

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 24
Marx on Democracy, and Colonialism

Welcome back to the class. Today, we are going to discuss Marx on Democracy and Colonialism. And we know that given the breadth of Marxian writings and the depth of his scholarship, there is hardly anything where we cannot have a really Marxian interpretation or a Marxist perspective on. But because of the very reason that Marx has written so extensively on a wide variety of topics, the list of topics could be endless, where we can talk about Marxian approach, or the Marxian perspective on so and so issues. But the two of the most important issues that are widely discussed are Marx's position on some of the crucial issues like democracy and colonialism, because the subsequent theoretical debates about democracy and colonialism has evolved over the last century.

Many of these debates are very critically analysed such as Marx's position the democratic institution of principle of democracy and the historical episode of colonialism. What was Marxian position on these issues, and to what extent, we can critically analyse Marxian position, democracy, colonialism? Those were extremely controversial position, there have been voluminous writings on these topics, but it is important that we have some idea about that.

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Marx on Democracy



- More complicated than his position on 'dictatorship of the proletariat'
- His analysis of politics and democracy by placing them in the context of class struggle. The state is the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie" - it rules with the economic interests of the bourgeoisie in mind.
- Marx writes that "the so-called *rights of man* ... are simply the rights of a member of civil society, that is, of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community."
- Civil society is essentially the economic realm, for "the anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy."



Let us discuss Marx on Democracy first. The common sensical understanding is that Marx never favoured democracy because he was a communist and communism and democracy do

not go together. Communism is always associated with some sort of dictatorship and that has been the experience of the world for the past several decades. The communist countries, where the ideology of communism has become a state ideology, in those societies, democracy does not have any value and it is mostly run in an extremely dictatorial manner.

The case of Soviet Union or the case of Cuba, China, or a host of other communist countries really stand testimony to that. Whether you say it is just an aberration or it is not how communism is supposed to function, these arguments do not hold water, because what is more important for us is to understand how they empirically get it realized.

One of the most important position that is often attributed to Marx is his very controversial remark that a post capitalist society will be characterized by the dictatorship of the proletariat. He did not present it as democratic thing, but it was as a dictatorship of the proletariat. And his term dictatorship is an extremely problematic term. And we know that dictatorship by anybody can be problematic.

Dictatorship, even given by the most benevolent person, or the most benevolent of the social groups can be extremely problematic, because it fundamentally goes against some of the ideals of democracy. It goes against the idea of division of power, it goes against some of the important central ideas of democracy. But the point here is that Marxian position is much more complicated or much more nuanced than this easy characterization that is often assumed on the basis of this argument that he characterized the post capitalist society as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Let us have a look at Marxian analysis of politics and democracy. Marx, by placing them in the context of class struggle, understood the state is the executive committee of the bourgeoisie. It rules with the economic interests of the bourgeoisie in mind. And when you look at Marxian critic of democracy, you come across some of the most powerful criticisms against the idea as well as practice of democracy. Because most of the justifications for democracy, most of the celebrations of democracy comes from a liberal understanding that every individual is an equal and independent individual bestowed with a set of rights and democracy is a perfect system where each of these individual is able to make use of his or her rights.

Here comes the Marxian criticism. So Marxian criticism is extremely critical of the argument that in a moral system, everybody is equal. The argument that the political equality does not

make every person equal. Political equality is only one dimension, but far more important is the question of economic equality. So, there is a fundamental tension between Marxian understanding of equality and the liberal understanding of equality.

That is the main reason why Marxism is able to provide the most powerful critic of the way in which democracies is celebrated or liberalism is celebrated. Marxian analysis of politics and democracy is something very important, because he is extremely sceptical of this whole idea of democracy without achieving economic equality, and he is extremely critical of the state, because it always protects the economic interests of the ruling class

Marx firmly believed and then argued that the state by default, by design, by its structure will be bound to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie. Marx establishes it with historical evidences, and also through his analysis that the state cannot act in favour of the proletariat. Marx uses this interesting term, to denote the state such as the “executive committee of bourgeoisie”. I do not think that you can use a more demeaning term than that.

