
UNIT 2 MARXISM

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Learning Objectives



This unit would enable you to know:

- the background of Marxism as a theory;
- use of Marxism in anthropological work; and
- critical evaluation of Marxism.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit would deal with Marxism as an anthropological theory. We would trace the roots of Marxism how it developed from a theory originally forwarded by Karl Marx (1818-83) one of the greatest intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Marx was widely known as a political activists and his *Communist Manifesto* was one of the most widely circulated political pamphlet known in history. Friedrich Engels worked closely with Karl Marx and contributed to the theories. Marxism as a theory was not rooted in any academic discipline. It had developed as a theory in practice for the labour class. Although it has dealt largely with the sociological, economical and anthropological issues. It entered Anthropology very late as a theory. Initially it was conceived as a sociological theory because the concept of class central to it was seen as a character of urban and western societies only. Anthropology was initially regarded as a subject dealing with classless societies and therefore Marxism was not seen as relevant.

2.2 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MARXISM

In order to understand the Marxian ideology and its adaptation by anthropologists we must first understand the philosophy and theory postulated by Karl Marx. The writings of Karl Marx had inspiration from Hegel's work, whose dialectical methodology was used to propagate the theory of social change by Marx. Though an inspiration yet, Hegel came under the spanner of Marx's criticisms, as the

latter's ideas were more inclined as a social and political activist. Before we move into the depths of the theory let's have a quick understanding of Hegel's dialectical ideology.

Hegel had the notion that *thesis* and *antithesis* leads to a *synthesis*, what in other words is understood as the dialectical view of the world. In Hegel's work, human mind is the Creator of the material world, but it gets alienated from it and this mind and material duality is the thesis and antithesis that seeks resolution in unity that can come only from the Spirit or when mind recognises that matter is its own creation and ceases to be controlled by it. This leads to alienation, wherein the mind no longer recognises the matter as its own creation.

Marx's general idea about society is known as his theory of *historical materialism*. It is historical because Marx has traced the evolution of human society from one stage to another. It is called materialistic because Marx has interpreted the evolution of society in terms of its material or economic bases. Marx's major contribution was his view of society; unlike other intellectuals he did not see society as an organism but as a hierarchical structure. The earlier view put forward by Hegel, was that ideas were the cause of change. He supported it by saying "I think therefore I am." On the contrary Marx said 'I am therefore I think.' For Hegel it was consciousness which determine our experiences. His was an ideological approach unlike Marx's materialism. For Marx human being comes first and then comes the ideas. Marx said that the ideas were the result of objective reality. Thus he argued 'if we want to think we need to eat first'.

2.2.1 Marxism as a Theory

Marx's theory basically deals with the contradictions found in the capitalist society of his time. He stated that the most crucial fact is the fact of production. If human being has to live, it has to eat and thus, he argues is the reason one produces. He considered production as a social process. In this system of production human beings enter into relations which are 'independent of their will'. It means these relations existed before the individuals entered into the relations and these would be continued in the future unless they are changed. Herein, let's understand according to Marx what is the base of society and then we would move on to how in this society class and conflict arises.

2.2.1.1 Modes of Production

Karl Marx identified in his theory two components of production in a society that forms its backbone – a) The material component – it consists of the material, thing, resources, capital, technology and so one can call them *means of production* through which production is done. E.g. – land. b) Ownership of means of production – it comprises those who all are working on the resources. These are always social components. It is called *relation of production*. The nature of these relations would vary from society to society.

These two together are called *mode of production* which according to Marx forms the base of economic infrastructure of the society. This economic framework also called as infrastructure supports the structures on which society is founded- the institution of law, politics, and ideology. Marx used the word *superstructure* to define it. For Marx base and superstructure can be identified. A change in the base brings change in the superstructure. Means of production keeps evolving. It changes frequently. Marx defined it in terms of human creativity. As human beings have innovative ideas technologies and other means of production keep on changing. On the other hand the relation of production lags behind. This starts stopping

means of production. This emerges a contradiction between these two. Thus, relation of production has to change keep pace with the means of production. This contradiction brings change to the whole system i.e. superstructure. Marx believed that this kind of contradiction brings dynamicity to the system. Marx applied it to the human society. For him, central to the understanding of society is the mode of production.

Marx developed a generalised history of modes of production from primitive communism to present-day capitalism. Marx's view of a mode of production was that it was made up of the forces of production, which were the technological means by which society produced the goods it wanted, and the relations of production, which specified the relations between people pertaining to both the division of labour and the division of the items produced. As a generalisation, it is possible to say that early in this century there was a tendency to economic and technological determinism on the part of Marxist thinkers. Here the division between base and superstructure in society has been vital. The base is seen to be composed of the economic forces of society: the forces and relations of production. These influence the superstructure of society, made up of the social divisions into kin groups or classes and the ideological apparatus or worldview of the group. Those holding to a strict division between base and superstructure see cause flowing in one direction from the forces of production, such that once one can understand these forces all other elements of society become clear. These views bring them close to those of Leslie White, who saw the energy-processing capacity of society as crucial.

