

Unit 7

Marxian Perspective on Development

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Learning Objectives

This unit aims to introduce you to:

- Marx's idea of development;
- Marx's idea of capitalism, class relations and development and his plan of action;
- neo-Marxian approach to development; and
- criticisms of Marxian approach to development.

7.1 Introduction

This unit deals with the central Marxian idea on development. Marx has tried to explain development in terms of the progression of society through various stages – tribal, asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist. He has visualised conflict inbuilt in the material condition of existence to be the core factor in development. To carry forward this conflict he has identified the agency of social class as the main vehicle of class conflict.

In the earlier units of this block we have discussed modernisation and the liberal approaches to development.

By now you must be acquainted with the significance of market forces in development.

In this unit we shall be dealing with Marxian approach to development. In MSO-001 Sociological Concepts and Theories, you have read Marxian concepts of class and class conflict, and capitalist mode of production and change. In this unit we touch upon all these issues again from the perspective of development. Here we shall briefly discuss Marx's idea of development, capitalism and his plan of action. The social conditions of the working class in the capitalist mode of production has been especially examined. We have also discussed neo-Marxian approaches to development, i.e., the world system analysis and critical theory. This unit ends with discussion on critical theory.

7.2 Marxian Idea of Development

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was the most influential socialist thinker on development in the 19th and 20th centuries. Of late, against the backdrop of the collapse of the socialist economy, Marxian thought has been a subject of critical review. Around half of the world population followed his suggested path of restructuring

the social and political organisation and economic development. His contribution to the theory of development is simply unparalleled and path-breaking. After his death on 14th March 1883, his life time collaborator and close friend, Friedrich Engels, wrote in his obituary:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that, therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

The development of human society through various stages, development and change in the material condition, existence, development of capitalism, and the corresponding change in the class relationship and transformation in the mode of production were the major concerns of Karl Marx. Let us examine some of these concerns.

a) Production Relation and Development

Marx had a profound philosophical vision of the development of human society which may be understood in terms of the material condition of existence and the dialectic, i.e., contradiction inbuilt in the material condition of existence. Though he has not denied the significance of non-material forces in the process of development of human society through various stages, he emphasised that material forces and their contradiction provided the very basic and fundamental condition of development and change in human society. Marx's idea of development is best understood in terms of his analysis and interpretation of the capitalist society, its evolution, structure and functioning. As a prolific writer, Karl Marx has touched upon all these issues in several of his writings, especially in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859, 1976) and *The Capital* (1887).

According to Karl Marx all the legal relations, politics, forms of the states, etc. are to be understood, not in terms of development of human mind but in terms of the material condition of life. To him, in the process of development of human society human being has emerged to be a producing animal and thereby tied with several production relations. To quote him:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general (Marx 1859).

He was very categorical to mention that with the change in the economic foundation the inter superstructure, that is the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical, get transferred. In the process of such transformation individual consciousness is determined not by what he thinks but by the contradiction of material life that is the conflict between the social productive forces and relation of production. Consciousness is a part of development in human society. To him, it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but on the contrary their material condition of

existence that determines this consciousness. As pointed out earlier antagonistic production relation is the key factor for change and development to Marx.

He points out that at a certain stage of development "the material productive forces come in conflict with the existing relation of production,..... with the property relation within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of productive forces this relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of revolution" (Marx 1976: 504).

To him the asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist are the progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The capitalist relation of production to him is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production.

b) Class Relation and Change

In all the stages of economic transformation of society, there have been specific forms of class struggles. Social classes according to Karl Marx are the main agents of social change. The change is however based on class conflict. Thus to him.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Ibid).

Classes, to Marx, are formed based on objective material conditions. These are groups of people with a common economic position vis-a-vis those of other class. In essence, this economic interest is conflicting and contradictory to each other's class position. These class relations get transformed to hostile action against each other with the intermediation of class consciousness. The objective material conditions form the basis for the formation of "class-in-itself" which get transformed into "class-for-itself" in the process of transversing of subjective class consciousness.

To Karl Marx, though the class relation was very complicated in the earlier epochs of history, in the modern stage of capitalism this has been simplified. In the modern capitalist society new classes however have emerged with new condition of operation and new form of struggle between the bourgeoisie (the owners of the of production i.e., the 'haves') and the proletariat (i.e. the 'have-nots').

