

Political Ideologies: Contexts, Ideas, and Practices
Professor. Arvind Sivaramakrishnan
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Madras
Lecture No. 13
Marx. Biography. Main Concepts Lecture 1
40:31

Well, hello everyone, and welcome to the fourth topic in our NPTEL ideologies course for 2019 – '20. Today we are going to look specifically, today and in our next lecture, we are going to look specifically at the main concepts in the work of Marx. We'll round up by looking at some of the issues faced by groups which attempt to draw upon Marx or in some cases to apply Marx in the political space. We'll also look at some differences between movements that call themselves communist and some that call themselves socialist.

But we'll start by spending time on the main concepts in the work of Marx. There are of course many varieties of Marxism in many parts of the world, in many areas of public discourse. But there are fierce arguments around all of them, as we know, all the different forms of Marxism. But, in that kind of controversy, the main ideas Marx himself developed often disappear in the argument and the disagreements and the agreements and all the rest of the debate.

Marx's own main concepts are the ones we shall focus on to start with; and once we've covered those, we shall move on to some of the issues arising in social and political life. Now, Marx himself started as a student of philosophy. He never studied under the great German philosopher Georg Hegel, but his own work has led to his being called the greatest student ever of the work of Hegel. And that remark was made with good reason, by Russell Jacoby, in 1981.

Now Marx's early works, such as the *German Ideology*, and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, are philosophically very rich. But Marx came to think that many of his German contemporaries, who were called the Young Hegelians, Marx came to think that many of these contemporaries, who claimed to follow Hegel, had underestimated the importance of economic forces in shaping our lives and institutions. Marx also concluded that these forces caused deep suffering for the great mass of humanity, and that his task was to change that state of affairs, I should say the task.

In the *German Ideology*, I quote, Marx famously says, I quote: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.' Marx seems not to mean that the task of philosophy is to change the world, but that we are faced with the urgent and

pressing task of altering our economic and social systems so that they do not cause the kind of mass suffering with which we're only too familiar.

In any case, even in his most politically committed work Marx shows sharp philosophic insight and considerable philosophical ability, not least in his precise analysis of concepts and in his meticulously structured arguments; and that is, he does that despite his criticism of Hegel's great work on the state, *The Philosophy of Right*. Marx's own approach and his methods therefore show strong inheritances from Hegel; that's well documented.

It is also the case that Marx's reputation today is probably higher in philosophy than it is in any other academic discipline, even though he has had a great impact on almost every other discipline in the humanities and social sciences, and even though most of Marx's writing after 1845 lies in social science and in political commentary. Marx wrote a very rich philosophic work, the *German Ideology*, from late 1845 to the middle of 1846.

And thereafter, he spent much of his life campaigning for change, and writing about the problems inherent in what was the then emerging system of industrial capitalism; his work is often assumed to be difficult, and possibly impenetrable. But he worked as a journalist for much of his life, and he often writes with great flair and wit. Almost two thirds of Volume One of *Capital*, often known as *Das Kapital*, almost two thirds of this volume read like first-class investigative or campaigning journalism on the appalling conditions in English factories in Marx's time.

Well, what about Marx's own life? We'll look at some of the details of his life and see how his working life was very much tied up with his philosophic arguments and his own campaigning. He was born, Marx was born in the German town of Trier, in 1818. His parents were called Heinrich and Henrietta and they were of Jewish origin, but they had adopted the Protestant faith, so as to make it easier for Marx's father to advance his law practice. His father was a lawyer, and they were at significant risk of substantial racial discrimination on account of anti-Semitism. So, they converted to Protestantism. They were financially comfortable, and when the young Marx was 17, he was sent to the University of Bonn to read law. He got into trouble for drunkenness and was wounded, not seriously, in a duel. So, his parents transferred him to the University of Berlin.

The young Marx disappointed them, disappointed his family again, because he abandoned law for philosophy, in which he was already showing his talent. That he would become one of the greatest thinkers in the Western tradition and indeed the history of the world hardly needs saying, but he never became a professional academic, even though he received a doctorate in 1841, for his thesis on the Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus.

Marx became a journalist instead, and he remained one for most of his life. He wrote for several journals and papers, which the authorities in many countries disliked and even closed down. At the time, it was not unusual for journalists to campaign openly on major problems of the day, and Charles Dickens was another famous journalist who criticized social and political conditions. So was Charles Mayhew, who was less well known and certainly too is less well known to us than Marx or Dickens, but Mayhew too, was what we would call today a campaigning journalist. In our own time, Glenn Greenwald has gained an international reputation for campaigning journalism on global surveillance and for protecting the whistle-blower Edward Snowden over illegal US government surveillance within the United States.

