

Why did Marx feel that it was necessary to uncover the 'laws of motion' of modern society?

When Marx was a student of law, philosophy and history, he produced ideas about the political and legal system which were opposed to the prevalent trains of thought among academics of the time. The general view was that modern institutions developed either from themselves, as a consequence of their own benefits compared to ancient systems, or from the 'general development of the human mind'. Marx disagreed with both of these ideas, and claimed that the system had roots in the 'material conditions' of life. In other words, the anatomy of civil society was to be sought in political economy. One of Marx's most famous quotations is that it is 'not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness'.

Marx believed that production was a 'social process' and that modern 'bourgeois relations' were only one manifestation of this. Indeed, much of the development of Marx's philosophy comes from his reflections on pre-history. Like Nietzsche, Marx defined the early human condition as a struggle with nature and a desire to achieve mastery of nature for man's own purposes. The turning point was seen to come with the development by early man of tools, which allowed an individual to produce more than he could consume. Marx recognised that even then there was potential for conflict in who would share the surplus food, and the potential for certain groups within the society to appropriate the fruits of the labour of others. This is used in order to determine which circumstances have had the greatest effect in changing human civilization, and the philosophy is described as 'historical materialism'.

The struggle inherent in every human society is Marx's primary concern, and this arises directly from the production relations described above. Marx sees a contradiction in that man's power over nature is always increasing through the division of labour, yet the majority are being increasingly deprived of the benefits of that power. As this power increased throughout history, the owners of the power became relatively richer, as the division of labour reduced the importance of subsistence workers and increased the amount of each product which the person in power (such as a monarch or feudal lord) was able to appropriate. However, despite this apparent pessimism, there is a current of optimism in Marxism – Marx sees capitalism moving steadily towards its own destruction as the inequalities of the past are exacerbated by

modern production methods. History was itself working towards the final liberation of man. This is criticised by some historians as being simplistic determinism, allowing no room for individual influence. The Marxist response is that the theory does not try to predict the actions of individuals, but only predicts mass phenomena which obey 'social laws'. Marx saw these laws as being just as incontrovertible as those of the natural sciences, while dismissing other legal, political, philosophical, religious and aesthetic modes of thought as far less rigorous and scientific than his own. In the social production of life, Marx believed that people entered relations which were independent of their individual will. The sum total of these relations constituted the economic structure of a nation, on which the political and legal structure grew.

This concept of two levels of human society is a recurring one throughout Marx's writings: at the 'base' he sees the relations of production, while built on the base is a 'superstructure' of political institutions (especially the state), organised religion, laws and customs, philosophy, morality and ultimately human consciousness. The struggle inherent in the base was seen to express itself in the superstructure, so a true understanding of the superstructure was only possible if we could grasp the fundamental 'laws of motion' at the base. One of Marx's reasons for defining his 'laws' in such a concrete way was his long-running debate with Hegel. Marx criticised Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right' for starting with abstract ideas, not concrete reality. While Hegel believed the state came about as a result of a general 'idea' which would succeed through its own superiority, Marx saw the family and civil society as having made themselves into the state. Marx disagreed with Hegel about the innate goodness of the state bureaucracy as well, suggesting that the apex trusted the lower circles with insight into the individual while the lower circles left the insight into the universal to the apex, so each end of the bureaucracy was liable to deceive the other. This reduced the likelihood of Hegel's claim that the bureaucracy existed because of their superiority. Marx went so far as to describe the bureaucratic culture as the 'idolatry of authority', and suggested that the political state was only 'the mirror of truth for the different elements of the concrete state.'

These 'laws of motion' were also essential to developing an understanding of what a communist system could be like. As Marx believed communism could only come about following capitalism (a theory which has not worked in practice), the study of capitalism provided the best means to comprehend the developments that would bring about communism. There were no 'shortcuts to socialism' in Marx's view – the public needed to have developed a hatred of the capitalist system before

communism would be acceptable to them. This fits in with the general view of historical materialism earlier – history is born of massed human desires, which lead to creativity and eventually progress. In other words, capitalism had to *precede* industrialisation – a full understanding of the latter could not be gained without any insights into the development of the former. Marx therefore searched for those elements which encouraged the relatively large accumulation of capital in the late Middle Ages, and settled on the emergence of a civil society as the principle reason. An autonomous plane of economic activity had developed, free from the constraints of political or religious activity. There was at last a moral justification for the massive accumulation of capital, which later allowed industrialisation to take place.

Marx talked about the 'cardinal facts' of capitalist production. The first was the replacement of widespread private property with so-called 'social property' through the concentration of the means of production in a few hands. The trustees of the bourgeois society (capitalists) were pocketing all the profits of this trusteeship. In an industrial nation, the minimum amount of capital required for business start-ups would steadily increase. Existing producers would, in order to stay ahead of the competition, use better but more expensive machines. This was another of Marx's immutable 'laws of motion', and would lead to an even greater divide between the owners of capital (becoming richer and more distant all the time) and those who were denied the chance to own any capital themselves by these prohibitive start-up costs. The power of the capitalists was seen to be 'an alienated, independent, social power, which stands opposed to society as an object'. The second of Marx's 'cardinal facts' was the replacement of private with social labour, through the division of labour and through co-operation. In the realm of labour, there was a pressure for existing labourers to work longer hours, at the expense of those who would become unemployed as a result. The surplus value caused by these long working hours is divided among capitalists as dividends. This was another contradiction of capitalism, and Marx believed that the unemployed would be at the forefront of the revolution.

The theme running through these two 'cardinal facts' is the replacement of a society where all members participated, with a society where the vast majority were excluded from the ownership of capital, and a significant minority were excluded from the labour market. In what Marx described as 'The Trinity Formula', capital was 'monopolised by a certain section of society', the advantages of improved use of the land were 'transferred from the cultivator or the consumer to the landlord', and

labour 'taken by itself does not exist at all' in that it depends on either land or capital for its existence. As such the very foundations of capitalist society came under serious attack from Marx.

The class system was seen as having developed out of these fundamental laws. The owners of labour power alone, the owners of capital and the landowners constituted 'three large classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production'. In conclusion, Marx tried to prove that the modern political and social system could not be understood without first looking at the 'laws of motion' governing the economic patterns at the base of society.