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Seven Theories of Human Society

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Karl Marx: A Conflict Theory

KARL MARX sees human society as a process of development that will end conflict through conflict. He anticipates that peace and harmony will be the eventual result of a history of war and violent revolution. With the exception of the earliest period of society, before the emergence of private property, the major feature of social relationships has been and is class struggle. Yet these clashes of economic interests will terminate in a classless, conflict-free and creative form of society called communism. Marx's attention is not, however, concentrated on the nature of the co-operative social relationships of the promised communist utopia. His theoretical writings deal much more with the explanation of existing social realities, and his central contribution to our understanding of society lies in his analysis of the economic causes of social conflict and the ways in which it is contained and suppressed by the ruling class in each society before breaking forth into new forms of social life.

Marx's emphasis on the role of conflict in social relationships is reminiscent of Hobbes, but Marx sees social conflict as between groups or classes rather than between individuals, and, although there is a similarity in their views of the social significance of power and on the topic of what Marx called false-consciousness, Marx has an optimistic belief in the possibility of humanly satisfying community life which is more characteristic of Aristotle than of Hobbes.

Marx lived in various European countries in the mid-nineteenth-century, a time of rapid industrial development, political upheaval and major social change. Born into a Jewish family which had converted to Christianity to avoid discriminatory laws, Marx must have become aware at an early age of the tensions which exist between social groups, an

awareness which was heightened by the obvious contrast between the liberal ideals in which he was educated and the policies of the reactionary feudal Prussian state of which his home town of Trier, in the Rhineland, was a part. Later, as a student in Berlin, and then as an impoverished exile in Paris, Brussels and London, he was confronted with the misery and deprivations of the industrial workers in the expanding cities of the time, and he could contrast this inhuman poverty with the massive enrichment of those who owned the new machinery and factories.

These experiences led Marx to take a much more pessimistic view of capitalism than did eighteenth-century philosophers such as Adam Smith and to work out in less individualistic and more aggressive terms the implications for social theory and political action of the apparently irreconcilable conflicts of interest which emerged in this period of capitalist expansion. He concludes that once the internal conflicts or 'contradictions' of the capitalist system were fully developed to the point of self-destruction the violent seizure of the privately-owned means of production would open the way to a genuinely free, satisfying and sociable life for all men, a vision which has much in common with Aristotle's ideal of civic community.

The theoretical framework in which Marx presents this prognosis of the cataclysmic demise of capitalism owes much to the philosophical ideas of G. W. F. Hegel whose thought dominated the intellectual life of Berlin where Marx became a student, first of law and then of philosophy. Marx accepts the historical perspective of Hegel but adapts and transforms Hegel's method and concepts to suit his own rather different approach to historical understanding. Thus, while the Hegelian notions of the dialectical development of history and the alienation of the creator from his creation are the inspiration for Marx's explanations of social conflict and eventual social harmony, from the start Marx rejected Hegel's nationalist, authoritarian and conservative political opinions. Instead he associated himself with the 'Young Hegelians', a group of intellectuals critical of repressive government and laissez-faire

capitalism. Marx's connection with this group cost him the chance of an academic position. He turned instead to political journalism. When his attacks on the censorship laws of the German government led to his expulsion, he went to Paris where he came into contact with French socialists and industrial workers. There he became familiar with the works of the French 'utopian' socialists Saint-Simon and Fourier, and met many intellectual radicals such as Proudhon. These experiences helped him to see the political weakness of socialist movements led by paternalistic members of the middle class and led him into the organization of working class political movements.

Involvement in the unrest which swept Europe in 1848 forced Marx to find sanctuary in Britain where he continued working to organize and articulate the ideas of the growing socialist movements of the time. This led to the writing of the highly influential *Communist Manifesto* (1848). It was in London that Marx, living in great poverty but with the support of his collaborator Frederick Engels, spent many years working on his major work, *Capital*, which was still unfinished when he died in 1883.

Some of Marx's writings, like the *Communist Manifesto* (written jointly with Engels) are journalistic political pamphlets. Others, like the *The Class Struggle in France* (1850) are analyses of economically determined historical change. His later works, such as the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* itself are more purely economic in content. There is also a contrast, now thought by most commentators to have been exaggerated, between the earlier philosophical works such as *The German Ideology* (1846) which use the Hegelian language of 'alienation' and the later, more positivistic, economic writings in which he speaks instead of 'exploitation'. The recent discovery of a transitional work, the *Grundrisse*, a draft for *Capital*, has led to a new appreciation of the unity of his work as a development and adaption of German Hegelianism, French liberal socialism and British Political Economy, particularly the work of Adam Smith on whose analysis of capitalism Marx drew heavily.

No single work of Marx's provides a comprehensive introduction to his thought. There are however, many excellent selections available. Page references here are to *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, edited by T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 2nd edition, 1961).

