

**Classical Sociology Theory**  
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**Lecture 25**  
**Marx – An Appraisal**

Welcome back to this session. And this is the final session in our discussion on Marx. We are planning for a short session on critical appraisal of Karl Marx as a sociologist. You know that in order to evaluate Karl Marx as a thinker, it is a very daunting task. It is not an easy task, because he is one of the most profound social thinkers that humanity has ever witnessed. A person whose academic scholarship, political life and personal life has very few parallels in the human history in terms of the breadth of scholarship, the kind of profound impact that Karl Marx was able to exert on human history, because he was not only a theorist, he was a political activist.

Many of his ideas were incorporated into the communist regimes later. And we can agree or disagree, we can argue whether they were currently understood or correctly interpreted, but for a long time, till the demise of Soviet Union, until the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1990s, till the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marx really represented the ideological face of a every important political ideology.

He represented the face of a political movement, he represented the face of a very important analytical school, the Marxist school and his impact, his profound impact on a, on a wide variety of social relevance, a wide variety of facets of society is something unparalleled, both as an activist, as a scholar, as a historian, as an economist, as a sociologist. So, it is very difficult for us to do some kind of an evaluation as a corporate, of Karl Marx as a socialist. So, I will be, you will find quite a lot of evaluations, quite lot of assessment on Marx.

And quite lot of this assessments are heavily influenced by the political ideology, the scholars, who describe themselves as Marxist or scholars who have an ideological leanings towards Marxist methodology are more sensitive to Marx or they are more accommodative of Marx. They try to justify the Marxian positions. Whereas those who oppose to his political ideology will be extremely vehement in their criticism of Marx.

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• So why should sociologists still read Marx? After all, have not most of his predictions about revolution and the spread of communism failed to materialize? The communist revolution by the proletariat never really occurred. The class structure of capitalist system did not polarize, but instead, became ever more complex. The state did not “wither away” in communist countries (indeed, only when they turned capitalist). And the world has become more capitalist rather than communist. Some contemporary sociologists continue to hold out, arguing that as the capitalism goes completely global, the contradictions in the system will finally emerge and usher in the communist revolution. Others have sustained an interest in exploitation and the value theory of labor, reworking these ideas to fit more contemporary conditions. Yet it must be said that much of the Marxian system of thinking, especially its more ideologically loaded portrayals of the future, has not held up.

(Jonathan H Turner 2012)



Here I have borrowed 2 paragraphs from a book by Jonathan H Turner on social theory, which kind of summarizes the contributions as well as the critical points of Karl Marx, and why should sociologists still read Marx? The Marxian contribution influenced all the realm of social sciences such as economics, history, sociology, political science, but since I am talking to students of sociology, I will be limiting myself to Marxist criticism from the perspective of sociologists. So, it is Jonathan Turner.

Why should sociologists still read Marx? After all, have not most of his predictions about revolutions and spread of communism fail to materialise. Of course, if you look into the Marxian theory of social change, we know that he was quite categorical, and absolute about the course of world history. He saw it as different stages, and he analysed the capitalist state and economic system.

He was completely convinced that this capitalism has its own seeds of its destruction, it will collapse under the weight of its own, its own convictions, and it will eventually move to a post capitalist era, which could be termed as socialist and finally communism. But we know that nothing of that sort happened. The kind of revolution that Marx predicted did not come true in most of the places.

And in places where communism was the state ideology, the kind of socialist economy that was persisting for a long time finally had to crumble down and the economy gave way to a capitalist mode of production. Capitalism seemed to be the most resilient economic system

which is able to reinvent itself. So, quite a lot of predictions of Karl Marx have not come true. The communist revolution by the proletariat never really occurred.

The class structure of capital system did not polarize. The famous argument of Marx that there will be class polarization taking place, due to the transition from 'class in itself' to 'class for itself', did not take place. The, we could even now introspectively argue that Marxian understanding of class was rather oversimplified. He could not foresee the kind of tremendous transformations that would have taken place in the capitalist society.

The state did not wither away in communist countries. They rather turned capitalist, the state became more powerful, and the state became more absolutist. The state never kind of represented the wishes of the people. In most of these communist societies, the state turned out to be dictatorial. There was nothing envying in the situations of ordinary people, the peasants and the working class.

And the world has become more capitalist rather than communist. Some contemporary sociologists continue to hold that as the capitalism goes completely global, the contradictions in the systems will finally emerge and usher in communist revolution. I would personally consider it only as a wishful thinking, because we know that we have been talking about a crisis of capitalism, especially since the 2008 financial crisis.

