
UNIT 2 KARL MARX

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this course is to introduce to the students the thoughts of Karl Marx, one of the greatest thinkers of all times. It aims to make the students familiar with his life and works, the historical factors that moulded his thought process and the main aspects of his Philosophy. It also invites the students to reflect on the political and economic system envisaged by Marx in the context of contemporary socio-economic and political realities.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly Marx is one of the most important philosophers of all times. No one in the 20th century has been more defended or vilified than Karl Marx for inspiring the many left-wing socialist or communist revolutions that changed the political landscape of the 20th century. Marx is also considered one of the fathers of democratic socialism that since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union is now the principle form of socialism throughout the world.

2.2 LIFE AND WORKS

Karl Heinrich Marx was born into a comfortable middle-class Jewish family in Trier in Germany on May 5, 1818. His father Hirschel Marx was a lawyer and while Karl was still a child decided to abandon his Jewish faith and become a

Christian to escape anti-Semitism. After finishing his schooling in Trier, Karl Marx entered Bonn University to study law. At Bonn he became engaged to Jenny von Westphalen. Later Karl joined Berlin University and changed his subject of specialization from Law to Philosophy. Here Marx came under the influence of the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, who had been the professor of philosophy at Berlin until his death in 1831. Marx became a member of the Young Hegelian movement, a group, which included Bruno Bauer, David Strauss and others who were involved in a radical critique of Christianity and the Prussian autocracy. After obtaining his doctorate from the University of Jena, Marx hoped to get a teaching post. However his radical political views and association with the Young Hegelian movement made it impossible.

Marx took to journalism to make a living and moved to Cologne and there the *Rheinische Zeitung* published an article by him in which he defended the freedom of the press. Marx immigrated to France, arriving in Paris at the end of 1843; Marx rapidly made contact with organized groups of emigrant German workers and with various sects of French socialists. He also edited the short-lived *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher* which was intended to bridge French socialism and the German radical Hegelianism. During his first few months in Paris, Marx set down his views in a series of writings which later came to be known as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). It was also in Paris that Marx developed his lifelong partnership with Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). While working on their first book together, *The Holy Family*, the French government expelled Marx from the country, and Marx moved to Brussels where he remained for the next three years. While in Brussels Marx devoted himself to an intensive study of history and elaborated what came to be known as the materialist conception of history, which was later published as *The German Ideology*. At the same time, Marx also wrote a polemic the *Poverty of Philosophy* against the idealistic socialism of the French socialist thinker J.P Proudhon. In 1847 a meeting of the Communist League's Central Committee was held in London and Marx attended this meeting. After returning to Brussels at the request of the Central committee, he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*.

Early in 1848 Marx moved back to Paris where a revolt against King Louis Philippe who was forced to abdicate, was on. Slowly the revolution reached Germany. On the outbreak of disturbances in Germany Marx went to Cologne. However the summer of 1848 brought the first reaction of counter revolution and the revolutionary movements were suppressed. Finally Marx settled down in London in May 1849 to begin the "long, sleepless night of exile" that was to last for the rest of his life. He wrote two lengthy pamphlets on the 1848 revolution in France and its aftermath, *The Class struggle in France* and the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. During the first half of the 1850s the Marx family lived in poverty in the Soho quarter of London. Marx and Jenny already had four children and two more were to follow. Of these only three survived. Marx's major source of income at this time was the help from Engels. From 1852 Marx wrote a series of articles in *New York Daily Tribune* and also contributed to *New American Cyclopaedia*. In London Marx spent a lot of time in the British Museum reading books and journals that would help him analyze the capitalist society. By 1857 he had produced a gigantic 800 page manuscript on capital, landed property, wage labor, the state, foreign trade and the world market, *The Grundrisse* (Outlines). Marx published *A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

in 1859. In the early 1860s he composed three large volumes, *Theories of Surplus Value*, which discussed the theoreticians of political economy. It was not until 1867 that Marx was able to publish volume 1 of *Capital*. Volumes II and III were finished during the 1860s but were published posthumously by Engels.