It is an executive committee of the bourgeoisie. It rules with the economic interests of the bourgeoisie in mind. So, Marx argues in theory, you cannot have a modern nation state, which is expected to do justice to the course of the proletariat and the poor. Marx writes that the so-called rights of man are simply the rights of a member of civil society that is egoistic man, a man separated from other men and from other community.

This is a most profound criticism of the liberal perception of equality, where everybody is seen as individual, disconnected from the society, guided by self-interest, egoistic person, a person who has no commitment the larger society. Such a person as per Marxian discourse is not aware about the historical role supposed to be played by him as he is only bothered about one's own life. Marx is extremely critical of that idea of a man as in right bearing individual in the civil society.

Civil society is essentially and Marx says “the anatomy of civil society is to be sought in the political economy”. So, this whole theoretical debate about civil society is really fascinating. That itself different topic to understand the way in which the liberal idea of civil society emerged as a space between the individual and the state. And of course, with the later theorization of scholars like Habermas, this idea of public sphere comes into picture. So, public sphere and civil society are seen as some of the most important stepping stone for the flowering or the flourishing of democracy.

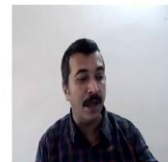
Later Marx almost dismisses the role of civil society. Later Gramsci almost reinterprets or provides a far nuanced analysis of civil society. He recuperates, rescues and reinvents civil society as an important space for building this class consciousness. So that is an extremely interesting analysis in itself. But for Marx, civil society cannot be made sense of by only looking at its political realm.

Essentially, it has to be understood at its economical realm, the anatomy of civil societies besought in the political economy, what is the structure of a civil society, what is its economic composition, how are different sections of people are structurally incorporated in it? Who gets to own, who do not own and what is the kind of the relationship between this. This particular analysis is at the central of Marxian architecture.

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- Real democracy is not based on constitutions or representative institutions for these can be discarded at any time. Rather, democracy means overcoming the dichotomy of public power embodied in the government and social power embodied in civil society - essentially it means socialism, the overcoming of class inequality.

- He praised the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871 where direct rule of people was established for its 'true democratic character'
- Marx thus advocates a decentralized form of participatory democracy that has many affinities with his anarchist rivals and the republican tradition of Aristotle through Rousseau. He supports a proletarian space, a public sphere, where workers can develop the qualities necessary to govern society.



The real democracy is not based on constitutions or representative institutions for these can be discarded at any time. Marx argues that true democracy needs true sense, cannot be reduced to constitutional or representative institution because it can be dismissed or discarded at any time by a powerful coup.

Rather, democracy means overcoming the dichotomy public power embodied in the government and social power embodied in the civil society. So, he talks about overcoming the dichotomy of public power embodied in the government that is on the one hand, you have the state, which have all the political power, and in the civil society, you have the social power, which is defined by the kind of an economic inequality.

In the Marxian conception of a socialist society, you will not have this kind of inequality in the realm of the government as well as that of the civil society. It is a state where class inequality is completely obliterated. And that leads to a real sense of democracy, where everybody has equal status, both at the level of the state as well as that of the civil society.

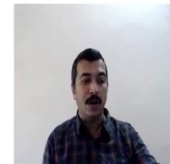
Marx praised the short lived Paris Commune of 1871, where direct rule of people was established for the “true democratic character.” So, Marx was not in principle against the idea of democracy, but his understanding of democracy was much more radical and he was not ready to accept democracy only within the realm of political right, without bringing in the question of economic inequality. And that is an extremely important point that we need to keep in mind.

Marx believed in democracy as the rule of the people, by the people in the truest sense, in the most radical sense. Marx thus advocated a decentralized form of participatory democracy that has many affinities with the anarchist rivals and the republican traditions of Aristotle through Rousseau. He supports a public sphere, where workers can develop qualities necessary to government, or to govern the society. So, he talks about a much more radical character of democracy, where the state is actually run by the people.

The practical difficulty to have such a radical conception of democracy is a completely different question, how does one do that? Can we live in a society where everybody can equally participate in the form of government? So, these kind of practical questions are not immediate concerns of Marx, but he is concerned about the kind of a larger idea of having a system, where everybody, especially the proletariat is able to take part in the process of democracy.