This idea of deglobalization is again being spoken of as, as something representing the crisis of capitalism. But to say that these crises will pan out in the way Marx predicted almost a century back would be really a wishful thinking, because things have significantly changed. Others have sustained an interest in exploitation and value theory of labour, reworking these ideas to fit more of contemporary conditions.

So, sociologists who identify themselves as Marxist, have real difficulty in using the Marxian framework exactly the way it is understood by the most, so called fundamentalist Marxists. Yet, it must be said that much of the Marxian system of thinking, especially its more ideologically loaded portraits of the future, has not held up. And I personally tend to agree with Jonathan Turner. That is why I thought of using this passage from Turner, *The Political Prophecy of Marxian thinking* has not really come into effect.

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- Still, Marx anticipated and framed many of the issues that occupy discussion of the economy and society today. Marx saw, more than any other scholar of the last century, that the economy is the driving force of society, and he predicted that capitalism would spread or, in today's vocabulary, become a global force. He understood that economic power and political power are highly correlated and that those with power could disproportionately influence the formation of ideologies and the other elements of culture. He explained the incredible wealth-generating capacities of free markets, but this dynamism is tempered by the inequalities, exploitation, and alienation generated by such a system, as well as by the inherent tendency of the system to cycle in and out of ever-deeper recessions and depressions.



(Jonathan H Turner 2012)



At the same time, we have come to a points where Marx is still relevant, and then we need a more nuanced understanding of why Marx is somebody who is still exerting considerable amount of influence and interest some of the contemporary sociologists and political thinkers. It is correct to say that Marx anticipated and framed many of the issues that occupied discussions of economy and society.

It would be very difficult to imagine without the invention of Marx, how we would have discussed the capitalist society, and made sense of the contemporary society. It is very difficult to imagine because the central arguments of Marx, kind of concepts and categories that he put forward, the analytical framework that he presented to us has become so common place and influential that it has permeated across the schools of those who agree with Marx and those who do not agree with Marx.

A host of issues that Marx anticipated and framed occupy central position in the discussions of economy and society today. Marx saw more than any other scholar of the last century, that economy is the driving force of society. And he predicted that capitalism would spread or in today's vocabulary become a global force. And no sociologist was able to bring forth the centrality of economy, in the way Marx did.

I hope that you would have by now got some idea about that the transition of this discipline of sociology from a philosophical engagement from that of a social sciences. So, in this transition, the more scientific analysis of economy is central and that has to be the central pillar around which this analysis is mostly placed. This is the argument which is now kind of

taken for granted, and now one of the foundational ideas of social science analysis, which definitely one of the major contributions of Karl Marx. He predicted that capitalism would spread or in today's world become a global force. We discussed Marxian analysis of capitalism and we discussed how he is one of the sharpest analyst of capitalism.

He indeed put forward a theory of capitalism. He welcomed it as a necessary stage. At the same time, he was extremely critical of it. He understood capitalism as the most exploitative system which dehumanizes people. Just recall his discussions on the surplus value. So, he criticized it, yet he welcomed it as a historic necessity.

Marx predicted that capitalism will become a global force, and that has become so. With the fall of USSR, what we are witnessing is a unipolar world, a world economic system where capitalism ruled the roost. So, in such a situation, the Marxian intervention is extremely important. He understood that economic power and political power are highly correlated.

Those with economic power put disproportionately influence the formation of ideologies and other elements of culture. Another extremely important point is the connection between economic power and political power that we tend to differentiate in our conventional sanity. We tend to look at each of them, the social, economic, political, and legal as separate things. We tend to look at each of them as completely independent, separate entities, but Marx would not agree. Marx would argue that you cannot understand society by separating the economic sphere from that of the social sphere or economic sphere of that of the political sphere.

So, Marx did not agree with any political analysis that focuses exclusively on the realm of politics. He wants an analysis of political economy. He wants analysis about how this politics is shaped by the economy, and look at who are the politically powerful class and what is their class position, who are the politically powerless groups and what is their class position, and how is this political arrangement directly or indirectly affects the people economically, and how do the interests of the economically backward group get reflected in the scheme of affairs in this particular political system.

So, this interconnectedness is a very important argument of Karl Marx. He explained that incredible wealth generating capacities of free markets, but this dynamism is tempered by the inequalities, exploitation and alienation generated by such a system, as well as by the inherent tendencies of the system to cycle in and out of ever deeper recessions and depressions.

