
Karl Marx's Theory of Historical Development of Humanity- an Analytical Review

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Abstract

The Marxist theory of historical materialism sees human society as fundamentally determined at any given time by the material conditions, in other words, the relationships which people have with each other in order to fulfill basic needs such as feeding, clothing, and housing themselves and their families. Overall, Marx and Engels claimed to have identified six successive stages of the development of these material conditions in Western Europe. In contrast to many of his followers, Marx made no claim to have produced a master key to history, but rather considered his work a concrete study of the actual conditions that pertained in Europe and India as well. As he put it, historical materialism is not "an historico-philosophic theory of the marche generale imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself."

The Marxist historical approach is truly economic which derive all the aspects along with. The economy dealt by Marx is the epicenter of all the cyclones in history. In this paper my prime focus is to define and elaborate the Marxist historical approaches in term of new emerging historiographical revolutions with different dialectics, for which Karl Marx is known so far.

Many primary and secondary sources will be used in this research. The hypothesis would take shape through descriptive method which comprises historical analysis of the Marxist literatures of 19th Century. Keeping in the view the historiographical theme of the International Seminar, the paper's central theme would follow historiographical approaches primarily. The research would be descriptive in nature and the used sources would be verified by the paradigm of ex-post facto methods of research methodology.

Main Words- *Karl Marx, Communism, Materialism, Capitalism*

Introduction

Karl Marx and Fredrik Angels judge the human historical development by the materialism. They claimed the entire historical journey of Europe in six successive stages.¹ The central theme of the ideology of Marx is private property. Private property is the profit of owner.² This private property is outcome of lower class exploitation of the society by industrial class of bourgeoisies which further resulted in revolution. Karl Marx divides entire historical processes in six phases which he termed as epochs. These are primitive communism, Slave

¹ Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, Published in 1932, URL:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>

² Gewirth, Alan (1998). *The Community of Rights* (2 ed.). University of Chicago Press. p. 168.

Society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism. Further I would describe these in detail as a Marxist view of History and historiography.

Primitive Communism as the first stage of historical development

The communism discourses are divided into different stages and the very first stage is called primitive communism which can be characterized by shared property, hunting-gathering and proto democracy. Shared property is the way of living of tribal society in which the shared property rights exists from one generation to another and no concept of the private property exists. Physically it may be considered as primitive living style but the spiritual and social values imbibed in this culture is worth appreciating. Marx depicts it as very primal social values which has become lacking with the course of time and by development of materialism. Absence of individual ownership invigorates further the sharing tendency, which strengthen indelible social values. Hunting-gathering was the result of daily struggle of human to accumulate their livelihood, which have yet to develop large-scale agriculture. Proto-democracy is the absence of democracy in primitive society, which tends to led by strong persons like warriors, diplomats and power holders of the tribal society.

The dawn of humanity creates spontaneous circumstances of the development of primitive communism. The discovery of basic attributes of life like fire, wheel, crop showing, harvesting and communal living was not human planned ways. These took shape by themselves. The social setups were ultra-convenient and free from material competitions due to enormous availability of resources of essential living. The members of society were few, in hundreds and size of families and societies were dependent of environment. The nature of human living was not much different than that of animal living in that it has not yet found ways to bend nature to its will. The consciousness of private ownership of property ended this stage which further developed large scale of agriculture. Productive property such as slaves and cattle also got possessions which further intensified the private ownership of the man.

Slave society as the development of second historical stage

The main characteristic of the second stage is the development of the private properties awareness among the people of primitive society. This way the second stage is also called the slave society. This was the beginning of the 'class society' as well as class struggle also. The very reason of this development was 'private ownership'. The slave society's crux was the idea of class. There is always a slave-owning ruling class and the slaves themselves. The state was much needed at this stage to regulate and control over slaves. Slave-ownership holding authority might be state only. The statesmanship was the significant development of this stage. People developed the cultivation, plantations, harvesting, rearing skills on a large enough scale to feed and support large populations.

