

**Classical Sociology Theory**  
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**Lecture No. 19**  
**Marxian theory of social change**

Welcome back to the session. We are continuing with the discussions on Karl Marx, his theories on history, his theories on economics, social change and a host of other fascinating ideas. I hope you remember that yesterday we discussed one of his foundational arguments of his whole theory known as dialectical materialism or historical materialism. It is a theory that he developed in order to explain the evolution of humankind and to explain social change. It is a theoretical foundation that he developed in order to understand the basic functioning of human society and in order to provide an explanation about the social structure of every society.

He developed an explanatory paradigm to explain how societies move from one state to the other one. We discussed about the way in which he conceived of society through a model of base and super structure. We discussed about how the economy or forms of economic production constitutes the base and how that has an overarching influence on various elements that are grouped under the term super structure which includes almost everything else other than economic sphere. We discussed about the modes of production, we discussed about its different components.

Today in this class we are going to focus more on his theory of social change. How did Marx conceive of social change? Or in other words, what is the kind of Marxian explanation for social change? How did Marx put forward a powerful and extremely influential argument about social change? We know that ever since this Marxian presented his theories of social change, they have been taken up by scores of social scientists, philosophers, and scholars and there have been relentless discussions and debate about Marxian notion of social change.

Many people agreed with that, many people disagreed with that but it is still continued to be one of the very important explanatory paradigms to understand how societies move from one stage to other.

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• Just as an economic conception of society, he advance an economic interpretation of history. For Marx "the history of humanity" is not a story of great men, or great ideas, or "spectacular political events," or the unfolding of human consciousness. Instead, he declares, the "true focus and theatre of all history" is economic life.

• "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".

"Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."

Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto



Marx advances an economic interpretation of history. As we discussed yesterday, Marx basically understand society is been driven by its economic features. Similarly he advances an economic interpretation of history. As history being moving forward by the economic forces. For Marx, the history of humanity is not a story of a great men or great ideas or spectacular political events or the unfolding of human consciousness. Instead he declares the true focus and motor of all history is economic life. And this is a very major departure from many of the conventional understanding or explanation about social change.

We know that once we study history we will study it through the contribution of some important figures like kings and emperors or we discuss social change through various other different frameworks. But Marx is very particular, and he is very clear that a human history must be understood through the lens of its material production. Or how a society moves from one stage to another? Or how a society evolves? For him, it needs to be understood by looking at the changes that is happening in realm of its material production.

Therefore, history is not a story of great men or it is not great ideas transforming society all of a sudden or it is not even spectacular political events because Marx argued that this political events are a consequences of much more deeper economic changes. His disagreed with the idea of history being the unfolding of human consciousness as argued by idealist like say Hegel and others. Instead he declares that the true focus and theatre of all history is the economic life. A very debatable and contentious, but a very powerful argument.


‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. It is very extremely popular quote from Karl Marx. History of all hitherto existing society is the history of class

struggles. It is this is an extremely quote. Marx argues that the history of every hitherto existing society can't be understood without looking into these forms of class struggle existed in every society. How people are classified into different classes, different groups and what are the kind of antagonist relationships between them and what is the kind of an economic rationale behind this antagonism. Without looking into these dynamics, one will not understand the true history of any society as per Karl Marx.

'Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, sometimes hidden, sometimes open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes'. These quotes are taken from Marx and Engel's extremely popular work, The Communist Manifesto.

Marx understands society as the antagonism between two primarily two groups of people who owned the means of production and who do not own it. All these categories that he has explained such as freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, or bourgeoisie and proletariat represent these two antagonist groups in different periods in history.


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• First, there is, according to Marx, a strong historical tendency, driven by the requirements of human survival along with advances in science and technology, for the forces of production to develop, to increase in power over time.

This fact—the continuous accumulation of productive forces—endows human history with a certain coherence or meaningfulness and paves way for progress.

In contrast to the philosophers of the French Enlightenment for whom progress meant the liberation of humanity from false ideas, a passage from ignorance to wisdom, for Marx progress takes the form of increasing economic productivity and the evolution of modes of production.



Marx talks about presenting a larger picture about social change, so how does his explanation of social change unfold? According to Marx, there is a strong historical tendency, driven by the requirements of human survival along with advances in science and technology, for the forces of production to develop, to increase in power over time. He is talking about how our production technologies and efficiencies of production and overall quality of production for meeting our material needs improved over a period in time.

We know that we have developed tremendously over the past so many centuries in terms of meeting or basic needs in developing novel needs and then our ability to satisfy these needs. So, with the help of science and technology and host of other aspects human beings have the ability to continuously expand their realm of production to meet the existing needs as well as to identify and fulfill the new forms of needs.

