

## A Critique to Marx's Contemporary Philosophy of Humanism

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### ABSTRACT

Humanism is not a new ideal. It is perhaps as old as philosophy itself and has its historical roots in human civilization. It is rather a technical term, which denotes an intellectual or moral conception. It recognizes the value and dignity of man. It represents a system of thought concerned with human affairs in general. Furthermore, it is an attitude, which attaches primary importance to man, his faculties, aspirations, growth, fulfillment, freedom and creativity.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is a German philosopher. His humanism begins with the proclamation that "man is alienated," while "he is the root of mankind". Its roots go back to the Enlightenment. Although, Feuerbach influenced Marx, he felt that Feuerbach neglected social history. Marxian concept of humanism is socialist. He pointed out that the religion is opium of the people which brought temporary relief and satisfaction to man. Religions are too harmful to the society as far as they do not allow man to use his potentialities for the welfare of humankind (Kurtz, 1973, pp. 138-39). We shall therefore attempt to critical evaluate Marx's view of humanism.

### Key words

Contemporary Western Philosophy, Human, Civilization, Freedom, Alienation, Exploitation, Value, Dignity, Creativity, Welfare of Humankind etc.

### INTRODUCTION

To begin with Marx's Contemporary Philosophy of Humanism, it is important to discuss humanism in general and its historical perspective. Humanism is the philosophical and literary movement, which originated in Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century. Although, the word 'humanism' came into general use only in the nineteenth century; it was applied to some intellectual and cultural developments in previous eras too. As we know, in ancient Greece, one of the leading sophists, Protagoras asserted "Man is the measure of all things". It was the beginning of humanism. Protagoras, therefore, may be considered as the first humanist (Henry, 1993, p. 137).

In Renaissance Italy, a teacher of classical languages and literatures was described as Umanista (contrasted with legista, teacher of law). And what we today call "the humanities," was, in the fifteenth century, called studio humanities. It stood for grammar, rhetoric, history, literature, and moral philosophy. The inspiration for these studies came from the rediscovery of ancient Greek and

Latin texts. Plato's complete works were translated for the first time and Aristotle's philosophy was studied in more accurate versions than those available during the Middle Ages (Audi, 1995, p. 340). The contribution of the Greeks lies in the understanding of man and nature through reason. Sophists represent the transition from the physicists to the humanists. The Sophists destroyed the faith "in the gods and goddesses of Olympus." They also did it in moral codes that had taken its sanction so largely from the fear man had for these innumerable deities (Durrant, 1948, p. 28).

Plato and Aristotle argued against the contention of Sophists that morality is simply social convention. According to them, there are certain universal and absolute principles of goodness and justice that can be discovered by man through his reason.

In its historical meaning, humanism is a basic aspect of the Renaissance. Renaissance thinkers sought to reintegrate man into the world of nature and history. The term humanism in this sense derives from *humanitas* meaning the education of man as such. Therefore, the central theme of Renaissance civilization is humanism, which is an attitude attaching prime importance to man and his values.

Stoics and Epicureans took a therapeutic view of man. They had agreed in saying that man had his cure in his own hands. The purpose of Epicurean school was to produce in its students a state of self-sufficiency. Stoicism, on the other hand, not only exalted the life of reason but also emphasised the essential equality of all men.

It was through Stoicism rather than Platonism that Greek philosophy was introduced into the Roman world. The Stoic conception of the universal community in which all men are brothers was given spiritual content. This happened due to the influence of the Christian conception of the kingdom of God.

Humanism as "return to antiquity" did not consist in a simple repetition of the ancient past. It rather consisted in the revival and development of capacities and powers that the ancients possessed and exercised and that had been lost in the Middle Ages. The humanists rejected the medieval heritage and chose instead the classical world. They accorded to the humanities prime of place. Their conviction was that these disciplines alone educate man and put him in a position whereby he can exercise his freedom (Russell, 1960, pp. 178-9).

Thus, from historical perspective, we see that the "return to antiquity" was the watchword of humanism. The middle ages knew and utilized classical culture but utilized it by assimilating it and making it contemporary. The philosophy of humanism has had to pass through a process of development and change. But its main idea that man must remain the supreme being and he must be the centre of attention in all walks of life has remained constant throughout. We can therefore say

that humanism recognizes the value and dignity of man and makes him "the measure of all things" as Protagoras asserted. In this sense, humanism can be said to be quite simply a study of man.