Marx was elected to the General Council of the First International in 1864. During the last decade of his life though Marx's health declined, he managed to comment on contemporary politics in his *Critique of Gotha Programme*. In his correspondence with Vera Zasulich, Marx contemplated the possibility of Russia bypassing the capitalist stage of development and building communism on the basis of the existing peasant cooperatives. The deaths of his eldest daughter and his wife clouded the last years of Marx's life. He died on March 14, 1883 and was buried at Highgate Cemetery in London.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the importance of Marx today?

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2) What is the importance of Marx's life for his theory and praxis?

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3) What are some of the important works of Karl Marx?

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2.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Marxism could be considered the continuation and culmination of German classical philosophy, French Socialism and British Economics. To gain an understanding of Marx's philosophy and the socialist praxis he advocated, it is necessary that we look into each of these fields of knowledge that formed the historical and academic background to Marx's thinking.

2.4 CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

Hegel was the most important philosopher of the time and he believed that Reality was Spirit and that the human being is Spirit alienated from its objects and from itself. He believed that this alienation can be overcome by knowledge, knowledge that there is nothing in the object which was not put there by the subject spirit itself. During his university days Marx became a member of a radical left wing group, the Young Hegelians. Marx accepted Hegel's dialectic, but for him history was not the dialectical manifestation of the Spirit but men and women transforming the world through the creation of their means of existence. He drifted away from the Young Hegelian movement and expressed his disagreements with their ideology in the *Holy Family*, the *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *German Ideology*. The *Theses on Feuerbach* contain one of Marx's most memorable remarks: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it." (Thesis 11) Materialism of the time ignored the active role of the human subject in creating the world we perceive. Idealism as developed by Hegel, understood the active nature of the human subject, but confined it to thought or contemplation. Marx combined the insights of both the traditions to propose a view in which human beings transform the world they find themselves in. This transformation happens not in thought but in reality, through actual material activity. This historical version of materialism is the foundation of Marx's theory of history; it was derived from his reflection on the history of philosophy, his experience of social and economic realities of the time, and his encounter with the working class.

2.5 SOCIALISM

Socialism as we know today is the product of modern industrial world. Millennial and utopian thought before the modern era only existed as forms of Christian heresy. Gradually the idea became secular especially during and after the French Revolution. G.D.H. Cole in the first volume of his *History of Socialist Thought* says that the word "socialist" was first used in 1827 in the Owenite Co-operative magazine as a general description of Robert Owen's co-operative doctrines, and then as "*socialisme*" in 1832 in *La Globe*. The general connotation of the word in 1830s was a system of society that stressed the social against the individual, the co-operative against the competitive, sociability against individual self-sufficiency; and social control on the accumulation and use of private property. Louis Blanqui, Fourier, Robert Owen etc advocated different versions of socialism. **Marxism emerged as a critique and revolutionary transformation of the different schools of socialist thought** and the political emancipation movements.

2.6 ECONOMICS

Capitalism is an economic theory which stresses that the means of production should be owned by private individuals. Capitalists believe that Private ownership and free enterprise will lead to more efficiency, lower prices, and better products. Adam Smith believed that an individual, by pursuing his/her own interest frequently promotes that of the society more efficiently than when one intends to promote it. According to Capitalist thinking enlightened self-interest and competition in the free market would benefit society as a whole by keeping prices low, while providing incentive for the production of a wide variety of goods and services. Capitalist mode of production advocated the division of labour which it believed would

contribute to an increase in production. Modern capitalism had created unprecedented wealth. Capitalism could not exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production. However the system made the workers, the real producers of wealth alienated and poorer, the more they worked the less they became. Marx felt that there was a need for a new economic and social system to liberate the vast majority of the people, the working class or the proletariat from the chains of oppression.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What are the historical and academic factors that contributed to Marx's thinking?

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2) Who were the left wing Hegelians and what was their philosophy?

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3) Describe the characteristics of socialism.

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4) Describe the characteristics of Capitalism.

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2.7 HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

The critique of Hegelian philosophy, different schools of socialism and capitalism made Marx to search for a new philosophy that would be instrumental in making communism a reality. He looked into history to see how societies had evolved

from primitive communism to slave economy, to feudalism and finally to contemporary capitalism. He believed that once we understand the laws of the development of history we could also direct them to achieve the goal we have. Marx's concept of historical materialism was his attempt to explain the historical process of development.

