

24. MATERIALIST INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

According to the view of history held by Karl Marx, man has travelled through various periods. Although he may not have purposely risen in ascent and this rise may not have been uninterrupted, there has been some force in history to cause a gradual climbing of man from earlier primitive or backward stages to the modern stage. How this happened has been very clearly enunciated and no one can accuse Marx of being ambiguous about it. Man has passed principally through four periods: the primitive communist, the slave period when there were the great autocracies, the feudal period, and is now going through the capitalist period. The first period may be left out of account, as it belongs to prehistory. Through all these periods, there has been a motion of history, a law of history, deriving from developing styles of production. Through all the various modes and styles of production have clashed the forces of production on the one hand and the relations of production on the other, various tools and manner in which they are used on the one hand and property relationships on the other. These two phases, forces of production and relations of production, are the significant core of Marx's teachings on history. The clash between them leads to class struggle. Marx says that all human history hitherto has been the history of class struggle.

This struggle has streaked through all of man's history and has taken various shapes. Class struggle in the feudal period is different from class struggle in the capitalist period, but that there are different classes in these various periods is not questioned and that a struggle takes place between them is

also undisputed. The struggle is aimed to liberate the agencies and forces of production, which are thrust down on account of a particular type of ownership enforced by the prevailing civilisation. Feudalism enforces an ownership of landed proprietors and does not permit production to grow beyond a point and the appropriate class of that period rises up to disrupt that order.

Similarly, in the capitalist period, the laws of property and its returns do not permit the full use of methods of industrialisation, of the application of science of industry and agriculture. The forces of production stay imprisoned until the working class is sufficiently strong and organised to disrupt the property relationship and release them. This has little to do with the mind of man and its designs. It takes place automatically in society. Man has got to will it because there are forces which compel him to do so. All development of history is placed inside the mode of production with its mutually warring factors, the forces of production and the relations of production.

Whether the history of man in all the world and not alone in Europe could be compressed into those three or four periods is open to serious doubt. Facts will have to be distorted in order to prove that there was an aristocracy of a slave period in India. Facts will again have to be distorted in order to prove that there was a feudal civilisation obtaining evenly over a demarcated period throughout the world, no matter that wide margins in years are permitted to varying climes.

Apart from such violence to facts as will necessarily have to be undertaken in order to divide the history of mankind into these or four congenial periods, the system of history which Karl Marx outlined may be examined experimentally with prophesied but actual developments. The system of class struggle diagnoses that capitalism produces its own grave digger. While it grows and magnifies, capitalism gives rise to concentration of capital on the one hand and socialisation of labour on the other, to big capitalists owning and commanding

larger and yet larger sectors of economy and the huge proletariat which gets organised not only because it wills so but more so because concentrated capital starts bigger factories and throws thousands of persons together to work in the same place. At the same time, exploitation of labour increases and its impoverishment is an inevitable consequence. This concentration of capital and socialisation of labour and its increasing impoverishment go on side by side until labour is so sufficiently socialised as to strangle the capitalist hold over economy until the capitalist-worker relationship is destroyed, a communist or socialist order is established, and science is liberated in order to admit of its full application to industry and agriculture. Does it bear a close scrutiny successfully?

There undoubtedly has been concentration of capital, but what of socialisation of labour and increasing poverty among the proletariat? What about the iron law of civilisation which Marx enunciated that class struggle would so take place that the great masters of the capitalist world would be forerunners and pioneers of the socialist world? If passages from Marx or Engels may be cited to prove that they admitted on one or two occasions the possibility of a revolution in Russia, most of the time they prophesied revolutions in Germany and England, and these passages anywhere are of little meaning. Such efforts are scholastic, for it would be possible to cull many kinds of stray passages from writings so voluminous. And anyway, China never was on Marx's agenda of communist revolutions. The search for stray passages has therefore stopped, and inevitably also, the theoretical debate on the Marxian law of civilisations. The point is as to what law was laid down for development of mankind from the capitalist to the socialist period. Whether stray predictions have been right or wrong may be left unconsidered, the law in all its exactness is available to us and must be reviewed. The law says that class struggle will assume critical proportions in advanced capitalist countries will become so organised as to overthrow capitalism

and usher in a communist or socialist civilisation.

