



Karl Marx's Theory of Social Change: A Brief Exposition

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Abstract: Karl Marx (1818-1883) is widely recognized as one of the most influential social thinker of the 19th century. His theory of social change is known as 'Historical Materialism', which influenced contemporary sociology, political science, economics, and philosophy as well. The objective of the present paper is focus upon Marx's view of social change and finally look into its social implications. In this regard the paper wants to find out how far Marx was influenced by Hegel in formulating his theory of social change. In the fulfillment of this objective, first the paper would focus upon Hegel's general philosophical background and then Marx's theory of social change.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was one of the greatest and most influential German philosophers of the 19th century. That which is interesting to note is that apart from being a metaphysical thinker, Hegel was also a great social and political philosopher. In the history of philosophy, Hegel has been described as an idealist and monist, for, he regarded the Spirit or Idea (Geist), or God to be the only reality. It is significant to note that Hegel proposed a method or process by which the Spirit becomes self-conscious; it is known as the dialectical method. It is the method of progression through negation or conflict.

Marx was influenced by Hegel's Dialectical Method. But he rejected Hegel's Idealism and proposed his theory of Historical Materialism. He believed that the primary cause behind social change is class struggle which is caused by economic inequality between the classes. It is through class struggle that the history of human society has changed over the years. The ultimate aim of such class struggle is the establishment of socialism and finally communism.

The present paper would try to focus upon Marx's concept of class and class struggle and show how they influenced the later sociological, social and political thinkers.

Index Terms - Historical Materialism, Dialectical Method, Class, Class Struggle, Socialism, Communism

INTRODUCTION:

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is widely recognized as one of the most influential social thinker of the 19th century. His theory of social change is known as 'Historical Materialism', which influenced contemporary sociology, political science, economics, and philosophy as well. In the development of his theory, he was influenced by G.F.Hegel, especially by his dialectical method. The objective of the present paper is focus upon Marx's view of social change and finally look into its social implications. In this regard the paper wants to find out how far Marx was influenced by Hegel in formulating his theory of social change. In the fulfillment of this objective, first the paper would focus upon Hegel's general philosophical background and then Marx's theory of social change.

Hegel's Philosophy:

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was one of the greatest and most influential German philosophers of the 19th century. He was primarily interested in abstract metaphysical and epistemological concepts. In fact, he developed a rich metaphysical theory which influenced the later philosophers, as well as modern philosophy, political theory, history, theology and social science. That which is interesting to note is that apart from being a metaphysical thinker, Hegel was also a great social and political philosopher. On the one hand, as he was concerned with serious metaphysical concepts, on the other hand he has also discussed about our practical, familial, socio-political issues. Rather he tried to view the socio-political issues from deeper philosophical perspective. Though there are many philosophers who have reconciled their general philosophical theories with that of socio-political ideas, however, these two trends have become truly integrated with one another in the thoughts and writings of this great German philosopher. In Hegel's system of Objective Idealism, politics forms an integral part.

In the history of philosophy, Hegel has been described as an idealist and monist, for, he regarded the Spirit or Idea (Geist), or God to be the only reality. This Spirit, according to Hegel, is of the nature of pure consciousness. It is active and self-creating. In order to be self-conscious, the Spirit posits the objects which it knows. Thus knowledge and its objects are the two sides of a single experience which are separable in thought but not in reality.

It is significant to note that Hegel proposed a method or process by which the Spirit becomes self-conscious; it is known as the dialectical method. It is the method of progression through negation or conflict. It involves three ideas – thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. There is an apparent conflict between thesis and anti-thesis which gets resolved in synthesis. The German verb *aufheben* means both 'to cancel' and 'to preserve'. Hence the Hegelian process of *aufgehoben* implies both removal of error and preservation of truth in the stage of synthesis. Hence Hegel's dialectic means the method of development that comes through negation or opposition. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel gives a detailed analysis and description of the various stages of through which the Spirit progressively becomes aware of its own nature as Absolute Spirit.

Hegel's Absolute Spirit expresses itself in two major dimensions, the Subjective Spirit or the world of living beings and the Objective Spirit or the world of material objects. The Subjective Spirit implies how the individual mind develops from its basic roots in physical nature to a self-conscious rational agent capable of free will. It involves discussions regarding psychology, anthropology and allied subjects. In his treatise on Objective Spirit we find Hegel's analysis of the natural world. This natural world as an expression of the Spirit is the ethical world. The social and political ideas of Hegel centres round this objective spirit. The dialectical structure of the Objective Spirit has been elaborately explained in Hegel's significant work, *The Philosophy of Right*. Hegel explained that in a dialectical or triadic process the objective spirit expresses itself into various institutions of the society. For instance, the concept of *Sittlichkeit* or Social Morality expresses itself in three stages: Family, Civil Society and State.