It is another very important point, he explained how there is an incessant process of wealth creation takes place, because since the objective of capitalism is to increase more and more surplus value, not the use value, how the capital has to be produced in a new, or in an endless manner, and the realization of profit has become the most fundamental objective of capitalist system. So, this dynamism tempered by the inequalities, exploitation and alienation generated by the system.

No other sociologist for that matter is so profoundly concerned with the question of inequality, no other great sociologist is so profoundly concerned with the plight of the powerless and the poor. This is extremely important. Why is that Marxian framework is being very sensitive to the plight of the poor is something extremely important, because that framework has a built-in sensitivity to look at the questions of the marginalized.

In a contemporary society like ours, where inequality has only increased and the gulf between the rich and the poor has substantially increased, Marx is an important reminder, Marx is an important reminder, whether you want to look at it as an ethical question, as a moral question or a political question. He is an important reminder of the kind of inequalities and exploitations and alienation that comes as a part of this economic system. He also rightly identified the the inherent tendency of the system to cycle in and out of ever-deeper recessions and depressions.

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Moreover, he even anticipated the power of big capitalism to standardize activities, to impoverish small businesses and artisans, and to destroy old cultures in the relentless drive to make production more efficient and to penetrate all markets. Thus, Marx had a very good sense for many of the outcomes of capitalism, once unleashed. Why, then, did his more specific predictions about the revolution of the proletariat go wrong? The answer must reside in Marx's ideological fervor. Marx was blinded by his convictions and, hence, could not see that the state, bourgeoisie, and workers could change the capitalist system in ways that make it more benign.



(Jonathan H Turner 2012)



Moreover, he even anticipated the power of big capitalists to standardize activities, to impoverish small business and artisans, and to destroy old cultures in the relentless drive to make production more efficient and to penetrate all markets. So the study of capitalism is a very interesting subject in itself. We need to understand why that capitalism is able to thrive, able even to co-opt people who really oppose that, how is the capitalism is able to generate more and more demands for consumption, how is that capital is able to thrive on the, on the endless conception of human beings.

And why that we create more and more artificial needs. And what is the kind of a social psychological aspects associated with that. So, Marx was extremely critical of that. At the same time, when we are critical of capitalism, it is also important to look at how the way in which capitalism underwent change from the time of Marx. Capitalism was at its very beginning when Marx have written his criticism of capitalism. But later capitalism has undergone change.

And it is not very easy to make sense of capitalism, especially what we call currently as the neo liberal capitalism. It is extremely difficult to understand. It goes much beyond than what Marx described as the problem between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. That is simple binary, no longer folds. It has reinvented itself, it has invented a major managerial class, it has fragmented this division of workers into different sections.

The whole stock market scenario has completely deconstructed this whole idea of ownership. With the new era of start-ups and new information economy coming into picture, the workers

are given the shares, so that the workers themselves own the company partially. So, the whole classical model of somebody being the owner and somebody else being the workers, it is only a partial truth about capitalism.

However, of course, you come across that classical kind of effect of capitalism even today in some of the developing or underdeveloped society. You will find there extremely exploitative systems. . You see how it destroys old cultures in the relentless drive to make production more efficient and to penetrate all markets. Thus, Marx had a very good sense of many of outcomes of capitalism that unleashed.

Why, then, did his more specific predictions about the revolution of the proletariat go so wrong? So, I do not think that there could be any other sociologists or economists who understood, who spent their entire life trying to make sense of this economic system. But if we go back to the earlier question that we started, why did he go wrong? The answer must reside in Marxist ideological fervour. Marx was blinded by his convictions and, hence, could not see that the state, bourgeoisie and the workers could change the capitalist system in ways that make it more benign.

This is an extremely important question. Remember, when we discuss Marx, when we began the discussion on Marx, a point that I highlighted was that Marx had a political position, as well as an intellectual position. As an academic, he believed that the fundamental obligation of a scholar is not to do intellectual exercise by sitting in his armchair, but rather to change. He was completely convinced about the political imperative of an, of an intellectual.

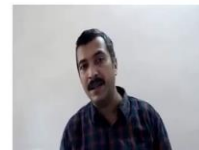
So, his ideological fervour, his commitment to overthrow the capitalist system, his commitment to see a world which is more egalitarian, as people like Jonathan Turner argues, prevented him from having a more objective understanding about the society, and more open understanding about the society that he sees. So, Marx was blinded by convictions and, hence, could not see that the state, bourgeoisie and the workers could change the capitalist system in ways that make it more benign or at least look as if it is more benign.