The materialistic interpretation of history holds that history is a product of human beings, men and women make history but they make it under given conditions. The process of development and change is as follows.

Human beings have needs and to satisfy these needs they enter into production. The mode of production is the manner in which men and women produce their means of existence. In the course of time, the modes of production become ossified into traditions and are handed down. It is this dynamic relationship to nature that Marx meant by the term productive forces.

Human beings do not produce as isolated individuals but as members of a community, the relationship within which is determined to a great extent by the mode of production.

This economic structure constitutes the base of the society on which superstructures like law, religion, and morality are built to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. Within the economic structure itself, the productive forces enjoy priority over relations of production.

The superstructures once risen can react on the base and can have certain autonomy.

What triggers social change is the maturing of the contradictions within a given economic system: (i) conflict between new needs and old mode of production; (ii) conflict between the terms in relations of production; (iii) conflict between base and superstructure and (vi) conflict between superstructures. When the conflicts mature and the possibilities within a given system are exhausted, one form of society gives way to another.

Human beings themselves are the most important agents of change, human beings who are aware of the conflicts and interests can change the course of history.

2.8 CLASS AND CLASS STRUGGLE

A class is a group of persons who stand in the same relation to property or to nonproperty, to the factors of production such as labour power and means of production. We might say that a class is a group of people who by virtue of what they possess have to engage in the same type of activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments. Marx was not the first to discover the concepts of class and class struggle. But Marx was the first to see class and class conflict as central categories in the unfolding of history. Marx showed (1) that the existence of classes is linked to predetermined historical phases of the development of production; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; and (3) that the dictatorship itself is only the transition leading to the abolition of all classes and the establishment of a classless society. In the *Manifesto* Marx says that history hitherto has been a history of class struggle. As capitalism developed and the capitalists acquired more and more power and wealth it also created an impoverished proletariat. Two basic classes oppose each other in the capitalist system: the owners of the means of production, the capitalists and the

workers who have sold their labour power. The conflict between the bourgeois who does not want to give up their privileges and the proletariat who have become aware of their loss, of their alienation, of the inhuman situation in which they live and work will create the conditions for a revolution. This revolution will be the prelude to the establishment of communism.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is historical materialism?

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2) Describe class struggle and its implications.

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2.9 ALIENATION

For the first time in history we live in a world where we have the technology and the means to produce enough to satisfy the needs of everyone on the planet, yet millions of lives are stunted by poverty and destroyed by disease. Vast numbers of people live their lives characterized by feelings of desolation, loneliness and alienation. The situation is not natural or inevitable but the product of the existing socio-economic system, contemporary capitalism. Marx developed his theory of alienation to reveal the cause of these contradictions, namely alienated human activity that lies behind the seemingly impersonal forces dominating the society. For Marx, alienation was not rooted in the mind or in religion, as it was for his predecessors Hegel and Feuerbach but something rooted in the material world. Alienation meant loss of control, specifically the loss of control over worker's labour power, the product of labour and its commodification.

2.10 ALIENATED LABOUR

Marx considers human labour as one of the chief ways in which humans are distinguished from non-human animals. Non-human animals do produce, but only for survival, and only in an instinctual manner. In contrast, humans are creative and make their life-activity and labour the object of their own wills and consciousness. Marx sees capitalism as an economic and social system which has created and augmented productive forces greater than ever before in human history, yet it thwarts, distorts, and limits human potential. There are four aspects to alienated labour. The worker is alienated:

- 1) from products of one's own labour. The first aspect of alienated labour is the separation of the worker from the products of his/her labour. Under capitalism, commodities produced by labour are taken away from the worker and sold, and labour itself becomes a commodity. This alienation produces riches and power for the capitalist but enslavement and degradation for workers.
- 2) from the process of production. Under capitalism, work is controlled by employers and is external to the worker and is not experienced as part of one's nature. While working, the worker does not have a sense of fulfilment.
- 3) from species. In capitalism individuals act less and less like human beings, and more and more like machines. Humans produce when free from physical need, reproduce and construct the world in freedom in accordance with sense of beauty as a member of a society. This is the essence of production as a *species-being*. In capitalism production is drudgery and merely a means to survive. In the process one is forced to sacrifice what is genuinely human.
- 4) from other persons. Humans are also alienated from other human beings, in capitalism, human relations are reduced to market or exchange relationships. According to Marx the exchange relationships are social relationships, even though they appear to have become only money relationships.

