
UNIT 15 RECENT MARXIST APPROACHES

Structure

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15.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 13 you have read about the classical Marxist tradition starting with Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). In this Unit you will learn about the changes at political and theoretical levels in European countries which gave rise to markedly different approaches towards history-writing among the European Marxist scholars after the Second World War. These writings influenced the historians in many countries, including India. The new trajectories established by these historians had profound impact on the course of history-writing all over the world. The depth of their research, the volume of their output, the expanse of their coverage and their insights in understanding the past was unparalleled except perhaps by the writings of the *Annales* School. These new Marxist historians derived from intellectual resources and ventured into unexplored areas hitherto untouched by the earlier Marxist historians. Their seminal achievements in the field of history made them subject of adulation as well as criticism. In this Unit we will endeavour to familiarise you with their manifold achievements. Our special focus will be on the writings of the British Marxist historians whose influence on the Indian historians is most marked. But we will also deal with some other western Marxist historians who have been crucial for providing a new direction to the Marxist historiography.

15.2 CLASSICAL MARXIST TRADITION

One thing that must be emphasised at the outset that the Marxist tradition of history-writing is a long and diverse tradition. It has dominated the historiography in many parts of the world and has been a very significant presence in the rest. Most important historians in the twentieth century have in some way or other been influenced by the Marxist theories of history. As one important commentator, S.H.Rigby, has pointed out that to attempt a comprehensive survey of Marxist historiography is difficult because it 'would virtually amount to writing a history of the world.' In addition, it also needs to be noted that Marxist historiography does not represent a monolithic, homogeneous and orthodox position. Marxist historians have often disagreed with each other. Moreover, they have worked on various aspects of history.

The cumulative writings of Marx and Engels established the doctrine of historical materialism which challenged the idealist philosophies of various kinds. At the level of history-writing, it moved the focus away from individuals to classes, from high-level

politics to economy and mass politics, from diplomats to revolutionaries and from stray causation to mode of production and social formation. This theoretical revolution profoundly affected the course of history-writing.

So far as Marxist theory of history was concerned, S.H.Rigby has tried to show that Marx and Engels, the founders of historical materialism, passed through three different conceptions of history. In the early stage, under Hegel's influence, they perceived history in 'anthropogenetic' terms. It means that historical movement is visualised as the 'overarching, dialectical progression through which humanity comes to its full self-realization, passing through a necessary negative phase of self-alienation and social atomization before achieving a fully human, free and rational community.' Later on, during the mid-1840s, in works such as *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels adopted a 'pragmatological' approach, where the needs of the individuals and groups become more important. Finally, in the later works such as the Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Capital* and *Anti-Duhring*, a 'nomological' framework was developed, where the human agency was not considered important. Instead, the human history was seen as 'analogous to a natural process taking place in accordance with "inner hidden laws" which it is the task of the historian to uncover.'

Louis Althusser also distinguishes between the 'Young Marx', whose outlook was Hegelian and humanist, and 'Mature Marx' who thought in structural terms. It was this later Marx which Althusser believed to be correct and from whom the Marxist theory of history and society may be derived. G.A.Cohen, in a major study of Marxist theory of history, has argued that according to this, the productive forces are the prime movers of society. The productive forces consist of means of production (which include instruments of production and raw materials for production) and labour process. Production relations, on their part, determine access to the society's means of production and decide the redistribution of society's wealth. The forces of production and the relations of production together constitute the mode of production.

From the various texts of Marx and Engels, a three-tier model of society may be discerned which is based on productive forces, relations of production and political and ideological superstructure. In this scheme, the productive forces determine the nature of social relations of production which, in turn, determine the political, ideological and legal superstructure. The productive forces keep developing and when they develop beyond a point, the relations of production become fetters on them. In such situation, the relations of production are burst asunder and new relations of production are organised to accommodate the developed productive forces. The superstructure is also accordingly organised. In this schema, the entire human history was divided into a few modes of production – primitive communism, Asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist. The future society would give rise to socialist and, ultimately, the communist modes of production. The crucial arguments in this regard have been provided by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* and in the Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In the later work, Marx stated :

'In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relationships, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production. The totality of relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence but their social existence which determines their consciousness.'