MARX'S APPROACH

When we come to consider Marx's theory of man, it will become clear that there is a strong 'humanist' element in his thought: he looks to the full development of man's creative capacities as the goal of historical progress. But genuine creative freedom is a feature only of the future communist society when man will at last be in control of his own destiny. In the meantime the individual is forced into particular moulds and patterns of behaviour by the economic realities of his society. Marx believes he has acquired a knowledge of the forces operative in society which is sufficiently scientific in nature to provide causal explanations of past history and generalized predictions of the future course of events. As regards his major analyses of feudal and capitalist societies Marx is therefore a positivist, although he believes that positivism would cease to apply when men were no longer in the grip of impersonal economic forces, and were thus able to make their own history, and so, on his theory, their own natures.

Marx's particular version of positivism has been called 'historical materialism' (pp. 67-72). It is historical in that the scientific generalizations he seeks to establish are about the course of human history. History he believes to be a process of evolution in which societies pass through various stages, each stage destroying and yet building on the previous one. In this respect his ideas on social development are to be compared with those of Darwin's on the evolution of species—and it is interesting to note that Marx was a great admirer of Darwin (p. 78). Marx considers it possible to identify these

evolutionary steps and to explain why societies pass through their various stages by exhibiting what he refers to in the 1st Preface to *Capital* as 'tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results'. On the basis of this scientific analysis he predicts the imminent revolutionary downfall of the capitalist system and the state after what Engels called a Darwinian struggle for survival between the classes (p. 207).

In his commitment to discovering an ordered pattern of historical development, Marx is being true to his Hegelian heritage. He also follows Hegel in using the idea of the dialectic to account for the dynamics of historical change. Hegel started from the Platonic idea of dialectic as a process of argument leading up to the disproof of a proposition by way of drawing out its inherent inconsistencies or contradictions. He recast this process of argument into a feature of general historical change in which ideas work themselves out in historical events until they are superseded in the new situation they have helped to create. In this way Hegel sought to overcome the ancient tension between thought on the one hand and material existence on the other, the dualism between mind and matter. History is to be seen as a process in which the gap between the external world and the experiencing mind, which involves the 'alienation' of the experiencing subject from external reality, is overcome by progressively more successful attempts to understand and so change the world through the exercise of reason. In the life of each individual and even more so in the development of each society, thought comes to master the material world by reducing it to a comprehensible form and changing it to conform with its own order. Alienation, the experience of the 'otherness' or hostility of the external world, is transcended by this recurrent embodiment of thought in material things, for example, by treating them as property. This 'dialectic' is a reciprocal procedure in which matter is changed by the operations of mind while at the same time mind is altered by its embodiment in material things, an ongoing interaction in which periods of tension between human thought and its

material embodiments are followed by a reunification of mind and matter in an integrated whole. The ultimate outcome of all this is presented in religious and metaphysical terms as the realization in human history of God as the 'Absolute Idea'.

Hegel's philosophy is thus a form of philosophical 'idealism' in that the underlying reality which fuels historical change and in which all things are eventually united is mental rather than physical. Marx follows Feuerbach in transforming Hegel's theological idealism by putting man rather than God at the centre of the process. For Hegel God created the world by an act of self-alienation and eventually gathered it back into himself. Feuerbach in his interpretation of religion (see *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841) put this the other way round and argued that man created the idea of God, endowed Him with the highest human characteristics and then worshipped this 'alienated' conception of himself.

Marx adapts this to the economic sphere by thinking of the activity of working as the embodiment of human qualities in the material things produced. These material products come to dominate man's life as for Feuerbach men's religious ideas came to control their creators. This results in alienation, which is, for Marx, the condition of being the slave of one's own products. Man is dominated by the material things he makes for his own use, a domination from which he is freed only by the development of new production processes over which he can assume full control. And so we get Marx's version of history as a dialectical process according to which the real contradictions, which manifest themselves in social conflict and a sense of alienation between man and the world in which he lives and between men, and are to be traced to the material circumstances of each particular stage of social development (pp. 177 ff).

Marx is thus a materialist, not because he values material goods above all else, or because he rejects the reality of mental phenomena, but because he held that the laws of tendencies which describe, explain and, to an extent, predict how societies work, are laws of economics. The forces which conflict

and synthesize in society are economic or material ones; history is therefore a movement of the contradiction and resolution of economic factors. This inverts the Hegelian notion of history as the progressive embodiment of ever more rational thought. In contrast, Marx believes that ideas are only pictures of things and hence the effects rather than causes of the historical process. This does not prevent him from saying that political and social ideas (or 'ideologies') are instruments in the struggle between classes, but he always holds to the view that these ideological weapons are manifestations of the underlying economic interests of the dominant social classes.