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- Foundation for the 'Marxian school of thought' in almost every branches of social sciences from Feminism to Philosophy
- Inspiration to Conflict theory within Sociology, Critical theory and a host of theorisations on power, dominance and hegemony.
- Continued relevance of Marx in the era of late-capitalism where questions of sustainability, inequality and environmental crises are debated



As we have discussed during Marxian analysis of capitalism, a host of subsequent changes, a host of new type of social movements, new concerns and preoccupations with the identities, came into picture and are slowly pushing the class based politics to the background after 1960s. And a new wave of social movements, concerning gender questions, race, with various sorts of identities push back the typical class based politics of the Marxian framework out of the forefront of academic discussions.

But at the same time, we realize that the foundation for the Marxist School of Thought is, an important contribution of Karl Marx because he is one person after whose name, an entire framework of theoretical orientation has been established. What we generally referred in sociology as the conflict school or the Marxian school is established after the theoretical foundations of Marx. And it is something quite significant, because the other schools like Structural Functionalism and symbolic interactionism and all are founded upon the contributions of a number of schools.

Marxian perspective, though founded by Marx, was later contributed and developed and made more improved upon by other subsequent scholars. The foundation of a Marxian school of thought influenced every discipline, whether it is in history or in sociology or in economics or in political science, it is specifically founded on historic contributions on socialism. Every branches of social sciences from Feminism to Philosophy, has a Marxian school.

Anybody who wants to engage with the contemporary social reality or social theory cannot avoid it or cannot neglect the contributions of Marx. And he has predicted an inspiration to Conflict theory within Sociology, Critical theory and a host of theorizations on power

dominance and hegemony. And you will see that the later development of sociology, when there was this Conflict theory created by Coser, Dahrendorf and others, and the critical theory of Frankfurt School, and of course, later Antonio Gramsci's theorization on power, on dominance and hegemony.

Each these are some of the most important preoccupations of contemporary society, important terms, important discourses, ideas about dominance and hegemony. But a Marxian perspective of political power, dominance and hegemony are extremely important. Even while we think that the idea of power has been redefined. It is always important to go back and to the conventional definition of power because in many of our current discourses, we are excessively carried away by the kind of a postmodern analysis of power.

Power being constructive, power being fully, power being everywhere. But in that process, many times, we forget more institutional, more structural, more old-fashioned kind of power as something that process our arbitrary from a Marxian perspective. And the continued relevance of Marx in the era of late-capitalism, where questions of sustainability, inequality and environmental crisis are debated.

Now, whenever we think about the future of the globe, how are we going to sustain this growth of economic activity, is it sustainable? Or, can we continue with this kind of production consumption? Do we have sufficient resources in order to support us? Or why that we are becoming more and more greedy? Why that is our demands are becoming endless? Why that our consumption is going up again and again? Why that we are becoming least concerned about at equitable distribution of wealth?

Why that we are becoming increasingly insensitive to the plight of the vast majority of the people? In all these discussions, Marx will emerge as an important field when we discuss about inequality, when we discuss about the future of capitalism, when we discuss about the sustainability, about the environment crisis. In all these discussions, Marx will emerge as an extremely important reminder, before you can disagree with it.

Of course, nobody is expected to agree with Marx on every point and become its blind believer. Academics is not supposed to be blind belief, you are supposed to leaving aside your ideological inclination, you are supposed to have a very brutally honest assessment of a scholar, and the political apprehension comes from the lay man. And once you, once you do

that, you will realise the central role played by Karl Marx in some of the most substantive areas of human concern.

He was the person who had extremely serious concern for the poor, for the questions of equality, questions of exploitation, questions of poverty, and a person who lived his life to explore these kinds of very unsettling kind of questions. So, we will conclude the class here. And studying Marx has been a fascinating experience for me. I hope many of you will also find the discussion on Marx interesting, because irrespective of the ideological position, the life of Marx was inspirational.

The life of Marx as an academic is inspirational. The life of Marx as a political activist is inspirational. His commitment, his hard work, his love for humanity is very important. So, I would urge you to read more on Marx. Read some of his original works. Read his other published books. It is going to be an extremely rewarding exercise. So, we are winding up the discussion on Marx. We will proceed with Durkheim in the next class in our discussion on the Classical Sociological Theories. Thank you.