

**How to Cite:****Dr Afroze Eqbal (Dec 2018). Historical Materialism***International Journal of Economic Perspectives*,12(1), 61–69.Retrieved from <https://ijeponline.org/index.php/journal/article>**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM****Dr Afroze Eqbal**

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**Introduction-:**

Larson explains to Marx “matter is not a product of mind: on the contrary, the mind is simply and most advanced product of matter.” The materialist theory of history is the cornerstone of Marx’s social and political thinking and remains one of the most major and influential works of Marx.

The materialist theory of history was developed in his major work **The German Ideology** with Engels. The German Ideology was published in 1846. The aim of the development of this theory was written between 1845 and 1846 and was to set out the views of materialism in opposition to Hegelian philosophy.

**Essential Ideas:-** The above passage expresses alley essential ideas of the Marxist economic interpretation of history. These essential ideas are as follows:

1. Men centre into definite relations by the force of economic circumstances such as the forces and relations of production. Thus historical processes are determined by economic forces.
2. The infrastructure of a society includes forces and relations of production. This is based on the superstructure of legal and political institutions as well as ways of thinking.
3. The mechanism of the historical movement is the contradiction between the forces and relations of production.
4. This contradiction leads to class struggle which, according to Karl Marx, is the main factor in historical evolution.
5. The dialectics of the forces and relations of production implies a theory of revolution.
6. Social reality governs consciousness and not vice-versa.
7. The stages of human history may be distinguished based on their economic mode of production. These stages are the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the bourgeois. These four modes are again classified into the ancient and the modern. Asiatic mode of production does not constitute a stage in the history of western society. To sum up “Science and society’s experience throughout history refutes the views of bourgeois sociologists and demonstrates

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that the development of society is a forward, natural, historical process which follows objective laws independent of man. The history of society is an endless chain of development, evolutionary transitions from the simpler, lower formations to more development and improvement of material production. Production has developed from the simplest tools, the sticks and stones man used in his struggle for life, to the latest automatic machines and equipment driven by electric power and atomic energy. As production advances, the other spheres of social life also develop.”

### Stages of Human History

Just as August Comte differentiated moments of human evolution based on ways of thinking, so Karl Marx differentiated stages of human history based on their economic regimes, and he distinguished four of these or in his terminology four modes of production which he called the Asiatic, the Ancient, the Feudal and the Bourgeoisie. Being a materialist Karl Marx looks upon thoughts as based on facts. According to Marx, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, it is the social existence that determines their consciousness.” In this way, social laws change along with the history of social and economic evolution. In these changes; the three foregoing laws Apply. There have always been conflicting classes in society. From historical Evidence, these conflicting classes have three major forms

- (1) Society of slave tradition.
- (2) Aristocratic society and
- (3) Capitalist society.

According to Marx, it is only a communist society which can resolve this conflict. Marx outlined some of the basic issues before going to discuss historical materialism in terms of propositions that are related to the task of understanding historical and social processes from the perspective of human economic activity.

First, Marx believed that, before anything else, human beings must be in a position to obtain food, shelter and clothing in order to live. Thus, the first and most important historical act is the **act of production of the means** to satisfy human economic needs.

Second, human beings distinguish themselves from animals to the extent that they produce the means to satisfy their primary material needs.

Third, how human beings produce depends nature and what they find in nature and what they must produce to survive.

Historical materialism is the scientific core of Marx’s sociological thought. According to Friedrich Engels, the theory of historical materialism was discovered by Karl Marx, but Marx

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thought it was Friedrich Engels who had conceived the materialist formulation of history independently. The clearest exposition of the theory of historical materialism is contained in Marx's 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). It is one of the most incisive summaries of his theory ever written. Marx wrote:

In social production, men carry on relations that are indispensable and independent of their will. These relations of production correspond to a definite stage of the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, which is the real foundation on top of which arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. It is not the consciousness of men, therefore, that determines their existence, but instead their social existence determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society conflict with the existing relations of production, or what is but a legal expression of the same within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production, these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

Marx believed that the division of society into owners and non-owners of the means of production is a law of historical development. To prove this he divided history into four stages of development:

1. Asiatic,
2. Ancient,
3. Feudal and
4. Capitalist.

These historical stages of development were based on mode of production.