With the development and emergence of state and law, need of democracy also raised value of populations living standards. With the private ownership of the property democracy arises first with the development of the republican city-state, followed by the totalitarian empire. Land ownership also got developed and Citizens now own more than personal property. Agricultural development raises the demand and importance of

land ownership rapidly in this stage. The resources to be owned were two now- slave and land. These were important production wealth. The strong people acquired supremacy over large land property and took under large number of slaves whereas at the same time as the vast majority of people have very little or nil. The property less included the slave class, slaves who work for no money and in most belongings women, who were also cast out during this period. From a Marxist viewpoint, slave society collapsed when it shattered itself. The need to keep victorious more slaves created massive problems, such as maintaining the vast empire that resulted. It is ultimately the aristocracy born in this epoch that demolishes it and forces society to step onto the next stage.

Feudalism as the next socio-historical stage

With the collapse of the slave society feudalism appeared more obviously in European middle age. This was the transition of the socio-historical setup from slavery to feudalism. Serfdom is indispensable attribute of feudalism with unpaid labor. The state is ruled by sovereigns who inherit their positions, or at times marry or conquer their ways into leadership. This is a time of largely religious rule - when there is only one religion in the land and its organizations affect all parts of routine life. Castes can sometimes form and one's class is determined at birth with no form of advancement. This was the case with India. Nations are formed from the miscellanies of the fallen empires - sometimes to rebuild themselves into empires once more. Feudalism comprises many classes like ruler, land lords, war lords, and serfs, slaves etc. the trading class established new socio-economical values and practices as well. At the same time that societies must create all these new classes, trade with other nation-states increases rapidly. The trading class was emerging rapidly in this stage and trade and commerce was new sustenance. This was the emergence of capitalism actually. Initially capitalists and peers were in mutual conflicts. The new social change was not easily adoptable by feudal lords. The capitalist class was not directly in negotiation of power and money with ruling class.

Further the nature of the feudal society created many hurdles in the way of development of capitalism as this proto-capitalist and capitalist classes are driven by the profit motive but are prevented from developing further profits by the nature of feudal society, in which, for instance, the serfs are tied to the land and cannot become industrial workers and wage-earners.³

Exploration of Capitalism as fourth stage in human development

Marx pays special attention to this stage in human development, as it was the one he lived on. The bulk of his work is devoted to exploring the mechanisms of capitalism, which in western society typically arose "red in tooth and claw" from feudal society in a revolutionary movement.

Capitalism may be considered the Fourth Stage in the sequence. It appears after the bourgeois revolution when the capitalists overthrow the feudal system. In capitalism, the entire economy is directed by market forces. Supporters of laissez-faire economics argue that

³ Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx, *Early writings*, Penguin, 1975, p. 425-6

there should be little or no intervention from the government on the economy under capitalism. Marxists, however, such as Lenin in his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), argue that the capitalist government acts as a powerful instrument for the continuance of capitalism and of the capitalist nation-state, particularly in the conquest of markets abroad, and also in the direct repression of reactionary/neo feudal movements and of proto-socialist or socialist movements.

The means of production are no longer in the hands of the monarchy rather they are controlled by the conformist and the bourgeois classes. The bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie control the means of production through commercial enterprises (such as corporations) which aim to maximize profit.

The bourgeoisie eventually, after years of struggle and opposition, accepted a form of democratic governance, descendent of the elective monarchy system through elected representatives. Bourgeois democracy at its beginning had minimum wealth requirements and sometimes led to different weight in voting, depending on the wealth/status of the voter. Historically it has also excluded sections of the population such as women, slaves, ex-slaves, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. Eventually the bourgeoisie accepted to extend the right to vote gradually to a large part of the population, although this did not necessarily lead to universal suffrage. A democratically elected government today usually only reaches power with heavy monetary support from the bourgeoisie, and even if it doesn't act directly on behalf of them, is forced to do so by the structure itself.