This continuous accumulation of productive forces endows human history with a certain coherence or meaningfulness and paves way for progress. So, it is very clear from this argument that Marx understands human progress not in terms of the emergence of new ideas. Marx understands human progress specifically as the progress in terms of expanding new forms of production.

We, human beings as a race is able to expand new forms of production, expanding various process of production. In contrast to philosophers of French enlightenment, for whom progress meant the liberation of humanity from false ideas or a passage from ignorance to wisdom, for Marx progress takes the form of increasing economic productivity and the evolution of modes of production.

It is very clear because he did not subscribe to the idealist argument which looked at human progress as a progress from one type of ideas to another, given the fact that Marx was a materialist. He argued that the human progress needs to be understood as a march towards or progress through development of new material forms and economic productivity and evolution of new modes of production.

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• Second, As the introduction of new methods of production transforms the labor process and increases productivity, the social relations of production are likewise altered. Advances in technology cause shifts in the class structure and in the larger social framework of society. "In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations."

"the handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist."



Secondly, as the introduction of new methods of productions transforms the labor process and increases productivity, the social relations of production are likewise altered. So, here he is bringing in the tension between the technical and material aspects of production on the one hand, and the relations which are involved in the process of production on the other. Advances in technology cause shifts in the class structure and in the larger social framework of society. In acquiring new productive forces, men change their mode of production and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their life, they change all their social relations.


New forces of production come into picture, when people move from agrarian society where agriculture is the main stay of economy into a capitalist society where factory and tools and machinery are the most important forms of production. Marx have used that the relationship between the classes of people who are involved in the process of production also change because this changes are not confined themselves within the realm of forces of production but they have the ability to influence the social relationship.

This is an extremely important point and this is also the crux through which Marx explains how social change and how revolution takes place. How society moves from one stage to the next one? Society moves from slavery to feudalism from feudalism to capitalism, from capitalism to communism, as according to Marxian argument. All these changes are propelled by changes in the forces of production and these changes definitely influences the social relations.

“The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist”. Because the people who own the means of production, who takeaway the surplus value, the people who live off the surplus that is produced by others, their designation changes, their


characteristic changes, their relationships with the people who actually involved in the cost of production also changes.

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• Third, as society's productive forces develop, Marx argues, they eventually "come into conflict with the existing relations of production," which "fetter" or inhibit the continued growth and full utilization of society's productive capacity.

At a certain point the relations of production are unable to accommodate the potential built up by the forces of production, and this circumstance creates pressure for a fundamental change in the economic structure of society



Third, as societies productive forces develop, Marx argues that they eventually come into conflict with the existing relations of production which fetter or inhibit the continued growth and full utilization of society's productive capacity. So, he says that this advancements in the forces of production, technological changes of course we know that these technological innovations are much faster in pace. They are much faster than social relationship.

These technological changes will become much faster in its pace, it will advance much faster and that ultimately will become an impediment. Marx uses a term fetter, as it chains or inhibits the continued growth of full utilization of society's productive capacity. For example, when Marx explains development of capitalism in Europe, he argues that the development of technological innovations like steam engine and host of other technological innovations during the sixteenth and seventeenth century as very significant.

These changes happened at a much faster pace and these changes kind of necessitated that the existing feudal system can no longer be a viable mode of production. It actually forced the society to move into a newer form where the labors supply is free, the laborer is free in the sense, we will discuss soon. Therefore, the social relations after sometime will become as a fetter, it becomes an obstacle, it becomes an impediment for the further growth of this technological advancements and the further movement of society of this mode of production to the next level.

At a certain point, the relations of production are unable to accommodate the potential built up buy


the forces of production, and this circumstance create pressure for a fundamental change in the economic structure of society. This particular point captures his explanation about the point of crisis in a given mode of production, which is composed of both relations of productions as well as forces of production.

The forces of production advance more rapidly and at the same time, relations of production remains almost static and then comes a flashpoint where the relations of production becomes a fetter and it can no longer advance, or improve and thereby bring a much rapid and thereby create a crisis where whole structure of that mode of production moves and collapses, moving into qualitatively different realm where the relations of productions are completely redefined.


In another words, the relation of production characteristic of a feudal society becomes an impediment for the further growth of technological advancements during a feudal era. That reaches a flashpoint and the entire mode of production moves to the next level, to that of capitalism where the forces of production is facilitated by further technological advancements but the relations of productions also take completely different qualitative level.

In a capitalist society, the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat and completely different form the relationship between a serf and a lord or a master and a slave.

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- Fourth, once it reaches a crisis point, Marx argues, the contradiction between the forces and relations of production inaugurates "an era of social revolution." This is eventually resolved by the destruction of the old economic structure along with its "whole immense superstructure" and its replacement by a new mode of production suitable for the continued growth of the forces of production.
- Human history, propelled by the accumulation of productive forces, is thus for Marx a story of how one mode of production develops, matures, stagnates, and eventually gives way to another, more advanced mode of production.



