Marx’s Theory of Alienation

In his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844) Marx laid down the ethical basis of socialism and humanist foundations of freedom. According to Marx capitalist system deformed the productive activity of man and caused his alienation in several ways. Alienation was an outcome of the system of commodity production and all its allied features. Alienation has been identified at four levels. First, man is alienated from his own product and from his work process. This is so because the worker plays no part in deciding what to produce and how to produce. Second, man is alienated from nature. Worker’s work does not give him a sense of satisfaction as a creative worker. In a capitalist society, due to mechanization, the work tends to become increasingly routinized and monotonous. Thirdly, man is alienated from other men through the competitive character of the economic system which forces everyone to live at someone else’s expense. The society is divided into irreconciliable class interests. Finally, man is alienated from himself since the realm of necessity dominates his life and reduces him to the level of animal existence, leaving no room for the taste of literature, art and cultural heritage. So the capitalist system subordinates all human faculties and qualities to the conditions created by the private ownership of capital and property. Even the capitalist himself becomes a slave to the tyrannical rule of money. There can be relief from this bondage only when there is a realization that society is a creation by which man attains a fuller measure of freedom. The peculiar conditions created by the private property obstruct this process. Such conditions obstructing the process of freedom exist in their worst form under the capitalist system. A socialist revolution, which will enable society to restore human values and inaugurate a new era of freedom, can alone remedy this situation. Marxist theory calls for the transformation of the capitalist system itself to secure the conditions of freedom.

Herbert Marcuse’s Concept of One-Dimensional Man:

Herbert Marcuse gave a brilliant analysis of the problem of freedom in contemporary Western society. Like many other adherents of neo-Marxism, he underlined the subjective, critical and humanist dimension of Marxism. Marcuse rejected Soviet Marxism as a distorted version of Marxism and sought to revive the original, humanist interpretation of Marxism as a tool of analysis as well as an instrument of social change.

According to Marcuse capitalism exercises monopolistic control not only on production and distribution, it also creates the desire and demand for commodities through a clever manipulation of the mass media. Under the spell of gratification of their trivial, material desires which can be easily satisfied the genuine urge for freedom disappears. Thus the alienated human beings become unaware of their alienation. Therefore they should first be awakened to realize their condition of alienation in order to arouse their urge for freedom.

Some critics argue that human needs are endless and the gap between aspiration and achievement will never allow human beings to attain happiness. Thus his view concerning possibility of happiness has been criticized. Marcuse has no faith in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. He pins his hopes on the marginal elite of the unbrainwashed students and radically dispossessed members of the poorest classes. So some critics argue that due to his lack of faith in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat Marcuse loses his claim to be a Marxist.

Macpherson’s Concept of Creative Freedom:

One of the acute critics of capitalism C.B.Macpherson argues that Western Democratic theory is characterized by two basic principles: a) maximization utilities; and b) maximization of powers.

Maximization of utilities refers to man being recognized as a consumer of utilities. Western political philosophy from Machiavelli to James Mill is based this principle. Derived from J.S.Mill’s revision of orthodox utilitarianism maximization of powers is an ethical principle which treats man as a doer and creator, demanding development and application of his uniquely human capacities. According to Macpherson power can have two components: developmental power and extractive power. Extractive power represents the familiar concept of power, viz a person’s ability to use others’ capacities to serve his own purpose. It signifies ‘power over’ others. This is a factual description of power relations in a market society. For example, the power of owners of land and capital exercised over serfs and workers is extractive power as land lords and capitalists use serfs’ and workers’ capacities to serve their own interests.

Developmental power, on the other hand, denotes a person’s ability to use his own capacities for the fulfillment of his self-appointed goals. Developmental power of a person enables him to develop his truly human capacities and essence of freedom lies in fully realizing these creative faculties. Some examples of such capacities are: capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic or artistic activity, for love and friendship and, of course, the capacity for materially productive labour. Developmental power treats a person as a doer and creator.

Macpherson enumerates three impediments to the maximization of a person’s developmental power. They are: a) lack of adequate means of life; b) lack of access to the means of labour; and c) lack of protection against invasion by others. The problems created by the first two are technological and material as well as cultural and ideological. They cannot be resolved within the framework of a market society based on capitalist social relations. Solution can only be found in a new system which would combine the protection of civil liberties with a socialist mode of production. It is only here that the individual would be able to make full use of his developmental power thereby achieve his creative freedom.