous to Darwin's theory of biological evolution and natural selection. Accordingly, he believed that capitalism would collapse for its own inability to make efficient use of the growing productive forces. The rationale and feasibility of a proletarian revolution was therefore ruled out, since by its decrees and violence no dictatorship of the proletariat could prevail over the objective economic laws. Bernstein and Kautsky, though having differences among themselves, were branded as 'revisionists', implying their alleged departure from classical Marxist position of class struggle and revolution.

Kautsky viewed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 in Russia as an event not in keeping with classical Marxism. This was connected with the antecedent circumstances of insufficient capitalist development in Russia. Kautsky raised the point emphasised by historical materialism as regards the maturing of economic conditions sufficient for the collapse of a mode of production ('No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.'). Vladimir Ilych Lenin (1870-1924), on his part, had analysed the development of capitalism in Russia in a well-documented analysis (*Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 1899). He did not deny its backwardness. Indeed, the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie was among the factors eventually obliging the Bolshevik seizure of state power. Expressed in simple words, though perhaps a little bizarre, the bourgeoisie appeared to be incapable of defending their own position against Tsarist autocracy, thereby making it incumbent on the leadership of the proletariat to thrust for socialist command of the state. As Lenin observed,

'It has been Russia's lot very plainly to witness, and most keenly and painfully to experience one of the abruptest of abrupt twists of history as it turns from imperialism towards the Communist revolution. In the space of a few days we destroyed one of the oldest, most powerful, barbarous and brutal monarchies. In the space of a few months we passed through a number of stages, stages of compromise with the bourgeoisie and stages of shaking off petty-bourgeois illusions, for which other countries have required decades.' (V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works* Vol. II, Moscow, 1947, p.308).

Lenin mentions Russian imperialism in the foregoing excerpt. A very important feature of capitalism was analysed by Lenin in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). In the first volume of *Capital* Marx indicated the inevitable direction of competitive capitalism towards more and more centralisation of capital and emergence of monopolies. This was the process which, Marx argued, would swell the masses of the proletariat and bring about the doom of capitalism. Such a classical Marxist position was extended by Lenin to the discovery of links between monopoly capitalism and imperialism bent on international division and domination of the world. The subordinate territories are the targets for export of capital to make use of cheap labour and raw materials. The first world war was an imperialist war of such aspirations and conflicts. Indeed, Tsarist Russia and its not so developed capitalism was the weakest link in this imperialist nexus. Lenin cited this factor as one of the reasons for hastening the course of Russian revolution in 1917 to the socialist supersession of capitalism. It was likely to contribute to the international collapse of capitalism in the face of a world revolution.

Kautsky's analysis of imperialism was different. He argues that the imperialist era is free from conflicts between the advanced capitalist countries. There would be conflict only between the advanced and the underdeveloped countries of the world. The process of exploitation of the underdeveloped countries was not necessarily through capital exports from the imperial rich to the colonial poor and surplus appropriation in an economic context of cheaper labour and raw materials. It could happen as well through the terms of exchange between the commodities of the more or less capital intensive production. Indeed, after the Second World War, the components of Kautsky's analysis have in a way influenced the formulations of the *dependency theory* focusing on the imperialist domination over backward countries and that in a historical context where the United States stood supreme among the capitalist nations of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the final decade of the last century, the scope of such supremacy has been even more strengthened and, at any rate, there are no historical laws either in classical Marxism or its later development to obstruct the co-existence of profits from both production and circulation on an international scale.

Marx and Engels stressed the need for organising a political party without which 'the working class cannot act as a class'. During the years of the Communist League and the First International they were mostly engaged in the presentation and clarification of the Marxist perspective of history, class struggle and abolition of capitalism. The Second International had the experience of national Social Democratic Parties coming to operate in the different capitalist countries of Europe.

Before entering into some details of the principles in question concerning the period of the Second International, it should be noted that the Paris Commune, however short-lived, was a major event happening during the phase of the First International. In its measures of decentred, democratic treatment, the Paris Commune was estimated by Marx as setting a sound example of the ways and means of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There lies the question of mediation by the party of the proletariat both in its leading the revolution to victory and then in its revolutionary governance.