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- True socialist democracy depends on social equality and collective participation rather than constitutional guarantees and representative institutions.
- Drawing on the republican tradition Marx argues that freedom and community are interdependent, and freedom can only be realized in conditions where people control their activity.
- Marx recognizes the limits of purely political change that only alters laws without changing the social conditions of particular groups. People have to transform the social world themselves if change is to be effective and lasting.



The true socialist democracy depends on social equality and collective participation rather than constitutional guarantees and representative institutions. So, he is arguing that when socialist democracy is established after socialist revolution has taken place and a classless society is established, it will be the most conducive society for the true sense of democracy. Drawing on the republican tradition, Marx argues that the freedom and community are interdependent, and freedom can only be realized in conditions where people control their activity.

Marx recognizes the limits of purely political change that only alters laws without changing the social conditions of particular groups. People have to transform the social world themselves if change is to be effective and lasting. So, this is his, the fundamental point, unless you bring in fundamental or substantial changes in the social structure, where you make a more egalitarian society, where you do not have a system of haves and have nots, where you do not have a system of a powerful group of few people controlling or amassing the mass amount, the vast amount of wealth and the vast majority of the people are made to suffer, that society for Marx does not represent the spirit of democracy.

It is an extremely powerful criticism. Whenever we can talk about crony capitalism, when we talk about how democratic institutions in capitalist system have been distorted Marx comes to mind, because he is the one who very profoundly critiques the problem of inequality in liberal democracy.

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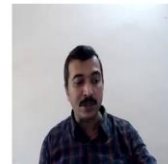
Marx on Colonialism



His Eurocentric orientation is clearly evident in the discussions on colonialism.

Depiction of Asiatic Mode of Production as static, unchanging..lack of private property....unlike Capitalism

- According to Marx, non-Western peoples lack a history. In his words, "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society."
- "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented."



Now, let us have a brief look at Marxian take on colonialism. This is also something extremely controversial, because Marx lived during the time of colonialism, and Marx had written quite lot of things about colonies, about the course of colonization. He has written extensively on India where he had made a thesis for the Asiatic Mode of Production as a separate mode of production. He had a very low opinion on the intellectual role of Indians. He thinks that the British invasion as a necessary shock for Indians, he considered it as positive.

At the same time, he is also extremely critical of the exploitative aspects of colonialism. So, it is a more complicated thing that whether Marx was for colonialism or against as Marxian position is much more nuanced. But it is very clear that his Eurocentric orientation is clearly evident in the discussion on colonialism. And this Eurocentrism is a common character of in the realm of every thinker Europe during that time.

Even today, taking social theory beyond the realm of Eurocentrism, only partially successful. It said that the Eurocentrism is something so inherently engraved in the thinking and Marx was no free from that. For Marx, Europe represented the model, Europe represented the true essence of humanity and all other societies were seen as backward and Europe as leading the world.

So, this depiction of Asiatic mode of production as static, unchanging, characterised by lack of private property has received lot of criticism. Marx argued that why that the Asian societies are not able to make progress is because of their mode of production, where he

argued that it is very static, it is unchanging with lack of private property, as it is all ruled by kings.

This particular economic structure, Marx argues is not conducive for a larger change, unlike Europe, it has seen a kind of a larger transformation through capitalist revolution and the ultimately, like I said a socialist revolution. So, his analysis of Asiatic mode of production is quite controversial as well as very interesting. So, according to Marx, non-Western people lack history. In his words, “Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history.

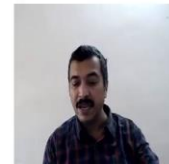
What we call it history, is for the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis that unresisting and unchanging society.” We will find the statement as extremely offensive, isn't it? Because it actually presents a much distorted idea of what history means. Marx wrote this idea because he had a very peculiar, distorted idea regarding what constitutes history of India.

Otherwise, no person who is sensitive today about Eurocentrism or about racism, won't write this kind of much blackened arguments that Indian society has no history at all. And whatever history Indian society has is only the history of intruders, who are coming and conquering all these people, unresisting and unchanging society. Which in a sense, is blatantly incorrect.