The essence of Marx's approach to social study is thus the claim that the nature of any society and its pattern of development are a function of the way in which the material requirements of human life—food, clothing, housing and so forth—are obtained through labour. The production of the means to support life is the basis of all social structure, social conflict and hence social change. Much of Marx's work is taken up with the detailed composition of this thesis.

Marx's historical theory of society has a positivistic ring. He sets as his goal the strict causal interpretation of social change which presupposes that history is a tightly determined and inevitable process. Certainly, from the point of view of individual behaviour, Marx's analyses allow for only slight departure from a path mapped out for the individual by his class position and the stage of historical development in which he finds himself. But the materialist basis of the process does not render history purely mechanical since the struggle between classes is waged through ideological means as well as physical conflict, and the dialectical nature of the process allows for an interplay between material factors and social and political ideas which Marx does not in practice attempt to fit into a rigid pattern. Moreover the goal of historical development involves the emancipation of mankind from the shackles of materially determined interactions and Marx is certainly prepared to claim that his own social theory is not simply an expression of the class interests of the proletariat;

it is also objectively true and its universal acceptance is part of the movement towards the freedom of communist society.

The contrast between the determinism of previous history in which moral and political ideas are simply a reflection of particular class interests and the emerging freedom of communist society of which Marx's own ideas are a prognosis, allows us to argue that Marx could claim universality and objectivity for his own ideals without contradicting his scientific assumptions. The passionate tone of his descriptions of the inhumanities of capitalism and his evident preference for the free, spontaneous and creative communal activity of unalienated man amply demonstrate his commitment to the goals of material prosperity and the development of human powers within a harmonious social context. There is therefore, in the end, something of a happy coincidence between the predicted outcome of historical development and the social values which Marx endorses.

MARX'S THEORY OF MAN

It is part of Marx's holistic approach to social explanation that man has no precise and fixed nature. The individual's actions, attitudes and beliefs depend on his social relationships and his social relationships depend on his class situation and the economic structure of his society. Man's nature is therefore social in the sense that he has no nature apart from that with which he is endowed by his social position. There is therefore no place for Hobbes's universal truths about human motivation, or even for Adam Smith's belief that there are certain aspects of man's make-up which can never be 'entirely perverted' (see p. 97). In so far as man's nature is equated with his behaviour it is 'the totality of his social relations' (p. 83) and these vary from society to society.

Marx's rather extreme view of the social determination of individual behaviour is designed to counter the assumption of

the classical economists that man is inherently self-interested. He declines to accept that social conflict is the result of the intrinsic competitiveness, aggression and selfishness of man. The Hobbesian picture he accepts as applying only in certain stages of capitalist development when alienated men are forced to act and feel in a self-centred and hostile manner, but such behaviour and emotions are the result not the cause of capitalism and will be superseded by new forms of behaviour and motivation once capitalism has been transcended and new economic relationships established.

On the Hobbesian analysis the most that can be done towards controlling social conflict is via the agreement to apply sanctions against anti-social behaviour. Marx saw that this approach presupposed that there were at least some unselfish and enlightened men in control of the coercive apparatus, whereas in reality the economically most powerful section of the population was generally able to use sanctions for their own benefit (p. 231). For the same reason he does not anticipate successful social engineering through the deployment of the more subtle educational devices of the utilitarian 'materialists' like Jeremy Bentham who 'forget that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated' (pp. 82 f).

On the other hand Marx does believe that, in the fullness of historical development, the 'capitalist' nature of man will be transformed into a genuinely benevolent and spontaneously co-operative disposition which will require no coercive manipulation. After the proletarian revolution men will willingly play their part in the communal life and distribution could therefore be in accordance with the principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (p. 263). It is not so much that Marx believes man to be inherently unselfish although temporarily corrupted by social factors, but rather that man has the potential to be either selfish or unselfish according to the nature of the relationships into which he is born or has to enter.

Indeed it is somewhat misleading to think of Marx's man in communist society as *unselfish* since this suggests a tension

between the interests of competing individuals, whereas it is part of Marx's prediction that in such a society the spontaneous co-operation between men destroys the alienation between men which leads them to perceive their interests as opposed. This is because when there is communal ownership of industrialized means of production it will in fact be the case that objective clashes of economic interest will be a thing of the past. Further the type of fulfilment which is available to men in this society is a communal not an individual achievement for it must be achieved together or not at all. Communist society is 'the real appropriation of human nature, through and for man. It is therefore the return of man to himself as a social, that is, really human, being' (pp. 249 f).

This truly human existence is one in which man's productive capacities are developed in a balanced and satisfying manner. Although man is always a producer there are some systems in which he is more genuinely a producer than others. These are the systems in which he is in command of his actions and can choose to make what he wants in the way he wants. Man affirms himself in his labour but not all forms of labour enable him to make this affirmation in its fullness. Work may be forced, dehumanized, and meaningless: the condition of alienation. It may also be free, human, satisfying and creative: the condition of unalienated man in communist society. How labour has become the former and will become the latter is the framework within which Marx sets out his view of human history.

