
UNIT 12 : POSITIVIST TRADITION

Structure

- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Auguste Comte and the Positivist Philosophy
- 12.3 Empiricist Tradition
- 12.4 Rankean Tradition
- 12.5 Positivist / Empiricist View of History
- 12.6 Critiques
- 12.7 Summary
- 12.8 Exercises
- 12.9 Suggested Readings

12.1 INTRODUCTION

What we commonly understand as the positivist view of history derives basically from three traditions :

- a) The Positivist Philosophy enunciated by the French thinker Auguste Comte;
- b) The Empiricist Tradition which had a long history but was most deeply entrenched in the British philosophical and historical tradition; and
- c) The tradition of history-writing which followed the guidelines laid down by the German historian Leopold von Ranke.

These three traditions fused in various mixtures to produce, what E.H.Carr calls, 'the commonsense view of history'. At philosophical level, these traditions cannot be said to be one. In fact, there are many contradictions between them. Sometimes, these contradictions, as between Positivism and Empiricism, may be seemingly opposed to each other. For example, while Positivism enunciated universalistic principles, general laws and had a teleological view of history, Empiricism doubted the grand theoretical schemes and relied on sense impressions and the knowledge gained from that. Nevertheless, in the sphere of history-writing, they have been used interchangeably, both by their followers and critics. In this Unit we will

discuss all the three trends separately as well as their combined impact on the writing of history. Let us start with the Positivist philosophy.

12.2 AUGUSTE COMTE AND THE POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), a French thinker, enunciated the Positivist Philosophy. He followed the Enlightenment tradition which believed in universalism. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that what was applicable to one society was valid for all the others. They, therefore, thought that it was possible to formulate universal laws which would be valid for the whole world. Comte also favoured this universal principle and was opposed to individualism which the Romanticists were preaching. Comte was a disciple of Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a utopian socialist, from 1814 to 1824. Apart from Saint-Simon, the other influences on him were those of John Locke (1632- 1704), David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). All these influences went into the making of his own system of philosophy. The main books he published were titled : *The Course of Positive Philosophy* and *The Course of Positive Politics*. It is in the first book, published in six volumes from 1830 to 1842, that he elaborated his theoretical model about history.

According to Comte, there was a successive progression of all conceptions and knowledge through three stages. These stages are in chronological sequence : ‘the Theological or fictitious; the Metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or Positive’. Of these three stages the first one is the primary stage through which the human mind must necessarily pass. The second stage is transitional, and the third stage is the final and the ‘fixed and definite state’ of human understanding.

Comte also sees a parallel between this evolution of thought in history and the development of an individual from childhood to adulthood. According to him, the first two stages were now past while the third stage, that is, the Positive stage, was emergent.

Comte considered that the Positive stage was dominated by science and industry. In this age the scientists have replaced the theologians and the priests, and the industrialists, including traders, managers and financiers, have replaced the warriors. Comte believed in the absolute primacy of science. In the Positive stage, there is a search for the laws of various phenomena. ‘Reasoning and observation’, Comte said, ‘are the means of this knowledge.’ Ultimately, all isolated phenomena and events are to be related to certain general laws. For Comte, the Positivist system would attain perfection if it could ‘represent all phenomena as particular aspects of a single general fact; such as gravitation, for instance’.

Positivism, therefore, upheld that knowledge could be generated through observation. In this respect, Positivism had very close resemblance to the Empiricist tradition which emphasised the role of sense experience. Thus observation and experience were considered as the most important and essential function. Facts were the outcome of this process. However, at its most fundamental level, the Positivist philosophy was not concerned with individual facts. They, instead, believed in general laws. These laws were to be derived through the method of induction, that is, by first determining the facts through observation and experience and then derive laws through commonness among them. For Positivists, therefore, general laws are only colligation of facts derived from sense experience. Thus, facts are determined by sense experience and then tested by experiments which ultimately leads to the formation of general laws. These general laws, like those in the sciences, would be related to the basic laws of human development. Once discovered (and formulated), these laws could be used to predict and modify the patterns of development in society. In such a scheme, individual facts, or humans for that matter, were of no consequence. Comte, therefore, looked down upon the historians as mere collectors of facts which were of no relevance to him once general laws were known.

