
UNIT 3 CLASS AND CLASS STRUGGLE*

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- define the concept of class;
- describe the various criteria for class formation;
- identify the various stages involved in the history of society that change due to class conflict or change in mode of production;
- discuss what is social revolution and how it will be reached; and
- understand Marx's concept of alienation.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit will explain the key notion of class as used by Karl Marx. We shall study in detail about the various criteria that are basic for calling any collectivity a class. Also we shall discuss how and why classes come into conflict with each other. We will seek to understand the impact of these class conflicts on the history of development of society. Finally, the present unit will give you a brief overview of history including the future of human society on the basis of Marxian framework. The Unit discusses the class structure, including the classification of societies in history and class struggle. We go on to elaborate the intensification of class conflict under capitalism, discuss class struggle and revolution and explain Marx's concept of alienation.

*Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 8 of *Sociological Thought* (ESO 13) with modifications by Nita Mathur

3.2 THE CLASS STRUCTURE

The word ‘class’ originated from the Latin term ‘classis’ which refers to a group called to arms, a division of the people. In the rule of legendary Roman king, Servius Tullius (678-534 B.C.), the Roman society was divided into five classes or orders according to their wealth. Subsequently, the word ‘class’ was applied to large groups of people into which human society came to be divided.

Marx recognised class as a unique feature of capitalist societies. This is one reason why he did not analyse the class structure and class relations in other forms of society.

Marx’s sociology is, in fact, a sociology of the class struggle. This means one has to understand the Marxian concept of class in order to appreciate Marxian philosophy and thought. Marx has used the term social class throughout his works but explained it only in a fragmented form. The most clear passages on the concept of class structure can be found in the third volume of his famous work, Capital (1894). Under the title of ‘Social Classes’ Marx distinguished three classes, related to the three sources of income: (a) owners of simple labour power or labourers whose main source of income is labour; (b) owners of capital or capitalists whose main source of income is profit or surplus value; and (c) landowners whose main source of income is ground rent. In this way the class structure of modern capitalist society is composed of three major classes viz., salaried labourers or workers, capitalists and landowners.

At a broader level, society could be divided into two major classes i.e. the ‘haves’ (owners of land and / or capital) often called as bourgeoisie and the ‘have-nots’ (those who own nothing but their own labour power), often called as proletariat. Marx has tried to even give a concrete definition of social class. According to him ‘a social class occupies a fixed place in the process of production’.

Activity 1

Can Indian society be divided into classes in Marxian sense of the word ‘class’? If yes, describe these classes. If no, give reasons why Indian society cannot be divided into in Marxian sense of the word ‘class’.

3.2.1 Criteria for Determination of Class

In order to have a better understanding of the concept of class and class structure, one must be able to respond to the question – “What are the criteria for determination of class”? In other words, which human grouping will be called a class and which grouping would not be considered as class in Marxian terms. For this exercise, one could say that a social class has two major criteria: (i) objective criteria (ii) subjective criteria.

- i) **Objective Criteria:** People sharing the same relationship to the means of production comprise a class. Let us understand it through an example – all labourers have a similar relationship with the landowners. On the other hand all the landowners, as a class, have a similar relationship with the land and labourers. In this way, labourers on one hand and landowners on the other hand could be seen as classes. However, for Marx, this relationship alone is not sufficient to determine the class. According to him it is not sufficient for class to be ‘class in itself’ but it should also be class for itself. What does this mean? By ‘class in itself’ he means the objective criteria of any social class. Obviously, Marx is not simply satisfied with objective criteria above. Hence he equally emphasises upon the other major criteria i.e., “Class for itself” or the subjective criteria.
- ii) **Subjective Criteria:** Any collectivity or human grouping with a similar relationship would make a category, not a class, if subjective criteria are not included. The members of any one class not only have similar consciousness but they also share a similar consciousness of the fact that they belong to the same class. This similar consciousness of a class serves as the basis for uniting its members for organising social action. Here this similar class consciousness towards acting together for their common interests is what Marx calls – “Class for itself”.

In this way, these two criteria together determine a class and class structure in any given society.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Define a social class in two lines.

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- 2) Name the two criteria for determining a class.