According to Marx, under capitalism wage labourers are paupers who grow more rapidly than the population and wealth. The essential conditions both for the existence and sway of the bourgeoisie class is the formation and augmentation of capital. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourer, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, is its grave diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable (Ibid: 119).

7.3 Capitalism, Class Relations and Development

Modern industry has established the world market that has given immense scope of development to commerce, navigation and communication by land. These developments again have paved the way for the extension of industries and free trade.

The bourgeoisie class constantly maximises its profit through the expansion of new markets, introduction of new technology, extraction of surplus value and exploitation of the proletariat. However, along with these developments there emerge new forces of contradiction within the capitalist system. Notwithstanding the emergence of new forces of contradiction, the bourgeoisie was very revolutionary in their outlook and action. According to Marx, "The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part.... the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."

Through the exploitation of the world market the bourgeoisie has given a cosmopolitan character to the production and consumption process. The old industries got destroyed. The old national industries got dislodged. Industry in the capitalist system no longer worked only on indigenous raw materials but raw materials drawn from the remotest zones, whose products are consumed in every quarter of the globe.

In place of old wants satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. the intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National onesideness and narrow mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature"(Ibid: 112).

The capitalists according to Marx also subjected the nature to the force of man and machinery through the application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, and modern technologies such as steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraph, canalisation of rivers, etc. All these facilitated the scope of free commodification of the economy at world scales. There also emerged free competition accompanied by social and political institutions to adopt to it.

The modern capitalist however, according to Marx, has inherited and nurtured the seeds of its destruction in its own womb. In proportion to the growth of the bourgeoisie there has emerged the modern working class – the proletariat, "These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market." (Ibid: 114)

For Marx the essence of the captor is to maximise profit through commoditisation of the production process. As long as capitalism is based on private ownership of the means of production, it maximises profits of the private producers. This profit is again maximised by exchange proceeding from money to money by way of commodity. Gradually the proceed from money to money by way of commodity ends up with more money than one had at the outset (Aron 1965: 128). To explain the sources of profit, Marx talked about the theory of value, wage and surplus value. To him, the value of any commodity is roughly proportional to the quality of human labour contained in it. The wage capitalists pay to the workers, as the compensation for the labour power the worker rent to the capitalist, is equal to the amount necessary for the existence of the workers and their family to produce the merchandise for the capitalist. Under the capitalist system, workers receive the wage which is less than the actual duration of the work; that is less than the value of the commodity he or she produces. Here comes the notion of "surplus value" which refers to "the quality of value produced by the workers beyond the necessary labour time". Under the capitalist system the workers do not get the wage for the quality of the value produced beyond the necessary labour time.

In return the wage received by a workman is restricted only to the means of his subsistence and survival. Marx calculated that the price of a commodity and therefore "also of labour is equal to its cost of production". In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of work increases the wage decreases. With the increase in the proportion of the use of machinery and division of labour the burden of toil of the labour also increases in terms of increase in the working hours, and increase in the quantum of work.

The proletariat is without property. His relation to his children and wife has no longer anything in common with the bourgeoisie family relations; modern industrial labour, modern subjugation to capital, the same in England, as in France, in America and Germany, has tripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interest" (Ibid: 118).

Gradually the number the proletariat also increases to gain more strength and awareness. The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, artisans, peasants also join the army of the proletariat in their fight against the bourgeoisie. To Marx "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority." And again Marx writes; in depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.

7.4 Marx's Plan of Action

After the revolution by the working class, the proletariat would be raised to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy, to centralise all instruments of production in the hand of the state, to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible, to entirely revolutionalise the mode of production. He suggested the following measures:

- i) Abolition of private property in land and application of all rents of land to public purpose.
- ii) A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
- iii) Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
- iv) Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
- v) Centralisation of credit in the hands of the State, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
- vi) Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.
- vii) Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste-land, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
- viii) Equal liability of all to labour. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
- ix) Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country.
- x) Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production.

Reflection and Action 7.1

What are the major features of capitalism according to Marx?

7.5 Marx and Historical-Sociological Perspective

Historical analysis can develop a critical approach to the study of the past, present, and future. It can illuminate the varieties of cultural and social diversity that have existed, and show how changes in these have occurred. Many historical approaches in sociology have assumed that history is associated with human progress and reaching higher stages of development of society – Marxian theories and liberal theories of modernisation generally adopt this approach. But historical approaches to sociology need not make this assumption and can consider human experience to have many forms of diversity, society to have made great progress in some areas and little in others, and to consider the possibility of regression rather than progression.