There were three major presuppositions in Comte's system of philosophy :

- 1) He envisaged that the industrial society, which Western Europe had pioneered, was the model of the future society all over the world.
- 2) He believed that scientific thinking, which he called the positivist philosophy, was applicable both for the sciences and for the society. Moreover, he thought that this thinking, and by implication the positivist philosophy, would soon become prevalent in the whole world, in all societies.
- 3) Comte believed that the human nature was the same everywhere. It was, therefore, possible to apply the general laws of development, discovered by him, to all societies.

Some of these ideas were common in Comte's age. The belief that the age of religion was over and the age of science and industry had arrived was shared by many.

Comte's main ideas derived from two sources – principle of determinism found in thoughts of Montesquieu (1689-1755), a French political philosopher, and the idea of inevitable progress through certain stages propounded by Condorcet (1743-1794), another French philosopher. Thus Comte's central thesis can be stated in Raymond Aron's words as follows;

‘Social phenomena are subject to strict determinism which operates in the form of an inevitable evolution of human societies – an evolution which is itself governed by the progress of the human mind.’

Armed with this principle, Comte strove to find in the human world a basic pattern which would explain everything. Thus, for him, ‘a final result of all our historical analysis’ would be ‘the rational co-ordination of the fundamental sequence of the various events of human history according to a single design’.

The Positivist method, as envisaged by Comte, would consist in the observation of facts and data, their verification through experimentation which would finally lead to the establishment of general laws. This method was to be applied in the sciences as well as in humanities such as sociology, history, etc. And, as in the sciences, the individual had not much role in determining the process of development.

Thus, for the historians, Comte’s method could have following implications :

- 1) History, like sciences, is subject to certain general laws which could explain the process of human development.
- 2) Human mind progresses through certain stages which are inevitable for all societies and cultures.
- 3) Individuals cannot change the course of history.
- 4) The inductive method, which Comte believed was applicable in sciences, consisting of observation of facts, experimentation and then formulation of general laws, should be applied in the writing of history as well.

12.3 EMPIRICIST TRADITION

The word ‘empiricism’ derives from the Greek word ‘empeiria’ which means ‘experience’. In philosophy, it means that all knowledge is based on experience and experience alone is the justification of all knowledge in the world. According to the Empiricists, the knowledge acquired through tradition, speculation, theoretical reasoning or imagination is not the proper form of knowledge. Therefore, the bodies of knowledge derived from religious systems, metaphysical speculations, moral preaching and art and literature are not verifiable and therefore not reliable. The Empiricists believe that the only legitimate form of knowledge is that whose truth can be verified. Both the Empiricists and the Positivists maintain that only the observable world which is perceptible can provide the source of genuine knowledge. They include texts as the physical objects which can form part of the

knowledge. They reject the metaphysical, unobservable and unverifiable modes of knowledge.

Empiricism has a long history. In western philosophical tradition, the earliest Empiricists were the Greek sophists who made the concrete things the focus of their enquiries. They did not rely on speculations as did many of other Greek philosophers. Aristotle is also sometimes considered as the founder of the Empiricist tradition, but he may equally be claimed by other traditions opposed to Empiricism. In medieval Europe, Thomas Aquinas believed in the primacy of senses as the source of knowledge. He said that ‘there is nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses’.

In Britain, there existed a very strong Empiricist tradition. In the 16th century, Francis Bacon believed that an accurate picture of the world could be derived only through the collection of observed data. He tried to base philosophical enquiries on scientific grounds. In the 17th century, John Locke was the leading Empiricist philosopher. The other important Empiricist philosophers in Britain were George Berkeley (1685-1753), David Hume (1711-1776), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

The theories of Empiricism hold that our senses (eyes, ears, nose, etc.) act as mirrors for the things and events in the world. It is on the basis of those impressions that we understand the world and establish connections between things and events. The world in all its particulars corresponds to how we describe it in language. Thus when we say potato, it exactly denotes a particular material thing in nature.