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3.2.2 Classification of Societies in History and Emergence of Classes

Marx differentiated stages of human history on the basis of their economic regimes or modes of production. He distinguished four major modes of production which he called the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the bourgeois or capitalist. He predicted that all social development will culminate into a stage called communism. Let us simplify this classification of societies or various stages of human history into (i) primitive-communal, (ii) slave-owning, (iii) feudal, (iv) capitalist and (v) communist stages. In this sub-section we will discuss the first three stages.

i) The Primitive-communal System

The primitive-communal system was the first and the lowest form of organisation of people and it existed for thousands of years. Men and women started using primitive tools like sticks and stones for hunting and food-gathering. Gradually they improved these tools, and learned to make fire, cultivation and animal husbandry. In this system of very low level of forces of production, the relations of production were based on common ownership of the means of production. Therefore, these relations were based on mutual assistance and cooperation. These relations were conditioned by the fact that people with their primitive implements could only withstand the mighty forces of nature together, collectively.

In such a situation, exploitation of humans by humans did not exist because of two reasons. Firstly, the tools used (namely, means of production) were so simple that they could be reproduced by anyone. These were implements like spear, stick, bow and arrow etc. Hence no person or group of people had the monopoly of ownership over the tools. Secondly, production was at a low-scale. The people existed more or less on a subsistence level. Their production was just sufficient to meet the needs of the people provided everybody worked. Therefore, it was a situation of no master and no servant. All were equal.

Gradually with time, people started perfecting their tools, their craft of producing and surplus production started taking place. This led to private property and primitive equality gave way to social inequality. Thus the first antagonistic classes, slaves and slave owners, appeared.

This is how the development of the forces of production led to the replacement of primitive communal system by slavery.

ii) The Slave-owning Society

In the slave-owning society, primitive tools were perfected and bronze and iron tools replaced the stone and wooden implements. Large-scale agriculture, live stock raising, mining and handicrafts developed. The development of this type of forces of production also changed the relations of production. These relations were based on the slave owner's absolute ownership of both the means of production and the slave and everything they produced. The owner left the slaves only with the bare minimum necessities to keep them from dying of starvation. In this system, the history of exploitation of humans by humans and the history of class struggle began. The development of productive forces went on and slavery became an impediment to the expansion of social production. Production demanded the constant improvement of implements, higher labour productivity, but the slaves had no interest in this as it would not improve their position. With the passage of time the class conflict between the classes of slave- owners and the slaves became acute and it was manifested in slave revolts. These revolts, together with the raids from neighboring tribes, undermined the foundations of slavery leading to a new stage i.e. feudal system (See Box 3.1).

Box 3.1 Feudal System

The term feudalism is derived from the institution of 'fief', which was a piece of landed property. During the medieval period of European history, this form of property was given to a vassal by a lord in return for military service. In this sense feudalism was a relationship between a vassal and his Lord. This relationship was expressed in terms of property holding through the fief. The relationship was exercised through jurisdiction. Lords held courts for their vassals, settled disputes and punished breaches of law and custom. The court was also an administrative body which levied taxes and raised military forces. Landowners maintained control over the peasantry. By the twelfth century, landowners' control over tenants and others had increased to a very great extent.

iii) The Feudal Society

The progressive development of the productive forces continued under feudalism. People started using inanimate sources of energy, viz., water and wind, besides human labour. The crafts advanced further, new implements and machines were invented and old ones were improved. The labour of craftspersons was specialised, raising productivity considerably. The development of forces of production led to emergence of feudal relations of production. These relations were based on the feudal lords' ownership of the serfs or landless peasants. The production relations were relations of domination and subjection, exploitation of the serfs by the feudal lords. Nevertheless, these relations were more progressive than in slavery system, because they made the labourers interested, to some extent, in their labour. The peasants and the artisans could own the implements or small parts of land. These forces of production underwent changes due to new discoveries, increasing demands for consumption caused by population increase and discovery of new markets through colonialism. All this led to the need and growth of mass scale manufacture. This became possible due to advances in technology. This brought the unorganised labourers at one place i.e. the factory.