Influence of Hegel on Karl Marx and Marx's Theory of Social Change:

Marx was influenced by Hegel's Dialectical Method. He admired Hegel's conception of history as a dynamic process driven by contradictions. But at the same time, he rejected Hegel's idealism and replaced it with a materialist understanding of history. According to Hegel, as it has been already been mentioned, the Idea or the Geist which is the absolute reality expresses itself in the material world in the various forms of social institutions through the dialectical method. And it is through a dialectical method that different changes take place in the society. The different aspects of the society – social, political, economic, ethical as well as religious are determined by conscious human thoughts and ideas which is the primary cause behind any form of social and historical changes. Such theory put forward by Hegel is known as Dialectic Idealism. Marx and his friend Engels did not accept this Hegelian idealistic interpretation of historical and social changes; rather he put forward a materialistic interpretation of history and his theory came to be known as Historical Materialism.

According to Karl Marx the environment in which an individual develops or spends his life constitutes his material existence and this material environment determines his life, ideas, politics, economics, religion, culture and civilization. In his theory of historical materialism Marx pointed out that it is the

external material life and circumstances that influence individual's mind and consciousness; it is not the individual's consciousness that determines the external social changes. Here it is important to note that by 'external material environment' Marx actually meant the production and distribution system of the society. In order to fulfill the basic needs of his life – food, clothing and shelter, man has to depend upon the economic structure of the society. It is this economic structure of the society that determines the social consciousness of the individual and becomes the primary cause of social change. This theory of Marx is known as economic determinism. According to Marx economic inequality has determined the nature of history of human society, social change, culture and civilization, art and aesthetics as well as socio-political philosophy. Every change in the society, social, political, economic, or ethical, is manipulated by the economic condition and the production system of the society as well as by class struggle caused by such socio-economic structure. Hence, for Marx, it is not the ideas, thoughts or ideals of men that bring changes in the society, rather human thoughts and ideas are influenced by the economic structure of the society and class struggle caused by such economic factors. Marx is of the view that it is centering round the economic differences between individuals in the society that there took place the origin of class, class-struggle followed by changes in the society. Hence, in the Communist Manifesto Marx along with his friend Engels stated that, "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle"¹.

Class and Class Struggle:

In this regard it is important to discuss Marx's concept of class and class struggle. Marx explained that how the concept of class originated and class struggle led to social changes in the history of mankind. According to him with the dissolution of the classless primitive society, it is through class struggle that slave society changed into feudal society and feudal society changed into capitalist society. If we look into the history of mankind, we would find that in the early primitive society, people lived a very simple life depending upon nature for their sustenance. During this time since there was abundance of natural resources, people had no private property and they lived forming one unified group. Hence there were no economic inequality between them and thereby no class distinction. Marx regarded such a society as primitive communism. Gradually with the rise in population, the needs and demands of the people also increased. Hence, people became divided into smaller groups and acquired lands as private properties, centering which they got involved in conflict with one another; the winners became masters, while the losers became slaves. This marked the onset of slave society. However, the slave society in the medieval age turned into feudal society where there emerged two classes – the landlords or zamindars and the landless farmers or serfs. Due to their unequal economic condition, there was a constant struggle between them. Gradually in the modern age as industrialization took place, there was a shift in people's needs and interests from agricultural production to industrial production. People invented advanced machineries, established factories and developed industrial townships. In this way the agrarian feudal society changed into industrial capitalist society where the landlords became the owners of the industries, while the farmers turned into the working class. The latter were being continuously oppressed by the former. To bring an end to such exploitation and oppression, the workers would revolt against the capitalists and this would again lead to the establishment of socialism. Hence, according to Karl Marx with change in the production system of the society, different classes have originated and class struggle between them has been the primary cause behind any form of social change. And it is important to note that Marx explained such social change and class struggle following Hegel's dialectical method. From slave society till the present capitalist society might be regarded as thesis. Due to its inherent character, such society attracts its opposite which may be regarded as anti-thesis; through the reconciliation of such thesis and anti-thesis there is origination of a new social system which is regarded as synthesis. Similarly if the working class is regarded as thesis, the capitalists who were opposed to the working class can be regarded as the anti-thesis; it is through conflict between them, that there would be synthesis i.e. the development of socialism or a classless, stateless society.