Despite their many critical differences, Lenin and Kautsky agreed on the point that political consciousness had to be brought to the proletariat from outside. It would not mechanically follow from their economic hardship and struggle, which was limited to the scope of trade union consciousness. Earlier, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels referred to the role of bourgeois ideologists who had achieved a theoretical understanding of the historical movement as a whole. They would have the role of endowing the working class with revolutionary consciousness. No doubt such a process of building up consciousness adds to the complication of mediation and of the kind of party which could fulfil the commitment.

Considering the condition of illegality and autocracy then prevailing in several countries of Europe, especially in Russia, Lenin thought it proper to build a narrow, hierarchically organised party of professional revolutionaries (*What is to be done?*, 1902). After the Russian Revolution of 1905, he favoured broadening the organisation into a mass party, but with strict provisions for democratic centralism. The division between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia started on the issue of centralism. Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) did not support centralism. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) of the German Social Democratic Party was against Lenin's idea of tightly centralised vanguard party. She strove to uphold the workers' own initiative and self-activity and had immense faith in the capacity of the working class to learn from its own experience.

The experience of the communist movement all over the world through the twentieth century, of its triumphs and failures, of Lenin's own apprehensions at his death bed about bureaucratic excesses within the party, and finally of the collapse of Soviet Communism in the last decade of the last century, cannot but raise questions regarding the appropriate principles of organisation for the party of the proletariat. It should be relevant to note that the historical role attributed by classical Marxism to the proletariat 'was assigned by an invisible intelligentsia, by an intelligentsia that never made an appearance in its own theory, and whose existence and nature are therefore, never systematically, known even to itself.' ('The Two Marxisms', in Alvin Gouldner, *For Sociology*, Pelican Books, 1975, p.419.)

Classical Marxism conceived of capitalism as a world system with all its nexuses of trade, capital exports and imperialist domination. In real history, the conquest of capital, its universal role, results in a differential impact on pre-capitalist structures. The differences are manifest in many types of amalgam of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. Such formations make room for capitalist surplus extraction, even though the former productive systems and power institutions remain largely unchanged. In those circumstance, classical Marxist position regarding the sequence of stages has to reckon with newer possibilities of historical transition.

It is no longer enough to move from feudalism to capitalism. Indeed, no such movement can have much meaning in terms of progress when capitalism and pre-capitalism are historically interlocked in their modes of exploitation and power. Marx and Engels did not lack in their clarification of historical conjunctures characterised by a compounding of the old and the new in the emergent complexes of exploitation and power. This situation has appeared time and again in the countries outside Western Europe and North America. It may well happen that the course of bourgeois democratic revolution cannot be pushed ahead by a weak and timid bourgeoisie. The task then falls to the proletariat and they have to proceed immediately from abolition of the feudal order to a struggle aimed at eliminating the bourgeoisie. Such a revolutionary reality was named as 'permanent revolution' and the idea was presented by Trotsky. The expression was first used by Marx and Engels in their Address of the General Council to the Communist League in 1850.

We have not yet given any clue to what happened to the expected solidarity of the international (universal?) working class revolution against capitalism. After 1917 this vital action parameter of Marx's theoretical scheme of history has never articulated in any historical change of decisive significance for transition to socialism. The Bolshevik leaders believed that the October revolution in Russia would open an era of international proletarian revolution. Defeated in the world war of four years duration, crisis-torn Germany was expected to be the first among the advanced capitalist countries to go for its socialist revolution. The facts of history were different. Bolshevik Russia had to bear the burden of building socialism in one country, an agenda which could receive little help from the classical Marxist tradition. The twentieth century witnessed another major socialist transition in china where the peasantry acted as the principal motive force of revolution. Its course of development after the communist seizure of power presents many questions that have no direct answer in classical Marxist tradition. The instances of Cuba, Chile, and Vietnam are also in the nature of exceptions to the classical Marxist views on the historical perspective of sociopolitical transformation.

