



CARL MARX CONCEPT OF MAN AND SOCIETY

S. Ramadevi

Research Scholar

Philosophy Department

Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

Introduction

The root of man, for Marx, is man himself. The distinctive character of man's humanity lies in his ability to engage in consciously planned action directed towards the realization of his human powers (which are in him). The true end of man's life is return of man into himself or his self-realization or to overcome man's self-alienation. Marx held that Communism is the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being. It is the positive transcendence of all estrangement – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social mode of existence. Therefore, for Marx, the transcendence of alienation is the highest ideal in which man regains his lost self, dignity and humanity.

Man as a Natural Being

Every 'natural being,' Marx conceived, is a specific and determinate being and, therefore, has a definite character or nature which constitutes its identity or essence. Every natural being has "powers and needs," which constitutes its character and strives to realize its powers. These powers, for Marx, are not merely capacities but 'impulses' which have an inherent dynamism. A natural being strives to realize itself, and suffers, when it is frustrated. A natural being cannot realize its powers without the fulfillment of certain basic needs. For instance, a plant cannot develop its powers without the help of the Sun, the soil, water, etc., and these constitute its needs. Without these basic things its powers remain unactualised and eventually withers away. Hence a natural being can be actualized only with the help of certain objects existing outside it. These objects are "essential and indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of (its) his essential powers," When isolated from the external objects, a by itself, man is a natural being endowed with certain powers and with definite needs. Since the objects, that satisfy human needs exist outside man, by his very nature man is an outgoing, active and strive being



and is driven by his impulses and needs to explore and manipulate the external world.

Man, according to Marx, is basically a dialectical unity of certain powers or qualities that he shares with other beings in the universe and certain others that are unique to him. Man is not merely a natural being, but a 'human natural being. Man's humanity and his human character consists in those qualities that distinguish him from all other natural beings. Man's distinctive human character involves in tracing the basic differences between man and the animal. The essence of a being, according to Marx, is known by examining its behaviour and the way it lives. The whole character of a species is contained in the totality of its life activities. The way in which a species produces its subsistence provides a clue to its essential character. Marx wrote:

“As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are therefore coincides with their production, both the what they produce and how they produce,”

For Marx, man is essentially a producing artist and this is what distinguishes him from an animal. The animal also produces but it cannot transform the nature. It normally extracts its immediate means of subsistence from the nature. It is moved by its instinct and does not aim beyond its material needs. On the other hand, man realizes himself in and through nature. He does not passively submit to the productive forces of nature but acts on them. Man realizes himself as man only by realizing nature, by transforming it to suit his needs.

Basing on the productive activity, Marx distinguished man from that of animal in four basic respects.

Man as a Conscious Being: Marx conceived man not as a being-in-himself, but as a being-for himself, who is capable of subject-object distinction. Unlike the animal, man is able to distinguish himself from his activities, from his environment and even from himself, and is therefore aware of himself as a subject. The animal, on the other hand, is directly merged into its life-activity and is unable to distinguish itself from it. The animal also possesses consciousness, but its consciousness is limited. While man is self-conscious, the animal is not Marx wrote:

“The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life activity. Man makes his life activity itself object



of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity... Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Only because of that is his activity free activity.”

Man as a Free Being: An animal fetches only what it immediately needs for itself or to its young. It produces only under the domination of its immediate physical needs; whereas man produces even when he is free from physical needs and “only truly produces in freedom.” Man can anticipate his needs and, therefore, produce in advance of his wants. Again an animal cannot see its product as separate from itself in a way that a man can, and it sees them as parts of its own body but not as objects of the external world.

Man as a Universal Being: While the productive activity of animal is confined to a limited part of nature, man alone can make the entire world of nature as his field of activity. The consciousness of an animal is merely an awareness of the immediate sensible environment, but human consciousness has no such limits and can make the entire universe as the object of his consciousness. Hence Marx observed, “An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature.” Thus man can universally appropriate nature’s scattered potential for his own purposes and so become a universal being reproducing the whole of nature, while other creatures produce only themselves.

