

# Marxism *Today*

Satyendranath Saha



Punascha  
PUBLISHER

## *An old dream: Marxism*

A twenty-three-page pamphlet was published in London in 1848. It proclaimed that modern industry had revolutionized the world. In its accomplishments, it had surpassed all the great civilizations of the past—the Egyptian pyramids, the Roman aqueducts, the Gothic cathedrals. Its innovations - the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph—had unleashed incredible productive forces. In the name of free trade, it had knocked down national boundaries, lowered prices, made the planet interdependent and cosmopolitan. Goods and ideas now circulated everywhere. Moreover, it swept away all the old hierarchies and mystifications. People no longer believed that ancestry or religion determined their status in life. Everyone was the same as everyone else. For the first time in history, men and women could see, without illusions, where they stood in their relations with others.

The new modes of production, communication, and distribution had also created enormous wealth and a problem too. The wealth was not equally distributed. Ten per cent of the population possessed virtually all of the property; the other ninety per cent owned nothing. As cities and towns industrialized, as wealth became more concentrated, and as the rich got richer, the middle class began sinking to the level of the working class.

Soon, in fact, there would be just two types of people in the world: the people who owned property and the people who sold their labor to them. As ideologies disappeared which had once made inequality appear natural and ordained, it was inevitable that workers everywhere would see the system for what it was, and would rise up and overthrow it. The writer who made this prediction was, of course, Karl Marx, and the pamphlet was “The Communist Manifesto.” He is not wrong yet.

The question is whether the author Karl Marx is “.....not our contemporary” and only a “.....A Nineteenth-Century Life” (as opined by Jonathan Sperber, a professor at the University of Missouri). Sperber insists, Marx is “more a figure of the past than

a prophet of the present.” Or Karl Marx was “the founder of a discourse” – An enormous body of thought is named after whom and by the middle of the twentieth century, more than a third of the people in the world were living under regimes that called themselves, and genuinely believed themselves to be, Marxist.

This matters because one of Marx’s key principles was that theory must always be united with practice. That’s the point of the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Marx was not saying that philosophy is irrelevant; he was saying that philosophical problems arise out of real-life conditions, and they can be solved only by changing those conditions—by remaking the world.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century world – led by the commodities, perhaps cannot deny the Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism.

Louis Menand, the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of English at Harvard University has genuinely commented, “In short, you can put Marx back into the nineteenth century, but you can’t keep him there” (Louis Menand, Karl Marx, Yesterday and Today, The New Yorker, October 10, 2016)

The nineteenth-century philosopher’s ideas may help to understand the economic and political inequality of our time - *Punascha* edition of “Marxism Today” by Satyendranath Saha is an attempt to provoke the debate – let us argue, question and think whether the society can afford to bear the death of an old dream – Marxism.

*Publisher*

## Foreword

Shri Satyendranath Saha, who has authored this thought-provoking monograph, has made a bold attempt to raise certain very fundamental questions confronted by Marxism in today's world. In an age when a section of the intelligentsia is becoming increasingly sceptical of the validity of Marxism and its future, it is a commendable effort to write such a book, especially for the reason that the author has addressed quite a good number of questions relating to the theory and practice of Marxism without resorting to dogmatism of any variety. Basically the book has its focus on the following range of issues: a number of questions involving the legacy of classical Marxism on multiple levels, namely, its philosophical, political, economic, sociological, aesthetic and ethical dimension; the reasons behind the collapse of Soviet socialism and the general debacle of revolutionary forces all over the world in the 90's; the new challenges before Marxism in a world dominated by a new variant of aggressive imperialism in the name of globalisation. The author, of course, has put forward his own opinion and understanding concerning these questions and reader may not agree with some of his interpretations. But the author's scholarly approach, polemical style and rigorous treatment of the topics have provided a solid foundation to the book and for me it has been a great pleasure to go through this well-written monograph. The special merit of the book lies in the effort to discuss a variety of quite complex questions in a style and language that, for the reader, is easily understandable. I sincerely believe that, considering the topical importance of the issues discussed by the author, the book will be properly appreciated by the academic community in our country.