The Marxist theorists and historians immediately following Marx and Engels took up this line of arguments in their theoretical and historical works. For Marxists such as Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin, Stalin and Trotsky, this interpretation of history remained the authentic part of Marxism. Many books were written to explain the Marxist theory of history. Franz Mehring (1846-1919) wrote *On Historical Materialism* in 1893; Georgy Plekhanov (1856-1918) wrote *The Development of the Monist Conception of History* in 1895; Antonio Labriola (1843-1904) wrote *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* in 1896; and Karl Kautsky (1854-1938) wrote *The Materialist Conception of History* published in 1927. These books were intended to give the Marxist view of history a final shape. They generally upheld the primacy of the productive forces in determining the nature of production relations and hence of society as a whole. Marx's statements like 'the hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist' were often quoted.

Moreover, among the early Marxists the study of economy and mode of production acquired paramount importance. Many books were written on economic conditions and development of capitalism into imperialism. Karl Kautsky wrote a book titled *Agrarian Question* in 1899 which explored changes in European and American agriculture. In the same year, V.I. Lenin (1870-1924) wrote his famous book, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. In 1910, Rudolf Hilferding (1877-1941) published *Finance Capital* which explored the changing nature of capitalism and its growth into monopolies, centralisation, trade wars and aggressive expansion. Rosa Luxemburg's (1871-1919) *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Nikolai Bukharin's (1888-1938) *Imperialism and World Economy* (1915) and Lenin's famous study *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) were studies in the same direction.

However, both Marx and Engels offered an alternative view of history where social relations of production were more important and decisive in changing the course of history. In fact, when the productive forces deterministic interpretations started becoming conventional, Engels tried to modify it. In 1890, in a letter to Ernst Bloch, Engels stated what he and Marx had thought about their theory :

'Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger writers lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights.'

He further elaborated :

'According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than that neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.... The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of class struggle and its consequences, constitution established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc. – forms of law – and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants : political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas ... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless hosts of accidents, .. the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary ... We make our history, but in the first place under very definite presuppositions not conditions. Among these the economic ones are finally decisive.'

Marx had already considered property relations as decisive in determining the nature of production. In *Grundrisse*, he criticises the bourgeois economists for considering production without taking into account the nature of property, that is, the social relations of production. He argues that :

‘All production is appropriation of nature on the part of the individual within and through a specific form of society. In this sense it is a tautology to say that property is a pre-condition of production.... That there can be no production and hence no society where some form of property does not exist is a tautology.’

He further states that the real beginnings of production must be sought in ‘individuals producing in society, hence socially determined production’. Thus the relations of productions are the crucial factors which define the various modes of production. Marx states in *Capital* (Vol.I) that

‘what distinguishes the various economic formations of society – the distinction between a society based on slave labour and a society based on wage labour – is the form in which surplus labour is in each case extorted from the immediate producer, the worker.’

The historical writings of Marx and Engels, such as ‘Class Struggle in France’ (1850) ‘Eighteenth Brummaire of Louis Bonaparte’ (1852) and ‘Civil War in France’ (1871) and ‘The Peasant War in Germany’ also provided theoretical underpinnings for this interpretation.

We see, therefore, that two theories of history can be derived from the works of Marx and Engels. In one, the productive forces are paramount and they determine the course of history and the social relations are a product of material production. However, in another theory, it is the social relations of production which play a determining role. It is this second version of classical Marxist theory that appealed to much of the later Marxist historians in Europe.

Another contentious issue in the Marxist theory of history is the definition of base and superstructure and their interrelationship. Traditionally, the base has been defined as being formed by the society’s relations of production which are basically determined by the economic structure. On this stands the superstructure which consists of laws, politics and ideology. This notion of base and superstructure has generated a lot of debate among the Marxists as well as the non-Marxists. The debates have mainly centred on two areas – which elements are included in each and whether there is a permanent causal hierarchy between them. Within the orthodox Marxist tradition it is generally accepted that it is the social relations of production which cause the superstructure. However, many of the later Marxists have rejected this notion of one-way determination. For example, Louis Althusser considers society as an ‘organic hierarchized whole’ instead of dividing it between base and superstructure. According to Althusser’s structuralist interpretation of Marx, the society is depicted as a ‘complex structural unity’. The social formation is ‘constituted by a certain form of complexity, the unity of a structural whole containing what can be called levels or instances which are distinct and “relatively autonomous”, and co-exist within this complex structural unity, articulated with one another according to specific determinations’. Thus the economic factors – forces and relations of production – do not determine the society in a simple, straight manner. All the levels have their own courses of development. Similarly, other Marxists have interpreted this differently from what was once thought as the orthodox position. The Marxist social historians generally tend to offer a more complex notion of society than the one which neatly divides society between base and superstructure in which the former determines the latter.