2.2.1.2 Class and Class Conflict

Both Marx and Engels were greatly influenced by Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877). Morgan had described three stages of human society in an evolutionary sequence- savagery, barbarism and civilisation. Basing on this, Engels defined *primitive communism*. Morgan had described savagery and barbarism of having total equality. Primitive communism was derived from this concept that the society in the primitive time had total equality. Engels defines that in primitive communism there is no man and man contradiction. Marx and Engels accepted the egalitarian concept for tribal societies. This concept was more or less imaginary. It served the purpose that human society was not a class ridden society in the beginning rather it was class free. It means that human society can come to an equal stage in times to come.

It was developed in an evolutionary manner by both Marx and Engels. In ancient human society there was no man and man contradiction but man and nature contradiction was there. They argued that for this, there was a need to control nature. Gradually improvisation of technique took place to control nature. Not all the people at a time, but some people were able to discover these techniques and they were able to have control over some lands. Two stages emerged in the society – the people who had the technologies and the others who had not the technologies and became dependent upon the first type. Those who had the technological advantages took others under them. From here comes two categories of people – the masters and the slaves. Masters had the control over resources and the slaves could not. Slavery evolved into feudalism where the dominant mode of production was agriculture. Again two groups emerged- lords and the vessels. Then comes the stage where factory was founded and production became more and more technologically oriented. This is the capitalist mode of production. Again two groups of people came into existence – the capitalists and the bourgeois.

PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM

SLAVERY	MASTER-SLAVE (UN free to sell labour)
BARBARISM	LORD-VESSEL (relatively un-free)
CAPITALISM	CAPITALISTS-PROLITERIATES (free)
COMMUNISM	

As we move downward the class becomes free to sell labour. This dual class structure was derived by Marx. Marx identified basically two classes- the class who own the production and the other who operate upon the production. The change from savagery to barbarism indicates the change in mode of production. In these stages also class conflict was there, but the kind of class conflict that according to Marx would lead to communism dwell in the capitalist society.

Herein, the key concept is Marx’s definition of class, defined in terms of ownership of property. Such ownership vests a person with the power to exclude others from the property and to use it for personal purposes. In relation to property, Marx’s had divided the society into three categories: the bourgeoisie class (who own the means of production such as machinery and factory buildings, and whose source of income is profit), landowners (whose income is rent), and the proletariat class (who own their labour and sell it for a wage). According to Marx, the proletariat class is always looked down by the bourgeoisie class and the fruits of labour are not rightly distributed among the proletariat class. This leads to a class conflict beings and one day it would reach its pinnacle and the whole structure would fall leading to a new type of economy and government.

Reflection: Dialectical Logic of Karl Marx

Karl Marx a positivist with a scientific vision uses Hegel’s dialectical theory to create a materialistic history where economic forces and relations create contradictions that move the system forward. The society as conceived by Karl Marx in a Capitalist economy has two classes- the *bourgeoisie* (the ruling class- the haves) and the *proletariat* class (the working class- the have not’s). Marx stated that in such a society there is a gap between the two classes and as the gap widens- the rich becoming richer by exploiting the labour class and the latter becoming poorer that alienation comes into play. The exploitation passing through the various stages reaches the Utopian wherein all ceases to exist and it would be the end of history.

Later on Marx’s theory faced criticism because of its futuristic aspect. The prediction that the present capitalist society would change with a revolution and finally it will bring equality has not been fulfilled. Capitalism continued, as the revolution came to the feudalistic society but not to the capitalistic society. Scholars argued at one point that Marxists is one method along with other methods. Moreover, time and again in history it has been noted that the Capitalist economy has rebounded. It neither died away nor did it change to a new system, as in the case of the Great Depression in the early 1930’s, whereas the fall of the USSR a Socialists economy was a setback to the predictions of Marx’s theory.

As stated above the theory of Marx was denounced by his contemporaries and it was only in the 20th century that it was revived and scholars from various fields started using the concept in their fields. Thus, the works based on Marx’s ideology is known as Marxism. In the next section we would see how Marxian ideas were applied by Anthropologists.

