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Neo-Marxism: An Interpretative Analysis

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Though Karl Marx lived for 65 years (1818-1883), but never before or after Marx any thinker could divide the scholars completely. It has happened first time in history that the social scientists and political thinkers/activists began to divide scholarship in terms of Marxists and non-Marxists. It implied that those who believed/thought and practiced Marxian ideology and others who did not. Even at empirical level there have been a number of countries which claimed to have followed Marx's ideas. Prominent amongst them had been U.S.S.R., Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Cuba, China, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos, East Germany, Angola, North Yemen, Nicaragua etc. We also find that in many countries there have been movements at different points of time which claimed to be Marxists. Latin America, Africa, and Asia provide enough examples of insurgency, protests and movements along these lines. India has also experienced a number of movements under the influence of Marxism, e.g. the CPI and the CPM led movements, Naxalite and Maoist movements are illustrations of the recent times. Such has been the importance of Marxism at the level of political activism and intended social transformations that it never happened earlier. This is one of the significant dimensions of Marxism in the 20th century onwards to the present. It is interesting to note that despite taking political dogmatic lines in some of the countries at the level of political activism, the Marxist school of thought continued to develop and grow by taking into consideration the new trends and developments in the capitalist societies. In other words, Marxism showed tremendous dynamism, which indicated that Marxian theory could be adapted to the changing material circumstances. However, there were also certain challenges to this kind of view of Marxism. Let us see how this happened.

How the ideas of Karl Marx have been interpreted over a period of

time is the main objective of the paper. The paper focuses on the way the Neo-Marxists have interpreted Karl Marx's ideas particularly with regard to capitalism. Russell, in *History of Western Philosophy* (2004) writes that communism could be regarded as a religion wherein Marx is a prophet and his *Capital* is holy book. An attempt in this paper has been made to know that how Marx's ideas have been revised, modified and interpreted after his death. The development of Marxist ideas has to be understood in terms of the following:

(a) Marx's ideas; (b) Interpretation of Marx's ideas and (c) analysis of the various changes in the development of capitalism by using Marxist methods. Neo-Marxism in its various forms like Frankfurt school, Zagreb school and critical theory are using interpretation of Marx's ideas to make analysis of modern capitalistic society.

Marx in *Capital* (1954) writes that as capitalism has its seeds of destruction within itself and the way capitalism was developing in England during his lifetime, it would collapse due to its inherent contradictions, particularly tendency in the rate of profit to fall. And a new system of production- socialism would emerge which according to him would be such where everybody would work according to his capacity and would get wages according to his needs and man would be free and creative (c.f. Judge, 2012). It would be a stateless and classless society where equality would prevail. Did Capitalism collapse? No. Rather, it did change its form to adjust with the changing means of production.

What happened after Marx? The Neo-Marxists and the critical theory emerging from the Frankfurt School in Germany and Zagreb School of Yugoslavia applying the dialectical methodology believed that proletariat would unite and overthrow the capitalist system. By the 1920s many of them started getting desperate whether it would ever happen. Why the revolution was delayed, despite the inequalities and the alienation. What should be done to bring change to the socialist society? The major problem they foresaw was that the 20th century capitalism was being regulated more and more by the state, when reason has become rationalization and has led to bureaucratization where calculations and efficiency dominate. Failing to see the change of structure, they started raising the basic question that why 20th century proletariat failed to transform the structure and also started analysing the possibility of a revolutionary class to bring change in the structure. Though the social forces in capitalism are important, but the human action cannot be ignored, rather praxis is most important. The social facts cannot be separated from the individual values/desires. Praxis has been interpreted as liberation, that is,

autonomy of the individual and elimination of his suffering and furthering of concrete happiness. MacIntyre in his book Marcuse (1970) points out that what Marx said about capitalism was valid up to 1929. But after the Great Depression capitalism took different turn. Hence, the neo-Marxists became pessimistic about the possibilities of ending the operation of capitalist culture- where new forms of oppression have emerged.

Some of the prominent Neo- Marxists belonging to Frankfurt school of Germany. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Jurgen Habermas and Walter Benjamin have made an attempt to analyse the modern capitalist societies and tend to observe certain developments which exist more at the cultural level. They argue that the modern capitalist societies have been able to resolve the economic crisis, but more serious issues have emerged in their life world. Roberts (2012) argue that they felt that Marxism needed to be developed to address the changes that had taken place since Marx's lifetime, and particularly to address the post-world war two situations. Their critique of capitalist society brings forth how it has distorted the reality for its own benefits.