A Neo-Marxist may well suggest that socialisation of labour has taken place in advanced countries of capitalism while pauperisation has occurred in retarded countries of Asia and Africa. Marx himself had foreseen combined developments of these two factors. He thought that such a combined development would cause disruption of the capitalist order. A Neo-Marxist might say that the disruption has been somewhat arrested because masses of people have been pauperised in India, China, Malaya, Burma, Africa and the like whereas the mass of the working class in the U.K., Germany, the US and similar countries have got into larger factories and have indeed got socialised but with better wages. On account of this split-up between socialisation of labour in Western Europe and elsewhere and increasing poverty among the mass in India and elsewhere, the law has not operated as it was enunciated. The law then goes overboard. Should it be shown that with the pauperisation of the mass of the people in colonies and erstwhile colonies, a revolution is likely to occur in these other areas, the whole edifice crumbles. It will no longer be possible to suggest that, with a change in property relationship, forces of production are automatically released so as to achieve plenty in the world. Revolutions will, according to this view, take place precisely in areas where forces of production have not gone much beyond the feudal stage or have even declined. Consequently, the new civilisation will start with a halter round its neck.

But the materialist interpretation of history enables the new civilisation to start in areas where capitalism is advanced so that, with socialist relations of property, use could be made of factories, machinery and scientific agriculture of developed capitalism in order to provide the world with plenty. With such a view, one could have thought of a golden age that was just around the corner. If relationships of production alone had been throttling the progress of mankind, class struggle would end them and achieve a society which could organise itself

collectively on the basis of socialist production and make the fullest use of all available machinery and agriculture. But this rosy picture of a golden age around the corner was drawn with false tints, for ruling lands of the existing civilisation were expected to become the forerunners and pioneers of the succeeding civilisation. There perhaps lies the clue to how this law got formulated. Every person is fond of maintaining the accomplishment of his age and land and Western Europe has undoubtedly achieved much. Its civilisation has indicated unending progress at least in some directions, mightier and greater than any which mankind was able to achieve in any earlier period or clime. And none should blame the European mind for wanting to cling to this particular period of history or to outline a stupendous doctrine so that Europe may stay eternally on this pinnacle and may also achieve the imperishable glory of remaking the rest of the world in its own image.

In comparing the Marxist view of history with the Hegelian, either appears so utterly contradictory of the other. In their approaches and formulations, they may be set one against the other for, Marx found the motive of history in the mode of production whereas Hegel sees that motive in the spirit of man. But the essential result of either is similar. Hegel discovers history to be freedom broadening from primitive society in gradual stage to the Prussian state, which he thought was the greatest pinnacle of human achievement. He named this gradual ascent as freedom of one to freedom of some then on to freedom of many and finally freedom for all. One would find a close family resemblance between this freedom of one going on to the freedom of all and the development of human history from the primitive communist period over feudal aristocracy and bourgeois democracy to the full social democracy of communism. According to Hegel, this freedom of all was embodied in the spirit of man, and the political society in which the Absolute had made itself manifest was the concrete Absolute of the Prussian state. According to Marx,

the Hegelian Absolute had manifested itself in the concrete absolutes of England, Germany, and perhaps to some extent, France; for, they were the advanced capitalist countries of Europe where the inevitable motive of class struggle, which is the Marxist spirit of history, would cause the overthrow of capitalism and usher in a new socialist civilisation.