Marx's ideal of creative productivity as the end-result of history carries the implicit assumption that there is a potential in all men which can be brought to fruition only in certain social conditions. Despite his more historical and scientific approach Marx presents an essentially Aristotelian combination of empirical observations concerning the activities men find satisfying and evaluative appraisal of what is most worthwhile in human life. He even speaks in his early writings of the 'species character' of man. In this respect Marx does, therefore, have a view as to what is essentially human amidst the diversity of actual human behaviour.

MARX'S THEORY OF SOCIETY

Marx identifies the causal basis of society with the 'forces of production' that is with 'what is produced and how it is produced' (p. 69). These forces of production include the raw materials, the end-products and the entire method of work used in the productive processes, including the tools and skills of those involved. This economic basis of society, from which everything else follows, incorporates all those factors which lead to the production of a certain type of thing in a certain manner.

The most important and immediate effects of the forces of production are the 'relations of production' into which men enter in order to carry out their productive tasks. The relations of production are the roles men occupy in the work process: they involve the division of labour, the chain of command, and, most fundamentally, the relationship of the owner of the means of production to the non-owners. These are relationships into which, outside communist society, men are forced to enter in order to earn a living. They include the relationship of plantation-owner to slave, of feudal lord to peasant, and of factory owner (capitalist) to proletarian (industrial wage labourer). Thus a feudal lord owns the land and the mill, so that the serf is forced to work for him in order to survive, and the industrial capitalist who owns the means of production can buy the labour of the proletarian who must sell his labour if he is to acquire the means of subsistence:

In the social production which men carry out they enter into definite relations independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society (p. 67).

From these relations of production class divisions arise along the line of ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. All societies (except communist ones) are thus divided into classes or orders, whose members, because of their different relationship to the means of production, have

conflicting economic interests; what benefits one class tends to harm another (pp. 186 f). Class divisions are therefore economic divisions. But these divisions are not simply a matter of different income levels since the nature of the distinction and so of the conflict between classes depends on the sources from which their income derives, not on its amount. It is because the proletariat earns wages and the capitalist lives off profits, and not because the former is poor and the latter wealthy, that their economic interests are antagonistic.

The nature and intensity of the struggle between economic classes determines the characteristics of the rest of the 'super-structure' as Marx calls the institutions and cultural arrangements of which the economic basis is the cause. The morality and religion of a society are means whereby the ruling class maintains its position by having its own 'ideology' accepted as being in the interests of all classes, a phenomenon Marx describes as 'false-consciousness' since all classes erroneously believe in the objectivity and universality of rules and ideals which are simply the expression of class interests. Similarly, the legal institutions of a society are mere instruments of the state. Here Marx sides with Hobbes against Aristotle and Smith: there is no natural justice. Marx goes beyond Hobbes in asserting that the function of the state is nothing more than the violent protection of the interests of the dominant economic class. Government is a manifestation and defence of economic power.

Like Adam Smith before him, Marx distinguishes types of society on the basis of their modes of production. On Marx's scheme history is a progression from tribal to slave-owning society and thence into feudalism, capitalism and eventually to communism. His most detailed analyses concern the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the development of capitalism through its various steps towards its ultimate self-destruction. By looking at this in a little detail we will see how he relates the structure of a society to the type of division of labour involved in its system of production.

In tribal society, sometimes called primitive communism because it involves the communal ownership of land, the

central economic activities are hunting, fishing, cattle breeding and, at a later stage, settled agriculture. Tools are primitive, and there is little specialism of labour, so that the fundamental social unit is the family, the tribe consisting of a number of such families with their own patriarchal chief. At this stage there are no classes because there is no private ownership of the means of production; hence there is no need for a state, all social relations being kinship relations and such division of labour as exists occurring spontaneously within the family group.

With the move to agricultural production, increases in population and the beginnings of trade, large tribal societies gradually develop a system of slavery as a more effective way of organizing the more specialized system of production, resulting in a growth of output which makes possible the creation of cities by the voluntary or coerced union of tribes. This slave-owning society represents the beginnings of classes and hence class conflict for the slaves are part of the means of production, although initially at least they are communally owned by the whole body of citizens. Slavery is thus the consequence of developments in productive methods and is not attributable simply to the human tendency to plunder and fight wars.

Feudal society emerges more out of country than out of urban life. The basic productive process was small-scale peasant farming carried out by serfs. At this stage production is an individual or family activity in that each peasant farmer or handicraft worker gathered his own raw materials and worked on them through to the finished product. This means that the means of production, particularly the tools, were such as could be used by individuals. Each peasant had his own piece of land and his own plough, while in the towns craftsmen worked in their own homes on hand tools such as the spinning wheel and the handloom, which were themselves owned by the worker.