It would be best to adopt a historical approach that does not consider human history to have a particular direction or to necessarily evolve to more progressive forms of social organisation. Further, there may be no inevitability or purpose to historical change – change certainly occurs but is a product of myriad influences, some intended and others unintended, with coincidence and chance along with intersection of various unforeseen social circumstances and forces. There are certainly social forces leading in specific directions (markets, exchange) and powerful individuals and groups attempting to further their influence and power, but people in the social world can also change these social forces. For example, some contemporary analysis assumes that globalisation, standardisation, and the decline of the nation-state are dominant forces that have a certain inevitability. While there is no doubt that these forces are strong, there are other aspects such as traditional cultures, resistance to change, local grounding, and communication and discussion (as highlighted by Habermas and others) that must be considered as well.

Writers in the nineteenth century often adopted a view that human history passed through various identifiable stages. The sociology of Comte with focus on the theological, metaphysical, scientific stage of society and the analysis of Enlightenment writers tended to assume that human history has gone through various stages of development, with each of the stages at a higher level than earlier stages. The Enlightenment thinkers assumed that the stage that had been reached at the time they were writing was an advance over earlier stages, in that humans had developed a better understanding of the world and could now improve the social world. The view that the stages of history represented progress is reflected in concepts such as primitive and backward to refer to traditional forms, and civilisation and modern to refer to the European societies of the nineteenth century.

Marx and Engels, and later writers in the Marxian stream have generally adopted a similar view and developed a historical analysis as a major part of their analysis. For Marx, the modes of production were historical in nature, with each representing a particular stage of historical evolution, and containing forces for change, but also being limited in form. Thus markets and cities emerged in feudal society, but the power of these emergent social forces required change in the mode of production. As a result, the forces of the bourgeoisie and capitalism broke the power of feudal forms of social and economic organisation, creating a new society in the nineteenth century. For Marx, each mode of production is historical in nature, having emerged at a particular time, but also having an historical dynamic built into it. Marxian analysis is thus essentially historical in content and form. While it is theoretical, the concepts and models of Marxian analysis are simultaneously historical and theoretical.

There had been several criticisms against this Marxian model of development. Let us look into some of them here.

Marx has forecasted the disappearance of the State after the successful implementation of the programme of action by the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, historical experiences show that, the state System has not only got reinforced, it has at times taken an oppressive form.

Again it is a fact that centralised planning can't be implemented without well-organised State mechanism. Thus Marx's idea of the State withering away remains in essence contradictory both in terms of historical experiences and execution of centralised planning.

It is assumed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would usher in an era of classless society. However after the seizure of state power, not the proletariat, but the political elites occupy the power. Ownership of power is an important dimension of defining social class. Indeed here new political classes emerge with a few occupying the power position, while the vast majority being the powerless.

Marx has generalised the idea related to class formation, class transformation and the role of the economic structure in determining the course of history. Marx has defined social collectivities or group in terms of the economy. Here "class" has been seen as the sole agent to bring change in society through revolution. However, the significance of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, caste, estate, etc. within these collectives are grossly ignored. Indeed Marx has defined all social relations and conflicts in terms of class relations and conflicts by ignoring the social and historical roles played by these collectives in various societies.

The Marxian idea of capitalism has not taken into cognisance the advancement of new technological inputs and new employer-employee relationship in the changing world. Many of the aspects are covered in the theory of modernisation and the critical theory. The process of advancement of capitalism may also follow the path of rationalisation of religious thoughts as depicted in Protestant ethics, highlighted by Max Weber.

Reflection and Acton 7.2

Write a critique of the Marx's perspective on development.

Karl Marx's core idea on development was furthered by several school's of Marxian approach. In the following section we shall be presenting a glimpse of Neo-Marxian approach.

7.6 Neo-Marxian Approach: World-Systems Analysis

One of the primary historical-sociological perspectives is that of the world-systems analysis, a neo-Marxian approach built around analyses of modes of production. This approach developed from an analysis of the economic and material world, specifically capitalism as it emerged and developed in Europe beginning in the 1500s. The world-systems analysis generally argues that this new economic and social system broke the power of earlier political and economic empires and systems, and developed towards a dominant world system. While originating in Europe, the world system that has emerged over the last five hundred years is without limits and extends for its reach throughout the globe. In contrast to some Marxian approaches, this world system is not always progressive in its effects, it encompasses a variety of modes of production, and could ultimately be replaced by a socialist world system.

