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KARL MARX'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Karl Marx, the revolutionist philosopher, interpreted history as a world view which is the dimension of social development. His dialectic effort and materialistic conception are intended to preserve the rights of social being particularly of the working people who are repeatedly being oppressed. Class struggle is the ultimate solution of distinctions among classes through which there will be no class and the existing working class will revolt against capitalist economy and, as a result, they will control means of production which will create the situation of the dictatorship of the working people. These class distinctions will be removed through the establishment of scientific communism referred by Marx. This article shows how Marx's life and thought changed the course of history and how he influenced society to make a

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better place for living. I intend to show the reasons behind the worldwide acceptance of Marxism theoretically. My aim is to show how his theories and ideas are significant in socio-political aspects of philosophy.

Keywords: class struggle, communism, dialectic, Marxism, means of production, philosophy.

Introduction

In the history of philosophy, from Thales to the present day, Karl Marx (1818-1883) is one of the most important and influential philosophers. His ideas on communism and capitalism have enormous impact on the development of economic and political systems throughout the world. He can be considered to be a historian, political scientist, revolutionist, or one of the greatest sociologists. But these adjectives are superseded by the philosophical Marx *i.e.*, the philosopher of revolution. Philosophy is a rational and critical thinking about human life and the world. This traditional definition of philosophy infers that it is basically concerned with formulating theories and, at the same time, a philosopher's job is to construct abstract thoughts. Marx rejected this traditional epistemology and roughly criticized the traditional philosophers who were satisfied only by illustrating a theoretical framework. Philosophers are just not to interpret things of the world they live in. They should have the responsibility to show how the theories can be used of its practical value for the sake of human society. In other words, they should explain the fundamental concepts and apply them to practical life. Marx considered philosophy as both theory and practice. Without practical importance, it will be of no use for man's real life. In his eleventh thesis of 'Theses on Feuerbach' he says, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in

various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” (Marx, 1968: 30) He wanted philosophers to come out of mere abstraction. Marx tried to define philosophy, breaking the tradition, in an alternative way, the way of explaining the problems of our life and the world. (Rashid, 2017, 15)

Marxism includes three aspects and components; Dialectic Materialism (Philosophy), Theory of Surplus Value (Economics), Theory of Class Struggle (Politics). Marx's greatest achievement was historical materialism and greatest endeavor was dialectics, *i.e.*, the doctrine of development. Karl Marx himself started his philosophical journey influenced by Hegel directly. He was a member of the Hegelian Young. Marx conceptually rejected Hegel's idealistic view but accepted his dialectic method. His doctrine of class struggle is enacted to give the real solution to the problem of exploitation and oppression of capitalist society. Early socialism only criticized the system but could not indicate that social force was the real solution to the existing problem. Marx showed the way out of oppression and exploitation. He emphasized the necessity of restructuring of society which includes the abolition of private property and the establishment of a socialist economic system. He contributed to the social and political philosophy by formulating influential philosophical theories about society and politics. Marx's mission was to liberate the working people from the subjugation of the capitalist bourgeoisie by upholding social reality. Marx's vision for a classless society was based on the hypothesis that capitalism is inherently unjust and the way working people are being exploited by the bourgeoisie is the flaw of the capitalist economic system.

Contribution to Social and Political Philosophy

As we know, political philosophy is a subfield of philosophy. It studies basic issues pertaining to the state, politics, government, liberty, justice etc. It looks for answers to fundamental questions about the nature of political institutions and justifications for political structures. Marx's political philosophy basically aims at human liberation. His critique of capitalism and the idea of class struggle is the cornerstone of the history of political philosophy. Social philosophy being another subfield of philosophy, on the other hand, studies issues pertaining to society and its institutions with an emphasis on the characteristics and functions of social structures. It aims to comprehend and critically assess these foundations. Karl Marx made revolutionary contributions to social philosophy by providing insights into the structures of society. His historical materialism is one of the most important contributions which examines that the superstructure is determined by the economic basis. According to his view, class conflicts arise as various groups compete for control over the means of production which leads to societal changes.