The natural division of labour occurring within the family and depending on age, sex and the changing seasons, becomes extended to cover a certain degree of specialism, but it is always possible for the individual worker to identify his own product and since, in the early stages, production is largely for

immediate consumption the individual worker normally appropriates what he makes for his own needs and those of his family, handing over a certain proportion to his feudal superior whose military power enables him to live on the surplus of the subject productive class.

As the source of wealth in such a productive method is the land the natural resulting social structure is a hierarchical territorially based feudal aristocracy in which the peasant exchanges some of his products for the protection of his immediate superior and the use of those means of production, like the flour-mill, which the feudal superior owns, the latter retaining his place in the hierarchy by contributing to the maintenance of a yet superior feudal lord who controls the use of military power over a wider area. Such relationships were clearly defined and fairly personal in that the feudal superior retains something of the patriarchal qualities of the head of a family and does not seek to extract the maximum profit from his control of the land. In the towns there is something equivalent to this in the structure of guildmasters, master-craftsmen, journeymen and apprentices, all centred around the individual productive unit, the guildmasters controlling and protecting the activities of the master-craftsmen and journeymen, each with their own tools, the apprentice undergoing a period of training before becoming a journeyman.

The change from feudalism to capitalism is initiated by the excess of production over consumption, leading more and more individuals to produce for the purposes of exchange and sale rather than for their immediate wants, and so prompting the rise of a new class of merchants. The crucial change comes with the introduction of new methods of production which involve the gathering together of numbers of workers in the same establishment in order to co-operate in the operation of larger and more complex tools and machinery. As these new means of production have to be provided there emerges a totally new class, the bourgeoisie, to supply the raw materials, tools and premises that are required, who then pay wages to those that work together on the materials and machines

provided. The new classes are thus the direct consequence of new tools.

The whole process of change is boosted by the enlargement of markets and the discovery of new raw materials made possible by the exploration and colonization of hitherto unknown parts of the world, but it is held back by the entrenched power of the feudal classes who, through their control of the state and the restrictive devices of closed guilds, are able to thwart the free competition between bourgeois manufacturers which is an essential part of a system devoted to the production of 'commodities', that is goods for sale rather than consumption by the producers themselves.

The struggle between the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeois capitalists is a classic example of social conflict. Its outcome is determined by the economic realities of the situation. These are that the greater efficiency of the manufacturing system gives more wealth and hence eventually political power to the bourgeois class which is then able to control the state and usher in the fullness of capitalist production, although individual capitalists are forced to compete to the point of mutual extinction.

In the capitalist system the means of production are social because they are no longer workable by one man working alone. The spinning-machine and the power-loom make production a series of social acts. This requires a highly organized division of labour and carefully planned and closely supervised relations of production. In this situation men are treated merely according to their usefulness to those who own the means of production who have no ties to the wage labourers other than a monetary one. In feudal society wage-labour had been characteristic only of the temporary stage of apprenticeship. Under capitalism it becomes the standard relationship of men in society.

The tight organization of labour in the production of commodities in the factory is in contrast to the disorder or anarchy of the market. The capitalist has to produce as much as the market will absorb as cheaply as possible in relative ignorance of what other producers are doing and what the

market can be expected to support. This results in a cycle of under-production followed by over-production and hence of full employment and then high unemployment.

It is obvious that this economic system destroys the relationship of the individual producer to his individual product, for the commodities produced in factories are social products. And yet, Marx points out, the capitalist who has provided the means of production himself appropriates what is made as if it were his own creation. This is the essence of capitalism and is the source of the major conflicts between proletarians (the wage-labourers in industrial concerns) and the bourgeoisie (who own the socialized means of production and appropriate its products). Marx expresses this inherent 'contradiction' between social production and individual appropriation in terms of the idea of surplus value and exploitation. Taking over Adam Smith's view that the value of a product is to be equated with the *labour* which goes into its production, he uses this labour theory of value to argue that the capitalist does not give the worker the full value of what is produced. The capitalist pays only a subsistence wage and keeps the 'surplus' (the difference between the full value of the goods produced and what he pays out in wages) for himself. This 'profit' enables him to build up his capital and so provide more machinery and factories to make yet more profits. Since this capital is in fact a social product the capitalist is exploiting the worker by treating it as a personal possession. Moreover it is a possession which gives him vast economic and hence political power and so makes it possible for the capitalist class as a whole to control the state and protect the private property on which the system depends.

The result of fierce competition and recurrent economic crisis is a simplification and polarization of the class system so that fewer and fewer but wealthier and wealthier capitalists *confront* an ever increasing number of poorer and poorer industrial workers. The end result is 'an accumulation of misery corresponding with accumulation of capital' and 'an agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality and mutual degeneration' in which the bourgeois class cannot even

provide for the basic needs of its slaves and 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—bourgeoisie and proletariat' (p. 207).