Calcutta  
May 22, 2000

Sobhanlal Datta Gupta  
Surendra Nath Banerjee, Professor  
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## Preface

Books on Marxism are not rare. There are Marxian classics, the basic works of the founders of the theory. Expositions and interpretations of the whole of Marxism or this or that aspect of Marxism have been brought out in almost all the modern languages of the West as well as of the East. No less numerous are the critiques of Marxism as a whole or of the particular part of the theory, written by the great thinkers in all realms of social thought - philosophy, history, economics, sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology and aesthetics from the day of the publication of Bohm Bowerk's well-known book - *Karl Marx and the Close of his System* — in 1885. Then what is the necessity of adding another work to the voluminous Marxist Literature? There has already grown up a new discipline, if it is called so — Marxology. Over and above regular publications in book-form, there are the ever-flowing torrents of dailies, weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies which regularly deal with Marxism favourably or unfavourably. Now-a-days, large sections of students in institutions of higher learning are required to study Marxism. They come out from these institutions at least with the elementary knowledge of Marxism. If one concludes, from these empirical facts, that never before has a comparable social theory been so widely diffused, he will not be altogether at fault. The statement does not suggest any comparison, since there is no objective basis for any meaningful comparison. There is no sense in comparing the extent of readership of Platonism in antiquity or in the historical period of more than two millennia with that of Marxism of, say, one hundred and fifty years.

Notwithstanding the wide diffusion of Marxism, the present author feels the compelling necessity of presenting Marxism afresh. The necessity springs from the peculiarity of the time through which we have been passing. The twentieth century has witnessed enormous growth of the Marxist movement in the world as well as its dramatic fall in the last decade after the political turmoil in Eastern Europe. The twentieth century ends and a new century is just to begin. What is the message of the new century? What signal does it send to the incoming generations? There are men who have superbly prognosticated of the new century in the



form of the line of the progress of science and technology. The thinking men of the time, by and large, no longer fail to admit that science and technology can't but deeply influence the shape of things, human or social. What shape will the social relations, the relations between man and man, assume in the coming days? The end of the century does not give a clear direction. Rather it has created confusion. Men are confused in the East as well as in the West. Political unipolarism and economic globalisation, not internationalism nor humanism, are presented by the interested and entrenched circles as the direction of social progress of the new century and that is interpreted as the future of mankind. Marxism challenges this interpretation. The present work contains an attempt to represent that challenge, which requires a reappraisal of the charges brought against Marxism and the restatement of the theory in the light of the developments of the contemporary world.

Since the theme pursued is inseparable from the unfolding reality of the historical process of which we ourselves are an integral part, what follows in the pages is not the result of the deductive reasoning from some self-evident axioms. Questions may be raised legitimately about the Marxian thesis that history is the history of class struggle. But nobody denies that struggle is there. It may be on questions of pure theory, and if this ideological question calls for the drawing up of battle-lines, thought ceases to be pure thought. Partisanship, not dogmatism, then becomes inescapable. Dogmatism is generally found on the side of statusquism. Science is naturally found on the other side. A Book on Marxism can't be an end-product of the solo-effort of antindividual enquirer for his personal edification or enlightenment. It takes shape in evolving social reality and this is impossible without constant interaction with many others who have something to add on the multi-dimensional subject-matter not only from the knowledge of other's intellectual performance but also from the participants' direct experience in life itself.

Formally, there is an author of the monograph. In fact, it is a collective enterprise. The author has been immensely enriched with highly fruitful discussion with the under-noted academics, some of whom are actively engaged in the movement for social change in diverse capacities.

