

**A CRITIQUE OF MARX'S EXTENSION OF THE
PRINCIPLES OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM INTO
THE PHENOMENA OF SOCIAL LIFE, SOCIETY
AND HISTORY**

It is my aim in this paper to focus mainly on the possible criticisms that could be levelled against Marx's extension of the principles of dialectical materialism into the phenomena of social life, society and history.

1. The first objection stems from Marx's claim that the socialism he is offering to us is advanced on a scientific viewpoint. Marx believes that socialism is proved scientifically, made evident by a careful observation of nature. He buttresses his assertion by saying that socialism is the result of the laws of reality, especially the laws of human history and progress. The theory holds basically, that everything in reality undergoes change in a revolutionary fashion, in accordance with the dialectics of nature. From the start, whatever exists generates its opposite (or negation). When this clashes with its opposite, a brand new item emerges, which then produces its own opposite. The process continues throughout nature until a point of total harmony is reached. Marx believes that the point of harmony in the operation of the dialectics in society is socialism which will finally culminate in communism. Thus, Marx's dialectical process proceeds along an upward-moving continuum.

Now the objection to this postulation is as follows: It can be argued that Marx's socialism is not scientific enough and

hence his view that socialism is scientific is untenable. There is no rational justification for any attempt to establish broad general laws of history. This may serve as a useful way of knowing the past but it can't provide any valid basis for predicting the future, as Marx tried to do. Marx sees historical process as an inevitable process which will ultimately lend to the establishment of a classless society. There must be serious doubt about the validity of this kind of interpretation of history and the claim that the process will stop somewhere along the line. Tibor R. Machan has rightly pointed out in his book *Introduction to Philosophical Inquiries*, that "the dialectical principle, whereby everything develops its opposite and then, through their clash, resolves into a new kind of thing, is difficult to confirm. The process simply does not appear to occur with sufficient regularity to qualify as a scientifically supportable law of nature and human social development".¹

This quotation aptly shows that it is very difficult to find any strict regularity in social phenomena. No one doubts the fact that physics and chemistry are reputable kinds of understanding, but intelligent thinkers have argued that the employment of the method of the natural sciences in the social life or society is misguided and that any theories that may be formulated do not correspond to social and political reality. For one thing, the social phenomenon is too complex for analysis, and quantification. If this be the case, which actually cannot be denied, then the whole strand of scientificism which Marx claimed to be inbuilt in the dialectic process is a false proclamation.

Yet it can again be argued that the dialectical principle is not well established. Although Marx's partner, Friedrich Engels tried to show, in his book *The Dialectics of Nature*, that all aspects of nature exhibit the operation of the dialectical principle, he did not succeed in his task. This is understandable since

the principle was borrowed from Hegel who did not view it as a scientific law of nature. It should be recalled that Hegel viewed this principle as a fundamental feature of reality, established by metaphysical inquiry. But Marx rejected Hegel's metaphysics for a scientific analysis. And without the metaphysics of Hegel, it is difficult to see how the dialectical idea can be defended. Without the dialectical principle – the idea that things develop their opposites and after a clash, between positive and negative, a new thing emerges, the basis of the communist theory is substantially lost. According to Bertrand Russell, in his book *History of Western Philosophy*, “Broadly speaking, all the elements in Marx's philosophy which are derived from Hegel are unscientific, in the sense that there is no reason whatever to suppose them true.” Thus, we can even argue from this that Marx's dialectical materialism is a metaphysical notion, that's the philosophical component of Marxism.

If this criticism sounds well, then communism amounts to nothing more than a mere day-dream, or a promise. It is no longer possible to view it as an ideal society. Instead, it becomes an image to which reality cannot conform, and any attempt to make it to conform is bound to lead to disaster. Communist society becomes an utopia which people try desperately to impose upon the people of the world. It is this criticism that underlies that 'Stalinism', a recent era in Soviet Union, filled with massive brutality and complete tyranny, was the inevitable outcome of trying to make communism realistic.

2. Critics have objected to Marx's emphasis on the priority of the base (i.e., the material order) over the super-structure (i.e., the realm of thought or ideas). For Marx, the political institution of a society followed from its economic situation, not *vice versa*. Thus, we could regard Marx as an economic theorist. But political theorists might disagree with Marx because they

are interested in the character of a political system and generally believe that economic situation of a society is determined by its political structure. They might say that the spiritual concerns of human beings are paramount to human life as such. But Marx had said that the mind of man could not operate free from the influences of his economic conditions. For him, it is these conditions that determine man's spiritual life.

More often than not people who see human beings as primarily spiritual beings build their political theories to suit the intellectual and moral life of the people. For example, conservatives in the United States tend to advocate laws that prohibit immorality e.g., gambling. But this does not mean that immorality has been completely wiped out in United State of America. As a matter of fact it is in United States of America moral decadence has reached its peak.