#### (i) Asiatic or Tribe Mode of Production:

Asiatic mode of production refers to a community-based production system where ownership of land is communal and the existence of it expressed through the real or imaginary unity of these communities. Therefore, this mode of production is the characteristic of a primitive community in which ownership of land is communal. These communities are kinship relations. The division development of private mainly based on of labour is rudimentary, there is no property and the social structure is derived from the family and kinship group. It's a type of classless society.

#### (ii) Ancient Mode of Production:

The second form of mode of production and ownership is found in ancient society. This form

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of social organisation develops from an association of tribes who form an organisation of city states. The productive system is largely agrarian with rudimentary industry and a system of trade and commerce. The ancient mode of production is characterised by slavery. In contrast to tribal society, there is private property and a system of class relations develops from property ownership. Masters and slaves are two social classes found in ancient society. In this system of production, the master has the right of ownership over the slave and appropriates the products of the slave's labour. Ancient mode of production, therefore, refers to a production system where the master has the right of ownership over the slave and appropriates the products of his labour through servitude, without allowing the slave to reproduce.

Societies of this type occupy vast territories and the productive system has an extensive division of labour. In addition, a civil, political and military authority arises in a productive system. The ancient Greece-Roman world is a historical example of productive systems where labour is found in the form of slavery.

**(iii) Feudal Mode of Production:**

The third form of ownership identified by Marx is that of feudal society. This system of production is agriculture based and the major food is concentrated on the land. The focal point of production is the countryside, agriculture is widespread, there is no industry and town life is not developed.<sup>32</sup> Feudal mode of production is concerned with two groups of classes, viz., the feudal lords and the serfs. Serfs were deprived of property rights and obliged to surrender their labour to fulfil their familial requirements. So the feudal lords exploited their tenants or 'serfs'. Hence, the feudal mode of production refers to a production system where the lords appropriate surplus labour from the serfs in the form of rent.

Feudal society was seen by Marx and Engels as intermediate, i.e., between the slave society of the ancient world of capitalists and proletarians in the modern era. The evolution of the feudal system brought about the exchange of agricultural and manufactured products in regional markets. Feudal societies were dominant throughout Europe and England between the ninth and the seventeenth centuries.

**(iv) Capitalist Mode of Production:**

The capitalist form of ownership is the fourth form of mode of production. The development of the capitalist mode of production presupposes the destruction of a feudal mode of production and a transformation of production from countryside to the town. In fact, the class of serfs of feudal society is replaced by the class of wage labourers of capitalist society. The productive system is based on an advanced division of labour, with developed trade and commercial activity. In a capitalist mode of production, the town has become the centre of

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economic activity, the productive system has shifted from agriculture to industry, and there is fully developed political and civil life. There is widespread emergence of private property and a developed class system of capitalists, who are the owners of the means of production, and wage labourers, who are of physical labour.

Hence, the capitalist mode of production refers to a production system where the owners of the means of production, capitalists, extract surplus labour from the proletariats in the form of profits. In addition, capitalism refers to a mode of production in which capital is the dominant means of production. As a mode of production, capitalism first emerged in Europe. The industrial revolution starting in England and spreading across different countries saw a rapid growth of technology and a corresponding rise of the capitalist economy. Marx viewed capitalism eventually replaced by the socialism-a revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. As Marx stated, “at a certain stage of development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or-what is but a legal expression of the same thing-with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed”


At this point, it can be said that each of these stages of historical development has three central themes:

- (i) they perpetuate the division of society into classes, in producers as a historical phase, to be which one class is dominant over another;
- (ii) they perpetuate economic, political and social inequality; and
- (iii) in each society, unequal social relations are supported by religion, law, and the political structure.

**Even the economic basis of social evolution has two parts:**

- (1) means of production
- (2) economic relations.

The first comprises machines and the second, ownership and ways of distribution etc. The order of society underwent a change with the development of the chaos. With the development of agricultural implements, it entered into a state of agriculture. Industrial age was conceived with the discovery of industrial machinery. In the same way society underwent important changes with the entry of banks and currency into the medium of distribution.