The division of labour, wage labour and private property are expressions of alienation. In order to end alienation, it is necessary to abolish private property and abolish the relationship between private property and wage labour. Marx believed that through class struggle that would culminate in a revolution which leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, private property would be abolished and by implication, alienation.

2.11 COMMUNISM

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a communist society, i.e., a classless society. The dictatorship of the proletariat and the nascent socialist society will be characterized by factors such as the

abolition of private property

abolition of inheritance

abolition of division of labour

universalization of education

planned economy, rational and just allocation of the resources of the society

As socialism develops one could expect the “withering away of the state” and creation of a society where the norm is “from each according to his ability and to each according to his need,” as mentioned in the *Critique of Gotha Programme*. It will be “An association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” (The *Manifesto*)

In a true communist society there will be no more a place for religion as the promise of an illusory happiness in the world to come or as opium to alleviate the pain and misery the masses suffer.

“Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premise now in existence.’ (*The German Ideology*).

Check Your Progress IV

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is alienation?

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2) Describe the different aspects of economic alienation

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3) What are the characteristics of communist society?

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2.12 LET US SUM UP

Though Marx remain one of the most important thinkers even in the 21st century, the collapse of Soviet Union and other East European Economies, the economic changes that are taking place in China which still calls itself a communist state makes a critique of what had been accepted by Marxists as a dogma for a long time. A critique in the context of contemporary realities is what Marx himself would have expected, for his favourite motto was, *De Omnibus dubitandum* (you must have doubts about everything). Marx never wanted his thought to be ossified into a dogma to be believed by his followers. His endower was to make the working class aware of their situation and their responsibility in bringing about a classless society where everyone will be able to develop all their potentialities unhindered by class divisions.

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2.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) What is the importance of Marxism today?

Karl Marx is one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, whose insights and critique of Capitalism are still relevant at this time of economic crisis that is affecting large number of people throughout the world. Karl Marx is not only the principal socialist thinker of the last two centuries, but also one of the intellectual giants of all times. It was Marx who inspired the many left-wing socialist or communist revolutions that had changed the political landscape of the 20th century. Marx is also considered one of the fathers of democratic socialism that since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union is now the principle form of socialism throughout the world.

- 2) What is the importance of his life for his theory?

Marx believed that human beings make their history but they make it under given circumstances. To understand Marxism the story of Marx's life too is

very important. He was born a Jew and early in life understood the meaning of belonging to an ethnic minority; his father had to change his religion. He came to know about the plight of the proletariat during his stay in Paris, his journalism taught him the oppressive nature of the state. He himself experienced poverty and deprivation. In his search for a communist society, his own life and background played a very important role. Most of his life, he was an exile who understood the plight of contemporary proletariat, whose liberation was his life's mission.

3) What are some of the important works of Marx

Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

The Holy Family

The German Ideology

Theses on Feuerbach

The Communist Manifesto

The Grundrisse

Theories of Surplus Value

The Capital, Vols. I,II,III

Critique of Gotha Programme, etc.

Check Your Progress II

1) What are the historical and academic factors that contributed to Marx's thinking?

German classical philosophy

French socialism

British economics

2) Who were the left wing Hegelians and what was their philosophy?

Young Hegelians were a group of radical left wing thinkers which included David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach and others who were critical of Christianity and the autocratic government of the time. Marx himself was a member of this group in his university days. They believed in the power of critique to change the situation, Marx gradually moved away from the group asserting that 'so far philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it'. His criticism of the young Hegelians can be seen in the Holy Family, The German Ideology and the Theses on Feuerbach.

3) Describe the characteristics of socialism.