Historical Materialism

Karl Marx's greatest discovery was his materialist interpretation of history. Consistent solution of fundamental questions about being and consciousness are critically developed by him. As a dialectic basis of philosophy, his theory is concerned about methodological development of the material world. He is a materialist because he sees the world as it is and not otherwise and epistemologically he considers matter as fundamental. His dialectical materialism is the perfect, classless social and material condition of society that is called communism. (Baggini, 2010,

51-52). What we call Marxism today is basically his philosophy of dialectical materialism. Marx's materialistic philosophy is scientific from the methodological point of view and unlike other particular sciences; it examines material or social phenomena on the basis of his three general laws. These laws are mentioned below:

- a) The law of the unity and struggle of opposites.
- b) The law of the transformation of quantitative into qualitative change.
- c) The law of negation of negation.

Marx subsequently developed an influential theory of history, known as historical materialism, centered around the idea that human history started with material productions and developed on the objective basis of society (mode of production). He increasingly became preoccupied with an attempt to understand the contemporary capitalist mode of production, as driven by a remorseless pursuit of profit, whose origins are found in the extraction of surplus value from the surplus labour of the workers.

Historical materialism is a theory of development of human history and society through dialectic method which posits that every change is the result of the contradiction between two opposing forces. It is the philosophy of history which provides a materialistic interpretation of history. Here history is the mode of development. It is considered as a methodological approach to the study of society. It was first enunciated by Karl Marx. Although he never stated the term as 'historical materialism', he mentioned it in his *The German Ideology* as 'the materialistic

conception of history'. (Marx, 1845) Although Engels described his own ideas and Marx's thought as 'materialist dialectics' in 1883 in his *Dialectics of Nature*, historical materialism was first used by Joseph Dietzgen in 1887 and then in 1891 G. V. Plekhanov, the founding father of Russian Marxism, used the expression 'historical materialism.' (Baggini, 2010, 51) However, Marx rejected the idea of the absolute that Hegel believed. He illustrated it from the materialistic point of view opposing idealistic conception. According to him, society cannot be determined by divine will as observed by the idealists. The main postulate of this theory is: "social being determines social consciousness." (Marx and Engels, 1976, 41-43) From this postulate we come to know that "life involves before everything else eating, drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life." (Marx and Engels, 1976, 47)

According to this theory, history of humankind starts with material production- the objective foundation of history. Men had to go to work to meet the necessity of basic needs, especially to get food. This material production is inevitable from the material point of view which is basically the foundation of the material history. And from this production, there arises wealth and, therefore, social institutions, states, religions, superstructures etc. are originated. In other words, the foundation of the human society is economy and everything is determined by economic reality. From the above discussion it becomes clear that "there are three guiding principles of Marx's historical materialism: 1) social development is regulated by objective laws (like science), 2) views and institutions, political, cultural and ideological

developments arise on the basis of the development of the material life of society and 3) the ideas and institutions which arise on the basis of conditions of material life play an active role in the development of the material life.” (Rashid, 2017, 16-17)

Marx formulated the most general laws of social development which deals with important general problems of social life. But all the laws of historical materialism do not operate social development. “Only a totality of the laws and categories of historical materialism furnishes a single and harmonious picture of social development.” (Afanasyev, 1968, 181) He also formulated a general law of truth and showed that there is no such truth as absolute. Truth cannot be abstract; it lies in material reality. From this material reality he formulated the general postulate of the development of society. This material foundation determines the development of human society. Marx actually didn't theorize his philosophy as well-organized but his writings are filled with vast philosophical insights. His philosophy is generally called dialectical materialism. He rejected Hegel's idealistic view but accepted his dialectic method (thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis) and also rejected Feuerbach's mechanistic view but accepted his materialism. Then he formulated his philosophy as dialectical materialism with an explanation of history. That's why his materialistic philosophy is generally called historical materialism. He later applied his materialistic view to society and analyzed the objective basis of society.

The Hope of a Classless Society

Human society is divided into classes. Class has been being existed, though not in the very primitive age, from the very

beginning of human civilization. Generally class is a group of people, a collective sum of people engaged by their interests. Lenin maintains in his *A Great Beginning*,

are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions and mode of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose. (Afanasyev, 1968, 237)

It is determined by economic power. There is antagonism between two classes *i.e.*, antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The working people struggle against the bourgeoisie that eventually flourishes revolution.