In his book Capital Vol II, Marx mentioned that the capitalist society consists of three classes: (i) the capitalist bourgeoisie who are the owners of raw materials and who earn without giving any labour of their own; (ii) petty bourgeoisie who in spite of being the owners of raw materials put labour on their own and (iii) the proletariat or the working class who in spite of giving labour for production are deprived from the profit of the production and earn very little for their sustenance. However, while

explaining his theory of class struggle, he primarily mentioned about the two classes, the bourgeoisie or the owner class and the proletariat or the working class. Marx explained that the bourgeoisie were the owners of raw materials but they did not have the ability to provide labour; the proletariat or the working class did not have raw materials but they had the ability to provide labour. As a result the former enjoyed all the profits of production while the latter were deprived from the legitimate fruits of their labour. This created a huge economic inequality between the two classes. In this regard Marx explained the theory of surplus value. Surplus value implies the extra profit that was enjoyed by the bourgeoisie. The capitalist class forced the labour class to work for more hours than their stipulated time. The extra money that was produced as a result of the extra labour of the workers is called the 'surplus value', the most of which was enjoyed by the capitalists depriving the working class. Thus, the working class could not even enjoy the fruits of their own labour. While the capitalists grew richer, the working class became poorer. According to Marx this inequality and exploitation would ultimately led the working class to revolt against the capitalist section of the society. The working class can only free itself by abolishing altogether all class rule, all servitude and all exploitation.

Socialism and Communism:

The aim of such class struggle, for Marx, was the establishment of socialism i.e. a classless, stateless society. Socialism is that philosophical theory regarding society which for the sake of people's interest regards the land, natural resources, production system, etc as belonging to and being controlled and determined by the state, instead of any individual or group of individuals. However, socialism would finally result into communism, according to Marx. The working class after being united would revolt against the capitalists or the bourgeois. As a result of such revolt, the working class after abolishing the capitalists would take possession of the production –distribution system of the society. Their aim would be to establish a classless society in which every member will be enabled to participate not only in production but also in the distribution and administration of social wealth. However, inequality would still be there between the ruler and the ruled and hence the society would not be totally free from exploitation. For, Marx was of the view that the state is a machinery of exploitation and as long as state would be there exploitation would persist. But as a result of living in such a classless socialist society, gradually there would be change and inner purification within every individual being; people would move towards a society which would be entirely free from exploitation and there would be no need for the state machinery any longer. Hence a classless and stateless society would be established. Marx regarded such a society as a communist society where people would no longer be controlled by external material environment but by their inner conscience, where everyone would employ labour according to their ability and would enjoy social wealth according to their needs.

Conclusion:

Thus, in his theory of social change Marx has put forward a structure of an ideal society where there would be no class distinction and social wealth would be distributed according to the individual's labour as well as the needs of the people. However, his theory has been criticized from certain perspectives. For instance, as the primary cause of social change, Marx has emphasized upon economic factors and the mode of production. As against this critics argue that social change is also influenced by other non-economic factors like religion, culture, politics, education, law and technology. Modern societies often experience change due to scientific discoveries, technological innovations as well as social movements other than economic factors. However, Marx has overemphasized upon economic factors and overlooked the other causes behind social changes.

Marx emphasized upon revolution as the primary means to bring change in the capitalist society. But the fact is many developed countries brought change and reforms in their society through democratic institutions, elections and trade unions rather than violent revolutions.

Marx's prediction that capitalism would be abolished by the revolution of the proletariat has not yet proved to be real. Critics argue that he has put forward the picture of an ideal society which is quite difficult to be realized in practice.

Moreover Marx was of the view that when people would continue to live in a classless society, gradually there would be change within their inner beings which would inspire them to move towards a stateless society or a communist society. Thus view of Marx is undoubtedly based on imagination and of course probable.

Despite such criticisms it is undeniable that Marx's analysis of the causes of social change, his concepts of socialism, class inequality and exploitation, are significant and have influenced the later social and political thinkers, modern sociology as well as socio-political philosophy in various ways. Among those thinkers who were influenced by Karl Marx mention maybe made of Lenin, Gramsci, Lukacs, Althusser and Mao who developed different forms of Marxism. Again thinkers like Weber and Durkheim critically analyzed Marx's theory and put forward their own interpretations. In sociology Marx established the foundations of conflict theory, class analysis and of course historical materialism. His significant contribution consists in his admission of socialism as an alternative social order. He transformed socialism from a moral ideal into a scientific theory based on historical and economic analysis. Thus the socio-political thoughts of Karl Marx inspired many thinkers who either accepted, or extended or critically revised his ideas and applied them to develop their own theories.

REFERENCES

[1] Engels, Fridrich, Marx, Karl, *The Communist manifesto*, Selected works, Vol 1, p108.