Socialism is a social, economic and Political system that stresses the needs of the community rather than of the individual. The system stresses collaboration against competition, sociability against individual self-sufficiency. It advocates social control on the accumulation and use of private property.

Louis Blanqui, Fourier, Robert Owen etc., advocated different versions of socialism. Marx realized that there was a need for a radical critique of the existing socialist ideas and means to bring about real socialism. Marxian socialism emerged as a critique and a revolutionary transformation of the different schools of socialist thought and the political emancipation movements.

4) Describe the characteristics of Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic theory which stresses that the means of production should be owned by private individuals. It is a system which believes that private ownership and free enterprise will lead to more efficiency, lower prices, and better products. Capitalists hold that enlightened self-interest and competition in the free market would benefit society as a whole by keeping prices low, while providing incentive for the production of a wide variety of goods and services. Capitalism advocates the division of labour, free market, and competition. Modern capitalism had created unprecedented wealth. However the system makes the workers, the real producers of wealth alienated and poor.

Check Your Progress III

1) What is historical materialism?

Historical materialism is the interpretation of history from the perspective of the working class who are the real creators of history according to Marx. Marx sees history as a dialectical process through which different forms of societies come in to existence and get transformed. The process of development and change is as follows.

Human beings have needs and to satisfy these needs they enter into production. The manner men and women produce their means of existence is the mode of production. In the course of time, the mode of production becomes ossified into traditions and is handed down. It is this dynamic relationship to nature that Marx meant by the term productive forces.

Human beings do not produce as isolated individuals but as members of a community. The relationship within which is determined to a great extent by the mode of production.

This economic structure constitutes the base structure of the society on which superstructures like law, religion, and morality are built to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. Within the economic structure itself the productive forces enjoy priority over relations of production.

What triggers social change is the maturing of the contradictions within the economic structures: (i) conflict between new needs and old mode of production; (ii) conflict between the terms in relations of production; (iii) conflict between base and superstructure and (vi) conflict between superstructures.

Human beings themselves are the most important agents of change, human beings who are aware of the conflicts and interests can change the course of history.

2) Describe class struggle and its implications.

In the Manifesto Marx says that history hitherto has been a history of class struggle. A class is a group of persons who stand in the same relation to property or to nonproperty, to the factors of production such as labour power and means of production. With the development of capitalism, the class struggle takes an acute form. Two basic classes oppose each other in the capitalist system: the owners of the means of production, or the capitalists, and the workers. When the workers have become aware of their loss, of their alienation, the inhuman situation in which they live and work, it will be possible for them to work for a radical transformation of the situation by a revolution. This revolution will be the prelude to the establishment of communism.

Check Your Progress IV

1) What is alienation?

Alienation is a feeling and a belief that one is an alien to the society in which one finds himself or herself. For, alienation was rooted in human labour and the material world. That is, it is not an individual problem or state of mind, but is an objective, observable feature of the manner in which human labour is organized. Marx developed his theory of alienation to reveal the human activity that lies behind the seemingly impersonal forces dominating society. Alienation meant loss of control, specifically the loss of control over worker's labour power.

2) Describe the different aspects of economic alienation

Marx considers human labour as one of the chief ways in which humans are distinguished from non-human animals. While labour is much more productive in capitalism than in earlier economic systems, capitalism thwarts, distorts, and limits human potential. There are four aspects to the alienated labour. The worker is alienated:

from products of one's own labour,

from the process of production,

from species and

from other persons.

The division of labour, wage labour and private property are expressions of alienation. In order to end alienation, it is necessary to abolish private property and wage labour. Marx believed that through a class struggle that would culminate in a revolution which leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, private property would be abolished and by implication, alienation.

3) What are the characteristics of communist society?

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, a communist society free of alienation. The dictatorship of the proletariat and the nascent socialist society will be characterized by factors such as,

the absence of private property

the absence of division of labour

the universalization of education

the planned economy and

the rational and just allocation of the resources of the society

As socialism develops and alienation disappears one could expect the “withering away of the state” and creation of a society where the norm is “from each according to his ability and to each according to his need.” The Communist society will be “An association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” *Manifesto*