In capitalism, the proletariat sells its labor to survive, and is paid for its productivity. The bourgeoisie and its supportive classes propagate the illusion that market forces mean wages converge to an equilibrium at which workers are paid for precisely the value of their services. In reality workers are paid less than the value of their productivity, the difference forming profit for the employer with the medium being manipulable by the elites. In this sense paid employment is exploitation and while working in the production line the workers become alienated from the product of their work. Insofar as the profit-motive drives the economy, it is impossible for all workers to be paid for the full value of their labour, with the exception of a small "labour aristocracy", specialized workers which are paid from the surplus value other workers produce, in exchange for their knowledge and loyalty.

Capitalist states actively seek to conquer, dominate or indirectly control other regions or states, encouraged and aided by the bourgeoisie, in order to gain access to important raw materials, but most importantly to provide captive markets for finished products. This is done directly through war, through the threat of war, through the election of a politician aligned with that nation or through the export of capital and eventual control of the victimized state economy. The imperialist state's control over other regions or states can play an essential part in the development of the imperialist state's economy and capitalism, to the extent the state has money spat directs warfare and other foreign intervention.

Market forces develop monopolies from the most successful or dishonest commercial objects, as the market rewards those who bang their opponents through capital war, and drives down the profit of those in competition, though it can happen that opponents which

can't defeat each other or don't want to, seek agreements to reduce competition and increase profits.

In capitalism, the profit-motive rules and people become freed from serfdom in order to work for the capitalists in exchange for wages. The capitalist classes are free to spread their *laissez-faire* practices around the world. In the capitalist-controlled parliament, laws are made to protect wealth.

But according to Marx, capitalism, like slave society and feudalism, also has critical failings internal contradictions which will lead to its downfall. Capital accumulation over time leads to increased inequality. Additionally, since capital demands a return, it also leads to increased returns coming from those without capital - the working class. Over time the number of work hours which the working class labors "for itself" decreases in order to provide returns for an ever-increasing pile of capital controlled by the capitalist class. Following the Marxist labor theory of value, this can be seen in how increasing labor productivity in the past 30 years in the United States has been accompanied by stagnant wage growth. In 2016 average U.S. labor productivity (attributing all productivity to labor, in accordance with the labor theory of value) was \$70.00 an hour [citation needed] while the average minimum wage was around \$10.00 an hour [citation needed], meaning that capital (and other costs) absorbed 6/7ths of the value produced by the average minimum-wage laborer. Marx hypothesized that this asymmetry generates social instability.

The working class, to which the capitalist class gave birth in order to produce commodities and profits, is the "grave digger" of capitalism. The worker is not paid the full value of what he or she produces. The rest is surplus value – the capitalist's profit, which Marx calls the "unpaid labour of the working class". Capitalists are forced by technological advances and partially by competition to drive down the wages of the working class in order to increase their own profits, and this creates a more direct conflict between these classes, and gives rise to the development of class consciousness in the working class. The working class, through trade-union and other struggles, becomes conscious of itself as an exploited class.

In Marx's view, the struggles of the working class against the attacks of the capitalist class lead the working class to establish its own collective control over production – the basis of socialist society. Marx believed that capitalism always leads to monopolies and brings the people to poverty; yet the fewer the restrictions on the free market, (e.g. from the state and trade unions) the sooner it finds itself in crisis.

Socialism as the fifth stage of historical evolution

After the working class gains class consciousness and successfully mounts a revolution against the capitalists, socialism, which may be considered the Fifth Stage, will be attained.

Lenin divided communism, the period following the overthrow of capitalism, into two stages: first socialism, and then later, once the last vestiges of the old capitalist ways have withered away, stateless communism or pure communism.⁴ Lenin based his 1917 work, *The State and Revolution*, on a thorough study of the writings of Marx and Engels. Marx uses the

⁴ The State and Revolution, URL <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

terms the "first phase" of communism and the "higher phase" of communism, but Lenin points to later remarks of Engels which suggest that what people commonly think of as socialism equates to Marx's "first phase" of communism.

