

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

Programme: Bachelor of Arts (T. Y. B. A.)

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Paper Title: Western Political Thinkers (Rousseau to Marx)

Unit: 5

Module Name: Karl Marx's views on Materialistic Interpretation Of History

Module No: 25

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Notes

- **Materialistic Conception of History.**

Marx's scientific socialism is based upon what he terms the materialistic conception of history. To assert the possibility of communism is by definition to assert a historical possibility. This requires, Marx argues, a scientific understanding of history, an understanding that he claims the materialistic conception provides.

Marx developed his own materialist theory of history by way of a critique of idealism and the idealistic interpretation of history (Hegel). This critique, and the basic outline of his own materialist conception, was published in 1846 as *The German Ideology*, with Engels as co-author. The basic proposition of this work is that 'the first premise of all human existence, and therefore all of history....that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'.

Before people can make history, they must first exist, not abstractly as philosophical categories, but concretely as actual existing material entities. Valid historical analysis must begin with the ways in which human beings materially produce themselves, both as individuals and as a species.

This involves the study of those basic productive or 'historical acts', by which people provide for the necessities of survival: their modes of providing activities, and the social form of reproduction by which the species as a whole is perpetuated. According to Marx, these historical acts of production have "existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and still assert themselves in history today". For Marx, what was important was not the fact that these acts must always be performed, but the ways in which they were performed.

Over time human beings improve their technology and along with it their whole mode of production. Since productive activity is inherently social, they alter society also.

Then there comes a point at which the division of labour becomes, for Marx, not only a stable factor in social life, but the very basis of all subsequent social orders. This point appears when a division between material and mental labour takes place. When a small intellectual class separates out from the mass of manual workers and devotes itself solely to intellectual pursuits, the basic structure of society up to the present day is set.

That structure, Marx argues, is a structure of class exploitation, for while the division of labour is at one level simply a division of activities, at another it is the division of property, that is, of social class. According to Marx, those who perform certain productive tasks are rewarded more than others, both in terms of quantity and the quality of the goods produced by society. For this reason, Marx believes that division of labour and private property are....identical expressions... the first is the activity and second is the product of activity.

What is crucial in Marx's analysis of Materialistic interpretation of history is that class exploitation must inevitably lead to class conflict. The above has been summed up in the famous words of *The Communist Manifesto*, thus; "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".

Accordingly, Marx divides the history into four stages- primitive communism, ancient, feudal and capitalist, in which the class which controls the forces of production controls the rest. According to Marx, the progress of society from one stage to another is the result of the law of history. In each stage, each dominant class develops its opposites.

As a result of the clash between the two, classless society shall emerge. Beginning with the obvious proposition that 'men must be in a position to live in order to make history,' Marx logically and empirically derives a sociology of class conflict. This constitutes, a radically different view of history, in which Marx demonstrated how idealist philosophies could themselves be explained in terms of his materialist analysis.

This is the basic outline of Marx's materialist analysis of History.

Marxist materialistic interpretation of history is considered as defective for these reasons: a. Marx ignores the role of non-economic factors in shaping history, b. he does not attach any importance to human passions, sentiments, emotions, religion, etc, c. though economic factors influence human affairs, it is wrong to say that they exclusively influence all human actions.

However, Marx deserves the credit for broadening the basis of the study of history.