The leaders of existing civilisation are not fated to be forerunners of the succeeding civilisation. It has not happened in history but that need not be the only proof. It seems inherently to be impossible for, in any civilisation, certain modes of production, certain styles of thought, some definite processes are firmly set. However much man may see that such modes of production and thought are no longer able to cope with the situation as it has developed, he is unable to change them because they are so firmly set. His whole edifice is centred round them or built over them and, however, much human intelligence may be credited with the power to revise, and change, it seems to be a great strain on reason to imagine that a people, which has been the head of a particular type of civilisation and got set in its ways, would again be elastic enough to throw overboard these ways and take up new ways better able to cope with another situation.

That is not to say that class struggle has not obtained in human affairs. There has been a struggle among classes throughout history and the time has now come to understand how it has actually operated. With an emotional like or dislike and the patriot's desire to preserve in his own country or age what has been achieved, a student of history may not concern himself. What has been the form and process of this class struggle should be objectively studied. That there has been internal inequality all through the ages and that this has been expressed in various classes who struggle with one another is an undisputed fact. Internal struggle of the classes has indeed gone alongside of the external struggle among nations. No time need be wasted to prove the validity of these two struggles. Arnold Toynbee makes a continuing mention of two

factors, the internal struggle and the external struggle, and believes that a civilisation disrupts or stagnates under the two pressures of the internal and the external struggle, the struggle inside a nation among the classes, and the struggle among the nations. Marx did not pay sufficient attention to the distinction between the internal proletariat and the external proletariat. If he had, he would have credited socialisation of labour to the internal proletariat and debited pauperisation or increasing poverty to the external proletariat.

The most fruitful examination of a system is that of its internal logic. Materialist interpretation of history is raised on the internal logic of maturing forces of production clashing with rigid relations of production. In fact, this logic is utterly self-contained, sure and consistent within itself. While Europeans may have rejected it after an experimental examination, a type of Asian mind is still infatuated with the doctrine's self-movement of society like the egg moving on to the chicken. Society moves itself and the materialist interpretation holds the key to this movement. The key consists of the clash between maturing forces and rigid relations, between the expropriated and the owners. The key is intoxicatingly simple and it seems to reveal so well the secret of the universe. But what is the dark chamber it throws light into? It only reveals that history is no history, that any given movement of the peaks and perhaps also the dips of history must always have been so in the past and ever continue like that in the future. At the present moment, a certain situation of matured forces and unchanging relations obtains in all the world. This situation has placed Europe and America on the peak of current history and the rest of the world at its bottom. The Marxist law should not take arbitrary refuge behind every explosion and revolution that took place consequent upon the clash between forces and relations, the present moment of the power of Europe and America must always have existed and shall be ever lasting in accordance with the self-movement of the total mode of production.

While considering the general law of materialist interpretation, catastrophes may be excluded from the purview. If they are to be more than an exception, the general rule goes. The general rule lays down that the self-movement of capitalist society will enable its most advanced regions of West Europe and America to herald communist society; on the same reasoning applied backwards, these regions must have been the leaders of feudal and earlier societies. If the key is usable forwards in history, it should be equally usable backwards. In fact, in the passage of man through the class struggles and the self-movement of aristocracy, feudalism and capitalism, there should have been no history of the rise and decline of nations as we know it. Furthermore, any given moment for instance, the moment when India or Egypt were on the pinnacle of history, should have been everlasting both before and after according to the materialist interpretation of history. The world should have in all history known an unchanging visage, with a starred smile fixed on one side and a frozen tear pocking the other. That the European intellect, in spite of its severe hostility, has not submitted the Marxian logic of history to such an internal examination is full of significant meaning. The effort of Marx was, after all, a colossal construction of the mind to keep the smile on the visage of Europe ever dancing. It was a peerless attempt of the European spirit. What European mind would be able or want to drag up by its roots this highly spiritual effort at Europe's everlasting glory? Like most other modern doctrines emanating from Europe, the materialist interpretation of history is also a doctrine in the service of the status quo, at least that part of the status quo which means European glory. This examination of the internal logic of dialectical materialism as applied to history reveals it to be as spiritual as it is undialectical, and altogether unhistorical.