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**Criticism:****1. Not-applicable to Asiatic society.**

The economic interpretation of history, as propounded by Karl Marx, is not applicable to Asiatic society including Indian society. The various stages of this interpretation of history also do not apply to Asiatic society. The anti-Marist sociologists have again referred to Asiatic mode of production as a challenge to Marxist interpretation. The analysis of capitalist society by Marx is impressive but not successful. It is because history has neither rationality nor necessity.

**2. Analysis of Capital not applicable to Capitalistic societies.**

The chief contribution made by Karl Marx is the analysis of capital in capitalist societies. This analysis however, is not applicable to so many capitalist societies. This is the case particularly with the Asiatic societies, which do not show any class conflict inspire of social stratification. Hence Marx's predictions about the downfall of capitalism have not come true everywhere. His idea of constant pauperisation of labour is wrong so far as concerned. Neither is there any proof of proletarianization. The claim of the destruction of capitalism as inevitable is far from being scientific. Marxist social thought is vitiated with the confusion of sociological and philosophical and economics and sociology. In the words of thing, the Marxist conception of capitalist society and of society in general is sociological, but this sociology is related to a philosophy; and a number of interpretative difficulties arise from the 3. societies are western Raymond Aaron, "For one relation of a philosophy to a sociology.

**3. Not essential**

The concept of the nature of historical law in Marxist philosophy has been interpreted both from objectives and dialectical viewpoints. Both these view points have their difficulties. To quote Raymond Aaron, "The objective vision which invokes the laws of history involves the essential difficulty of declaring an undated and unspecified event to be inevitable; the dialectical interpretation can assert neither the necessity for revolution nor the non-antagonistic character of post-capitalist society nor the all-embracing character of historical interpretation."

A scientific approach, as the British philosopher David Hume rightly pointed out, claims probability and not necessity. Marx's thinking purports to be scientific and yet it seems to imply imperatives; it prescribes revolutionary action as the only legitimate consequence of historical analysis.

In addition according to Marx, it is in terms of economic knowledge that a society as a

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whole is understood; but the relations between economics and sociology, phenomena and the social entity, or between economic are also ambiguous.”

**CONCLUSION-:**

Karl Marx was greatly influenced by the writings of Hegel especially his writings on the *Philosophy of History*. Karl Marx believed that Hegel had found a general historical law, called the dialectic, but attempted to make it materialistic by explaining the historical process in economics rather than metaphysical terms and applying its classes rather than nations. He thus tried to explain history in terms of the struggle between classes instead of the struggle between nations as Hegel had done.

German philosopher Karl Marx was a great social thinker of the twentieth century. His contribution not only recognised in sociology but also social sciences s whole. Due to his distinct contribution, a special school of thought has been established called Marxism. Marxist ideas have found place in almost all disciplines of social sciences. Marx’s writings mainly discussed in two parts-

(1) Youthful Marx; and


(2) Mature Marx.

Youthful Marx is mainly for his humanistic thought while mature Marx is for scientific in thought. Marx touched upon all the fields or aspects of society. He sees societal evolution through dialectical approach. His theoretical orientation is also considered as evolutionary in approach.

However, Marx’s great achievement lies in the application of synthetic approach. Marx described wide-ranging body of work in the analysis of sociological thought.

Marxist ideas provide a wide range of methodological, conceptual and theoretical orientation in the field of sociology. In addition, he also gives a direction to revolution, and the communist manifesto is the handbook of revolutionaries around the world. At this point, Marx establishes a theory of class-struggle and the concept of alienation.

Marx has applied his methodological tool, i.e., dialectical materialism in different historical stages of society from primitive to capitalist mode of production. This theoretical approach what he calls historical materialism. Due to the theory of class-struggle, Marx is considered to be the father of conflict approach. At the same time, he has also analysed social stratification, family and religion from the viewpoint of conflict approach. Religion, he goes on to say is opium for the society. He, therefore, explained everything from the parameters of two classes-dominant and depressed. In his theoretical understanding, social change is the inevitable part of any society.

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In a nutshell, Karl Marx is definitely original in thought and approach because he has presented a new theory of and the new philosophy that can bring about the emancipation of downtrodden people. He struggled throughout his life and based on his experience, he presented a philosophical understanding of social reality. However, his economical emphasis is still relevant in the present context also. His thought seems to be practical in nature of his times and space.

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