It is historically incorrect, because if you look at the type of engagement that India had with the rest of the societies through trade, and through philosophical engagements, it is very immense. It was quite uncharitable for Marx to write this. He wrote ‘they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’ which is another colonial trope, that every colonies, do not know how to represent and they must be represented by a higher authority, a politically superior position. This is a very problematic understanding.

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- Marx's endorsement of European colonial expansion as a necessary step in the progress of the world and its advance toward socialism. The oppressive Asiatic mode of production needs an external agent to overthrow it, which appears with European colonialism.
- For Marx, the political unity of India and its modern means of transport are the result of British actions. Marx recognizes that British imperialism destroyed Indian culture, separating India "from all its ancient traditions and from the whole of its past history."
- Marx writes that "whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution."



Marx's endorsement of European colonial expansion as a necessary step in the progress of the world and its advance towards socialism. So now, once we realize that Marx was Eurocentric, he was very uncharitable with the civilization of such societies outside the European realm, but his position towards colonialism is something more interesting. He says that European colonial expansion as a necessary step in the progress of the world and its advance towards socialism.

Marx argued that European colonialism, though it was exploitative, it was violent, it was something necessary for India, it was a welcome sign because it was a necessary in the progress of the world, and its advancement towards socialism. Because Marx argued that this transition from feudalism to capitalism is taking place only in Europe, and that will ultimately happen transform into a socialist society.

As Europe has already done that, and the rest of the societies are lagging behind, they are not able to do this transformation from feudalism to capitalism. Marx believed that this process of colonialization will push every colonies into this process into the system of capitalism, which ultimately lead to that of socialism.

Marx was dreaming that kind of a situation. The oppressive Asiatic mode of production needs an external agent to overthrow it, which appeared with the European colonialism. And this is an extremely important point. And for Marx, the political unity of India and its modern means of transportation are the results of British actions. So, as I told you, Marx looked at India as a static society, which did not have a history, which did not transform itself for a

long time, was so lethargic. He even characterized Indian state as a vegetative state in some of his writings which I have not quoted here.

At the same time, Marx recognizes that the British imperialism destroyed Indian culture separating India from all its ancient traditions and from the whole of its past history. He recognizes that, that British imperialism destroyed Indian culture, separated India from all its ancient traditions and from the core of its past history. And we do not exactly know what he meant by Indian culture, what kind of position that he had towards it. However, it is an extremely important point for contemporary debate, what did British colonialism do to India.

Of course, you know that they completely destroyed Indian craft business, tradition economic industries and they looted India in the plain sense of the word. But there are also other arguments that, a host of new ideas were brought to India through the course of colonialism. Indian society was never known for the whole celebration of idea of equality, given it is a caste bound society, ideas of justice, ideas of equality was never practiced in India.

For on other words, there was religious legitimacy or cultural legitimacy to look at Indian or the different sections of Indians as unequal. So, a host of institutions including modern judiciary, modern legal system, and ideas of rights, bureaucracy, and a host of other ideas around this modern sense of emancipation, modern enlightenment ideas were brought in India through the process of colonialism.

Colonialism had a completely different impact on the traditionally underdeveloped, underprivileged sections of society in India. So, a host of scholars who belonged to the underprivileged sections of India would argue that colonialism was a positive phenomenon, because without colonial intervention, the lower castes could not have been able to enjoy the fruits of freedom, they would have not be able to realize a kind of happiness or even the token form of representation they have now.

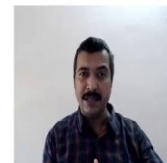
The debate is more complicated and I am not going into that. Marx writes that “Whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.” Several scholars have also argued that the kind of material or data that Marx received about India was also very limited.

This is very much reflected in Marxian writing on India as Marx has never visited India, for that matter, many of the European thinkers never visited India, but they have written extensively on the basis of a very limited amount of material received which was biased

about Indians. That must have really influenced their understanding about India. But he is very clear when he wrote that, “Whatever may have been the crimes of England, she has the unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution.”