Humanism, on its critical side, is essentially a protest against the dehumanizing and depersonalizing procedure. It involves a critique of the modern scientific and technological outlook. However, given the wide diversity of views among its exponents, it should be clear that humanism is not a dogma or creed. It shares a general point of view about man and his place in the universe. Humanism is critical of super-naturalistic religion or ideological dogma. It has a moral commitment to free thought, to the fulfillment of human potentialities and the democratic ideal of humanity as a whole (Blackham, 1968, p. 21).

Humanism is committed to the method of reason as the chief means of solving problems. It expresses the belief that mankind can survive and humans can enjoy a significant life. This conviction can be realized only if men continue to have confidence in their own natural powers and abilities. They also must have the courage to use them.

In the modern context, humanism can mean two things: first, that man is the sovereign value and an end by himself. Second, that the man is all the time outside himself. It is in projecting himself and losing himself beyond himself that he exists. There is no other universe except the human universe. The real problem for man is to understand himself again and again, to understand that nothing can save him except himself. There exists no insuperable barrier to the progress of human civilization. Man must be able to realize the heaven of comfort and happiness here in this world. Man is his own rule and his own end. Human life is in human hands (Kurtz, 1973, p. 49).

It is already mentioned that the humanism came in general use in 19th century while the humanistic approaches were found in medieval and Greek periods too. Some of the humanists whose names deserve to be mentioned are French philosophers like Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. Some other European and American figures are Bentham, Hume, Lessing, Kant, Franklin and Jefferson. There are some names of twentieth century humanists like Jean Paul Sartre, Gilbert Murray, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell and Erich Fromm. Though these humanists did not always agree with one another, they formed a family united in support of such values as freedom, equality, tolerance, secularism and cosmopolitanism (Clearance, 1962, p. 38).

There have been many versions of humanism, such as religious humanism, scientific humanism, rationalist humanism, ethical humanism and Marxist Humanism etc. Each of these is, surely, a legitimate and valuable type of humanism. A brief account of some of them is given as under:

First, there is an idea of religious humanism. The religious humanists believe in the existence of a supernatural power and its active role in human affairs. They believe that the conscious subordination

of man to divine will does not affect his commitment to the value of freedom. They also accept the value of rationalism but to a limited extent. Because they believe that there is, besides reason, a supra-rational way of acquiring knowledge. According to them, morality is derived not from biological impulses and guided by man's reason, but from divine will that is expressed in religious texts.

Religious humanism is cosmopolitan. It does not believe in any organized religion. Religious humanists also regard all religions including their own as different ways of reaching God. They are all part of a human brotherhood and they cherish the ideal of freedom with sincerity (Audi, 1995, p. 341).

Secondly, Scientific Humanism arose through the thinking of John Dewey, Julian Huxley and others. But it can be traced to Bacon's *Novum Organum*. Bacon's formula was that "pursue science in order that the human state may be enhanced."<sup>14</sup> According to these humanists, science has emancipated man from the bondage of dogmatic religious mythology. It has provided him with the instruments for remaking and reordering his life (Kurtz, 1973, p. 5).

Moreover, Renaissance humanism can be considered one of the conditions that contributed to the birth of modern science. Scientific humanism is called naturalistic humanism. It is because it rejects all forms of supernaturalism, pantheism, and metaphysical idealism. It considers man's supreme ethical aim as working for the welfare of all humanity in this one and only life. It uses the methods of reason, science and democracy for the solution of problems. Moreover, there is no need for a God or gods to solve human problems (Kurtz, 1973, p. 5).

## **Marxist Humanism**

Marx's humanism begins with the proclamation that "man is alienated", while "he is the root of mankind". Its roots go back to the Enlightenment. Feuerbach influenced Marx but he felt that Feuerbach neglected social history. Marxian concept of humanism is socialist. He pointed out that the religion is opium of the people which brought temporary relief and satisfaction to man. Religions are too harmful to the society as far as they do not allow man to use his potentialities for the welfare of humankind.

Marx's contention was that private property had to be abolished because it was the manifestation of the exploitation of man-by-man through the instrumentality of the machine. According to him, the individual is the social entity. Where there is no freedom for the individual, there is no freedom in the society (Ibid, p. 129).

Marx proposed that in place of the profit motive of capitalism or the substitution of state for private ownership, the principle of the new society should be the freedom of man. This will help in the development of man's innate talents. The unity of mental and manual labor had been fragmented by the exploitative society. It alienated from man not only the product of his labor but also the very activity of labor (Ibid 150). Marx said, "Religion is the opium of the people" (Bottomore, 1963, p. 167). He also wrote:

Man makes religion: religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has lost himself again. But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, state, society.... Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of the religion as the illusory happiness of the men, is a demand for their real happiness.... Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself....(Dunayevskaya, 1958, p. 206).