Prof. Ratan Khasnobish, Department of Business Management, Calcutta University; Prof. Arup Mallik, Department of Economics, Calcutta University; Prof. Satyabrata Dasgupta,

Retd. Head, Department of Philosophy, Maharaja Manindra Chandra College; Prof. Krishanu Dasgupta, Retd. Head, Department of Political Science, Raja Peary Mohan College; Prof. Aranab Roy, Department of History, Dinabandhu Mahabidyalay, Bangan; Prof. Dipankar Chakrabarti, Reader, Department of Economics, K. N. College, Berhampore; Prof. Saumendra Kumar Gupta, Department of Political Science, K. N. College, Berhampore; Prof. Prantosh Sen, Department of Economics, K. N. College, Berhampore; Prof. Mrinal Chakraborty, Department of Philosophy, Berhampore College; Prof. Dhrubojyoti Majumder, Katwa College; Sri Bimal Chakraborty, Poet and Teacher, Sri Dilip Bagchi, Headmaster; Sri Kamona Prasad Saha, Teacher of Philosophy and Sri Atul Chandra Bandyopadhyay, reputed Teacher of English, Linguist and Musicologist, are all held in high esteem in their respective fields of research and academic and social activity. The book would have not got the present shape without their invaluable advice and words of encouragement. But the facts stated and observations made in the pages that follow are obviously of the author's.

My two sons, Subrata and Sudipta, helped me in all possible ways in the stage of the preparation for the publication of the book.

Prof. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, Head, Dept. of Political Science, Calcutta University, readily agreed to write the fine Foreword out of the love more for the subject dealt with than for anything else.

Prof. Dipankar Chakrabarti and Prof. Soumendra Kumar Gupta were available for consultation not only on matters of theory but also on the material problem of bringing it out.

My sincerest thanks are to the publishers Partha Sankar Basu and his staff and also to Sri Mrinal Kanti Biswas, my student, who set the manuscripts in computerised type.

Berhampore  
2. 02. 2002

Satyendranath Saha

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## Marxism-The Theory of the Communist Revolution

Marxism is the theory of revolution and the revolution, the theory of which Karl Marx propounded, is Communist Revolution, the revolution which aims at the world-wide overthrow of the capitalist social system. There were many outstanding thinkers with exceptional abilities and sensibilities before Marx or contemporary with him who scathingly criticised capitalism and seriously worked for the communist transformation of society at least in the countries of Western Europe. Marx was quite aware of this current of critical thought and radical movement of those thinkers. Though he positively evaluated their critical and creative thoughts, he promptly distanced himself from that trend of socialist thought which Frederick Engels, his co-thinker and comrade-in-arms, designated as Utopian. The theory of socialism which Marx developed conjointly with Engels came to be called scientific socialism.

Marx's claim to be regarded as the originator of scientific socialism was challenged by many of his contemporary socialist writers and workers. But when the nineteenth century wore on, the rival schools of socialist thought of Europe almost died out and Marx came to be regarded by his antagonists, i.e., the spokesmen of the bourgeois class, as the real exponent of the theory of socialism. Utopian socialism ceased to exist as a living movement, but it was the Marxist thought which ungrudgingly gave it its due.

Utopianism left the stage, but the claim of the Marxist theory to science faced the challenge of the bourgeois ideologues. They asserted that Marxian socialism was a special variety of utopianism, and the movement that came into existence with the

sanction of Marxism in the ever-increasing number of countries was not to be interpreted as the inevitable expression of the working of the law of motion as enunciated by Marx in his Critique of Political Economy. They characterized Marxism as an ideology and an ideology is merely a bunch of illusions cultivated by the thinking section of an economic class to justify its social existence and claim. So it can have nothing in common with science. Marxism is, at best, an ideology of a class in the fight against its enemy, and, as such, there can't be any justifiable ground to regard it as a science. To call Marxism a science is a travesty of truth, an example of the misuse of a venerable term.

Marxists, in general, don't say that Marxism is not an ideology and they emphatically claim that it is the ideology of the working class in its all-out struggle against the bourgeoisie for the successful completion of the world-wide communist revolution. But the ideological character of Marxism does not stand in the way of its developing into a science of a specific nature. This is the general tenor of the thinking of the Marxists for more than a century. The present author does not contend that the general tenor of the Marxist thinking is flawed.

But ideology as a social phenomenon requires objective investigation. It itself becomes the subject of a scientific study. Marxist ideology similarly requires a study of this type in order to help the students of Marxism understand the true nature of this ideological function of Marxism.