These laws of capitalist development illustrate very well Marx's idea of the social determination of individual behaviour. The individual proletarian *has* to sell his labour in order to survive just as the individual capitalist has to modernize his machinery to remain a capitalist. Further, members of both classes are forced through the sanctions of law or through false-consciousness to abide by the laws of property, which are the product of the economic system. Capitalism makes property relations the central feature of political order so as to protect the economic powers without which it could not survive. Further the rules and attitudes concerning all aspects of life come to take on the same characteristics as the economic aspects so that even sexual relations in capitalist society come to reflect bourgeois values, marriage being regarded as a commercial contract in which material support is exchanged for sexual and domestic services while children are treated as commodities over which paternal rights are absolute. . . .

Similarly religious belief and practices are not an external source of values and social organization, but are part and parcel of the same economic conflicts and tensions. Thus all religion, especially the highly emotional millenarian type of cult which promises the believer divinely initiated and imminent heavenly rewards, is to be seen as an expression of the alienation of the proletarian from his present existence and a means whereby the ruling class can divert the energies of the suffering classes from political activity to relatively harmless religiosity.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of Marx's theory of society are primarily causal. By uncovering the mechanisms at work in the capitalist

economy Marx feels able to foretell its imminent collapse. For even if individual capitalists become aware that the anarchy of the market place coupled with constant innovations in manufacturing processes must eventually undermine the stability of the system, they are powerless to do anything about it. If any individual capitalist attempts to hold back change another will take his place and any agreements to restrict modernization of the means of production will be undercut by those who stand to gain from breaking the agreement or remaining outside it from the start.

The inevitable consequences of the rationally calculated acts of individual members of the bourgeois class are recurrent economic crises, increasing impoverishment of the proletariat and a gradually increasing awareness on the part of the proletariat of the now manifest contradictions between social production and individual appropriation. Socialism is, for Marx, the reflection in thought of this very real suffering on the part of the industrial masses in the final period of capitalist development. In particular his own doctrines mark the end of the false-consciousness which hid the underlying realities of class conflict behind the rhetoric of equality of opportunity, individual freedom and justice under the law. In the graphic imagery of the *Communist Manifesto* the advanced member of the proletariat begins to see through the bourgeois state and its commitment to the protection of bourgeois property: 'law, morality and religion are to him so many bourgeois prejudices' masking bourgeois interests. Eventually the bulk of the proletariat see that they have no security and no benefit from capitalism, they become aware that they are not in competition with each other and have 'nothing to lose but their chains' and that together they have the power to defy the system. And so the proletarian revolution takes place.

The essence of the revolution is the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. This is no more than the logical consequence of the social nature of the forces of production but from it immense changes follow in all aspects of social life. With the abolition of private property in the means of production the entire bourgeois class is eliminated, since

there is no longer individual ownership of the productive forces. For the same reason there is no longer a proletarian class as all are equally owners and therefore free from exploitation and external control.

With no classes there can be no class conflict, and with no property to defend there is no need for the state or for laws to establish who owns what. With the means of production under communal control there is no basis for conflict between groups and so the coercive mechanism of the state can simply 'die out' as Engels put it in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. As production is no longer under the control of the bourgeoisie decisions about what to make and how much to produce can be made on the basis of the satisfaction of the real needs of individuals rather than the requirements of profit and the artificial demands created to serve the interests of the manufacturers, and so the alienation of the worker from his product ceases.

Since the techniques of the industrial processes remain collective those involved in this social production, now that the causes of economic conflict are removed, co-operate naturally and spontaneously with each other so that the relations of production are harmonious. This extends to all other social relationships. Once men are no longer alienated from their product they are no longer alienated from each other. At this stage of social development, in complete contrast to Hobbes's state of nature, there is a peaceful society without the existence of any state: social relations have lost their political character.

The changed basis of economic life alters the very nature of individual men and women. The selfish greed of capitalist man gives way to an effective sense of solidarity and mutual interest. Together men are able to control their productive acts and to organize their working life in such a way as to realize their full potential as creative social beings.

Marx's vision of communist society is one of material plenty for he believes that modern scientific production is well able to provide more than adequate means of subsistence. It is also an approximately egalitarian society, although he puts little stress on strict equality, an ideal which has no significance when

each person cares for the welfare of others and is aware that his development as a human being can be fully accomplished only with the freely given help of others. The transformation of human relationships is exemplified in the ending of the cash-nexus as the basic form of co-operation. Money symbolizes the self-interested exchanges of Hobbesian men and its accumulation is the foundation of inequality and of capitalist production; it has no place in communist society. Similarly the divisive and dehumanizing effects of the division of labour will also cease because men will specialize only to the extent that they wish to do so.