Man as a Species Being: According to Marx, species is the unique character of man which distinguishes him from all other beings. Unlike other animals, man has a number of special capacities that are unique to him. He has the capacity to think, reason, judge, imagine, plan, anticipate and so on. These capacities are ‘mental or spiritual capacities.’ Of all the mental capacities, the most important one that determines man’s species being is the ‘conceptual thinking.’ Animals learn skills only from experience, and not by reflection on experience. Though they communicate with one another, they do not have the capacity to describe or explain. They acquire some practical skills. They learn how to do things without learning how things are done. Man, on the other hand, can visualize the end product of his activity and direct the latter, accordingly. In order to describe, and explain theories, man alone acquires and uses the medium of language. Referring to the skills of human labour Marx remarked:



“A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect rises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”

Man is a species-being in the sense that he is aware of himself as a being of a certain kind, he is conscious of his humanity of what is common to him with other men. What is peculiar to man is not only that he can know what sort of being he is, it is also peculiar to him that he cannot be that sort of being unless he knows that he is one. Man's conscious and free life activity distinguishes him immediately from animal life activity. Thus Marx held:

“The whole character of a species – its species character is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character.”

Man as a Social Being

Marx's conception of man 'as a social being', is the basis for the whole system of his philosophy. By 'social', Marx means “the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner, and to what end,” Co-operation covers all the forms in and through which man relates to his fellow beings.

The origin and development of man, according to Marx, can be understood only in the social and historical context, in the sense that he is the product of social life. This is what Marx had in mind when he wrote:

“... the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.” From his birth, man finds himself within a given social system, and he cannot choose in which system to be born. Man as an individual can never be alone, since even his loneliest thoughts are socially formed and conditioned. His decisions and choices are always socially conditioned, and as such he is never “Free” in the Existentialist sense of the term.

Living in a society, an individual cannot be compared with an atom. An atom is self-sufficient and has no needs, whereas an individual is not so. It is the social character of man that makes him human. Production is the area of life, where man's social character emerges most clearly and Marx referred to human co-operation in the field



of production to reject the atomistic theories of man. He wrote thus:

“Production by a solitary individual outside of society – a rare event, which might occur when a civilized person who has already absorbed the dynamic social forces is accidentally cast into the wilderness – is just as preposterous as the development of speech without individuals who live together and talk to one another.”

For Marx, man is essentially social, and society is precisely the actualization of his social nature. In his individual existence he embodies his society. Individual and society are one in essence and being. For this reason, the interests, aims and rights of the individual should in no way be opposed to the interests and aims of the society. Marx held that:

“Man is in the most literal sense of the word a *Zoon Politikon*’ not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individualized only within society,”

Therefore society is the ‘*sine qua non*’ for the humanization of the individual man.

Individuals are invariably in a close relationship with one another because, “their needs – therefore their nature-and the manner of satisfying them creates between them reciprocal links (sexual relations, exchange, division of labour).” An individual cannot escape his dependence on society even when he acts on his own. A scientist who spends his life time in a laboratory may delude himself that he is a modern Robinson Crusoe, but the material of his activity and the apparatus and skills are all social products. They are inerasable signs of the co-operation which binds men together. The very language in which a scientist thinks has been learned in a particular society. Hence Marx observed:

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but it is their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

Man is essentially a social being, not only because of his distinctively human capacities and needs which are developed in society, but also their exercise and satisfaction consists in social intercourse. Hence Marx held that “as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him.” By “society produces man,” Marx meant that the capacities peculiar to man are developed in him by the activities that are essentially social. The essence of a particular personality is not its bread, or its blood, or its abstract physical character, but its social quality. The progress of a personality of an individual is a part of the general advance of society. Referring to the progress of the



personality, Marx argued:

“If man is social by nature, he will develop his true nature only in society, and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of the separate individual but by the power of society,”

Conclusion – Relation between Man and Society

Marx's conception of man contradicts the existentialist's view of man as an isolated, lonely and tragic individual in his senseless struggle against the alien forces of the world around him. He also criticized Feuerbach for conceiving man as an abstract, isolated being and for regarding man's social conditioning in a naturalistic way in terms of the bonds uniting the individual members of a species. In contrast to other philosophies, Marx conceived man in the entirety of social relations, i.e., as a member of a given society and of a given class. This is one of the greatest contributions of Marx to the field of social philosophy and it contains the nucleus of his philosophy of man. Marx replaced Feuerbach's passive, abstract man by the active social man whose reality consists in social activities historically conditioned. The essence of man is not static as imagined by the idealists, but is constantly changing. Nor man is simply a passive product of his social circumstances. Thus man and his nature are historical products and history is a process of man's self creation.