In this paper only two prominent neo- Marxists- Herbert Marcuse(1898-1979) and Jurgen Habermas' (1929-) ideas would be explored. Both of them can also be termed as critical theorists. Critical in the sense of being sceptical, questioning, is an adjective to which all sociologists have an equal claim (Roberts, 2012). Horkheimer labelled the ideas developed in Frankfurt School as the critical theory. But both of them and also other neo- Marxists particularly those belonging to the Frankfurt School associated Nazism with capitalism, express it in the sense of being critical of the capitalist system- the way it is developing- the forms it is taking. The Frankfurt school represents the works undertaken at the Institute of Social Research¹ at the University of Frankfurt, Germany.

The Explanations

Marcuse gave a new explanation of why capitalism is still growing when Marx had expected differently. Marcuse wrote four books- *Reason and Revolution*, *Eros and Civilization*, *Soviet Marxism*, and *One Dimensional Man*. And it is the fourth, *One Dimensional Man*, which gave him the real recognition in which he terms the technology as the reason for the furtherance of capitalism as machines now can work for 24×7 and is capable of producing in bulk for mass consumption. The capitalist in order to sell his produce depends on various techniques of selling, through advertisements etc. The mass media generate

various needs of people which must be fulfilled. Thus the person tries to earn more and more money so that he is able to fulfil his needs. What is the nature of the needs? These needs are false needs which have been superimposed upon the people by the capitalist system and have become the source of dominance. These are the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Also satisfaction of needs is most gratifying. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave, to consume in accordance to advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs (p.5) It also provides to individual an identification with the system. Everybody becomes the part of the mainstream- equalization of Class distinctions(p.8). Therefore, everybody feels happy and free to the extent it fulfils the wants of the people- a powerful instrument of domination- a new form of social control. Thus, the man is rendered one Dimensional, ceases to be a multidimensional to which Marx refers that he will be a poet in the morning, fishermen in the evening and worker at noon (c.f. Judge, 2012: 103). The technical progress, extended to whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life(and of Power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system and to defeat or refute all protest in the name of the historical prospects of freedom from toil and domination(Marcuse, 1964:xiii). Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion (xvi).

While Habermas (1970) using hermeneutics approach² finds fault with the communication which has been distorted by the capitalist in such a systematic manner that one does not come to know about it. It occurs at the level of language, behaviour and in the realm of gestures. As a result there occurs incongruence among the three and communication ceases to be public and inter-subjective. Now the capitalist creates a hegemonic control and occupies a superior position and tends to dominate. The distinction between reality and appearance cannot be differentiated. The truth becomes sacrificial. The Capitalist through advertisements and media provides the wrong information about the facts of the goods produced. For instance, the manufacturers of whitening creams propagate that by using it one would become white. It is presented as which would make one fairer in complexion, which is not true. He argues that the free and open dialogue or by creating an ideal Speech community would create a public space where both the speaking parties would be at equal level and both would understand each other and people would create an inter subjective life world where nobody wants dominate the other. In view of Habermas, the knowledge created in this life world is true and correct. But in the advanced stage of capitalism the crisis have occurred not in the

economic or political systems rather in the administrative and socio-cultural systems.

Paradoxical Situation: Elimination of Conflict

Karl Marx has analysed the capitalistic mode of production in great detail and as has happened in earlier systems of production the capitalist system of production also would develop its seeds of destruction. The two classes- capitalist and workers in this system having antagonistic interests would develop class conflict. The forces of concentration, accumulation and centralization of capital would lead the capitalist system towards its radical change. After the revolutionary transformation of the capitalist system to a new system, namely socialism would emerge which would be a classless and stateless. Has socialism arrived anywhere? In the beginning of this paper, we listed many countries which have undergone social transformation along Marxian lines. How do Neo-Marxists interpret it? Why the working classes have failed to have consciousness?