Empiricism can be said to have generated the following ideas:

1. The real world as we experience is made of concrete things and events and their properties and relationships.
2. Individual experience can be isolated from each other and from its object and from the position of its subject. Thus an experience can be described without reference to the person who experienced it or the circumstances which generated it. In relation to the practice of history, it means that the facts can be separated from the individuals or groups or societies that produced them, and from the researchers who have supposedly uncovered them.
3. The person who experiences a particular object should be like a clean slate who is influenced only by the object he/she experiences. His/her earlier experiences and ideological orientation are not important. In terms of history-writing, it means that the historian or the collector of facts should be

influenced only by those facts that he /she has collected and not by previously held ideology or beliefs.

4. The nature of the world can be derived only through inductive generalisation. All such generalisations, however, should be verified through experiments and can be displaced or corrected by further or different experiences.
5. All knowledge consists of facts derived through experiences and experiences alone. Therefore, any claimed knowledge of transcendental world or any metaphysical speculations have no basis in reality.

The historians, according to the Empiricists, should repose their trust in the evidences about the past that are presented for us by the contemporaries through their sense impressions and if historians look at these sources closely, they can present a true picture of the past.

12.4 RANKEAN TRADITION

Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), the nineteenth-century German historian, is generally considered as the founding father of the Empirical historiography. It was with him that a completely new tradition of history-writing started which is still the predominant mode of historiography today. It is true that before Ranke, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) had established the modern historical scholarship with his monumental book, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published between 1776 and 1788. He based his book on available sources and evidences. However, his work, along with those of others, such as Voltaire, Hume, etc., who wrote historical pieces in the 18th century, was seriously wanting in many respects. These deficiencies were mostly due to the nature of historical research in the 18th-century Europe. Those problems may be listed as follows:

- 1) The first was their concern for establishing the universal principles of human and social behaviour. Moreover, they could not analyse the patterns of change and development in society and polity. Except Gibbon, most of the 18th-century historians were not seriously concerned with providing empirical details. There was also a lack of critical acumen among many of the practitioners of history with regard to their sources. Most of them relied completely on the sources and took their accuracy and truth for granted.
- 2) There was also the problem of the non-availability of primary sources and documents. Most of the archives were not open to the scholars. Moreover, most of the rulers practised censorship and did not allow publication of books and accounts which did not agree with their views. In addition, the

Catholic Church was still powerful and was able to enforce its own censorship prohibiting the books critical of the Church.

- 3) Another associated problem was the lack of formal teaching of history at the university level. Because of this, the historians often worked as individuals and never as a team. This led to an absence of mutual checks and informed criticism.

By the early 19th century, mostly due to the French Revolution and many political reforms introduced in its wake, it became possible to overcome many of the problems discussed above. This great revolution changed many ideas and concepts about the human nature and society. Now people started to think about change and development in social and individual behaviour. Sources and documents were now more carefully and critically evaluated before deciding on their veracity. The Danish scholar Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1831) is generally considered as the pioneer of this new critical method and the source-based historical research. He used the advanced method of linguistic studies and textual analysis for the study of the sources and writing of his book, *History of Rome*, which was published in 1811-12. Niebuhr had worked in Prussia since 1806 and was appointed in the recently founded University of Berlin. In his lectures on Roman history, he critically examined the sources, especially the work of the classical writer Livy (59 BCE — 17 CE). For this, he used the most advanced philological methods and exposed several weaknesses in Livy's work. Niebuhr thought that such method would bring out the bias in the contemporary sources and would enable the historians to present true state of things. He believed that 'In laying down the pen, we must be able to say in the sight of God, "I have not knowingly nor without earnest investigation written anything which is not true."

Although Niebuhr was a crucial figure in developing method of history-writing, it was Ranke who must be credited with the beginning of the modern historiography. In 1824, he published his first book, *The History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*. In the Preface of the book, as the statement of his purpose, he wrote the passage which became the foremost justification of empirical historiography:

'To history has been assigned the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show how it really was.'

The Rankean approach to history-writing can be summarised as follows:

1. As is clear from the above-quoted statement, Ranke believed that the past should be understood in its own terms and not those of the present. The attitudes and behaviour of the people of the past ages should be discerned

by the incisive study of that particular period and should not be viewed by the parameters of the historian's own age. In Ranke's opinion, the historian should avoid the present-centric concerns while studying the past and should try to understand what issues were important to the people of the age he/she was studying. This idea of Ranke and the Empirical school introduced the notion of historicity. It meant that past has its own nature which was different from the present. It is the duty of the historian to uncover the spirit of a particular age.

