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A critical analysis of the Marxist theory of state

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at a reasoned critique of the Marxist theory of the ontology of the state as an entity, and includes his views on economics, the idea of revolution, and a critique of capitalism that were an integral part of his understanding of the workings of a state machinery when he devised his theory. The paper is largely descriptive, and analyses the aforementioned concepts in the light of their intended meaning by Marx, and how they manifest in his thought.

Keywords: Marx, state, revolution, capitalism

Introduction

The Marxist theory of state was fundamentally different as compared to the other theories prevailing. It provided with an entirely different outlook of the state and termed it as just a mere instrument of exploitation. Though it is widely regarded as a path breaking theory but still it suffered from some major loopholes that are going to be discussed in this particular section.

Starting from the most basic point three points are clearly visible where Marxian theory has clearly failed.

It is not right to say that the state is just a mere instrument of exploitation and repression by the dominant class over the proletariat class. On one hand it is also an agency of public welfare and its ultimate aim is as Aristotle said, to make 'good life' possible for its citizens [1].

We should not take the factor of exploitation as the only decisive factor in the structure of the entire political system. Significant as the motive was, it did not work alone. The authority of the elders over the younger kin was not exploitation, but it played a part in the making of the state. The tribal sense of justice evoked agencies of jurisdiction, and they too were conditions of the emerging state. And many factors contribute to create the kind of political loyalty without which the state could have never grown to maturity" [2].

Lastly, the state taken as to be a mere apparatus of coercion is once a mistaken notion. It is not fictitious to say that the state uses some element of force but it seeks coercion to seek the enforcement of its laws. But it is wrong to say that only force renders obedience from the people. The role of the other factors such as habits, social customs, good sense of the people, etc. Should also be given due recognition. "Coercive power is a criterion of the state, but not its essence. There are many other influences, more subtle and even more resistless which restrain and control us" [3]. Further Marx overlooks the important fact that man does not only compete but also co-operates. MacIver rightly says that man can live without competition, but they cannot live without co-operation. It is wrong to assume that all social changes are accomplished by force [4].

Apart from that Marx in his theory has laid great stress upon the point of class struggle. He spoke of the idea of human liberation as different from political liberation. He said that the society is composed of basically two classes that is the rich and the poor and the tussle amid these two classes leads to the formation of the state as has been already discussed in the 4th chapter. But in this regard it is felt that undue importance has been given to this class struggle.

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¹ J.C. Johari, "Principles of modern Political science", Sterling publications, 54

² MacIver and Page, op. Cit., 590.

³ MacIver, op. Cit., 223.

⁴Dr. Eddy Asirvatham & K.K Misra, "Political Theory", S. Chand Publications, 595

If a classless society is formed by conflict or by annihilation of the other group is not worth to strive for, as it would disturb the stability of the present institutions. While talking about all this Karl Marx did never take into consideration the fact that a even a new class of managers and technical advisers could come up which in turn would have helped his cause in dealing with the state on the point of economics. Thus, his point of a classless society seems to be a distant and a utopian dream.

Karl Marx on State and Economics

In the views of Karl Marx those were the economic policies in the form of the modes of production and control over it that decided the nature of the state and the economically powerful were always the rulers and so on, the detail of which has already been discussed in the earlier chapters. But this conception cannot be totally agreed upon as-

Economic factors are not alone

It is not wrong to say that economics does have considerable effect on the social and political conditions of the state but economics as the only factor cannot be readily accepted as there are other factors like religion, customs and conventions that have their own parts to play.

The economically powerful do not always rule

Marx asserted that those who were economically strong formed the ruling class of people. To some extent this view can be taken into account but it is not necessarily always correct. For an instance, the Papacy had no economic power yet their political influence was considerable ^[5].

Role of feelings and sentiments

While laying stress upon the economic factors the theory completely neglects the role of feelings and sentiments that are present in every human just by the virtue of being one. Apart from that the entire Marxist theory regarding state seems to be very sceptic on the point of religion and attacks it mercilessly by terming it "The opium for the masses", but religion is deeply rooted in mankind. Religion by developing our spirituality forms the base for our modern life to rest on.

Also the theory of Marx culminates with the destruction of the institution of state and Marx believes that the state would wither away but with the changing times the nature of the state has also changed to a great extent with each state thriving to gain the status of a welfare status so instead of destruction the modern state is getting stronger day by day, as state is the basis for all social institutions so we can say that the state has not withered away but it is getting stronger rather than weaker ^[6].

Karl Marx and the Idea of Revolution

According to Karl Marx "The first exploiting state was the slave-owning state. It was succeeded by the feudal state, which in turn was suspended by the capitalist state. In spite of certain differences all the three had one point in common; to keep the people in check and to crush any attempt of the working people to emancipate themselves from exploitation" ^[7] and thus predicted a blood-spattered

revolution to overthrow the capitalists and to establish the dictatorship of the proletariats. But this notion can be criticised on two main bases, as mentioned below.