Herbert Marcuse argues that in modern industrial societies, even the thought has been subordinated. Man has lost the potential to think critically or rationally or the power of questioning. The man has become passive being because the system has assimilated him so well. The forces which Marx saw as probable to dissent and protest have been lost as technology by and large has created affluence in general and freedom from material needs in specific. The workers also have become passive as the conditions of working have changed. The rhythm of work, the nature of skilled work, the structure (decomposition) of working class, increase in the proportion of white collar workers, decomposition of capital and consumerism have destroyed the consciousness of being critical of the system. Man does not want be free as he is so much entangled with his needs and their satisfaction.

The modern democratic political system is welfare in nature in which the state tries its best to bring equality, freedom and happiness. The artistic and literary works also have lost their traditional functions. The language has also been degraded. Innumerable instances are there in the form of advertisements, captions, headlines, journalism and abbreviations. Under such a situation men do not have the potential to dissent or protest. Neo-Marxists, particularly Marcuse, who fled to America to escape Nazis, were disgusted to find American capitalistic and political totalitarianism. They found the dominant popular culture as oppressive as fascism in Germany. But still there is no possibility of revolutionary conditions. MacIntyre writes that there is only quarter truth in assuming that there is no possibility of class conflict. There

are still many unresolved issues and challenges, like human rights, social responsibility and many unfulfilled needs of people in modern capitalist societies which they fail to address. The state/political system makes many promises which it cannot keep.

In 'Legitimation crisis in the late capitalism' Habermas (1983) writes that the advanced nature of capitalism is state regulated. When the state increasingly intervenes in the economy, there is decline of public sphere and there is growing dominance of science and technology in the service of state's interests. Therefore, state seeks to translate political issues into technical problems. As a result there is depoliticisation of issues. To do this the state propagates technocratic consciousness, which is a new kind of ideology. At the core of this consciousness is instrumental rationality- what Weber says as means-ends rationality. Habermas divides advanced capitalism into three sub systems- the economic, politico- administrative and socio-cultural (the lifeworld). Marx was first to develop sociological concept of crisis when he talks of economic crisis, that is, when there is more and more capital accumulation on one side and lot of surplus value on the other side, it creates a huge gap and such a crisis is inevitable. Now question is whether late capitalism is also following similar self destructive development pattern or the principle in advanced stage of capitalism has changed. It means that the process of accumulation no longer produces problems which would threaten the existence of the system.

As a result of this type of division of societies, Habermas identifies four types of crisis- economic crisis, rationality crisis, motivation crisis, and lastly the legitimation crisis. A crisis is a state of jeopardy that arises because of contradicting motivations of the subsystems based on systems theory. Economic crisis occurs when there is surplus value and system fails to generate sufficient production to meet people's needs. Rationality crisis exists when political system fails to meet the demands of the economy and not able to give sufficient number of instrumental rational decisions. Motivation crisis exists when actors cannot use cultural symbols to provide meaningfulness so that people feel committed to participate fully in the society. Finally, legitimation crisis³ occurs when actors lack commitment and motivation to the politico-administrative subsystem. The administrative decisions are taken independent of the aims and motives of its citizens in the formal arrangements and procedures of democracy (Habermas, 1973: 368)

The important point is that Habermas is shifting emphasis from Marx's analysis of the economic crisis of production to the crisis of meanings and commitment. In the late stage of capitalism, the systemic crises have moved to culture or lifeworld. Legitimation crisis

refers to a decline in the confidence of administrative functions, institutions, or leadership. With legitimation crisis, an institution or organization does not have administrative capabilities to maintain structures effective in achieving their goals. The state is perceived as legitimate when its citizens treat it as properly holding and exercising political power. Weber (Bendix, 1962) writes that a political regime is legitimate when the citizens have faith in that system. It occurs when the legitimate system does not succeed in maintaining the requisite level of mass loyalty. This type of crisis is seen as crisis of identity. As a result state suffers a loss of support by the public when the people judge its administration as unaccountable. This is basically a loss of public confidence, besides policy incoherence and loss of institutional will. Habermas argues if the crisis is in these areas then the focus should be on how people communicate and their interactive processes by which people would generate understanding and develop symbolic meanings.

The advanced capitalist countries specifically after Second World War have succeeded in keeping class conflict latent in its decisive areas; in extending the business cycle and transforming periodic phases of capital devaluation into a permanent inflationary crisis and filtering the secondary effects of the averted economic crisis over the consumers, school children and their parents, the sick and elderly, etc. In this way the social identity of classes breaks down and class consciousness is fragmented. The class compromise that has become part of the structure of advanced capitalism makes everyone at the same time both a participant and a victim (Bottomore and Goode, 1983: 263).