3. Another criticism of Marx stems from his attitude towards ethical evaluation of the dialectical development. Marx disclaimed always all ethical or humanitarian reasons for preferring socialism or taking side with the workers. Marx even said that his own idea of capitalism did not constitute a moral condemnation; he did not say that capitalism was either wicked or due to man's folly. For him, not that this or that is bad but that the side taken is determined by the law of motion of the society, the law of dialectic in its wholly deterministic movement.

Marx might say that he did not advocate socialism, but only predicted it. This, however, wouldn't have been wholly true. He undoubtedly believed that every dialectical movement is a progress and he certainly held that socialism once established would usher in happiness more than either feudalism or capitalism. However, Marx occasionally abandoned calm prophecy for rigorous exhortation to rebellion.

My first objection is against Marx's evaluation of each stage of the dialectical progress. Each one, Marx tells us, is superior to the one that preceded it and the final stage, the classless society, is more perfect than the earlier stages. Here, it can be argued that there must be some standard by which we evaluate this progress so that to speak in this way is to appeal to an absolute moral criterion which Marx himself will not accept the validity of. Marx might reply that it is only because of his belief in the inevitability of the dialectical progress that he thought it necessary to dispense with ethical considerations. But one might wish to know whether Marx's views that the classless society is a perfection, and that it will minister happiness to man more than feudalism or capitalism are not moral evaluations of the dialectical progress or not. Of course, they are. Thus, one can justifiably argue that Marx's notion of dialectical progress has some tinge of moral evaluation around it.

Marx's occasional appeal to rebellion or force instead of insisting on calm prophecy showed that he had not understood clearly how society could move through self-criticism and change, and even revolution, without physical violence. But one might defend Marx by saying that the idea in his mind was to let people know that they were exploited in order that they might be able to smash the system of exploitation.

4. A basic weakness in the inner logic of Marx's dialectic is the question of why the dialectic has to stop with the overthrow of capitalism. Here one would itch to know why his communism should not be a new thesis. Why does dialectic have to stop there at all? Why not a new ruling class exploiting the masses on a completely new basis? Some Marxist writers have argued that the bureaucracy of the communist party has become a new ruling class, which exploits the masses not through private property but through its control of the state. Good examples

of Marxist writers who have argued this way are Leon Trotsky — who wrote *The Revolution Betrayed* and Milovan Djilas, who wrote *The New Class*.

Marx's assertion that economic alone is the basis of social class and also the basis of opposition or clash between two opposing tendencies is another subject for criticism. In contrast to Marx's view that social change is always explicable by a clash between only two incompatible or contradictory phenomena and that this opposition is purely an economic one, Althusser maintains both that such pure oppositions are never to be discovered in reality, and that the practical contradictions that do exist in the society are never, at any time, purely economic. For Louis Althusser, the social world and history are too complex and as such "Whatever economic opposition the scientific theory of Marxism may discern, at any given point in time, as being fundamental is always going to be 'over-determined', that is, inextricably influenced by many other factors such as political and cultural ones, in such a way that the 'basic' contradiction may frequently not ever appear salient to the social factors."³

Apart from this criticism by Althusser one can also criticise Marx's analysis of classes and the prediction of their future development. It could be argued that there could be numerous instances of political changes that do not reflect on social and economic changes. Certain powerful historical forces or movements, for example, nationality, cannot be explained by class struggle; neither can Marx's explanation of ideological commitment adequately explain them.

Marx Weber would argue that it is not economic alone that determines social class; he would say that 'status' is another determining factor.

Another criticism of Marx's dialectical principle is that it solved some problems of sociology of knowledge but created new ones, particularly the problem of accounting for the diversity of ideas and of erroneous ones. If ideas reflect reality, there has to be a correspondence between thought and reality. But how does one account for the emergence of Utopian thought? Granted that ideas are mere reflection of the material order. But what does Marx's Utopian society correspond to? We can argue that this is beyond empirical verification. However, Marx could be defended on the grounds that he was influenced by the social ideas of his time.

Lastly, defenders of capitalism have criticised Marx's economic theory by appealing to facts which seem to disprove it. Marx seemed to be unaware that at the time he was writing his *Capital* the nature of English capitalism was undergoing modifications. He came up with his analysis without supporting it with empirical observation.

Now, the defenders of capitalism attack Marx's economic theory on two counts. First, they point out that the prediction of increasing misery in capitalist societies has not been confirmed. They claim that the lot of the worker is better than ever before. For instance, he works fewer hours, has more money and in general enjoys a higher standard of living. Secondly, defenders of capitalism assert that the capitalist system has shown itself amazingly inventive in solving problems inherent in the system. They say that "such developments as the growth of Trade Unions, anti-trust laws, social security measures, have all proved beneficial in contributing to the economic stability of capitalist societies. For example, Trade Unions have thwarted the tendency to sell labour power more and more cheaply by fixing the rates for the use of labour time"⁴ In the light of this, critics of Marx conclude that such measure mentioned

above will constantly be discovered by capitalist countries and hence the prediction of increasing misery will not be realised.