But the prime value which Marx sees embodied in communist social existence is that of freedom, by which he means the capacity to control the human environment and make it serve human needs. Society can now be organized on a definite plan to serve real human requirements. The result is a realization of the productive essence of man in a way which frees him from the deterministic control of economic forces and makes him master of his own destiny. In this final stage of social development conflict has no place.

ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENTS

Marxian theory is sometimes said to be internally inconsistent. For instance it can be argued that a determinist (see pp. 234 ff) who claims to be able to predict the future is thereby debarred from urging us to act in one way rather than another since our actions are, on his own theory, the inevitable results of causal factors which are beyond our control. Knowledge only gives power when we are free to use that knowledge to obtain the objects of our own choices. And, in any case, if the future is the inevitable outcome of present social realities it seems unnecessary to urge us to help bring that future about by our own efforts. Yet Marx appears to urge the workers to unite and rise in revolution.

It is true that Marx does not think that the material causes of social behaviour bypass human consciousness and he is

clear, for instance, that it is part of the necessary conditions of the downfall of capitalism that the proletarians become aware of the economic and political realities of their exploited and oppressed position. But this is only to say that men will become conscious of their historic situation and that this will be part of the process leading to revolution. It does not help us understand the rationality of exhortation in a deterministic world. This criticism is best countered by pointing out that much of what Marx says is not strictly determinist and that, at least as regards the timing of historical changes, he concedes that individuals can have an influence in retarding or hastening the processes in which they are caught up. This fits with Marx's claim that after the revolution men enter a period of increasing freedom to use the natural environment and the manufacturing powers according to their own assessment of human need. Such a picture implies that the limited scope afforded in pre-communist societies for effective causally-independent human choice is widened to become a central feature of the unalienated condition of communist man. In this way the consistency of Marx's theory and practice can be maintained, although this more flexible position makes it appropriate to raise the question of whether Marx may not have under-estimated the extent to which men in non-communist societies are able to modify their social institutions in the light of their long-term self-interest or even in the light of their moral convictions.

A similar inconsistency is said to occur in Marx's critique of morality as an expression of class interests disguised as standards of universal right and adopted by other classes as a result of false-consciousness. How can he hold to this interpretation of morality while evidently condemning the immoralities of capitalism and extolling the virtues of communism? However, it is not the case that Marx indulges in direct moral criticism of capitalists as individuals or as a class. He accepts that capitalists are playing a necessary part in historical change and that they are not morally culpable for acting according to the norms of their class for these are not of their own making. Similarly progressive proletarians are not

morally better people, they are simply representatives of the next stage of society. Marx does believe that capitalism is evil in that it degrades and harms human beings and that communism is to be preferred because it is the condition which makes possible the full realization of what is most worth while in human life. It is perfectly consistent for him to make such valuations while maintaining that men are not free to choose which form of society to create for themselves or others. Necessary facts can be either welcome or unwelcome.

Marx does still have a philosophical problem on his hands as regards the justification of such value-judgements since he appears to have no room for this in his essentially positivistic approach. The most that we can glean from his writings on this score is the claim that communism is preferable to capitalism because it comes later in the historical chain. But unless we simply assume the Hegelian view that what comes later is thereby more progressive in some evaluative sense, an assertion which requires the support of independent moral judgements, Marx's confidence that the final stage of society is the best stage commits the naturalistic fallacy in a form typical of the nineteenth-century, by assuming that what is more evolved is more desirable.

Marx's weaknesses as a moral philosopher may be of relatively slight significance given the extent of evaluative agreement concerning the moral priority of peace, prosperity, social harmony and creative work over against war, poverty, competitiveness and the boredom of monotonous work undertaken for purely economic reasons. His significance as a socialist theorist depends far more on the alleged scientific status of his social analyses. Indeed his insistence on the importance of the economic foundations of a society for all its other aspects, including those features which are traditionally thought of as being due to 'human nature', has become almost the reigning orthodoxy of social science. Ahistorical, non-economic and purely individualistic accounts of social phenomena do not nowadays gain much credence. But there is still immense scope for disagreement about both the content of

Marx's particular scientific claims and the scientific status of his theory as a whole.

Hostile critics fasten on a number of Marx's specific predictions that have been falsified in the course of history. In developed countries capitalism has adapted and changed rather than collapsed, and even if modern economies, with their vast range of state controls, are scarcely capitalist in Marx's sense and may yet fail to maintain their prosperity, they cannot be said to be following the path which Marx foretold. And while there are, of course, countries like the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China that claim to embody the Marxian idea this did not come about after the full development of the 'contradictions' of capitalism in these countries and so does not match the theories he propounded.