“Habermas argues that advanced industrial society has brought into existence both a new type of social structure and a new way of justifying that structure. He locates the change from liberal to advanced capitalism in two movements. The first is the increase of state intervention in economic life. The second is the growing interdependence of research and technology, which has turned the sciences into the leading productive force. The two changes have brought a new constellation of forces which render Marx’s terms of analysis increasingly obsolete. We can no longer understand the society the way Marx separates politics from economic life. The state and society no longer stand in a relationship of superstructure and infrastructure. The function of the political system is now crisis management and long term strategies of avoiding risks. The rules that guide administrative operations are ‘technical- preventative’ ones. Now problems are not solved politically but they are presented as technical

problems for which technical experts are required not the public discussion” (Connerton, 1980:100).

Propositions for Emancipation

Neo Marxists are questioning rather than challenging the power relations in the society by, at the same time, also suggesting ways and means to overcome power dynamics. All of them believe in praxis- the human action. Though social forces are important but action and consciousness cannot be ignored. And the resulting society would be classless, that is there will not be any power relations and the crisis of modern society would be overcome and man would become one with the society. But the question is that how a man can come out of such crisis when he would feel committed with the system and derives meaningfulness and is motivated. The truth would prevail in interpersonal communication. Marcuse in his ‘Program’ in 1964 first assigns the task of liberation to the minorities such as migrants, students, blacks, unemployed and downtrodden as he believes that the majority can be rescued by the minority, because they do not have will to change but ‘it is nothing but a chance” Towards end of his life he assigns this task to actor himself. Since nobody can liberate others, it is the self- consciousness of the actor which could translate into praxis. The only education that liberates is self-education. The majority of people in advanced industrial societies are often confused, unhappy and conscious of their lack of power.

Habermas believes that theory provides orientation towards right action and praxis has been extended to cover stages of emancipation. Thus, the unity of theory and practice is interpreted as liberation from externally imposed compulsions towards the autonomy of the individual, just as theory which is guided by this interest of liberation is interpreted as enlightenment (Habermas, 1973:330). For Habermas the key to emancipation lies in the ability of the people to comprehend the logic of thought and its rational basis. Therefore, communicative rationality is the basic element of his communicative action theory. If instrumental rationality is taking away the action based on mutual understanding and commitment, then the goal of critical theory is to expose this trend and suggest the ways and means to overcome it, especially when motivational and identification crisis make people aware that something is missing from their lives, they will be more receptive to emancipatory alternatives. Therefore, there is a need to restructure the meanings and commitment in social life.

Both Marcuse and Habermas are concerned about humanity, their elimination of suffering and furthering of concrete happiness. The

question is whether the goal of emancipation is realisable or it is an ideal type to strive for. Marcuse in his 'Program' in 1964 proposes the meeting of the "most advanced consciousness of humanity and its most exploited force" to take up to radical action. In 1969, in an essay on Liberation, Marcuse changes his perspective and finds the needs of the people coming in the way. These needs must undergo a 'Qualitative change' if men are to be liberated. But the majority cannot voice their true needs as they cannot feel them. The minority must voice their needs and they should rescue the passive majority- the new technically skilled working class as they neither have interest nor need to do so. They are well integrated and well rewarded as well.

Habermas has not assigned such a role to any class. Then, how and by whom the project of emancipation would be accomplished. Larson (1986) asks whether it is through revolution or is it going to be the result of prolonged educational and evolutionary process? Habermas desires to have transparent, good society and to attain it communication reason operates as an avenging force. His failure is in view of Larson to link his theory of communication action with political practice. He has not outlined a plan of linking theoretical knowledge of the conditions of emancipation with plan of action. Neo-Marxists claimed that future would be best served by negative⁵ rather than affirmative social theory. The affirmative theory used to subjugate rather than liberate people. The message they give is, it is better to maintain critical vigilance than to proceed affirmatively and optimistically.