Fourth, once it reaches a crisis point, Marx argues that contradiction between the force and relations of production inaugurates an era of social revolution. This flashpoint, Marx explains as the point of social revolution. This is eventually resolved by the destruction of the old economic structure along with its whole immense superstructure. I hope you remember what constitutes under this super structure. Marx puts virtually almost everything else within the super structure except the economic base.

Marx is pointing out at the possibility of the destruction of old economic structure along with a whole immense super structure. Marx argues that almost everything else other than the economic relations, which includes law, literature, and notions of morality, social organization, political system, and character of your state, all that is part of the super structure would have its replacement by a new mode of production suitable for the continued growth of the forces of production.

Marx understands social change as something that is propelled by a continuous change and advancements in the forces of the production. The super structure gets replaced because the base gets completely reformulated. Human history propelled by the accumulation of productive forces is thus for Marx a story of how one mode of production develops, matures, stagnates and eventually gives way to another more advanced mode of production.

That is why along with number of other scholars of modernity in Europe, he also conceives of social changes as something that is taking place through different distinct stages. If you remember when we discussed August Comte, he talks about three stages of history, theological, metaphysical and positive. When we discuss Durkheim, we came across similar kind of characterization. So, here Marx also is somebody who belongs to that category of thinkers who understood social change as

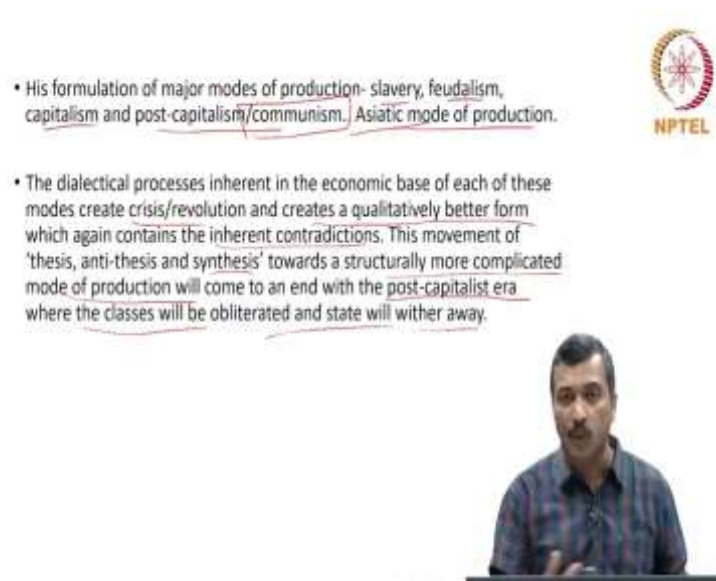


taking place through definitive periods in a kind of an evolutionary manner.

This is something quite common characteristic of most of the social scientist and thinkers of Europe during that particular time. And needless to say they all understood Europe as representing that particular model of historical evolution and argued that almost every other society needs to do this catching up this business with Europe. They are talking about one mode of production developing, maturing and then it stagnates because the relations of productions is not able to catch up with the changes taking place in the mode of production and then eventually that leads to a crisis, a revolution which takes entire thing into a qualitatively different realm.

The new mode of production again has this kind of an inherent contradiction. Heere you will see Marx very beautifully implors the method of dialectics, the thesis, anti thesis and the synthesis and the synthesis again contains the contradictory qualities of opposite tendencies which again used leads to kind of a higher stage.

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The slide contains two bullet points:

- His formulation of major modes of production- slavery, feudalism, capitalism and post-capitalism/communism, Asiatic mode of production.
- The dialectical processes inherent in the economic base of each of these modes create crisis/revolution and creates a qualitatively better form which again contains the inherent contradictions. This movement of 'thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis' towards a structurally more complicated mode of production will come to an end with the post-capitalist era where the classes will be obliterated and state will wither away.

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His formulation of major modes of productions are slavery, feudalism, capitalism and post capitalism or communism and Asiatic mode of production. This is again a very controversial and contentious matter that how many specific modes of productions did Marx formulate. For example, he talks about slavery, he talks about feudalism, capitalism, and post capitalism. He does not really call it as communism. He does not really develop it further and he also has a completely different idea of Asiatic mode of production which really does not fit into this this universal category.

There are quite a lot of interesting discussions and debates about types of modes of productions. Because as we discussed the other day, Marx presents a Meta- theory of social and historical

change. A theory which is so broad in its scope that, he is trying to give a theory about the whole social change the humankind has witness so far. In order to give a very comprehensive theory of that sort, he is providing a universal explanation which must be applicable to whole world to every society, to every culture, to every human civilization.