The world-systems analysis was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1930-) who has been a professor at Columbia University, McGill University, and currently the State University of New York at Binghamton. Wallerstein is best known for his *The Modern World-System*, published in 1974. In this work he analyses the origins of the modern system, beginning around 1500, where there began a shift from political and military forms of dominance to economic influences and power. In later volumes, Wallerstein traces the development of this new system, showing how it is creating core, periphery, and semi-periphery regions of the world. While political structures are connected to economic ones, Wallerstein argues that a variety of political structures are compatible with the capitalist world system.

The world-systems theory abandons national economies and the nation state as the unit of analysis. Marxian theory generally works within the framework of national social structures, with a capitalist and a working class being rooted in the organisation of production and distribution on a national scale. The world-systems theory considers the division of labour, exploitation, and inequality on a world rather than a national level. That is, capitalism is not just organised on a national level, it develops and uses resources, labour, production, and markets on a world scale.

The development of Canada could easily be interpreted within a world-systems approach. European expansion led to the development of Atlantic fisheries to supply food for Europe. Later the development of the fur trade made Canada supply furs for European consumption. These were connected to the development of industry and consumer markets in Europe - with an emerging bourgeoisie and working class. The development of trade and European expansion across North America destroyed many of the aboriginal economies that existed earlier. Agricultural and industrial changes in Europe led to export of dispossessed and poor Europeans to settle in North America. Forest, mining, and agricultural products were exported to Europe, thereby assisting in the growth of European and North American capitalism. While some areas benefited, others became disadvantaged as a result of these developments. Social and class structures have a connection to this international division of labour and the forms of development of production and markets on a world scale.

In world-systems analysis there are three types of regions. The **core areas** of the world system are the wealthy countries of Europe and North America that dominate and exploit much of the rest of the world. These countries tend to have relatively free labour markets with relatively well paid skilled workers. In contrast, the **periphery** is poor and exploited, exporting raw materials to the core economies. Conditions for workers in the periphery tend to be very poor, and workers in these countries are often coerced through slavery or threat of starvation. The core countries benefit by maintaining the peripheral countries in a backward state.

Semi-peripheral countries combine aspects of the core and periphery, being exploited and exploiting. Examples might include some of the poorer parts of Europe (Portugal or Greece) or some of the better off South American countries such as Argentina. The key to the division, however, is not so much the countries but the position any area occupies within the international division of labour. For example, there may be peripheral areas of core countries (some parts of northern Saskatchewan or the Maritimes) and core areas in primarily peripheral countries.

7.7 Implications of World-System Analysis

In terms of sociological analysis, there appear to be at least three implications of the world-systems analysis.

- a) **Expansion:** Unlike earlier empires, which had limits to expansion prescribed by the ability to politically govern a wide area, there appears to be little limit to the capitalist world system, especially today. It has expanded over the last five hundred years and shows no signs of ending the domination of the world economy. Wallerstein argues that this is one difference of the current world system from earlier ones - there was a decisive break around the period 1500, whereby capitalism, technology, and science combined to create an expansive and global system.
- b) **International scope:** Social structure has an international basis. Any analysis of the social structure must consider the international aspect of this. That is, the particular place any group occupies in an international division of labour may be more important than the seeming place within the national economy and society.
- c) **Difference and Inequality:** In contrast to theories of modernisation or globalisation that argue that there may be a single, more uniform world in the future, the thrust of world-systems analysis is that continued inequalities and backwardness are furthered at the same time that wealth and progress occur in the core. This world system does not require similar culture, politics, or even modes of production in different regions. Rather, the capitalist world system can accommodate many different political forms (democracy, totalitarianism, monarchies, military rule) and different forms of production (slavery, semi-feudal forms of large estates and impoverished peasants, market-oriented agriculture). While the economic power of capitalism makes its effects felt on a world wide scale, this system creates wealth in some places and takes wealth away from others. As a result, poverty and inequality are essential aspects of such a system. This creates strains and can lead to redistribution of power and wealth on a world wide scale.
- d) **Study of Change:** The world-systems analysis provides a useful way of examining changes that have occurred and continue to occur across the globe. For example, the migration of large numbers of people from poor to richer countries is a result of the developments on the world system – destroying traditional ways of life and livelihood in the sending countries and filling labour supply needs in receiving countries. At the same time, this approach may be overly economic in much the same manner as much Marxian analysis. That is, the world-systems analysis does not pay much attention to culture and does not appear to consider it as an independent aspect. Further, the assumption of dominance of European and North American capitalist forces may be somewhat ethnocentric.