2.3 MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGY – AN OVERVIEW

In the theoretical field, Marxism has faced many criticisms. The main criticism that centers on this theory is about its futuristic attitude towards human society. Marx extensively dealt with his concern about how capitalist society would change and how communism would take place. To satisfy this Marx described certain stages of human society and showed how communism would take place gradually. Along with this, Marxism greatly dealt with the issue of equality. Marx vigorously talked about the equality for all. It is amazing how little academic influence it had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the west (in areas like Russia, influence was crucial and early). This general lack of influence also makes more striking the Marxist thought of Gordon Childe, the only major figure in Anthropology in the English-speaking world to be a self-professed Marxist. The relative poverty of writings by both Marx and Engels on anthropological topics, in terms of both their numbers and scope, has left Marxist anthropologists and archaeologists with a series of basic principles pertaining to the process of labour and the social and ideological relations resulting from that process, but little in the way of specific models to apply to non-capitalist societies. Also, over the century since Marx died there have been subtle currents within Marxist thought which have subjected principles drawn from Marx to constant criticism and revision. We can artificially separate two elements of Marx's thought which have been influential in anthropology in different ways: his general philosophical approach and his historical scheme of social change.

The interface of anthropology and Marxism begins with structuralism, as the theorists of the late sixties and early seventies denounced classical functionalism as inadequate; unable to explain the social realities such as imperialism and exploitation, with reference to colonial anthropology. As mentioned Morgan's *Ancient Society* had inspired Marx and Engels, but Terray examines Morgan in the framework of Althusser's over determination. Morgan had put forward several germs of thought, in the form of Idea of Property, Idea of family, Idea of Governance and the Modes of subsistence. His ethnical periods are not arbitrary or unconnected evolution of these ideas, like Tylor's version of evolution, but a coming together of stages of these institutions, where they are compatible with each other. In a similar tone to Althusser's over determination, the compatibility /incompatibilities are measured against the modes of subsistence. Thus a particular form of family, a particular form of government and a particular form of property are brought together in an ethnical period provided they are also compatible with the Mode of subsistence in that period. Thus according to Terrey, we can look upon Morgan as the father of structuralism, as the Ethnical periods have an internal structure of logical compatibility.

However the application of a classical Marxist model to the kind of societies studied by anthropologists proved problematic as is evident from the debate surrounding the concept of Lineage Mode of Production, favoured by some hard core Marxist scholars like Terray. According to some lineages may be seen as ruled by elders who exploit the labour of the young men for their political gains. But ethnographic examples do not always show that elders get brides for themselves, with the bride price created by the labour of the young men and that are later passed on to the young men. In most lineage societies with few exceptions the elders get the brides for the young men and are managers rather than usurpers of wealth. Almost all tribal societies work on the basis of rights of user rather than

rights of possession and the elders are seen as guardians and trustees and not owners, so they cannot be equated with the Bourgeoisie of the capitalist societies. Moreover we cannot say that the older and younger generations are classes in any true sense of the word; as the classes are closed entities and the generations are not; everyone who is young at one point of time has a chance of growing into an elder.

Yet structuralism and Marxism were seen as analogous especially by the school of French structuralists such as Maurice Godelier and Claude Meillasoux. Like Marxism, structuralism also believed that the surface appearance of things or the evident social world had an underlying deeper level of reality that was a logical structure capable of explaining the overlying varieties of factual data by a single logical schema. Thus for Marx the variations of history were explainable by the structural principle of contradictions and a dialectical mechanism of social transformation; thus no matter how diverse the apparent phenomenon, the underlying structural possibilities are limited. This was in direct contradiction to the empiricist methods of British social anthropology that assumed the factual reality to be the social structure. Marxism is a nomothetic as against an ideographic theory. It has a high level of generalisation and abstraction and a scientific endeavour to look for underlying logical structures. Levi-Strauss comes close to this form of analysis except that he is more interested in the abstract symbolic world of myths and representations than the realm of the political and the economic.

The French structuralist school or what may be called as the New Economic Anthropology is based quite solidly on Marxist interpretations. Maurice Godelier, one of the leading intellectuals of this school tried to resolve the issue of applying a Marxist model to a non-capitalist society. According to him it is not the form of the institution that is important but rather its function so that it is not necessary that anthropologists go looking for the economic and the political as institutions where they do not exist. Rather, in those societies, where these institutions are not autonomous the existing institutions such as kinship and religion themselves act as economic and ideological aspects of society. Thus kinship for example will act as both infrastructure and as super structure, provided we look towards the way kinship functions. These he calls as the 'inner' and 'outer' relations.