Socialism may be categorized by the means of production are taken from the hands of a few capitalists and put in the hands of the workers. This translates into the democratic communes controlling the means of production. Marx, basing himself on a thorough study of Paris Commune, believed that the workers would govern themselves through system of communes. He called this the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, overthrowing the dictatorship (governance) of the bourgeoisie, would democratically plan production and the resources of the planet. Marx explained that, since socialism emerges from capitalism, it would be "stamped with its birthmarks". Economically this translates into the individual worker being awarded according to the amount of labor he contributes to society. Each worker would be given an amount of standardised credit verifying his contribution which he could then exchange for goods produced by other workers.

Marx explains that socialist society, having risen from a class-conscious movement of the vast majority, makes such a society one of the vast majority governing their own lives:

Now the productive forces are truly free to develop, but in a democratically planned way, without the vast waste of anarchic capitalist society, its wars and its destruction of the planet. One of the primary tasks of the workers in the socialist society, after placing the means of production into collective ownership, is to destroy the "old state machinery". Hence the bourgeoisie's parliamentary democracy ceases to exist, and fiat and credit money are abolished. In Marx's view, instead of a dictatorship of capital, in which rulers are elected only once every few years at best, the state is ruled through the dictatorship of the proletariat with the democratically elected workers' commune to replace the parliament:

The commune, in Marx and Engels' view, modeled after the Paris Commune, has a completely different political character from the parliament. Marx explains that it holds legislative-executive power and is subservient only to the workers themselves.

Marx explained that, since socialism, the first stage of communism, would be "in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges", each worker would naturally expect to be awarded according to the amount of labor he contributes, despite the fact that each worker's ability and family circumstances would differ, so that the results would still be unequal at this stage, although fully supported by social provision.

Fiat money and credit whose values were determined by anarchic market forces are abolished. Instead, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx speculated schematically that from the "total social product" there would be deductions for the requirements of production and "the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc", which latter deduction "grows in proportion as the new society develops", and, of course, deductions "for those unable to work, etc". After these deductions the workers could divide up the wealth produced by their labor and everyone could be simply given a "certificate from society", which could then be exchanged for products. This schematically introduces a means of

exchange ("the same principle" - i.e., money) in socialist society but with the speculative element removed.

In this way, each worker is paid according to the amount of labor contributed to society, in other words according to the agreed difficulty, length of time, and intensity of his labor. All goods (such as housing, for instance) are priced in a greater degree according to the amount of labor required to produce them, which the individual worker can buy with his labor voucher.

Only if this new socialist society manages to end the destructiveness of capitalism and leads to a higher quality of life for all will socialist society be successful. As socialism raises everyone's quality of life above the precarious existence they knew hitherto, providing decent health-care, housing, child-care, and other social provision for all without exception, the new socialist society begins to break down the old inevitably pecuniary habits, the need for a state apparatus will wither away, and the communist organization of society will begin to emerge. Socialism, in the view of Marxists, will succeed in raising the quality of life for all by ending the destructive contradictions which arise in capitalism through conflicts between competing capitalists and competing capitalist nations, and ending the need for imperialist conquest for the possession of commodities and markets.

Conclusion

Sometime after socialism is established society leaps forward, and everyone has plenty of personal possessions, but no one can exploit another person for private gain through the ownership of vast monopolies, and so forth. Classes are thus abolished, and class society ended. Communism will have spread across the world and will operate worldwide. Eventually the state will "wither away" and become obsolete, as people administer their own lives without the need for governments or laws. Thus, stateless communism or pure communism, which may be considered the Sixth Stage, is established, which has the following features:

1. **Statelessness:** *there are no governments, laws, or nations anymore.*
2. **Classlessness:** *all social classes disappear; everyone works for everyone else.*
3. **Propertylessness:** *there is no money or private property; all goods are free to be consumed by anyone who needs them.*

Few applications of historical materialism, the philosophical system used by Marxism to explain the past progressions of human society and predict the nature of communism, account for a stage beyond communism, but Marx suggests that what has ended is only the "prehistory" of human society; now, for the first time, humankind will no longer be at the mercy of productive forces (e.g. the free market) which act independently of their control. Instead human beings can plan for the needs of society, inclusively, democratically, by the vast majority, who now own and control the means of production collectively. By implication, only then will the real history of human society begin



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