Reflection and Action 7.3

What is the essence of the World-system theory? How is it significant in exploring development in contemporary society?

7.8 Critical Theory: Frankfurt School

Critical theory has different meanings for different writers. As critique it is usually considered to be a critique of modernity and the developments and institutions associated with modern society. It can also be a critique of particular schools of thought within sociology, or of sociology and social science as a whole. A large part of critical theory has been to critique art and culture, in particular the consumer culture, advertising, the media, and other forms of popular culture. Some of the arguments in Giddens *Dilemmas of the Self*, such as the evaporated self and commodified experience, are very similar to critical theory. In fact, it is in the sphere of culture that critical theory continues to be relevant and innovative.

Marxism is one form of critical theory, since Marxism provides a critique of capitalism and modernism. The Marxism of many communist parties and established socialist societies is generally not regarded as critical theory - it is rather Marxist theories that attempt to show the shortcomings of existing society and institutions that are considered critical theories. Kellner (1989: 3) notes:

Critical Theory has been deeply concerned with the fate of modernity, and has offered systematic and comprehensive theories of the trajectory of modernity, combined with critical diagnoses of some of the latter's limitations, pathologies and destructive effects - while providing defences of some of its progressive elements.

In Kellner's view, critical theory has generally been committed to the idea of modernity and progress, while at the same time noting the ways that features of modernity can create problems for individuals and society.

Critical theory is usually more closely associated with a group of theorists called the Frankfurt school. It were German Marxist theorists such as Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and, more recently, Habermas and Offe, who usually identified as establishing and developing a critical theory of modern society. Others, such as the Hungarian Marxist Lukacs, and some contemporary North Americans, most notably Calhoun and Kellner, are also considered to be critical theorists. It will be primarily this tradition that will be examined in this section.

Box 7.1: Post Modern vs Critical Theory

Note that critical theory differs from post-modern approaches to social theory. Theorists in the latter perspective tend to argue that modernity has ended, or that modernity must be rejected in its totality. Post-modernists may even reject social theory and political practice whereas critical theorists tend to theorise extensively and some argue that politics can be used to pursue progress. Critical theorists generally tend to have a comprehensive and overall social theory and an idea of progress and a better world, even if they are unable to find ways of getting there. In contrast, a post-modern approach is more likely to be associated with rejection of comprehensive, universal theory.

a) Historical Background

When critical theory is mentioned in connection with social theory, it is usually associated with what is called the "Frankfurt School." The Institute had begun in 1923, with a financial endowment from a wealthy German grain merchant, and was attached to Frankfurt University in Germany. German universities had been quite conservative, but with the political turmoil following World War I, new ideas developed and were influential within the universities. For a time, many Marxists thought that Germany would become socialist, following the Russian revolution. When this proved unlikely to occur, some of the intellectuals attracted to Marxism argued that Marxist-oriented research was necessary to re-examine Marxist theory in the light of the changes that had occurred in Europe. In particular, some of these Marxists considered that while the objective conditions for socialism existed, the subjective consciousness of workers was not conducive to overthrow capitalism and creating socialism. In particular, "revolutionary consciousness, culture and organisation and a clear notion of socialism seemed to be lacking." As a result, it was necessary to reconsider various aspects of Marxism and focus on "consciousness, subjectivity, culture, ideology and the concept of socialism ... in order to make possible radical political change" (Kellner 1989: 12).

The Institute began its work in Germany and continued through 1933, when the Nazis came to power. Most of those who were members of the Institute went to the United States at that time, with some like Marcuse staying there,

while others returned to Germany after World War II. The Institute was established in New York City and became affiliated with Columbia University and it was there that the term “critical theory” became associated with the Institute. After World War II, the Institute was re-established in Germany and continues to operate there. Following the death of Horkheimer and Adorno, Jurgen Habermas became the leading critical theorist, a position he continues to hold.