That is not an easy task. That is why this whole lot of debate and discussions about how many specific modes of production that Marx propounded and the argument whether Marx understood this Asiatic mode of production, and all comes up. Because there are a lot of argument that whether Marx really understood the kind of economic character of Asian societies. Because the kind of material that he received to formulate this Asiatic mode of production as a unique mode of production was very limited. They were erroneous and there was lot of criticism in that direction.

The dialectical processes inherent in the economic base of each of these modes create crisis revolution and creates a qualitatively better form which again contains the inherent contradictions. This movement of thesis, anti thesis and synthesis towards a structurally more complicated mode of production will come to an end with the post capitalist era where the classes will be obliterated and the state will wither away. This is another prophecy or prediction that Marx put forward.

We all know that this did not come true and this was an inspiration for whole lot of political activist who were involved with Marxism and communism and they all believed that the capitalism will destroy itself. Because as per this Marxian argument, capitalism also has the seeds of its own destruction. It should lead to a kind of a revolution and Marx argued that it will lead to post capitalist era whether we call it as a communism or not. It will be a classless society and the state will wither away. He even argued that it will be characterized by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is an extremely problematic, controversial and contentious arguments.

What does it mean to be a state less society? Are we anywhere close to that kind of a situation? What is there to replace the state? And what does it mean to be a classless society? At least as of now, we realize that these ideas remain only as wishful thinking imaginations. It has not coming to reality in anywhere. Even in some of the so called communist society whether it is USSR, or China these things have not happened. Classes have not withered away, the state have not been obliterated. On the contrary, they all had extremely powerful and authoritative states.

One of the weakest points in Marxian theory is his prediction about social revolution and era of communism and the emergence of a class less society, a situation where people live without being ruled by a state.

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• He defined classes on the basis of ownership of the means of production. Those who own and those who do not own. The 'haves' and 'have-nots'

• Masters and slaves; feudal lords and serfs; bourgeoisie and proletariat

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".



Marx defines classes on the basis of ownership of the means of production. So, unlike other definition of class which is on the basis of economic position, or the money that you own, Marxian definition of class is rather simple, it is defined on the basis of the ownership of means of production. The people who own the means of production and the people who do not own is the determining factor. For example, in a factory, the workers do not own the means of production because they do not own the factory, do not own the raw materials, do not own the machinery and on the other hand factory owner owns the means of production.

The conflict is between these two classes; the haves and have nots, the masters and slaves, feudal lords and serfs, bourgeoisie and proletariat. The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles as we discussed. Marx wants to understand the social change as something that is unfolding through the conflict between these two classes.

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- Class struggle
- Class polarization
- From class in itself to class for itself when the workers realize their historical role
- Revolution

"THE PROLETARIANS HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT THEIR CHAINS. THEY HAVE THE WORLD TO WIN. WORKINGMEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!"

Marx also discusses about his idea of class struggle. He defines that the movement from slavery to feudalism, feudalism to capitalism and then from capitalism to communism, all these things happened through class struggle. So, let us spend a couple of minutes trying to understand the Marxian notion of class struggle. Marx argues that this class struggle will be preceded by something what he calls as class polarization.

In a capitalist society, people will become extremely conscious about their class position and the society will get polarized into two mutually antagonistic group. The one who owns the means of production, the others who do not own the means of production. As per his account, in a capitalist society all workers will assume a class consciousness. There is a very important term that he uses, he says from the 'class in itself' people will move towards 'class for itself' when workers realize their historical role.

This is an extremely important point because it talks about how the consciousness of workers play an extremely important role in the creation of history. Marx would argue that a worker, while working in an extremely exploitative situation, will realize that he is a part of a larger working class population and he has historic role to play and his historical role is to over throw this existing situation. Because, with class consciousness, he realizes that the system of exploitation that he is experiencing is not something unique to him. Everybody of his class, every other proletariat, and every other worker is subjected to similar forms of exploitation.

Therefore, the working class has a historic role to over throw this particular system so that is why Marx says that from a 'class in itself', situation where the people are not aware of the class consciousness to a 'class for itself' situation where the members are aware of class consciousness

and they become aware of the of their important role as a member of a class. And they are aware that they have to or they are supposed to take part in the historical process of overthrowing this particular system.

Here it is an extremely important point where Marx is bringing in elements of changes in consciousness, different understanding of subjective position, how different forms of consciousness inspire people to take a forms of political activism and that leads to what he calls it as a revolution. A revolution is complete comprehensive change of society which propels a society into a completely different and higher realm. Marx describe this in his Communist Manifesto with this extremely popular quote which has inspired millions and millions of people across the globe.

‘The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have the world to win, workingmen of all countries unite’. This is a call for all the working class people and as I told you, this has really inspired millions of people for generations. We are winding up the session today and we will meet in the next class with discussion on capitalism. Thank you.