Marx viewed society as the sum of the relations in which individuals stand to one another. Man can only realize his powers through his activity with his fellow beings. 'Man cannot realize his powers in isolation' is the basis, for Marx, to establish his thesis that 'man is a social being'. In all periods of human history, the society is held together on the basis of man's need for other men to realize their human powers. This glue binding man to man is based on a natural necessity and mutual interest.

The real social unit, for Marx, is the species, the human collectivity at a given stage of its historical growth-process. The development of society is the result of the continual productive interaction between men and nature. Men “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their needs of subsistence...” Hence productive activity is at the root of society. Every kind of productive system entails of definite set of social relationships existing between men involved in



the productive process. For this reason, Marx rejected the theories of 'isolated individual' of the political economy and of utilitarianism. Human society never produces simply abstract individuals, but only individuals of a definite form of society. In the history of humanity, there is no society which is not founded upon a definite set of relations of production. Referring to the relations of production, Marx wrote:

“In production, men not only act on nature but also on one another. They produce only by co-operating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities and only with in these social connections and relations does their action on nature, does production, take place.”

The social relations into which the producers enter with one another, the conditions under which they exchange their activities and participate in the whole act of production vary according to the character of the means of production. The totality of these relations of production constitute the basis structure of society, i.e., the economic foundation of the society, on which the whole superstructure will develop. Marx wrote:

“The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development, a society with a peculiar, distinctive character,”

Thus it is production that brings men into indispensable social relations, and it is out of these relations that law and government arise, and it is to law and government that forms of social consciousness correspond.

In the history of human production, each 'social stage' constitutes a social epoch dominated by a particular social formation. Marx listed three of such social stages - (1) Ancient society, (2) feudal society and (3) bourgeois society, each of which denotes a special stage of development. The aggregate of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society. For this reason, Marx argued that “the history of humanity must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange”. In 'the poverty of philosophy' Marx argued:

“Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.”



Hence the primary binding force that connects men with one another is the materialist connection, but not the spiritual or political. Thus, Marx categorically declared:

“...it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a “history” irrespective of the existence of any political or religious nonsense which would especially hold men together”.

History is a process of continuous creation, satisfaction and recreation of human needs. The relation of the individual to his material world is mediated by the particular characteristics of the society of which he is a member. Hence, to study the development of human society, one must start from an empirical examination of the concrete process of social life.

REFERENCES

1. Hardayal, 'Hints for Self-Culture,' Jaico Press, Bombay, 1967, pp. 56-57.
2. Marx and Engels, 'Collected Works,' Vol. III, p. 182.
3. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, p. 97.
4. For Marx, natural beings are sole constituents of the universe. He classified natural beings into three kinds: (1) inanimate natural beings, (2) natural beings that have life but not consciousness, and (3) natural beings that have life and consciousness.
5. Marx seems to use the term 'powers' to mean a faculty or ability to act and to produce certain results. 'Needs' correspond to powers and refers to the conditions a natural being must have to express and to realize its powers.
6. For Marx, 'A' possesses a power to do 'X' is to say that not merely that 'A' can do 'X' but also that 'A' strives to do 'X'.
7. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, p. 145.
8. Ibid., p. 14.
9. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology,' p. 37.



10. Marx 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,' pp.72-73.
11. Ibid., p. 73.
12. Ibid., p. 74.
13. Ibid., p. 74.
14. Marx, 'Capital., Vol. I, p. 174.
15. John Plamenatz, 'Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man,' pp. 68-69.
16. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, pp23-24