The periods of a few major critical theorists:

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)

Theodor Adorno (1903-1969)

Erich Fromm (1900-1980)

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)

Jurgen Habermas (1929-)

Let us now look at the features of Frankfurt school and how it can put as an extension of Marxist thought.

b) Materialism and Idealism

Critical theory is thus primarily a European social theory, influenced by the German tradition of Marx and Weber and by the experience of fascism, but also by the changing aspects of modern capitalism. Critical theory began by putting Marxian political economy at the centre of analysis, and thus the early critical theory was materialist and committed to socialism. One of the major features of this perspective was that all of social life is a reflection of the economic system and the role of social theory was to investigate the ways in which this changed and affected people. “Rather, critical theory describes the complex set of ‘mediations’ that interconnect consciousness and society, culture and economy, state and citizens” (Kellner 1990: 3, 4).

Critical theory thus developed an approach which incorporated both the economic and material, and an analysis of individuals and their social psychology, attempting to deal with aspects of what we might refer to as the agency-structure issues today. But neither the material nor consciousness was primary in determining the other. Rather, these theorists paid much attention to culture, law, ethics, fashion, public opinion, sport, life style, and leisure (Kellner 1989: 18), topics which had not previously been incorporated into Marxian analysis. Calhoun notes how “Marx shared with the young Hegel an attempt to conceptualise the absolute creativity of the human being through the example of art, but unlike Hegel he extended this into a more general analysis of labour” (Ibid 441). The Frankfurt school theorists took up this challenge once again and made art and aesthetics a central feature of their analysis.

c) Supradisciplinary

Critical theorists are critical of Marxism when it is mechanically materialist or too determinist. They were especially critical of branches of philosophy, especially positivism and scientific methods associated with it. They are also critical of sociology and other social sciences for being insufficiently critical and having only partial analyses. They thus set very high standards for social science, ones that they themselves were ultimately unable to meet.

Given that the initial concern of these theorists was to understand the reason why class consciousness had not developed among the working class, their first project was to conduct an empirical study of the white-collar working class in Germany, to obtain information concerning their psychological, social, and political attitudes and combine this with theoretical ideas from the various

social sciences (Kellner 1989: 19). The findings of this study were that “the actual revolutionary potential of the German working class was less than what usually assumed, and that, while the workers might resist a fascist attempt to take over the government, it was unlikely that they would undertake the sacrifices necessary for a socialist revolution” (Ibid: 20). While this approach provided interesting results, it is not clear that in studies of this type, the approach of these critical theorists differed all that much from some of the conventional social science approaches.

d) Commodity Exchange

Beginning with commodity and commodity production as the key feature of capitalist society, they argued that capitalist market relations and values were penetrating ever more areas of life. Exchange was becoming the primary way in which people related to and interacted with each other in a capitalist market society. Consequently reification – the turning of humans, culture, nature and everything else into commodities whose fundamental substance was exchange value – came to dominate relationships and activity within the capitalist society (Ibid: 53).

That is, rather than human relationships between individuals, exchange relationships come to dominate inter-personal relationships. Marx had noted this; but this line of thought was much further developed by the critical theorists. They looked on capitalism in the twentieth century as extending this to many aspects of society previously untouched or relatively unaffected by exchange relations. They saw aspects of personal life such as love, friendship, and the family being reduced to such form of exchange. Consumption became organised by such forces as well, so that there were increasingly “oppressive uniformities and identities”. The concern was with rising sameness and conformity in society that did not let underlying tensions and contradictions to surface and be amenable to public attention and action (Calhoun 2002). They viewed such forces as stifling individuality and particularity and producing a certain sameness among all members of society. This aspect of capitalism has developed much more than in the 1920s and 30s, so that this part of their critique certainly has an important resonance in today’s economy, media and society. Consumer and media capitalism have vastly extended their reach into all aspects of the consumer society and life in general, and a critical approach to contemporary society can benefit from and use the ideas developed by these critical theorists.

e) Administered Society

A major feature of the political sociology of critical theory is the notion of an administered society. Weber had argued that forces of rationality and rationalisation were becoming increasingly dominant in western society. Rather than traditional or charismatic forces being dominant in social organisation, Weber argued that calculation, accounting, considered decision-making, and guided social action by careful examination of how means could be used to accomplish particular ends were forms that had become more forceful in western society. These forces are clearest in economics, business, and formal organisations, but Weber argued that these same forces made their effects felt in politics, education, and even the arts.