The history of the world is the history of class struggle between two opposite classes – the oppressors and oppressed. In the words of *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” (Marx and Engels, 1968, 35) This may be considered as one of the most significant statements through which Marx and Engels indicated class system as much primitive as human society and formulated the philosophy of class, more specifically the philosophy of the working class as a materialistic world view. Since philosophy and society are connected, the former cannot be alienated from the latter and *vice versa*. So, class conflict, the driving force of society and its development, appears to be the prime concern for Marx and he described the history of class conflict (struggle) and therefore constituted the law of social development using the dialectic method.

Marx discussed so many classes in his journalistic writings but, on the contrary, he reduces all of them into two fundamental classes- bourgeoisie (the capitalists) and proletariat (the workers) in the capitalist mode of production. Here, one may argue, the middle-class is missing. But, if we notice carefully, some of the members of the class will be able to be raised into the dominant class and most of them will be disappeared and turned into the oppressed class. So basically, there are two contradictory classes. The proletariats are not the owner of the means of production. Therefore, they have to give away their ability to work *i.e.*, their labor power. On the other hand, there is a class of people who are the owner of the means of production, who are the capitalists of industries and dominate the societies. They do not have to sell their labor power as they can hire it from the property-less people. Here the former class receives wages and is being exploited selling their labor with insufficient remuneration and the latter class gets the surplus value which they get from the workers.

Critics may argue that the proletariats are not being exploited as they are working for the wages and they have the opportunity to negotiate. They are not slaves, as compared to ancient slavery system, in the capitalist economic system. They can still find a better job if they are not satisfied with the existing one. Marx, to respond to these critics, would describe the above argument as a lie. If we notice, it is transparent that practically the proletariats in this system have less freedom than the ancient slaves. There is never enough work. And with the development of science and technology, their opportunity is being vulnerable. Even there are a large number of hungry people who can do any job to have food with lower wages and extended working

hours. They, the unemployed, can be called as the reserve army of workers. So basically, the workers have no bargaining power and are exploited. They have no alternative but to give away this surplus value with practically nothing in return. Therefore, the proletariats sell their labor from which the bourgeoisie own means of production. Again the bourgeoisie offer low wages in exchange for which they get labor from the proletariat and dominate the capital. This is the cycle of exploitation.

Modern proletariats are called by Marx as the revolutionary class. He prescribed social revolution for the emancipation of the working class to establish a classless society. But “the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself.” (Marx and Engels, 1968) The proletariats have to understand that their emancipation lies in socialism, that this revolution is for a better order of society, that “the class struggle of the organized proletariat that will deliver humanity from the evils which now oppress it” (Marx and Engels, 1968) and that they are capable of waging the struggle through which the society will be free from exploitation and there will be no division of class after the establishment of socialism. They must know that they are the social force. Then the domination and exploitation of the bourgeoisie will be replaced. Marx and Engels reminded, “The more proletarians there are, the greater is their strength as a revolutionary class, and the nearer and more possible does socialism become.” (Marx and Engels, 1968)

Every class struggle is a political struggle which leads to revolutionary movements. Revolution is the only effecting way through which capitalism can be replaced by communism

and the emancipation of the proletariats will follow. But revolution is a gradual process of social transformation. It is unwise to try to stop class struggle. Let the struggle reach at its highest peak; it will help transform itself into the end of class struggle by establishing a classless society. Marx believed that the key to revolutionary change was the development of class consciousness among the working class. He argued that workers needed to recognize their common interests and unite to overthrow the capitalist system. It is necessary for their emancipation. And freedom is "acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion." (Freire, 1993, 47) Marx saw the role of the intellectual as that of a 'revolutionary educator', who can help to raise the political consciousness of the working class. He believed that after the overthrow of the capitalist system, a transitional period of dictatorship of the proletariat would be necessary to establish socialism. During this period, the working class would hold political power and reorganize society along socialist lines. Marx saw this as a necessary step in the ultimate goal of establishing a classless society.