More radical is the sweeping rejection of Marx's 'historicism', as Karl Popper calls the claim that the proper method of understanding human history is to discover the sort of scientific laws which enable us to predict its future course. Popper, himself a powerful advocate of scientific method as the process of putting forward empirical hypotheses which can be disproved or falsified by experience, rejects the use of this method to predict human history on several grounds; Popper argues in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, revised edn (Hutchinson: London, 1968) that, since human history is a unitary and unique phenomenon, it is impossible to make the observations which would test historical predictions for to do this adequately we would have to observe very many examples of human history. He also points out that the course of economic change is affected by developments in knowledge and that this cannot (logically) be predicted since to predict future knowledge is to possess it at the moment of prediction.

Such arguments lend weight to the impression that Marx's method is often more deductive than empirical, depending too much on inherited dogmas about historical stages and the use of abstract or logical 'inconsistencies', like the 'incoherence' of social production and individual appropriation. Too often he seems to confuse the logical necessity of non-contradiction with empirical claims about the clash of interests.

In the face of such criticism it is natural for the scientifically minded Marxist to retreat, as Marx sometimes appears to do, into limited claims about short term predictions based on the observation of a variety of advanced capitalist countries which provide a range of examples on which to base tentative inductive conjectures. This more limited approach has led to a great deal of interesting and significant social science but it inevitably treats the detailed findings of Marx as open to revision, and involves the abandonment of the broad and sweeping claims about the inevitable demise of capitalism which gave Marxism its political attractions.

What we are then left with is a general methodology of seeking in the economic basis of each society the explanation for its other social arrangements. This leaves as relatively open questions whether or not there is something more fixed in human nature than Marx himself allowed and whether men individually or collectively can use their rationality and moral beliefs to affect the economic basis on which everything else is said to depend.

Whether at the end of the day the accumulation of studies made on this methodological basis confirm or cast doubt on the fruitfulness of Marxian assumptions it is difficult to say. But one recurrent problem which arises from a certain lack of clarity in Marx's own position is the determination of which factors are to be counted as part of the economic basis of a society and which are part of the superstructure. Many writers have noted the ambiguous position of the relations of production in this respect. But there are also formidable problems in describing any economic bases without reference to their legal and political backgrounds. This is particularly the case with the institution of property, a legally defined and politically central concept which is inseparable from the description of the economic base of capitalism, for without a law of private property there could be no private ownership of the means of production. How then can the latter create the former?

One response to the Popperian criticism of Marxist historicism or scientism is to reassert the significance of the early philosophical Marx and to develop Marx's theory of ideology

to encompass the whole corpus of modern science as being simply another example of bourgeois thinking which reduces human thought to the instrumental function of serving to increase commodity production. Thus in the 'Critical theory' of the 'Frankfurt School' (the label given to a group of neo-Marxist philosophers including Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas) much science, especially social science, is an ideological weapon whereby the bourgeoisie manipulates the proletariat by making out that their descriptions of existing social relationships have to do with inevitable and necessary processes. This 'reification' or 'hypostatization' of events as if they are what inevitably must and ought to be the case is supported by a bureaucratic organization that approaches social problems solely from the point of view of technical control. Science is thus used to gain power over the workforce and this power is reinforced by the palliatives of the welfare state. On this view Marx mistakenly extends the application of science from the material to the social world whereas human freedom and fulfilment depend on men taking control of the apparatus, which at present makes them slaves to productive 'necessities'. Science should be used, if at all, only in a very limited way as a means of incorporating technology into a way of life aimed at freeing men from phoney 'scientific' truths, such as those of economic theory.

The weakness of this school of thought lies in its inability to justify its hopes for a more liberated form of society in such a way as to vindicate the call, made by some members of the school, for the destructive overthrow of existing social systems. But the force of their critique may be better appreciated after we have examined the theories of Max Weber, whose model of a rational, bureaucratic form of society is a main target for the attacks of the Frankfurt School.

FOR FURTHER READING

We have used as our text the selection edited by Bottomore and Rubel, (see p. 116). The best initiation to Marx and Engels is the

famous *Communist Manifesto*. For an early authoritative exposition of Marxian ideas see Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. Both are to be found in Lewis S. Feuer *Marx and Engels* (Fontana Library, Collins: Glasgow, 1969) Marx's most important works have been published in the Pelican Marx Library edited by Quintin Hoare (Penguin Books, England).

The secondary literature on Marx and Engels is vast. The reader might start with David McLellan, *Marx* (Collins: Glasgow, 1975) which is part of the useful Fontana Modern Masters series. More taxing are Michael Evans *Karl Marx* (Allen and Unwin: London, 1975) and Angus Walker, *Marx*, (Longman: London, 1978). S. Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1968) is particularly relevant to Marx's theory of society.

For examples of the work of the Frankfurt School see Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Heinemann: London, 1972), Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: 1964; Sphere Books: London, 1968). For commentary read Alistair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (Fontana Modern Masters, Collins: London, 1970). See also Paul Connerton (ed.) *Critical Sociology* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1976) and David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (Hutchinson: London, 1980).