Critical theorists added these ideas of Weber on bureaucracy, rationalisation, and administration to the Marxian ideas of exchange and commodification. While Marx was primarily concerned with the economic sphere, the critical theorists extended their analysis to the political and social sphere, combining the ideas of exchange and administered society. The result was a view that capitalism and the society associated with it “was a totalising system which attempted to penetrate every area of life from self-constitution to interpersonal relations to education.” These totalising processes were leading to the destruction of “individuality and particularity” (Kellner 1989: 54).

One form this took was an economic analysis which argued that capitalism had been transformed from uncontrolled and relatively free markets to a form of state capitalism. While Marx and some earlier economists may have foreseen some aspects of this, they did not foresee the manner in which the state would intervene in the economic sphere. Friedrich Pollock, one of the economists associated with the Frankfurt School, developed a model of state capitalism, whereby “the state acquires power over money and credit, and regulates production and prices. Furthermore, management becomes separate from ownership” (Ibid: 60-61). While these critical theorists may have overestimated the role of the state in economics, and underestimated the vibrancy of capitalism as an economic system, theories of this sort have contributed to our understanding of capitalism and how it evolves. There is a strong political aspect to the economic sphere and many aspects of the economy are administered.

f) Totalising Societies

An important part of critical theory is related to their critique of totality and totalising forces. They were always opposed to any form of totalitarianism, whether it was the totalitarian society of fascism in Germany or the totalising form of administered socialism in the Soviet Union. Their arguments here make sense given the system that emerged in Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union, where the structures to “control more and more aspects of life” (Kellner 1989: 54) were established and acquired great power. Totalitarian here could mean any system which attempts to govern many or all aspects of social life.

Since the critical theorists came from, were living in, and were affected by the fascist form of political and social organisation, it is no surprise that they developed a model of this totalitarian system. Their intimate knowledge of this system and their later observation of it from exile in the United States each provided them with useful insights concerning the nature of totality. Critical theorists looked on fascism as a new form of monopoly or state capitalism, whereby “the state assumed functions previously carried out by a market economy and thus became the primary arbitrator of socio-economic development” (Ibid 1989: 67). They looked on this system as a result of political and economic disorder, a system that capitalism developed to survive in the face of challenges from the working class and its own inability to govern itself. This was then a new phase of capitalism, “a new synthesis of monopoly capitalism and the totalitarian state which threatens to dominate the world and to eliminate its opponents and all vestiges of the earlier forms of liberal economy and politics” (Ibid 1989: 67).

Attractive as this analysis was, this prediction turned out to be incorrect and capitalism has taken a different form, perhaps totalising, but in a different manner. However, the experience of the critical theorists with fascism and totalitarianism helped shape their later analysis. In particular, they focus on the ways such a political-economic system achieves a rational, efficient form of production, but eliminates alternatives and debate over them. The reading from Marcuse will show how he interpreted and developed these ideas of totality and administered society as applying to societies that are normally considered more democratic and liberal.

An additional aspect of the discussion is the relative autonomy of the political and the economic spheres. Marxists tended to argue that the state and political forces operate in the interest of the owners of capital. Some of the arguments of the critical theorists questioned this, pointing out that the political sphere sometimes was dominant, and the interests of the administered, totalitarian society might dominate the economic in some aspects.

Another aspect of the analysis of such a system was the “socio-psychological analysis of the cultural roots of fascism in attitudes towards the family and

authority" (Ibid: 66). For Marxists, this was a new direction for social analysis to take and Erich Fromm, one of the key critical theorists, incorporated Freudian and other psychoanalytic theories into the social theory of the Frankfurt School.

g) Individual and Human Nature

For the Frankfurt theorists, human nature was related to the historical conditions in which it emerged. Humans beings are creative, but their creativity gets dominated by certain conditions under capitalism that appear to be natural and immutable. The critical theorists argued with the model of the absolute individual consciousness and identity that characterised the era of enlightenment, and liberal thought gave legitimate place to individuals' subjectivity and their relationships with others. In addition to identity, non-identity and multiple involvements of the individual meant that self-identity took many different forms. It was in this that the individual can develop creativity and reach beyond an unchanging individual identity. If society allowed the individual to explore and critique different ideas and situations, this would allow the individual to be free. But more and more the increased sameness and uniformity of society is forced on individuals and prevents this freedom from occurring.