For his own part, Marx joined and later became the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* or *Rhenish Gazette*, but the public authorities closed the paper down after he exposed poverty among wine-growers in the Mosel region, the Mosel region of Germany. Marx then became co-editor of a journal called the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, or the *German-French Yearbooks*. The new job enabled Marx and his childhood friend Jenny von Westphalen to get married. They moved to Paris in 1843, but the paper was closed down by its backers when the Prussian government confiscated copies of a particular issue and ordered that the editors be arrested.

Marx was unable to return to Germany; he went back to writing philosophy, and the family lived on their savings. Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* date from this period. Marx moved among the many German communists then in Paris, and he also got to know Friedrich Engels, whose father was a German cotton-mill owner in Manchester in north-western England.

And Engels had become a revolutionary socialist, and it was a lifelong friendship and collaboration which started at that point. But the French government gave in to pressure from the German government and expelled Marx. So, Marx in his family moved to Brussels. The Belgian authorities banned Marx from political activity, but he soon breached their order, and he also started work on what became the book *Capital*, equally widely known as *Das Kapital*, that's the German name.

Intellectually, this was a highly productive time for Marx. He wrote his book *The German Ideology*, and he was very active in various communist movements. In February 1848, he and Engels published the now legendary Communist Manifesto. Marx was also inspired by the French Revolution of that year, and so too were many of the other European movements, the Belgian government ordered Marx to leave the country, to leave Belgium at 24 hours' notice.

But in France, the new government, almost simultaneously, cancelled or revoked the previous governments order banning Marx from France. So, the family moved to Paris and then back to Germany. Marx started another paper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* or the *New Rhenish Gazette*. But the Prussian government crushed an attempted revolution in Germany and would not grant Marx renaturalization or in effect re-grant him permission to remain. Marx had already moved back to France, and he was expelled from Paris yet again.

In August 1849, he and his family moved to England. Marx spent much of the rest of his life in London. In the family's first few years there, they struggled financially and with the deaths of three of their young children. But after that things got somewhat easier. Horace Greeley, who was editor of the *New-York Tribune*, published an article by Marx almost every week for the next ten years. And in a very short period in 1857-58, Marx wrote much of what later became *Capital*. It was meant to be one in a series of six works on economics, including of course political economy.

Marx continued to be very active in politics. He was elected to the general council of the International Working Men's Association which was later called The First International; that was founded in 1864. Marx's lectures to them on the Paris Commune were so successful when they were published in 1871 as *The Civil War in France*, under that title, *The Civil War in France*, that Marx even welcomed the notorious reputation he got as a result for being a noted communist and activist.

The Paris Commune was put down with terrible brutality, and that has not been sufficiently documented, but it is starting to get more attention. The end of the commune was a bitter blow for its supporters, not least because a number of socialist and socialistic movements had sprung up in Great Britain and Germany in 1848. But Marx continued writing. In 1875, he published *the Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and that contains reflections on a post capitalist society.

He seems to have planned to do much more work on a post capitalist society, including work on the state. But he died in 1883 and was buried in Highgate Cemetery in north London. Well, that is Marx's biography. It is quite likely that if he had lived today, he would have been one of the world's great campaigning journalists. He often writes with very great power and wit, and frequently sharp sarcasm, about those who, whom he criticizes, including oppressive political conditions.

Now, what about the main concepts in Marx? We shall take these turn by turn, and then we shall move on to questions arising in political life more recently and in our own time. The main concepts in Marx's work, there are seven or eight. Species being and the social nature

of labour that is the first one. The second one is modes of production, subsistence production and commodity production.

The third is the division of labour. The fourth is alienation. The fifth is profit in capitalist society, the labour theory of value and the theory of surplus value. The next is the falling rate of profit, and that will include Marx's demonstration of a central contradiction within commodity production or capitalist production. And the final major concept we shall look at in Marx is ideology and commodity fetishism.

We start with species being and the social nature of labour. For Marx we are of course a form of animate life, we are animals, we have evolved naturally. He never denies that and he often says we are a form of animate life. But what differentiates us, what makes us different as humans from animals, what makes us different from animals is the character of human productive activity.