The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a historico-philosophical term. (Afanasyev, 1968, 287) It is the essence of Marxist philosophy. It is the rule of the exploited. This dictatorship arises through revolution of the working people altogether. The working people construct a new state by overthrowing capitalism. This new type of state is built based on socialism. Lenin describes,

Only a definite class, namely, the urban workers and the factory, industrial workers in general, is able to lead the whole mass of the working and exploited people in the struggle for the overthrow of the yoke of capital, in the process of this overthrow, in the struggle to maintain and consolidate the victory, in the work of creating the new, socialist system, in the whole struggle for the complete abolition of classes.”
(Lenin, 1970, 247)

Communism and Human Freedom

What kind of political system constitutes a better society? In which system people may get benefitted most, capitalism (private ownership of the means of production) or communism (social system)? Why should a government form, to rule or to serve? These questions are essential to ask ourselves for better understanding of a better social system. The job of a government is definitely to serve the best interest of the common people, and not otherwise. But in the capitalist form of government, if we look thoroughly, people do not get what they deserve. They are getting eye-washed that their government is working for them, developing infrastructure, increasing their way of livelihoods. What actually they are doing is making money for them and humiliating human rights of the common people which they should be accountable for. If we do not observe it closely, we cannot understand how they are just faking it, how we are being deprived of our rights. They want us to believe in what they are doing. After supervising this capitalist cycle of exploitation, Marx understood the faked system and advocated for communism as the way out.

Marx and Engels started writing their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by this statement "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism." (Marx and Engels, 1968, 35) It illustrates the dominance of the theory of communism of that time. Marxist communism refers to a classless or stateless social organization. It is based upon the common ownership of the means of production by rejecting private ownership. The ultimate goal of this political theory is to establish a communist society where there will be a socio-economic order structured upon the common ownership of productions and where social classes will disappear and the state will be with or away. This political system is a practical necessity as thought by Karl Marx. He considered communism as the solution to the riddle of history. According to the Communist Party, "Communism is a classless social system with one form of public ownership of the means of production and full social equality of all members of society; under it, the all-round development of people will be accompanied by the growth of the productive forces through continuous progress in science and technology; all the springs of co-operative wealth will flow more abundantly, and the great principle 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' will be implanted. Communism is a highly organized society of free, socially conscious working people in which public self-government will be established, a society in which labour for the good of society will become life's prime want of everyone, a necessity recognized by one and all, and the ability of each person will be employed to the greatest benefit of the people." (Afanasyev, 1968, 224-25)

Marx's communism is directly established on the basis of the concept of the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. His vision was to harmonize the contradiction

between private interest and public interest of the community. He thought that the establishment of common ownership in society would be the logical and, in a sense, ethical solution to this conflict. According to utilitarian ethics, something can be good only if that could serve good for the greatest number of people. But Marx went beyond this concept. He did not abandon any part of the community. He believed that every individual should have the right to get equal concern. He accepted morality which could bring good for all and rejected the morality which serves a particular class of a community. Morality, however, was not a major concern for Marx because he believed that under the rule of communism there would be no class and common good would follow from the abolition of private property. If private ownership of the means of production exists, there arises a vice like greed and egoism in human nature which may violate the main objectives of communism. Social means of production rather than private means of production can ascertain common good of the society and distribute ethically. Marx's communist distribution principle entails cooperation with one another and ensures common interest. It can be understood by a single expression used in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (Marx, 1968, 325). That is how we can sum up communism by the concept of 'the abolition of private property'. Private ownership of property indicates class property. Here 'private property' does not refer only to individually owned property but to a class other than working class who own the means of production. As opposed to the capitalist mode of production, communism is the alternative to capitalism.

Marx's vision was to formulate a movement which could bring out a post-capitalist society free from any kind of exploitation. He also tried "to remove the earlier Utopian fantasies and eccentricities" and "to present the socialist ideal not as a mere pleasing dream but as a historically realizable goal." (Howe, 1972, 5) He distinguished between two phases of communism: the first as it emerges from the womb of the old society, the second as it stands on its own foundations. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program* he says,

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.*" (Marx and Engels, 1968, 331)

Remembering a slogan of the Communist Party may enrich our understanding of the aim of communism. The slogan is *everything for the sake of man, for the benefit of man.* It indicates that the conception of communism arises from Marx's conception of social being and the aim of his communism is basically man. Human and their society was the major concern for Marx. So, he wanted to formulate a form of production and an organization of society in which man can overcome alienation from his product, fellow man, and nature. According to Marx, man has created a culture in the course of history where he will be free from all chains not only of economic poverty, but also of spiritual poverty created by alienation. He played his role by raising revolutionary consciousness in practice among the workers.