Calhoun notes that critical theorists looked on essential human characteristics as crucial for the pursuit of happiness, the need for solidarity with others, and natural sympathies. These, of course, were developed in particular ways in each specific form of social organisation, since people are products of the historical conditions in which they live. But they connect a critical form of reason to this, with Horkheimer arguing that "a form of reason implicitly critical of civilisation" is part of human nature. The problem is that administered and totalising societies attempt to stifle and constrain this and channel it in particular directions. Erich Fromm argued that there is an essential human nature that is "repressed and distorted by capitalist patterns of domination".

Erich Fromm's contribution to critical theory involved an analysis of the individual, the family, sexual repression, the economy, and the social context of the individual. His writings outline one way in which the work of Freud and Marx can be integrated. Fromm argues that there are basic instincts of motive forces for human behaviour, but that these are adapted, both actively and passively, to social reality. For Fromm, "psychoanalysis ... seeks to discover the hidden sources of the obviously irrational behaviour patterns in societal life - in religion, custom, politics, and education" (Kellner 1989: 37). In this way, he combined social psychological approaches with the materialism of Marx, that is, synthesising the instinctual, psychological forces in humans with the effects of economic and material forces on human life.

For Fromm, the nuclear family as it exists in capitalist society is key to understanding the connections between these. That is, the individual is raised in a family, and the family stamps a specific part of the social structure on the child. This is the manner in which "society reproduces its class structure and imposes its ideologies and practices on individuals" (Ibid). While individuals growing up in a different society would develop differently, the particular effects of modernity create forms of domination and inner struggles in each individual. Forms of social behaviour such as submissiveness and powerlessness become part of the self in these circumstances.

In contrast to Marxian theories, critical theorists made analysis of art and culture a central focus of their studies, and noted developments in culture that were not purely economic in origin. Rather, the dialectic of enlightenment was used as critique of culture. Kellner (1989: 121) notes that they argued:

Culture, once a refuge of beauty and truth, was falling prey, they believed, to tendencies towards rationalization, standardization and conformity, which they saw as a consequence of the triumph of instrumental rationality that was coming to pervade and structure ever more aspects of life. Thus while culture once cultivated individuality, it was now promoting conformity and was a crucial part of the “totally administered society” that was producing “the end of the individual.

For the most part, critical theorists developed critiques of mass or popular culture. For example, Adorno “criticized popular music production for its commodification, rationalization, fetishism and reification of musical materials” (Ibid: 124). In particular, Adorno attacked jazz as being standardised and commercialised, arguing that “seeming spontaneity and improvisation are themselves calculated in advance, and the range of what is permissible is as circumscribed as in clothes or other realms of fashion” (Ibid 1989: 126). While Adorno’s critique has some truth to it, he is unable to explain innovation and new developments using this one-sided approach. Adorno tended to look on traditional forms of “high culture” such as the art of art galleries or the music of German composers as more authentic and creative than were forms of popular culture. In my view, Adorno adopted a very elitist approach to culture, one that would lead to limiting accessibility to and understanding of culture by large parts of the population.

Walter Benjamin, one of the individuals associated with the Institute, disagreed with Adorno and argued that there were not such dramatic differences between high culture and popular culture. Benjamin was interested in the copy, the mechanical reproduction of artistic images, a relatively new development in the early part of the twentieth century. While Benjamin regarded the copy as questioning the authenticity of the original work of art and the aura and aesthetic quality of the work of art, he also argued that: “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Ibid: 124).

Benjamin considered these to be progressive features of this new development, with the new forms becoming more accessible to more people, becoming more politicised, and possibly leading the situation where many images could be brought to the masses could raise political consciousness. This was particularly the case with film where Benjamin is somewhat reminiscent of Simmel.

Reflection and Action 7.3

Explain the major contribution of critical theory in evaluating Marxian perspective on development.

7.9 Conclusion

This unit has dealt with the central Marxian idea on development. Marx has tried to explain development in terms of progression of society from various stages that is tribal, asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist. He has visualised conflict inbuilt in the material condition of existence to be the core factor in development. To carry forward this conflict he has identified the agency of social class as the main vehicle of class conflict. In this unit we have explained all these facets of development as formulated by Karl Marx. The Marxian plans of action and thought, the limitations of his scheme of thought are discussed in this unit. We have also discussed neo-Marxian approaches to development with special reference to dependency theory and critical theory on Marxism after Marx.

7.10 Further Reading

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