15.3 RISE OF WESTERN MARXISM

Almost all the important Marxist thinkers till the First World were involved in revolutionary practice in some way or the other. A large part of their theoretical production was therefore related to this reality. The failure of the revolution in advanced West European countries and its success in backward Russia posed new questions to Marxist theory.

The renewed consolidation of capitalism and isolation of revolutionary Soviet Union and the desperate struggle to save socialism in one country witnessed various adjustments in revolutionary theory and practice which the classical Marxism could not explain. Moreover, the chauvinistic role played by the Social Democratic parties in the West and the consequent disintegration of the Second International questioned the universality of proletarian solidarity. All these developments led to a schism between Marxist theory and revolutionary practice in the West. Perry Anderson, in an important study (*Considerations on Western Marxism*, 1976), states that 'It was in this altered universe that revolutionary theory completed the mutation which produced what can today retrospectively be called "Western Marxism"'. He has outlined the major characteristics of Western Marxism. According to him,

'The first and most fundamental of its characteristics has been the structural divorce of this Marxism from political practice. The organic unity of theory and practice realized in the classical generation of Marxists before the First World War, who performed an inseparably politico-intellectual function within their respective parties in Eastern and Central Europe, was to be increasingly severed in the half-century from 1918 to 1968, in Western Europe.'

Even though some of these Western intellectuals had been members of and in important positions in the newly-formed Communist parties, their theories were formed in more or less isolated conditions. The three important Marxist intellectuals in the 1920s, George Lukacs (1885-1971), Karl Korsch (1886-1961) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) were major political leaders in the Communist parties of their respective countries. However, most of their works was written either in prison (in case of Gramsci) or in exile (in cases of Korsch and Lukacs).

This has its positive results as well. Now theory could be developed in relative immunity from everyday political contingencies. A renewed interest in philosophy was one of the outcomes. The crucial catalytic factor was belated publication of the most important early work of Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, also known as *Paris Manuscripts of 1844*, in 1932 in Moscow. The Western Marxism became predominantly concerned with the aspects of superstructure. In this, culture, particularly art and literature, became prime area of study. Lukacs devoted most of his intellectual energies to literary criticism, Adorno to music, Walter Benjamin to art and literature.

This change saw its first manifestation in Germany. The establishment of the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt, more famously known as the Frankfurt School, in 1923 started the trend of academicisation of Marxism. The most important thinkers attached to it over the period were Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Jurgen Habermas (b.1929). The other important Marxist thinkers whose ideas had great influence on production of knowledge were George Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch, Jean Paul Sartre, and Louis Althusser. Among these Gramsci had the greatest impact on the writing of history. His theory of 'hegemony' created an altogether new conceptual tool in Marxist discourse. It sought to explain the continued ascendancy of the capitalist system through its network of cultural institutions such as newspapers, schools, churches and political parties.

Now we will deal with the major trends of Marxist history-writing in the West.

15.4 TRENDS IN MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE WEST

Marxist historians in France, Britain, Italy, Germany and America began to rethink the earlier base-superstructure model imputed to Marxism, both by the Marxists and their critics. These historians radically broke away from that interpretation of Marxism which

gave primacy to productive forces in a deterministic and teleological framework. Instead, they sought to develop a more integrative approach. Their historical work testified this. We will separately discuss these historians and their works in the next section. In this section we will deal with the major trends which the works of these historians brought forth.

Later Marxist historians found it difficult to accept the primacy of productive forces and thus laid more emphasis on the role of class struggle in determining the social structure. Moreover, they also questioned the dichotomy of base and superstructure and the determining role of the former.