This sparked off already sharpened class conflict leading to peasant revolution against landowners. The new system of production demanded free labourer whereas the serf was tied to the land, therefore, the new forces of production also changed the relations of production culminating into a change in the mode of production from feudalism to capitalism. In the next sub-section we will talk about class conflict in capitalist societies. So, the next section will cover our discussion of the fourth stage of social development. But before going to it, let us complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Give the five stages of society as given by Marx.

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2) Mark True or False against each of the following statements

- a) History of class antagonism begins with slavery systems True/False
- b) There was no private ownership of property in primitive-communal systems True/False

3.2.3 Intensification of Class Conflict under Capitalism

Large-scale machine production is the specific feature of the productive forces of capitalism. Huge factories, plants and mines took the place of artisan workshops and manufacturers. Marx and Engels described the capitalist productive forces in the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party'. "Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground". In a century or two capitalism accomplished much more in developing the productive forces than had been achieved in all the preceding eras of human history.

This vigorous growth of the forces of production was helped by the capitalist relations of production based on private capitalist ownership. Under capitalism, the producers, the proletariat, are legally free, being attached neither to the land nor to any particular factory. They are free in the sense that they can go to work for any capitalist, but they are not free from the bourgeois class as a whole. Possessing no means of production, they are compelled to sell their labour power and thereby come under the yoke of exploitation.

Due to this exploitation the relatively free labourers become conscious of their class interest and organise themselves into a working class movement. This working class movement intensified its struggle against the bourgeois class. It begins with bargaining for better wages and working conditions and culminates into an intensified class conflict, which is aimed at overthrowing the capitalist system. Marx said that the capitalist system symbolises the most acute form of inequality, exploitation and class antagonism. This paves the way for a socialist revolution which would lead to a new stage of society i.e. communism (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 Communism

The word 'communism' originated in the mid-1830s, when it was used by members of the secret revolutionary parties in Paris. It referred to political movement of the working class in capitalist society. It also referred to the form of society which the working class would create as a result of its struggle. During the later half of the nineteenth century, both terms, socialism and communism, were used interchangeably to describe the working-class movement. Marx and Engels also used these terms in a similar fashion.

With the advent of the Third (Communist) International in 1917, the term communism was applied to a form of revolutionary programme for overthrowing capitalism. We can say that the term socialism began to be applied to a more peaceful and constitutional action of long-term changes, while communism referred to a revolutionary action, involving violent forms of changes.

Marx discussed communism as a form of society. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844) he wrote that 'Communism is the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation of human nature, through and for man'.

3.3 CLASS STRUGGLE AND REVOLUTION

It is clear that according to Marx the mode of production or economic structure is the base or foundation of society. Any change in this infrastructure will cause fundamental changes in the superstructure and consequently in a society. The changes in the mode of production are essentially changes in the forces of production and relations of production. In primitive communal stage there was no surplus production and hence it had no inequality and exploitation caused by the private ownership of means of production. The means of production were common property of the community. With the development and improvements in the forces of production there was increased productivity. This caused private ownership of means of production and change in the relations of production. This marked the end of primitive-communal system and thus began the long history of inequality, exploitation and class conflict, coinciding with the emergence of slave-owning society.

In the slave-owning society the class conflict between the slave owners and slaves reached a peak causing a change in the mode of production from slavery to feudalistic mode of production. Marx has said that the history of hitherto existing society is a history of class struggle. This means that the entire history of society is studded with different phases and periods of class struggle. This history of class struggle begins in the slave-owning society and continues through feudal society where this class struggle is between classes of the feudal lords and the landless agricultural labourers or serfs. Due to change in mode of production and class struggle a new stage of society i.e., capitalism replaces the age-old feudal system.

In the capitalistic mode of production the class antagonism acquires most acute dimensions. The working class movement begins to concretise and reaches its peak. Through a class conflict between the class of capitalists and the class of industrial labourers, the capitalist system is replaced by socialism. This violent change has been termed as revolution by Marx. We shall deliberate on this concept of revolution in detail in the next section. This marks, according to Marx, the fifth stage of social development. Before reading about the fifth stage in the next sub-section, please complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

Do you think that Indian history provides us with some examples of class conflict? If yes, elaborate at least one such example. If no, then give reasons for the absence of class conflict in Indian history.