For example caste has an economic dimension such as providing for a societal division of labour, a systematic exchange of resources and labour, property relations and distribution and control of resources that act as a infrastructure. At the same time it has a ritual and mythical dimension that is the super structure; thus the same institution has the structural possibility of acting as both infrastructure and super structure. In a similar fashion we have Claude Meillasoux's classic work, *Maidens, Meals and Money*, where he gives a Marxist interpretation of both hunting, food gathering and shifting cultivation showing how they differ from the agricultural societies. His analysis of kinship is thus based on the economic aspect of kinship and according to Meillasoux, where kinship has apparently very little to contribute to economy, like in the band societies that have as their productive unit a largely fluid organisation, namely the band, whose membership varies over time and space in accordance with the environmental needs. More importantly the productive cycle is very short, and whatever is brought into the camp is consumed in a very short time (also for lack of storage technology). In this kind of economy each band is largely independent of the earlier generations and other relationships. Since there is no continuity of productive cycle the value of kinship is very little and he calls them "pre-kinship" societies as they have little structural representation of kinship ties like family and lineage. The collective identity of the band is more

important than individual parentage and thus the family ties too are weak. Immediate sharing and cooperation rather than long term or delayed consumption is the norm. The children belong more to the community than to the individual parents. Thus Meillasoux constructed a historical materialist schema of pre-capitalist or domestic economies.

A very important contribution of Marxism was to show that institutions or societies are not created as it is; there are logical connections between the material conditions and the historical circumstances that gave rise to them. A particularly critical point of view was developed with respect to imperialism and colonisation and the deliberate ignoring of conflict and war by the functionalists. For example George Balandier, in his book *Political Anthropology* has criticised Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes for their designation of some societies as acephalous or stateless, saying that many of these societies so designated were actually flourishing kingdoms that became depopulated and dispersed under the colonial aggression. In fact the entire notion of static, ageless societies has been critically appraised by Eric Wolf, in his book, *Europe and the People without History*. The introduction of history into anthropology was largely attributed to Marxism and so was the incorporation of conflict and disruption as part of an ethnography.

While British anthropology with few exceptions like Peter Worsley and Max Gluckmann, had largely avoided Marxism or any reference to it, till quite late, American Anthropology had shown the influence of Marxism, from the early twentieth century without always explicit acknowledgment. Thus Leslie White and Julian Steward, both neo-evolutionists had turned obviously to the techno-economic dimensions of society as causative of social evolution. While White talks of Energy and evolution also giving more determining role to the subsistence dimension of culture; Steward reformulated the concept of culture to make it look more like a Marxist model of society. His Core culture, with its direct relationship to environment and comprising the techno-economic dimensions of society has been given a determining role in evolution, with the peripheral culture playing a more passive role and resembling the super structure. Since both White and Steward were talking of culture rather than social systems, they make no direct connection to Marxism, yet the influence of dialectical materialism and a hierarchical structure of culture with a techno-economic determinism is found in both theories. Although Sahlins emerges as a strong critic of Leslie White and his technological determinism, yet he too forms a strong critical appraisal of capitalism in his description of what he calls as a Domestic Mode of Production.

In fact while White is more inclined towards a materialist version of Marxism, Sahlins is more inclined towards the Philosophical dimensions, emphasising the dehumanisation brought about by capitalism and the alienation of a materialist world view as propagated by modernity.

2.4 CRITICALASSESSMENT

Like any other theory Marxism has also certain criticism. The basic points are discussed below:

- 1) Marx's theory overtly concentrated on 'economic relationships' leading to a number of criticisms:
 - a) Marxism over-emphasis the importance of economic relationships and suggests that this economic relationships determine all other relationships (family, education, friendship, religious and so forth).

- b) Marxists tend to overlook other forms of (non-economic) conflict or tries to explain these conflicts as ultimately having economic roots. Radical feminists, for example, argue that the roots of male - female conflict are not simply economic (to do with social class) but patriarchal. Marxism – both old and modern - has ignored the role and position of women in society.
- 2) The subjective interpretations of individuals are under-emphasised when looking at the way in which people see and act in the social world. A person's subjective interpretation of their class, for example, might be quite different to their objective class position.
- 3) Capitalism, as an economic and political system, has proven to be more durable and flexible than Marx maintained. In modern social systems, for example, the advent of Communism does not appear imminent.

2.5 SUMMARY

In this unit the students have been acquainted with the basic tenets of Marxism and how it has influenced anthropological theories and practices. The concept of materialism derived from Marxists thoughts have given impetus to many of the anthropological works and also in many areas of intellectual thinking. The focus on history and consideration of social change as inherent aspect of society, recognition of exploitation, conflict and protest, the assessment of role governance and economy have all lent a rich nuanced depth to anthropological writings in the present century.

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Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

- 1) State how Marxism developed as a theory.
- 2) Elucidate the contribution of Marxism in anthropological arena.