In fact, they found support for their view in the works of Marx and Engels which led in two directions. In the abstract analysis the primacy of productive forces and a teleological development were established. But when analysing the concrete events, a more complex explanatory structure was evolved where the struggle between classes became the prime mover. Many Marxist historians took this up and professed that class struggle was the prime motor of change. For example, in his analysis of the decline of Roman Empire, F.W. Walbank argued, in his *The Decline of Roman Empire in the West* (1946), that there was no development of productive forces from Greek to Roman times. The reason for this was that the relations of production based on slavery demotivated both the slaves and the slaveowners for seeking any kind of technological innovations. It led to a situation where a top-heavy political apparatus without corresponding development of productive forces failed to survive. Similarly, Robert Brenner and Eugene Genovese locate the roots of social and political decline in the prevalent relations of production (respectively feudal relations in Europe and slavery in nineteenth-century America) rather than in the contradictions between developing productive forces and stagnant relations of production.

Although the later Marxist historians still saw the tendency of productive forces to expand, particularly under capitalism, they rejected it as a universal law equally applicable to pre-capitalist modes of production. In the context of pre-capitalist societies, Perry Anderson has argued that 'forces of production typically stall and recede within the existing relations of production. . . . The relations of production generally change *prior* to the forces of production in the epoch of transition and not vice versa'.

However, these historians generally maintain that the crisis and change in any society was primarily due to its internal dynamics rather than caused by any external impact. Thus feudalism declined because of its own internal contradictions rather than due to revival of trade. Similarly, the reason for the decline of the Roman Empire was its internal weakness and not the barbarian invasions.

Thus Marxist historians, writing in epochal terms, have tended to categorise various societies on the basis of their typical relations of production rather than in terms of productive forces. Moreover, there are disagreements over existence of various modes of production. For example, the concept of the 'Asiatic' mode of production is not accepted by most Marxist historians. Similarly, the slave mode of production was not found to be applicable to many societies, including India. In fact, some historians have argued that even in ancient Greek and Roman societies, slaves did not form the majority of producers and the use of chattel slavery was limited to certain areas and certain periods. Thus, it cannot be said that the ancient world can be uniformly characterised as slave mode of production.

Despite these disagreements, the Marxist historians believe that all modes of production after the hunting-gathering phase are characterised by appropriation of surplus labour of the producers by the dominant classes. This basic fact generates class struggle which

is also the prime motor of social, economic and political changes. Even in those societies which appear relatively free of explicit lower-class actions, class-struggle is present and the apparently consensual rules and practices evolve through vocal or silent negotiations.

Although the Marxist historians have been concerned about various periods of history and different facets of social structures, the rise and growth of labour movement under capitalism has attracted much attention. The visibility and collectivity of labour and its revolutionary potential in advanced capitalist countries have interested these historians. They have also written against the tendency of the elite historians to ascribe all positive developments in society and politics to dominant classes and to condemn the lower classes for their backwardness. The Marxist historians have emphasised that the lower classes should not be considered reactionary and their role in the making of social and political values must be brought out. Thus Rodney Hilton stressed that the medieval peasantry should be given its due for the development of ideas of equality and freedom. George Rude has criticised those who consider the urban rioters as irrational mobs. Instead, he pointed out, the bulk of the protesters came from respectable labouring professions whose actions were rational. Similarly, E.P.Thompson, in his famous essay 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' (1971), has defended the eighteenth-century food rioters in England whose actions were 'a highly complex form of direct political action, disciplined and with clear objectives'. In his earlier classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), he is even more vehement in the defence of the mass action :

'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.'

This defence of the lost radical causes is to be found in Christopher Hill as well. Hill saw the mid-17th century English Revolution as assertion by the emergent bourgeoisie. This, according to him, ushered in the rise of modern society in England. However, there was another, lower class, element in the upheavals, one that did not succeed. Hill urges to consider it more favourably:

'We can, perhaps, extend a little gratitude to all those nameless radicals who foresaw and worked for – not our modern world – but something far nobler, something yet to be achieved – the upside down world.'