Marx said that the class antagonism and subsequently the class conflict in the capitalist system will usher in socialism in place of capitalism through a revolution. Here the question arises what is the basis of this antagonism? Marx's answer is that the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production is the basis of this antagonism. The bourgeoisie is constantly creating more powerful means of production. But the relations of production that is, apparently, both the relations of ownership and the distribution of income are not transferred at the same rate. The capitalist mode of production is capable to produce in bulk, but despite this mass production and increase in wealth, majority of the population suffers from poverty and misery. On the other hand, there are a few families who have so much wealth that one could not even count or imagine. These stark and wide disparities create some tiny islands of prosperity in a vast ocean of poverty and misery. The onus of this disparity lies on the unequal, exploitative relations of production which distribute the produce in an unequal manner. This contradiction, according to Marx, will eventually produce a revolutionary crisis. The proletariat, which constitutes and will increasingly constitute the vast majority of the population, will become a class, that is, a social entity aspiring for the seizure of power and transformation of social relations.

Marx asserted that the progress of society meant the succession of victories of one class over the other. He assigned his life to planning a victory for the proletariat. In a way, he became a commander, engaged in a campaign. With his solitary aim of defeating the enemy, Marx stressed on acquiring the knowledge of the history of society and the laws that regulate its organisation. His monumental work, *Das Kapital* (Capital, 1861-1879), provided an analysis in which Marx was not concerned with arguments for a class-war. He treated the necessity for such arguments as an unnecessary task. He had no love for emotionalism and humanitarianism and appeal to idealism etc. He conceived of the class conflict on every front and proposed the formation of a political party which would eventually gain victory and be the conquering class.

You do not have to imagine that it was Marx who, for the first time ever, advanced the idea of conflict between classes. Saint Simon wrote about human history as the history of struggles between social classes. In the 1790s Babeuf, a French political agitator, spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat and Weitling and Blanqui (Babeuf's disciple) developed Babeuf's ideas in the nineteenth century. The French State Socialists worked out the future position and importance of workers in industrial states. In fact in the eighteenth century many thinkers advanced such doctrines. Marx did the admirable task of sifting all this material and constructed a new set of social analysis. His analysis of class struggle was a unique mix of simple basic principles with down-to-earth details.

According to Marx, the bottom rung of the social stratification is the proletariat. Below it there is no class and therefore emancipation of the proletariat will, in fact, be the emancipation of mankind. Marx accepts the right of the bourgeoisie to fight the final war. But for the proletariat the battle is for its very survival and it has to win.

The revolutions of the proletariat will differ in kind from all past revolutions. All the revolutions of the past were accomplished by minorities for the benefit of minorities. The revolution of the proletariat will be accomplished by the vast majority for the benefit of all. The proletarian revolution will, therefore, mark the end of classes and of the antagonistic character of capitalist society. This would mean that the private ownership of property will be abolished. The proletariat will jointly own means of production and distribute the produce according to the needs of the members of the society. This stage is called the stage of dictatorship of proletariat. This stage will later on convert into a stateless society where the communist system will finally be established in the society. This will also end all kinds of social classes and of all kinds of class conflicts for future. This will also mean de-alienation of the proletariat. Since the concept of alienation is now regarded as one of the main ideas of Marxism, after completing Check Your Progress 3, you will also learn a little about this concept, and its relevance to Marxian analysis of class conflict.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Discuss the main features of communism in three lines.

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2) Mark True and False against each of the following sentences.

a) The private ownership of property will not be abolished in communism. True/False

b) Communism is characterised by stateless and classless society. True/False

3.4 MARX'S CONCEPT OF ALIENATION

Alienation literally means “separation from”. This term is often used in literature and Marx has given it a sociological meaning. Marx has conceived of alienation as a phenomenon related to the structure of those societies in which the producer is divorced from the means of production and in which “dead labour” (capital) dominates “living labour” (the worker). Let us take an example of a shoemaker in a factory. A shoemaker manufactures shoes but cannot use them for himself. His creation thus becomes an object which is separate from him. It becomes an entity which is separate from its creator. He makes shoes not because making shoes satisfies merely his urge to work and create. He does so to earn his living.