Critical Comments

In orthodox Marxist tradition, Neo-Marxist may be designated as revisionists, though they have played the most significant role in the post-Second World War period when some of them clearly pointed out the emergence of an industrial mass consumption society on which Marxian analysis could not be blindly applied. For changing material conditions there was a need to apply Marxism in terms of method which is not reductionist. Therefore, the Neo-Marxist came up with various alternative explanations keeping the thread of dialectics at the high pedestal. Many of them were inspired by Lukacs, Gramsci and Sartre, but the Frankfurt School with its unique blend of Hegel and Marx argued that the logic of capitalism which is based on instrumental rationality needs to be examined. It is in this context that they linked the gas chambers built by Nazis with the instrumental rationality which they argued was the underlying logic of capitalism. Thus two revisions have been offered to the orthodox Marxian positions by the critical theorists. One is that praxis - the unity of theory and practice - would

lead the way to emancipation from the systematically distorted communication, whereas the other offered by Marcuse was to reject proletariat as the revolutionary class. Marcuse's emancipatory project deals with the emphasis on those social groups which in the Marxist terminology could be designated as lumpen elements or to express it little positively, the students, underclass, racially discriminated groups, etc. No wonder, during the student movement in 1960s Marcuse emerged as the most popular thinker. However, it should be remembered that Neo-Marxism is an effort to reinterpret and reconstruct Marxist theory in the changing material and ideological conditions after 1945.

Notes

1. The idea of setting up this institute was of Felix Weil, who was the only son of a rich merchant, Hermann Weil. Felix Weil had radical ideas and was friendly with George Lukacs and others who decide to set up a research institute to study Marxism. Hermann Weil financed it. The institute came into existence in 1923(Singh and Sandhu,1982). Its leading researchers were Marxists and Jews. When in 1933 Hitler came into power, they relocated the institute in New York and most of them joined it and stayed in most advanced capitalist country- America. After migrating to USA they found the dominant popular culture just as oppressive as fasism in Germany. Marcuse and Erich Fromm never returned to Germany, While Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas returned back after the Second World War was over and consecutively remained the director of the institute. The institute formally was closed in 1969(Roberts, 2012). The research carried out on Marx in this institute refers to Frankfurt school.
2. Hermeneutics is derived from the word Hermes means interpreters. Who used to convey or translate the messages of God to the people.
3. The term Legitimation crisis was first introduced in 1973 by JurgenHabermas.
4. The Third stage of Critical theory sees a renewed search for the Negative

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Karl Marx (5 May 1818 – 14 March 1883) was a German political philosopher, economist, historian, sociologist, journalist and revolutionary socialist. Marx's work in economics laid the basis for the current understanding of labor and its relation to capital, and has influenced much of subsequent economic thought. He published numerous works during his lifetime, the most notable being *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867–1894). Sorted chronologically. Karl Marx, revolutionary, socialist, historian, and economist who, with Friedrich Engels, wrote the works, including *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (*The Communist Manifesto*) and *Das Kapital*, that formed the basis of communism. Learn more about Karl Marx and his life, beliefs, and writings here. How did Karl Marx die? Karl Marx died on March 14, 1883, when he was 64, after succumbing to a bout of bronchitis. Not owning any land when he died, he was buried in London's Highgate Cemetery. Originally, his headstone was nondescript, but in 1954 the Communist Party of Great Britain etched the stone with "Workers of all lands unite," the last line of *The Communist Manifesto*, along with a quote from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). Read more below: Last years. How useful is Karl Marx—who died a hundred and thirty-three years ago—for understanding our world? Illustration by Roberto De Vicq De Cumplich. Just as important, it swept away all the old hierarchies and mystifications. People no longer believed that ancestry or religion determined their status in life. As ideologies disappeared which had once made inequality appear natural and ordained, it was inevitable that workers everywhere would see the system for what it was, and would rise up and overthrow it. The writer who made this prediction was, of course, Karl Marx, and the pamphlet was "The Communist Manifesto." He is not wrong yet. A detailed biography of Karl Marx that includes images, quotations and the main facts of his life. GCSE: Parliamentary Reform. Over the next forty years she remained by his side helping him with his work and "since his handwriting was indecipherable to the untrained eye, he depended on her to transcribe" his writings. (19). During this period Marx took a detailed look at religious belief. Marx then tackled the ideas of Feuerbach. James Richmond has pointed out that in Feuerbach's book, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) he announced "his programme of doing what his philosophical mentors had shrunk from doing - to transform completely theology into anthropology, the love of God into the love of man, the service of God into the service of man.