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- Marx criticizes European imperialists for their brutal treatment of native peoples, sometimes coming close to advocating wars of national liberation against colonialism, especially in the case of Ireland.
- Marx indicts British colonialism in India, stating that it was based on plunder and murder as hideous as the slave trade.
- The British exploited the Indians both financially and physically. As Marx states, the British taxed Indians so that it crushed “the mass of the Indian people to the dust, and ... its exaction necessitates a resort to such infamies as torture.”
- He was extremely critical of the British trade of opium in China and the exploitative trade relations with India



At the same time, Marx criticized European imperialists for their brutal treatment of native people, sometimes coming close to advocating wars of national liberation against colonialism, especially in the case of Ireland. So, Marx, while he understood this as a historic intervention, he was also extremely critical of the violent and exploitative nature of the colonial. He never justified the crimes of colonialism.

Sitting in London, he was one of the most vocal critic of British imperialism, the way in which they looted wealth from Africa, from Asia, from India. And he never condoned that. Marx indicts British colonialism in India, stating that it was based on plunder and murder as hideous as the slave trade. So, this is also something important. While Marx celebrated the colonial intervention of India, he was also extremely critical of the brutality and exploitation associated with the colonial time, and he even equated it with slave trade, though the British did not engage in the kind of slavery in India that they have done with the different countries.

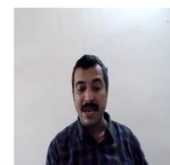
The British exploited the Indians, both financially and physically, as Marx states, the British taxed India so that it crushed “the mass of the Indian people to the dust, and... its exaction necessitated a resort to such infamies as torture.” So, Marx is very direct and vocal in his condemnation of the British exploitation and British decimation of Indian craft and Indian

culture, local industries, everything and the kind of an exploitation that it inflicted on Indian society.

He was extremely critical of British trade of opium in China and the exploitative trade relations with India. And you know the, the British trade of opium in China had very devastating effect on the Chinese population, especially with the kind of absolutely immoral and unethical ways in which the British went ahead opium trade, and also the kind of exploitation, taking away all the raw materials from India and making them into finished products and then bringing them back and then selling at much higher prices, which prompted the Gandhiji to start the famous Swadesi movement. In sum, Marx was quite conscious about the economic rationale of British colonialism.

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- Marx states that India had been "the great workshop of cotton manufactures, since immemorial times." but that Britain demolished it, in part through imports.
- In such a context expulsion of foreigners is just. Marx states: "dispassionate and thoughtful men may perhaps be led to ask whether a people are not justified in attempting to expel foreign conquerors who have so abused their subjects."
- Indians will not enjoy the fruits of their own labor until a socialist revolution occurs in Britain. or "the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether."



Marx, states that India had been “the great workshop of cotton manufacturers, since immemorial times.” but that Britain demolished it in parts through imports. So, Marx identifies the way in which the Britishers crushed the India's indigenous craft, indigenous industries, indigenous economy, and he writes about it in detail. In such a context, Marx states, that “dispassionate and thoughtful men may perhaps led to ask whether people are not justified in attempting to expel foreign conquerors who have so abused their subjects.” So, sometimes even goes to the extend of supporting the kind of armed revolution against colonialism.

Indians will not enjoy the fruits of their own labour unless a socialist revolution occurs in Britain or “the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English

yoke altogether.” So, it is very interesting that Marx sees the liberation of India through the liberation of British themselves. Marx wished that if a working class revolution takes place in Britain, and that could automatically lead to a similar revolution in India and would end the kind of colonial or imperial domination over India and resultant exploitation, or the Hindoos themselves shall kind of grow strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.

These are some of the observations or some of the interesting snippets about Marxian opposition on democracy and colonialism. Because his positions have been always controversy, as they aren't very simple. In each of his positions, Marx was preoccupied with a very Eurocentric understanding of history and he had a foolhardy conviction about the revolution as a social law or about the inevitability of revolution.

It was not nuanced enough to accept other possible course of human history. So, these thoughts become more and more evident, when you discuss Marxian analysis of colonialism and colonialism. We will end the class here and we will have one more session of Marx where we will have critical appraisal of Karl Marx as a sociologist. So, see you there and thank you.