For a worker this 'objectification' becomes more so because the process of production in a factory is divided into several parts and his job may be only a tiny part of the whole. Since he produces only one part of the whole, his work is mechanical and therefore he loses his creativity.

A systematic elaboration of the concept appears in *Capital* under the heading "Fetishism of commodities and money". But the ethical germ of this conception can be found as early as 1844, when Marx unequivocally rejected and condemned "the state" and "money", and invested the proletariat with the "historical mission" of emancipating society as a whole. In Marx's sense alienation is an action through which (or a state in which) a person, a group, an institution, or a society becomes (or remains) alien

- a) to the results or products of its own activity (and to the activity itself), and/or
- b) to the nature in which it lives, and/or
- c) to other human beings, and in addition and through any or all of
- d) to itself (to its own historically created human possibilities). Alienation is always self-alienation, i.e., one's alienation from oneself through one's own activity. To quote Gajo Petrovic (1983: 10) we can say, "And self-alienation is not just one among the forms of alienation, but the very essence and basic structure of alienation. It is not merely a descriptive concept, it is also an appeal, or a call for a revolutionary change of the world".

Mere criticism of alienation was not the intention of Marx. His aim was to clear the path for a radical revolution and for accomplishing communism understood as "the re-integration of one's return to oneself, the supersession of one's self-alienation". Mere abolition of private property cannot bring about de-alienation of economic and social life. This situation of the worker, or the producer does not alter by transforming private property into state property. Some forms of alienation in capitalist production have their roots in the nature of the means of production and the related division of social labour, so that they cannot be eliminated by a mere change in the form of managing production.

Far from being an eternal fact of social life, the division of society into mutually interdependent and conflicting spheres (economy, politics, laws, arts, morals, religion, etc.), and the predominance of the economic sphere, are, according to Marx, characteristics of a self-alienated society. The de-alienation of society is therefore impossible without the abolition of the alienation of different human activities from each other.

Alienation in the Marxian sense of the term cannot be overcome by the reorganisation of the economy, however radical the programme of such transformation may be. Alienation of the society and of the individual are integrally connected. Therefore, the de-alienation of neither can be carried out without the other, nor can one be reduced to the other.

The concept of alienation is a key tool of analysis in Marx's thought. According to Marx, one had always been self-alienated thus far. The bourgeoisie relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production causing alienation. At the same time, the production forces developing in the womb of bourgeoisie society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism and alienation. This social formation constitutes, therefore, the closing chapter of the "prehistoric" stage of human society. Our discussion of the concept of alienation closes Unit 3 on Class and Class Conflict. Before moving on to a summary of the unit, let us complete Activity 3.

Activity 3

Is there a word for alienation in your mother-tongue? If yes, provide the term and explain it by giving examples from your day-to-day life.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the concept of class and class conflict in the history of development of society as given by Karl Marx. He defined class in terms of people's relationship to the means of production and their class-consciousness. In Marxian terms, the history of society, so far, is the history of class struggle. This means that ever since the social inequality and exploitation started in human history, that is, beginning from slavery system, society has been divided into mutually warring classes of Haves and Have-nots. This successive class conflict and change in mode of production has led to change in the stages of society from slavery to feudalistic and feudalistic to capitalistic system. The final social revolution would transform the capitalistic system into communist system where there would be no more classes, social inequality and class conflict. In other words, there will be de-alienation of the proletariat.

3.6 REFERENCES

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3.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) It comprises people sharing same relationship with the means of production and having similar consciousness regarding their class interests.

Karl Marx

- 2) A social class can be determined by two major criteria, namely,
 - a) objective and
 - b) subjective criteria.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Five stages of society as given by Marx are:
 - 1) Primitive-Communal System
 - 2) Slavery
 - 3) Feudalism
 - 4) Capitalism
 - 5) Communism.
- 2) a) True
b) True

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) It will be characterised by a classless society, devoid of private ownership of means of production. There will be no stateless society.
- 2) a) False
b) True