In the Marxian theory revolution has been specified as the only method to bring about a social change. But to be rational at this point far greater changes have been achieved through the instrument of 'non-violence'. For example, now even the communist try to be in power through democratic means as we can see in the case of China.

Marx was opined to the view that once a classless society is set there would be no further struggle but this is not in accordance with the basic human nature, as a party coming in power after constant use of violence will not abandon it. One struggle leads to another. In this struggle there shall be no idea of reason but of catching power and authority.

Further according to Dunning,

"The theories of Marx which at the first sight seem to be so compact and well provocative of dissension, have two fatal ambiguities which have been provocative of dissensions. The first that he nowhere describes the general outlines of society which is to spring from the old. Marx moreover expresses the most contradictory statement as to the methods to be pursued. His doctrine of capitalistic development would naturally minimize the importance of active organisation and propaganda save a means of consolidating the proletarian forces for final cataclysm" ^[8].

Marx on the Capitalists

Marx castigated the idea that the institution of state had been created for the sake of leading a good life and that it was a natural organisation, instead he said that the state was an instrument of exploiting the poor. Accordingly, he took the help of history and claimed that history has witnessed different phases when the state has always favoured the rich. Marx also regarded capitalism as extremely unsatisfactory and he was very concerned with getting rid of it, via violent revolution and the establishment of a communist society. Marxism is therefore also about political goals and action. But even this perception has been under heavy criticism from the anarchists.

Even if you get rid of capitalism you might still have enormous problems of conflict and domination in society. State bureaucracies as well as capitalists can dominate (as the Russians will vouch for) and Marx's theory of history is contradicted by the fact that industrialized countries have not moved closer to revolution. The recent revolutions have been in peasant societies, such as China. Capitalist societies seem to have become more secure from threat of revolution throughout the twentieth century.

Many if not all Anarchists would also reject Marx's theory of how capitalism can or will be replaced, which involves confronting capitalism, class conflict, seizing the state and taking power from the capitalist class, and destroying capitalism, a process which will almost certainly involve violence. However, some anarchists believe the change could come via increasing awareness and disillusionment, the building of alternative communities based on anti-capitalist principles, and thus an increase in the numbers who want to dump capitalism...especially given that its coming difficulties will probably increasingly reveal its inability to provide for all.

⁵ Manoj Sharma, "Political Thought", Anmol publications Pvt. Ltd., 283

⁶ Dr. Eddy Asirvatham & K.K. Misra, "Political Theory", S. Chand publications, 595.

⁷ V.G Afanasyev, Marxist Philosophy, 283-84

⁸ Manoj Sharma, "Political Thought", Anmol publications Pvt. Ltd., 276-77

Marxist ideas on how to change society are also strongly criticized by the Anarchists. Marxists thought capitalism must be fought and overthrown through violent revolution, because the capitalist class will never voluntarily give up any of its privileges. There must be leadership by a front-line party prepared to be ruthless and to use aggression, and which will rule in a strict way after the revolution. Eventually when people have developed the right ideas and value the state can dissolve and there will be a communist civilization^[9].

Marxist Theory in Politics- A Diminutive Disapproval

Karl Marx advocated a socialist form of government, which has already been discussed in the earlier chapters. Now, according to Dahl, Marxism cannot be acknowledged “as an adequate political theory”, due to the simple reason that it was not in league with the basic ideologies that were acceptable to all the political parties and those being- Inevitability of conflict of interest and articulation of wants as a matter of choice in a complex society.

Resolution of such conflicts by majority rule, but with due concern to the rights of the minorities such as the freedom to form political parties, and recognition of free competition^[10].

Now first of all the socialist form was unclear regarding the idea of harmony which is the mainstay of any democratic system. Marxism did not provide with any way for the distribution of political power amongst the socialists and in the same way was very confusing regarding the concept of majority rule. If going as per the views of Marx than the proletariat revolution should have taken place in highly industrialized countries such as England or Germany but that did not occur and the revolutions took place in the backward tsarina state of Russia and the agrarian Chinese society^[11].

Adding on the theory never talks about anything related to rights, political freedom, power or even the role of authorities in the socialist state. The theory also portrays Marx’s disbelief for constitution or laws which he dismisses as shams. He totally overlooked the role of constitution and law in the smooth governing of the system, which not only restrict the powers of others but also provide ways to achieve and exercise power.

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⁹ Marxist Theory-A brief Introduction, Ted Trainer

¹⁰ Subrata Mukherjee & Sushila Ramaswamy, A History of Political Thought”, Prentice Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., 376

¹¹Dr. Eddy Asirvatham & K.K. Misra, “Political Theory”, S. Chand publications, 595