Many animals produce things such as nest, tunnels, hives, and so on, and some of these are very complex indeed, we can see them in trees, we can see ant, ants' nests and ant hills, which are often really very much more complex. There are great many apartment blocks, and are occupied by many different creatures, including rats, snakes, and so on. Now, many animals also cooperate to obtain food; they don't just build their dwellings, they cooperate to obtain food. Lions and wolves hunt in packs, lions cooperate to single out particular animals from herds before they attack them. Killer whales, dolphins, they're among animals which hunting cooperatively and so on. Nowadays, we can see such cooperative activities such cooperative behaviour by turning on our televisions and watching nature programmes.

But Marx recognizes that animals produce or cooperate, produce or cooperate, to produce what according to Marx is only what they need for themselves or their young. That is, they produce only under the compulsion of physical needs. Humans, on the other hand, produce even when they are free from pressing physical needs, that is, when they do not need to produce solely for survival; we still produce, we continue to produce, all manner of things.

Now, it is true that in practice, enormous areas of human activity take place under terribly oppressive compulsions; having to work is one of them, but having to feed ourselves if we are not earning well, or if we are not paid well, if we are poor, and so on, we have to go out to work much of the time, often under terribly oppressive conditions and compulsions. But Marx covers that matter in great detail in other areas of his work, and we shall see that.

So, what does he mean by saying human productive activity is something we engage in freely? What he means is that we're the only species that produces over and above what we

need for survival -and that we produce reasoningly, by thinking about what we make, by collaborating in production and by evaluating what we do and how we do? According to Marx, we can only be understood as this species, which produces in these ways, over and above what we need, and by reasoning about our collaborative productive activity, Marx uses a particular term for that, he calls us species beings, because we can only be understood as this species. The German term is *Gattungswesen*, species beings. Now this means we also means that we transform the world by our reasoning activity upon it. That is, we transform the world by acting reasoningly, thinking about what we do, evaluating what we do, adapting what we do, upon the world. That's how we act on it.

The evidence for that is all around us, in the form of agriculture, buildings, cities, extractive industries, indeed in the form of whole land scapes which we have transformed, say, by clearing forests for farming or construction, or by damming rivers for reservoirs or power generation, and so on. The results have not always been entirely benign, and we have also caused colossal environmental damage and destruction to the point where we have even altered significantly the global climate.

But at least in principle, we can act reasoningly and collaboratively to redeem, to slow down, perhaps even to stop some of the damage and prevent or minimize future damage - and that would be acting upon the whole global climate, but we'd have to do it reasoningly and collaboratively. Now Marx further, Marx recognizes furthermore, that in the process of transforming the world, we transform ourselves and, in that process, we transform our sense of human capacities and possibilities.

In effect, we transform our sense of the human, of what we are. Today, almost all classes of people, in almost all countries, live substantially longer than they did even a century ago. And - terrible diseases which used to kill tens of millions or more, and now easily diagnosed and cured or kept under control, so that we can continue to live almost as though they did not exist.

We have also devised techniques and instruments which make routine activities out of what would have been almost unimaginable achievements in times past. To take just one example, we are now thoroughly familiar with the practice of transporting a quarter of a million tons of cargo halfway around the world within a few weeks, aboard ships which are over 300 metres long, and over 50 metres in beam.

A key insight, perhaps the central one, which Marx has here is that we cannot do any of this as individuals acting entirely on our own. Even our physical survival on our own is something for which we are very poorly equipped in comparison to any number of other species. So,

Marx's central insight here is that we cannot conduct our human lives in the ways we do as individuals acting entirely on our own. Even our physical survival is something that we are actually very bad at ensuring if we are isolated individuals.

Marx's point here is that production, that is, that labour [is] involved in production and our very sense of who and what we are as humans, that is, our sense of what it is to be human. These are themselves social creations. In addition, our sense of human needs and capacities is also social, because it has been shaped by the historical epochs or periods in which we find ourselves. This does not mean there is no continuity or development. Of course there is - we accumulate knowledge, and we draw upon it as we live our lives.

Now, at no point does Marx say that we are solely the products of the historical and material conditions of our lives. If we were that, if we were solely the products of the historical material conditions of our lives, we would be robots. We would be unable to change or transcend our particular times and situations; as Marx might have put it, we would be locked into our time and place with no prospect of transforming the world, and in the process, educating and transforming ourselves.

Marx's point is that we can imagine alternatives, and that is part of the development of our capacities to reason. We are of course material beings, but we are material beings who are shaped by nature and who for our own part shape, we shape nature and ourselves by acting intentionally, collaboratively, and reasoningly upon nature, that is, upon the world. In effect, our own consciousness is a social creation, and production is a social activity.