Human freedom was also the central concern for Marx. His idea of freedom helps us to understand our nature. Communism

provides genuine freedom because “as society advances to communism, man’s freedom becomes wider and diverse.” (Afanasyev, 1968, 183) Marx considered human freedom as a result of objective necessity and historical development. In a sense, human freedom is the result of communism. It signifies that communist revolutionary movement rejects class distinctions and private ownership of property and man, therefore, can achieve freedom.

Marx maintains, cannot consist of anything else but of the fact that socialized man, the associated producers, regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power; they accomplish their task with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most adequate to their human nature and most worthy of it. But it always remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human power, which is its own end, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can flourish only upon that realm of necessity as its basis.” (Marx, 1909, 954)

Hence, we can conclude, comparing above-mentioned discussion, communism referred by Marx is far better than any other existing political system for people of all sectors.

Marxism: Political or Religious?

Marxists are divided with their arguments whether Marxism is philosophical theory or not. Some consider it as philosophical, some as economic and others argue that it is nothing more than political action. There is a huge tendency to show it as a philosophical analysis. This tendency is mostly carried by ‘the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*, the exponents

of Soviet Diamat and Louis Althusser' (Ling, 1980, 152) Robin Blackburn, on the other hand, shows that the originality of Marxism lies in political questions, not in economics or philosophy. Again, some Marxists, even some non-Marxists also, consider Marxism as a religious trend. They argue that "the roots of Marxism appear to lie in the realm of religion" (Ling, 1980, 152) and that the thoughts developed as Marxism are of religious origin. Marx from his childhood had an interest in religious problems and was influenced by religious doctrines of Saint-Simon. His doctrines were becoming popular in such a way that "the archbishop was obliged to issue a special warning against this new heresy." (Bottomore, 1963, 25) Some of Lenin's biographers also affirm that Marxism is not only a political creed but also a religion- the way of living. They asserts that "for all its materialistic and free-thinking base Marxism has always held a secret attraction for some religious-minded; it promises, and considerably sooner than in the next world" (Ling, 1980, 153). J. E. Schumpeter shows the reasons why it is to be considered as religion. He says,

Marxism is a religion. To the believer it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions; and secondly a guide to those ends which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved. (Schumpeter, 1950, 5)

Karl Popper considers Marxism as a moral theory rather than religious. He even characterizes it as 'oracular philosophy' in his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*. He declares himself to be 'the last to deny its religious character.' (Popper, 1962, 255)

Concluding Remarks

Although Marx's ideas, specially the implementation of his ideas, have been subject to criticism, his contributions to social and political philosophy are far way influential. Marx's prophecy is clear. He assumes that capitalism will rise with increasing wealth and will also increase the number of the working people with increasing class- consciousness. It will also increase tension between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and, therefore, lead to a successful social revolution. His prophetic philosophy is industry-based. By 'capitalism', he means industrial capitalism, by 'proletariat' he means industrial workers. However, his interpretation of human history, philosophy of class struggle, conception of communism, theory of social change etc. have remarkable significance in the history of philosophy. He discovered the general law of social development with the help of his materialistic interpretation of history which is the 'methodological foundation' of all social sciences. Prior to him, many thinkers all over the world tried to formulate general laws of social development, to furnish the picture of the world. But no one is more successful than Marx. He believed that problems of social life were to be solved not just in theory but in practice. So his combination of dialectic process and materialistic view of history became revolutionary in philosophy and other branches of thought.

Marx's philosophy is grounded on the practical problems of human life which demands to be solved practically without neglecting social reality. To build a classless society it is almost compulsory to abolish capitalism and build a communist society. Therefore, the revolutionary class philosophy of Marx is the key

to abolish social distinctions. The dominating class relations and the exploitation of working class can be wiped out by establishing socialism and leaving capitalist system away. We can look at the Soviet Union, for example, in this regard.

The principle concern for Karl Marx along with his friend Engels was to preserve the rights of all working people through revolution. Marx himself was a revolutionist and his goal was the emancipation of the proletariats. Engels at Marx's funeral said that, "Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat..." (Singer, 1980, 59) Since he was the successful pioneer of the revolutionary ideas and activities, he will be remembered all the time wherever and whenever the rights of the working people are at stake and the capitalist ruling class will always be haunted by Marx's spectre.

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