Significantly, in the last decade of his life, Marx was involved in some critical study of the pre-capitalist village communes in Russia. This was in response to questions put to him by Russian Narodnik leaders like Vera Zasulich, Danielson and others regarding the potential of those communes to act as mass agencies for socialist transformation, even though the country

had no maturity in capitalist development and growth of the proletariat. Marx made it clear that his theoretical position in *Capital* was valid only for the experience of western Europe, especially that of Britain's capitalist development, and it would be utterly wrong to apply those formulations for understanding situations in a different context. As for the realisation of socialist potential of Russian communes, Marx emphasised the need for abolition of Tsarist monarchy and on the probability of being correlated to socialist revolutions in countries of west Europe. Marx distinguished the two historical tendencies inherent in the communes, viz. the private ownership principle eroding the communes and the collective principle rendering viability to the commune and making it suitable for socialist transformation. Marx elaborated these ideas in three drafts of a letter to Vera Zasulich.

During 1880-82, Marx took to studying a large amount of literature on pre-capitalist communal land ownership. It appears that Marx read in them 'an index that modern man was not without an archaic communal component, which includes a democratic and equalitarian formation, in his social being.' (Lawrence Krader, Introduction to *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, Lawrence Krader (ed.), Amsterdam, 1974, p.4).

13.6 SUMMARY

As things have turned out, the record of Marxism from its beginning to the end of the twentieth century has been replete with many twists and turns, contradictions even within its own following and subject to numerous interpretations and developments in response to the variations of capitalist strategies from one country to another as well as in different stages of capitalism. Marx had his own awareness about challenges to be faced by his premises and method of historical comprehension. It was manifest in the wide diversity of his analytical subjects ranging from the wonderful reflections on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), relating to an awful stalemate of bourgeois transition in France, to the ethnological notebooks written in the penultimate years of his life, searching for the characteristics of pre-capitalist Asian villages.

Thus the historiographic implications of classical Marxism are immense. Nothing is arbitrary or dogmatic about the premises of historical materialism. The future of historical changes envisaged by classical Marxism may not have been fully borne out by the subsequent course of events. But the clues to such points of departure can also be found in classical Marxism, its ways of exploring historical experience in all its relations of social, economic and cultural dimensions.

An intense sensibility for those manifold dimensions is evident in the major historical writings of Marx and Engels. Moreover, historical materialism points to the relevance of the parts and the totality of any phenomenon, since a proper understanding of their relationship sets the key of the dialectical method. Indeed, the *Annales* school of France, perhaps the most innovative of the new types of history-writing that emerged through the last century, shows a kind of concern for micro-studies reminding us of the attention for both forms and fragments in Marxist historiography.

13.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the differences between pre-Marxist socialist thought and Marxism.
- 2) Write a note on the historical and other ideas of Marx's immediate successors.
- 3) How did Marx's ideas develop over time? Discuss with examples.
- 4) What is your evaluation of Marxist theory of history?

13.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Tom Bottomore, et al (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Blackwell Reference, Oxford, 1983) (see entries Karl Marx, Marx, Engels and Contemporary Politics Parties, Rosa Luxemburg, V.I.Lenin, Capital, Leon Trotsky, Karl Kautsky, Historiography, Historical Materialism).

David Riazanov, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, (Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1973).

Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. 1. (Oxford University Press, 1978).

T.Z. Lavine, *From Socrates to Marx : The Philosophic Quest* (Bantam Books, New York\London, 1984, Parts Four and Five).

P.N. Fedoeyev et al, *Karl Marx A Biography* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973), Chapter 15.

G.D.H. Cole, *Socialist Thought : The Forerunners 1789-1850* (Macmillan, London, 1955).

For the writings of Marx and Engels mentioned in the notes *vide Early Writings, The Revolutions of 1848, Surveys from Exile, Grundrisse, The First International and After* (all in the Pelican Marx Library) and Karl Marx, *Selected Works* Vol. 1, (Moscow, 1946).

List of Courses

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