Marx suggested man to be engaged with what he called the human world. The human world is primarily concerned with material production. Marx meant by 'material' the basic and primary conditions of human existence. The legal property relations of men as well as their philosophical concepts were rooted in material production.

Though Marx declared that the Hegelian dialectic is the source of all dialectic, it seemed to limit itself to thought. The thoughts were something outside the human being. Marx claimed to humanize the Hegelian dialectic. Marx claimed that his materialist concept of history was a scientific philosophy. In contrast to utopian socialism and to mechanical materialism, Marx's view was that there is nothing automatic. All depended on the human subject. It was about undermining the existing order and creating the new one.

According to Marx, reason and revolution both are compulsory for the transformation of reality. They are the inseparables for the same struggles decided the fate of men. Just as it was men who made religion, not religion men, so it was they who developed science not science them. The human being, not science, was the stuff of revolution.

### **A Critique to Marxian Contemporary Philosophy of Humanism**

As we understand, that Marxism could not be the horoscope of humanity. It was only a method to study and interpret history. It has been experienced in what was happening in Soviet Russia. If a liberating revolution cannot take place under the leadership of communism, and if we still want to

work for a higher ideal that is the ideal of achieving human freedom, we should keep away from communism. The degeneration of communist theory and practice is the result of its failure to understand the supreme importance of ideas in human progress. Materialism was not inconsistent with the role of ideas in human history as Marx thought. For ideas have their origin in the physical existence of man. Marx's theory, however, demands sacrifice of the individual at the altar of an imaginary collective ego as M N Roy, a twentieth century Indian philosopher says:

Karl Marx said: "Man is the root of mankind." That was even more explicit than what Protagoras had demanded as the criterion of all values. Karl Marx could improve upon the ancient sage, because he had greater scientific knowledge at his disposal. What does the principle mean? First comes man, then mankind; the individual is antecedent to society, which is the means for the unfolding of his potentialities in continuation of the process of pre-human biological evolution. The end should not be sacrificed for the means; the position of the individual is the measure of social progress. That is the philosophical essence of Marxian, the collectivist interpretation of which has become a form of totalitarianism (Roy, 1999, pp. 132-3).

Marxian philosophy of humanism, according to Roy, is fallacious. It could not convince thinking people. Marx accepted collective ego. Society was to be recognised to promote collective progress. This libertarian philosophy of Marx provided sanction for the negation of the concept of freedom. It was done by denying the very existence of men and women as individuals.

Thus, it is clear that Marx wants the sacrifice of individuals for the sake of society. According to Marx, social progress is necessary for man otherwise humankind cannot move forward. However, what does all that mean? The individuals sacrificed for a collective ego cannot be humanism. The philosophy of Marx, therefore, in which individual is sacrificed for the society is not humanism. Humanism must needs be all about man. Man is higher than anything else. Society is the creation of individuals. Therefore, the individual comes first. He is prior to society. Society is the means for attaining an end, which is freedom and progress of the individual.

According to Roy, this is not to underrate the importance of society. Because living in society is essential for the very survival of the individual. Apart from survival, society gives to the individual the gift of language. It enables him to be a co-participant in the social heritage of knowledge and culture. Society is valuable to the extent to which it promotes the interests of the individuals. The value of the society is thus instrumental. Society is the means while the individual is the end.

When it is said that society is for individual, it is not implied that society is for one individual or only some individuals. Society is for all individuals who compose it. The concept of equality is essential to social existence. If one individual is an end in himself, and not the means to any higher end, every other individual will also be an end in him. Society implies cooperative living. It also involves duties as well as rights. Nevertheless, they must contribute equally to the good of all the individuals.

Society is a kind of collectivism so when the individual surrenders himself to the collectivity he becomes a storm trooper for the greater glory of the collectivity. That was how in Hitler's Germany the bulk of people surrendered to the fascist state. They sacrificed themselves in trying to make it the most powerful state in the world. It caused death, destruction and untold suffering to millions of innocent people.

The difference between collectivism and cooperation is basic to every form of social organisation. A social organisation is collectivist to the extent to which the constituent individuals retain their spirit of self-reliance. They also associate with others for the fulfillment of common objectives. While cooperation is consistent with the freedom and dignity of the individual, collectivism implies servility and self-surrender.

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