In keeping with their belief in the existence of class-conflict in societies and the role of class-struggle as the prime mover of change, the Marxist historians have explained various revolutions in these terms. Thus Lefevbre, Soboul and Rude have analysed the French Revolution in terms of the leadership provided by emergent bourgeoisie. Similarly, Christopher Hill has interpreted the English Civil War as caused by the aspiration of rising English bourgeoisie. Rodney Hilton sought to show that even during the medieval society there was an intense class-struggle going on between the lords and the peasants.

The Marxist historians also view the state as a 'class state', that is, the state of the ruling class. This situation, in their opinion, has continued since the day the state was first formed. It served the interests of the dominant classes and has been used to keep the lower classes in subordination. Hilton, Hill, Anderson, Miliband, Therborn all adopted this view. E.P.Thompson, however, somewhat differs in his views and puts forward the idea that the

law should be seen differently. Although it ultimately served the interests of the ruling classes, it had to appear neutral. This appearance of neutrality may sometimes be used by the lower classes for their own agitations.

The Marxist historians generally see ideology and religion as serving the interests of the ruling classes. But they do not see such a relationship mechanically. Thus although the religions like Protestantism ultimately served the interests of rising capitalists, it should also be seen as a 'system of thought for which men were willing to kill and be killed'. But, in the final analysis, Hill argues, 'to understand Puritanism we must understand the needs, hopes, fears and aspirations of the godly artisans, yeomen, gentlemen and ministers and their wives, who gave their support to its doctrines. . . . It seemed to point the way to heaven because it helped them to live on earth.'

Their main contributions may be summarised as follows :

- 1) Criticism of economic determinism and the base-superstructure model of traditional Marxism.
- 2) Development of Marxism as a theory of class determination.
- 3) Emphasis on the history of and from the viewpoint of the oppressed people, on experience and agency of the subordinated classes as two important categories to understand the dynamics of their actions.
- 4) Eschewing the neutrality of the traditional historians in favour of taking sides without relinquishing objectivity.

15.5 SOME IMPORTANT MARXIST HISTORIANS IN THE WEST

In this section we will discuss the individual contributions made by some important Marxist historians in the West whose writings provided new orientation not only to Marxist historical theory and practice but to historiography in general.

Georges Lefebvre (1874-1959)

Lefebvre, a French historian, was crucial in the development of Marxist social history. He is best known for his work on the French Revolution. His book, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939 in French; 1947 in English) provided a general synthesis of the views which argued that the Revolution was a bourgeois one and was caused by the opposition of the French nobility to reforms in 1787-88.

Lefebvre's main contribution, however, is in his insightful studies of the French peasantry. He related the Revolution to the peasantry and argued that it was basically a peasant revolution. In his quantitative study of the French peasantry, *The Peasants of Northern France during the French Revolution* (1924), he sought to study both the structure of the peasant society and economy and the peasant mentality just before the Revolution. After a thorough study of archival material relating to feudal dues, taxation, sale of church lands, changes in religious practices and Terror records, Lefebvre outlined the differentiation within the peasant society and peasants' response to the appeal of Revolution. This study was followed by his great work on the peasant fear and hysteria during 1789 resulting from an imagined aristocratic conspiracy, *The Great Fear of 1789* (1932).

Lefebvre was also associated with the *Annales* School, as is evident in his articles 'Revolutionary Crowds' and 'The Murder of Count of Dampierre' (in the collection *Studies on the French Revolution*, 1954), where he used storytelling to explore the

mentalities of the peasants. Thus, Lefebvre's contribution ranges from quantitative history to psychological and sociological aspects of peasant's existence to history of mentalities.

Maurice Dobb (1900-1976)

Dobb was not a social historian. He was basically an economic historian, but one who, in the words of Harvey J. Kaye, 'pushed economic history beyond economics. In fact, he was quite consciously seeking to shift the focus of study in economic history and development away from a narrow economism to a broader politico-economic perspective'. Dobb's emphasis on the politico-economic and on the class-struggle as a determining factor is significant in deciding the course which Marxist social history would take in Britain.

Dobb, in his classic work, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946), discussed the origins and growth of capitalism. He criticised Henri Pirenne for considering external factors, like the rise of commerce in medieval times, as crucial to the decline of feudalism. Dobb argued, on the contrary, that it is in the internal structure of a particular society where the dynamics of change must be located. Moreover, Dobb insisted that feudalism, as any other social system, should be defined in terms of its social relations of production.