Had Marxism been a mere ideology and nothing else, it would have died a natural death long ago, along with all other Utopian trends of the nineteenth century. The Utopian element of Marxism is altogether of a different quality. Its ideological function can't be correctly understood, if it is not studied in the context of its analysis of the objective reality, which is both a product and a process, and this analysis is the core of an empirical science.

Marx did not write a comprehensive history in the sense of the chronological compilation of the historical data. He interpreted human history, explained social development of man and elaborately studied a special stage of historical process—capitalism in its motion from the simple to the complex. In this

presentation he framed the supreme question of the contemporary world and traced out the broad contour of the world to come.

Every science has its peculiar tool of analysis. Materialism is the indispensable tool of analysis of the science which Marx himself founded. This may sound ludicrous and it really sounded so to a large number of outstanding scholars, particularly in the context of the traditional belief that materialism is a philosophical trend of thought. Even many Marxists of today will wink at the use of materialism as a tool of historical analysis. In his student days Marx studied philosophy and his doctoral dissertation was on the difference between Democritus and Epicurus, the two celebrated philosophers of the ancient Greece. With many youngmen of his country he became an ardent follower of Hegel's idealistic dialectics. So it was not unreasonable to think that the materialism he developed was nothing but a special strand of philosophical materialism.

Marx became a materialist in philosophy largely under the influence of Feuerbach. But he shifted his focus from the questions of pure philosophy to man's history under the exigencies of the specific situation in which he found himself in the beginning of the forties of the last century. In outlining the course of his intellectual development he said:

Although I studied Jurisprudence I pursued it as a subject which I had subordinated to philosophy and history. In the year 1842 as the editor of the *Rhenisch Zeitung*, I first found myself in the embarrassing position of having to discuss what is known as material interest. The deliberation of the Rhenish Landtag on forest thefts and the division of landed property; the official polemics started by Herr Von Schaper, the Oberprasident of the Rhenish province, against the *Rhenisch Zeitung* about the condition of the Moselle peasantry, and finally the debates on free trade and protective tariffs caused me in the first instance to turn my attention to economic questions.'

The practical experience of the conflict of interest between the Moselle peasantry and the landlords turned Marx, an idealist follower of Hegel, into a historical materialist who traced the



property question to the mundane interests of the contending classes.

A comprehensive understanding of Marxian materialism is the starting-point of a perusal of the Marxian theory of revolution. We shall definitely undertake the task. But before that we shall try to understand the relation in which the Marxist system stands vis-a-vis Hegelian philosophy, since much of the misunderstanding of Marxian Theory had its origin in the misreading of Hegel's influence in the shaping of Marx's theoretical evolution and the dispelling of this misunderstanding is the precondition to the placing of the theory in the proper perspective.

## Hegel's impact on the Marxian Science of History

### 1

The Hegelian influence in the Marxist system has been blown out of all proportions by its critics as well as by its admirers. No enquirer can ignore Marx's avowal of discipleship of the great German philosopher in the Afterword to the second edition of the Volume 1 of his opus, i.e., *Capital*. In that famous and highly valuable afterword Marx openly admitted that he had coquetted with the mode of presentation peculiar to his mentor in the first few chapters of his work and it is not quite unreasonable to assume that Lenin's assertion, 'It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's logic.'<sup>1</sup> stems from this admission of Marx.

Marx accepted dialectics as the general law of social development. The process of development in Hegelianism contains both quantitative change and qualitative leap, the latter being the cornerstone of the Marxist theory of social revolution. Marx readily greeted Darwin's epoch-making work "Origin of Species", though he was not quite satisfied with Darwinian scheme of biological evolution. The work contains not only evolutionary, gradual, change but also qualitative transformation. But this view of change did not influence Marx much. The Darwinian view of the evolution of species substantiated the materialistic foundation of the Marxian interpretation of human history. Marx's view of revolution might have somehow been moulded by his Hegelian lesson on the distinction between quantity and quality.

In fact, Marx did not return to the pure problems of philosophy after the writing of the *German Ideology*, which was never