However, defenders of socialism might contend that the spread of socialism throughout the world is now greater than it was before. This, they may argue, is an evidence that socialism is being embraced by the masses all over the world, whereas capitalism is gradually losing its hold. Indeed, the cry everywhere in the world is 'we want socialism, away with capitalism.' This is a pointer to the fact that people have become fed up with capitalism because of its exploitative and dehumanizing tendencies.

Conclusion :

Despite all attempts to demolish his importance, Marx has been universally accepted as the founder of Marxist ideas. In the third world he remains widely accepted and widely read. He condemned exploitation and alienation, despised capitalism in all its ramifications and saw it as the last conflict in the dialectic movement that man has to overcome. He denounced the barbaric horrors of slavery and serfdom with the horror of excessive labour.

Marx analysed the consequences of colonialism for the enslaved peoples of the world and noted the inevitable collapse of the system of colonial enslavement. He stressed that there is hope for the revival of the enslaved countries in the more or less distant future. He linked the prospect of such a revival with the development of the world-wide struggle of working people.

In his teaching on socialist revolution and ways and forms of mankind's transfer from capitalism to socialism, Marx's successor, Lenin, worked out non-capitalist ways by which the development of the peoples liberated from imperialism could be enhanced. This paved the way for the prosperity and well-being

for the countries whose historical development was hampered by colonialism. Scientific socialism's theory of national liberation movement enriched by Lenin became an efficient tool for people struggling for independence and against colonial oppression.

About seventy years ago, Lenin claimed that the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. Today we can confidently say the same about Lenin's teaching which creatively developed under a new historical era. Today most African leaders with socialist bias believe that the scientific conception of our epoch is a fundamental factor for socialism as a theory which may not be accepted by broad masses but can provide them with a realistic programme for building a new, advanced society. They were initially attracted by the political aspect of Marxism, but at the present stage of national liberation movement an equally significant part embrace the economic doctrine of scientific socialism.

The distinct structure of the Third World has given birth to a kind of communal ethic, the concept of a proper balance between man and nature, and the integration of the social and natural worlds. The synthesis of the important values of the communal ethic through socialist relations will finally permit the suppression of bourgeoisie individualism and repressive collectivism alike by a society where, in the word of Karl Marx, the free development of each is the promise of the free development of all.

The Marxist-Leninist theory is being put into practice by the social-oriented nations who struggle not only against imperialist oppression but against all forms of exploitation of man by man. It is not uncommon nowadays to hear people quoting from Marx to warn against certain threats being perpetuated by the status quo. For instance, quoting extensively from Hegel and

Marx, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a veteran Nigerian politician, was so confident to remark in *the Guardian* of 17th December, 1983, that although the (then) ruling party (N.P.N.) seemed impregnable, yet with the inexorable law of dialectics at work, it would eventually wither away through self-destruction. I think the chief's words have been confirmed today.

That Marx's contribution to the present world is tremendous is not an overstatement. What did come as a genuine contribution from Marx was his insight that the economic order is capable of creating an ideology whereby some people are led to believe that the status quo rests upon eternal and immutable principles. All this goes to show that even though Marx is now dead, his spirit still parades itself around the whole world and many people are learning from it. In fact, in this century, for at least one-third of the world's population, Marxism provides the official philosophical point of view or the systematic articulation of beliefs about the world and the destiny of man in it. In the Soviet Union, for instance, Marx's Dialectical Materialism is the official philosophical doctrine. Still, it is fascinating that Marxism as a philosophy should have spread like wild fire chiefly among the underdeveloped peoples of the world rather than among the advanced capitalist countries where, presumably, it was supposed to have its greatest impact.

Today, of course, as in Marx's time the underdeveloped and developing countries have to break the chain of oppression and exploitation as its strongest link, the advanced industrial countries, if they wish to build socialism. But, for that very reason, the task and the challenge it offers call for an immediate action among the so-called Third World countries. There is no other suitable conclusion to this work, dedicated to Marx's dialectical materialism and the extension of its principles into the pheno-

mena of social life, society and history, than his remark that, "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it."⁵

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NOTES

1. Tibor R. Machan; *Introduction to Philosophical Inquiries* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon Inc., 1977), p. 270.
2. Bertrand Russell; *History of Western Philosophy*, (London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), p. 754.
3. William L. McBride; *The Philosophy of Marx*, (London, Hutchinson and Company Limited, 1977), p. 159.
4. R. H. Popkin & A. Stroll; *Philosophy Made Simple*, (London, W. H. Allen & Company Limited, 1969), p. 89.
5. K. Marx & F. Engels; *Selected Works*. Volume 1, (Moscow Progress Publisher, 1977), p. 15.

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