George Rude (1910-1993)

Rude was one of the most important Marxist historians who pioneered the history from below. The major area of his research was the French Revolution and the popular participation in it. In books like *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959), *The Crowd in History* (1964), *Revolutionary Europe : 1783-1815* (1969), *Paris and London in the 18th Century* (1970), *Ideology and Popular Protest* (1980) and *The French Revolution* (1989), he discussed in detail the nature of the Revolution and the participation of ordinary people in it. He argued that the common people who took part in the riots should not be considered as irrational mobs, but as thinking men who had particular aims in mind.

Albert Soboul (1914-1982)

Soboul was a French historian who has significantly contributed to the debates over the nature of, and reasons for, the French Revolution. Although he rejected any simple explanation of the Revolution as directly caused by the bourgeoisie, he accepted its overall bourgeois character. In his book, *The French Revolution* (in French, 1962; in English, 1974), Soboul adhered to the traditional Marxist position of characterising it as a bourgeois revolution, despite criticism of this view by Alfred Cobban in 1955.

However, Soboul's most important contribution to social history consisted in his study of the Parisian *sans-culottes* (common people). It was these people who took the Revolution to its radical conclusion. Soboul was one of the pioneers who comprehensively studied the composition and role of these people. He also wrote about the French peasantry and their role in the Revolution.

Rodney Hilton (1916-2002)

Hilton is considered as one of the greatest historians of medieval Europe. His work has immensely enriched our understanding of the peasantry of medieval Europe. In his important book, *A Medieval Society* (1967), Hilton argued that the feudal society must be defined in class terms, as a society consisting of feudal lords and subordinate peasants. Since the peasants' surplus produce was appropriated by the lords, there was always an element of class tension in this relationship. Thus, according to Hilton, feudalism was a society not only divided in class terms but also one in which there existed a continuous class struggle.

This line of enquiry was further advanced in his *Bond Men Made Free* (1973) in which he argued that the medieval peasants had been able to collectively resist the increasing exploitation by the lords. And it was this class struggle which was the main reason for social change in medieval societies.

Hilton emphasised the active role of peasantry in the socio-economic changes. The entire range of his work contrasts with those of some non-Marxist historians who consider the changes as result of abstract economic and demographic laws; it also revises the traditional Marxist notion about the passivity of the peasantry.

Christopher Hill (1912-2003)

Hill is *the* historian of seventeenth-century England. Most of his writings centred on the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956), *Puritanism and Revolution* ((1958), *The Century of Revolution* (1961), *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965), *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (1971), *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) and *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (1974) are some of his major works dealing with the subject. His main thesis was that the English Revolution of the mid-17th century was a bourgeois revolution and had led to the development of capitalism. He differed from those explanations of the Revolution which interpreted it in terms of struggle for religious and constitutional liberty. Hill, instead, argued that the Revolution should be basically seen in class terms which led to the success of the bourgeois revolution and was crucial in shaping England's historical development and heritage. He, however, detected a revolution within the revolution, a radical upheaval of ideas which sought to 'turn the world upside down'.

Hill's important contribution is to explore the social basis of ideas. Although he considered ideas as very significant in the historical process, he emphasised that it was the context which gave rise to such ideas. He pointed out in the 'Introduction' of the *Intellectual Origins of The English Revolution* :

'Ideas were all-important for the individuals whom they impelled into action; but the historians must attach equal importance to the circumstances which gave these ideas their chance. Revolutions are not made without ideas, but they are not made by intellectuals. Steam is essential to driving a railway engine; but neither a locomotive not a permanent way can be built out of steam....

'It seems to me that any body of thought which plays a major part in history – Luther's, Rousseau's, Marx's own – 'takes on' because it meets the needs of significant groups in the society in which it comes into prominence...'