Well, what about the systems in which we produce - the systems we establish and organize for production? Marx calls these modes of production - and his argument is that in human history, there have been two major ones. One is subsistence production, and the other is commodity production. We shall look at both of these now. Well, [from Marx to form for] we start with subsistence production.

And for Marx the form our humanity takes, that is the way it is expressed in our ways of life is particular to our historical period. Therefore, our needs, or more precisely the ways we conceive our needs and meet them, are particular to our historical period. In particular historic periods we see ourselves as having certain needs, and the ways we meet those needs are also located in our historical period. So, we are stating the obvious.

But Marx is very clear that our needs are not totally bound by our time. What does shape, what does shape our ways of meeting our needs and producing what we need is the period in which we live. So, the period in which we live is decisive and shaping the ways we meet

our needs and the ways we produce what we need. That does not mean that our ideas are totally bound by our time, or that our needs are totally bound by our time. If that was the case, we would never change anything.

Now, again, that may seem obvious, but it means that our systems or modes of production, and the instruments we use for production are particular to our time. Therefore, the instruments, tools and machines we use, have to be understood in their historical context, not simply as new objects or inventions to be seen as abstraction or as abstractions.

Instead, the instruments and tools and machines we have and use show and represent the organization of human consciousness and human activity; the things we create in and through our activity express and embody our humanity. Our productive instruments, that is the means of production, and our productive systems, the relations of production, are therefore always changing and developing, as we evaluate them in the light of our purposes. We improve some, discard others, and so on.

Marx holds that when we look at this in overall terms, we see that productive systems, modes of production, fall into two major and very different historical forms. The, historically the first, mode of production was subsistence production, and the second - which continues today - is commodity production. Well, what about subsistence production? Let's do that in detail. Marx sees subsistence production as a feature of pre-industrial or feudal societies, and of the societies which came before them.

In subsistence production, in such societies, we produce primarily to meet our needs. And if we have any surplus produce, we sell it, but only if we have a surplus, any kind of surplus. For example, we might sell certain fruits or vegetables when they are in season, we have more than we can use. Now, we must remember that Marx says very little about barter. Unlike most conventional economists, he does not seem to assume that barter preceded currency or currency-based systems of exchange.

In any case, the idea that barter preceded currency exchange, has been severely criticized by David Graeber, and David Graeber shows with extensive evidence that for thousands of years, human societies have used forms of currency-based exchange, including accounting records, debts, and various forms of currency. Graeber is an archaeologist and has done extensive work on this. He finds accounting systems and accounting records as far back as ancient Sumer, perhaps four or five thousand years ago.

So in subsistence production, our needs come first, sale comes second. We only sell any surplus, that is anything over and above our needs, if we have a surplus.

What about commodity production? Marx says that historically this replaced subsistence production. In subsistence production we produce first for ourselves. If we have a surplus, we sell it, we can exchange it in various ways, keep various kinds of records, and so on.

But what about commodity production? This is production for exchange. And it also reshapes the whole of society as we shall see. First of all, commodity production is a radically different system from subsistence production. In commodity production, we produce goods to sell them; we produce them in order to participate in systems of exchange. Now according to Marx, the transition from subsistence production to commodity production took place in late mediaeval Europe.

At that time, demand for goods grew rapidly as international trade expanded and the expanding productive forces could not meet rising demand, that is the techniques of production. Now in addition, according to Marx, this was also the first time technical innovation could serve to meet rising or expanding demand. But technological or technical innovation itself now came to depend on the accumulation of capital, that is the resource to fund it.

This was a key development; wealth was ceasing to be seen as residing or inhering in natural objects such as land, gold or the like. Instead, it was being reconceived in terms of produced goods. It was being reconceived in terms of manufacture. That is, wealth was starting to be seen as the accumulated result of labour carried out on raw materials. This new sense of wealth saw itself embodied in the goods produced by labour applied to natural resources, or to machinery, or both.

But technological innovation itself was not the central cause of the change from subsistence production to commodity production. According to Marx, the main cause of the change was social and political. At that time, sections of urban society in Europe were starting to engage in economic activity of a kind which was increasingly independent of the existing feudal and religious authorities.

For example, the emerging corporations and communes developed a concept of property and the inheritance of property. And this, in effect, enabled members to trade in property, to exchange property, and therefore to accumulate wealth through their economic activity, rather than through, say plunder, or the production of grain for themselves, or the hoarding of stocks or whatever.

