

of the rapidly changing world reflect in the way they handled various issues and topics.

In Unit 20 we saw how Emile Durkheim and Max Weber tackled the topic of ‘division of labour’. In this unit, we shall try and understand how Karl Marx and Max Weber treated or understood capitalism.

In the first section (21.2), we shall outline the views of Karl Marx. In the next section (21.3), we shall see how Max Weber approached the issue. In the final section (21.4), we shall try and see how their ideas converged and diverged.

21.2 KARL MARX ON CAPITALISM

As you have already studied in Block 2, Karl Marx maintains that economic activity and the economic structure is the basis on which social life rests. The economic base or infrastructure comprises a certain mode of production and certain forces and relations of production. The mode of production is not the same everywhere and at all times; it changes during the course of human history. Marx and Engels outline certain stages of world history each characterised by a distinctive economic formation. It is this economic formation that shapes other social sub-systems, which are termed as superstructure like the political structure, religion, values and culture. In German Ideology, Marx and Engels broadly outline four stages of history. These are (i) the primitive communal stage, (ii) the ancient stage based on slavery, (iii) the feudal stage, (iv) the capitalist stage. The study of human history in terms of stages each with its own distinct mode of production forms the basis of the Marxian theory of historical materialism.

As just mentioned each of these stages has a mode of production peculiar to itself. Each stage follows logically from the previous one. This is because each stage contains certain inner contradictions or tensions. These contradictions eventually break the system down and a new stage emerges from the womb of the old.

21.2.0 Capitalism: A Stage in Human History

The stage of capitalism, according to the Marxist interpretation of history, is a natural outcome of the contradictions within the feudal system. The feudal order was marked by the oppression of ‘serfs’ by the feudal lords. The tensions within the system lead to the breakdown of feudalism freeing large numbers of tenants from the feudal lands. The growing towns absorbed these people. A labour force thus became available for product manufacture. The development of new machines, the birth of the factory system and the mass production of goods consolidated the new economic system called ‘capitalism’.

The point that must be stressed is that Marx views capitalism from a historical perspective. Marx does not consider individual members of society as the focus of his theory. He speaks in terms of the whole society. To him, capitalism is a stage in the development of human society, which arises from the contradictions of an earlier stage. It is a stage that will generate its own contradictions too, as we shall see later. The contradictions