E.J.Hobsbawm (b. 1917)

Hobsbawm is among the greatest historians of the modern age. The volume and range of his historical writing are immense and they cover peasant history, labour history and world history. On the one hand, he has written on the origins of capitalism and imperialism in *Industry and Empire* (1968), and on nationalism in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1992) and *Invention of Tradition* (edited with Terence Ranger) (1983); on the other hand, he has extensively covered the history of ordinary people in such works as *Primitive Rebels* (1959), *Labouring Men* (1964), *Captain Swing* (with George Rude, 1969), *Bandits* (1969), and *Worlds of Labour* (1984). In the field of world history, Hobsbawm has written four volumes of complex but lucid 'total history' – *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Capital* (1975), *The Age of Empire* (1987), and *The Age of Extremes* (1994).

E.P.Thompson (1924-1993)

Thompson was one of the pioneers of social history in England after 1945. His writings gave a new turn to histories of popular culture, labour, crime and protest. He was one of the most widely known and influential of the Marxist historians in the world.

Thompson's best-known book, *The Making of the English Working Class* instantly acquired the status of a classic after publication in 1963. It heralded a new labour history which rejected the notion of the working class as passive recipient of the industrial and economic changes. Thompson also argued against the traditional Marxist notion of class as an economic category, as something which 'can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production'. Instead, he sought to analyse class as 'an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning.' Thompson asserted that the 'working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.' In his opinion, class should be seen as a historical process and not as a static category :

'By class I understand a historical phenomenon . . . I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.'

This dynamic conception of class revolutionised the practice of social history not only among Marxists but among others as well. Besides this, Thompson's work in other areas such as the 'moral economy' of urban food rioters and his emphasis to see history from the point of view of common people have also given new orientation to social history.

Eugene D. Genovese (b.1930)

Genovese, an important figure in America's New Left, emerged as America's most important social historian during the 1960s and 1970s. His reinterpretation of the slave economy and society in nineteenth-century America became very influential and controversial. His major works include *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965), *In Red and black* (1968), *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1969), *Roll, Jordan, Roll : The World The Slaves Made* (1974) and *From Rebellion to Revolution* (1979). He described the South American slave society pre-bourgeois and pre-modern. Despite being 'Cruel, unjust, exploitative, oppressive', Genovese argued that it was 'a historically unique kind of paternalist society' in which the 'slavery bound the two peoples together in bitter antagonism while creating an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other'.

On the practice of history, Genovese maintained that the historian should be able to take sides while being objective :

' . . . what we stand for is the realisation that all historical writing and teaching – all cultural work – is unavoidably political intervention, but that ideologically motivated history is bad history and ultimately reactionary politics.'

Robert Brenner (b.1943)

Brenner is one of the most important of Marxist historians in the West. He shot into fame by attacking the population-based theories about the decline of feudalism in Europe. In his articles, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe' (1976) and 'The Origins of Capitalist Development : A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism' (1977), he attacked those historians who focused on demography and on trade and urbanisation as prime causes for decline of feudalism in Europe. His intervention started

an intense debate about the decline of feudalism and origins of capitalism. Brenner replied to the criticism in another article, 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', published in 1982. Brenner argued that it was the class-structure and relative balance of class forces which were the determining factors of changes. Thus it was the strength of the Western European peasantry which made it capable to resist the onslaught by the landlords. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, the peasant communities were unable to counter seigniorial pressure. Brenner thus emphasised the primacy of class struggle as the motor of change in a given society.

15.6 SUMMARY

In the foregoing discussion we have seen how the theory of history found in the works of Marx and Engels led into two directions. While one version stressed the role of productive forces, another version as well as their historical writings emphasised the crucial role of relations of production and class struggle in determining the course of history. The later Marxist historians, particularly the Marxist social historians, accepted the second version in their writings. Moreover, many of them did not consider the political and legal superstructure as simply a reflection of the economic base. They, instead, accorded it crucial importance. At another level, these historians accorded active role to the common people in making their own history. In this respect, they can be said to have pioneered the people's history in real sense. Their collective contribution to the theory and practice of history-writing has been immense and it has proved to be trend-setter for historians all over the world.

15.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What is Western Marxism? Who are the important thinkers identified with it?
- 2) Discuss the various trends in the classical Marxist interpretation of history. Which aspect of it appeal to the Western Marxist social historians?
- 3) What are the main trends in the Marxist historiography in the West? Discuss with reference to some of the important Marxist historians.

15.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, NLB, 1976, Verso, 1979).

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