Now, trading, gaining wealth through traded property, amounted to the emergence or creation of a sphere of economic activity, which was relatively free of political and religious restrictions and regulations. Exchange became the new way to gain wealth. Hegel had called this sphere, this was back in the 1830s, or thereabouts, 1820s or thereabouts. Hegel had call this sphere civil society - that is, the aggregate sphere of interest. Marx uses the same phrase too, and it is still used to mean much the same thing.

This new social development, civil society in which exchange was the main generator of wealth, was truly revolutionary and Marx recognized this. It enabled natural resources and land to be turned in to commercial goods; it also enables the commercialization of agriculture. Therefore, by about 1700 in Europe, social conditions and powerful financial incentives had arisen which drove the development of the forms of technology required for the exploitation of the new commercial assets, such as land and natural resources.

These were now new commercial assets. They were not merely sources of wealth in themselves; they had to be worked on to generate wealth. This process seems to have taken place in its earliest form in Britain at the time, but it was paralleled in other parts of Europe and a little later in the United States.

But those who participated, who in effect created this new mercantile civil society, this trading civil society, those who did that very quickly became a new class in society; Marx calls them the bourgeoisie. They posed powerful challenges to the existing order. And these challenges were so powerful that religious and feudal institutions swiftly gave way to them, and adapted significantly in shape, in effect both lost their influence of earlier times and much of their power of earlier times very quickly; that is, feudal and religious institutions very rapidly adapted for sheer survival.

The transformations were enormous; they amounted to the creation of a whole new mode of production, because commodity production replaced subsistence production very quickly. In this system, we produce goods not for subsistence, or to meet our own needs, but for exchange, that is, for sale. This Marx notes drives technological innovation and that in turn enables us to produce far more than we can consume. The point of production is to sell what we produce.

Now the emergence of commodity production as an entire system had another immensely important consequence. As commodity production emerged, the old feudal and religious social hierarchies disappeared and were replaced by only two classes. So, in a commodity production, in a commodity producing society, one class is the bourgeoisie, that is those who own land and other resources, as well as the factories and other instruments of production.

The other class is very much larger, and is made up of the form of peasants and artisans. They have no property and can only sell their labour power, that is, their capacity to work. Marx calls this the proletariat. The proletarian class comes from the Latin term used in ancient Rome, *proletarius*, which meant a citizen of the lowest rank. Now Marx sees this new mode of production, also called capitalism, as revolutionary, because it transforms entire societies.

He also sees it as progressive because it eliminates the restrictions of feudal and religious hierarchies, or severely weakens them. It exposes the nature of those hierarchies, because those concealed exploitation behind claims of divine right to rule, inherited superiority, religious authority, and the like. So, the new system has done, as Marx himself says, it has done this I quote, 'In one word for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions. It has substituted naked, shameless, brutal exploitation.'

Well, we'll see why he says that; he does give detailed argument and evidence. Now according to Marx, when the last restrictions on capitalism have been removed, the system starts changing under its own internal forces and imperatives. The Corn Laws in England provide a good example. They were repealed in 1846, and in 1847 there appeared the first of a series of laws which curbed unregulated economic activity.

These were the Factory Act 1847, also called the Ten Hours Act because it made ten hours the legal maximum for the working day. And in the next 30 years or so, the Factory Act was followed by several other regulatory laws. These included the Artisans' Dwellings Act 1878, which laid down minimum house-building standards, including standards for clean water, the Education Act 1870 - that required all children between five and eleven to attend school.

And there were a great many other pieces of legislation passed by the British parliament to start regulating economic activity. And this was quite independent of feudal and religious authorities, because those were already in a significant form of retreat in face of the new system, which had rapidly become the dominant mode of production. There was one more act for example, the Sanitary Act 1866. It made local municipal authorities responsible for water, sewage and street cleaning; that may well have been a significant factor in the relatively quick elimination of cholera in the United Kingdom. In addition, the ban on trade unions was lifted when the Combination Acts were repealed in 1824.

Many of these laws, as I have said, were passed precisely because the processes of unrestrained capitalism had exposed the effects of them, and the problems of the system to itself; it had shown the system to itself. It is also the case that sick workers and uneducated

children, who will become workers when they grow up, are a hindrance to the further development of the system.

Now Marx sees the new laws as resulting from the processes within capitalism itself. That insight is part of his conclusion that every mode of production contains the logic of its own transformation. He never says capitalism will collapse. What he does argue for in detail throughout his work is that every mode of production, as a result of the everyday changes and developments within it, and under its own imperatives, will transform itself. He never says capitalism will collapse.