2. Ranke was an Empiricist who believed that the knowledge is derived only through the sense experience. And the knowledge of the past can come from the sources which are the objective embodiments of the experiences of the people of that particular period. Thus the historian should rely only on the material available in the sources. The historian should not take recourse to imagination or intuition. Any statement to be made about the past should find reference among the sources.
3. But Ranke was also critical towards the sources and did not have blind faith in them. He knew that all sources were not of equal value. He, therefore, advocated the hierarchy of the sources. He gave priority to the sources which were contemporary with the events. These are known as the **primary sources**. Among these, the records produced by the participants or direct observers should be given preference to those written by others in the same period. Then there are the other sources produced by people later on. These are known as the **secondary sources** and should be accorded lesser credence than the primary sources while studying the events. Thus the precise dating of all sources became a matter of prime concern.
4. Ranke also emphasised the importance of providing references. This way all the assertions and statements could be supported by giving full details of sources from which they were derived. Here he further refined and elaborated the technique already followed by Gibbon and other historians before him. This practice was important because it provided the opportunity to cross-check the evidences cited by the historians. This would lead to corrections and modifications of the views and interpretations of historians.
5. Ranke differentiated between facts and interpretations. He emphasised on the primacy of facts which were supported by the evidences based on the sources. The historians' job is to first establish facts and then interpret them. Thus, in Ranke's opinion, the historian should not look into the sources to confirm his/her hypotheses, but, instead, build his/her hypotheses on the basis of the facts found in the sources.

Ranke's own output was enormous. He wrote several multi-volume books, the best known among them are : *The Ottoman and the Spanish Empires in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, *The Popes of Rome, their Church and State, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* and *History of Reformation in Germany*. Through his books Ranke tried to set the example for the future historians.

Ranke and his followers not only established the methodology for professional history but also helped in developing the institutions to support it. Ranke started graduate seminars in the University of Berlin in 1833 where young researchers were systematically trained. It created a group of scholars in Germany in the 1840s who were devoted and who were involved in writing professional history. Even before that, in 1823, the Prussian government had started the publication of *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* which strove to publish all important sources for German medieval history for the historians. By now, more than 360 volumes have appeared.

Ranke conceptualised history as a rigorous science which should abstain from metaphysical speculations and value judgments. He further emphasised that the historians must put the sources to philological criticism in order to determine their veracity. In contrast to the Comtean positivism, Ranke stressed the uniqueness of the events and not their universality. For him, it was important to look for the exact details and not for the general laws. By 1848, all German-speaking universities had adopted the Rankean method for writing history. And after 1870, in most European countries, the United States and Japan, the Rankean model was adopted for historical studies. Journals began to be published in several languages to promote scientific history. Thus the journal *Historische Zeitschrift* began publication in German in 1859. It was a trend-setter. It was followed by *Revue Historique* in French in 1876, *Rivista Storica Italiana* in Italian in 1884, the *English Historical Review* in 1886, the *American Historical Review* in 1895 and several similar journals in many languages and countries.

12.5 POSITIVIST/EMPIRICIST VIEW OF HISTORY

Despite their differences, what all these traditions shared became crucial for the development of historiography. Firstly, they all maintained that history (along with sociology, politics and economics) was a science and similar methods of research and investigation might be applied in both areas. Secondly, history dealt with reality and facts which existed outside and independent of the perception of the historians. Thirdly, history moved in more or less linear sequence in which events followed the earlier ones in linear chronological time.

Some of the hard-core Positivist historians were Numa-Denis Fustel de Coulanges and Hippolyte Taine in France and Henry Thomas Buckle in England. Coulanges

asserted that what could not be perceived did not exist. Hyppolyte Taine, in his book *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine* (1874-93), attempted to explain history as 'geometry of forces'. Buckle, in his *History of Civilisation in England* (1857-61), tried to explain English history in terms of such factors such as climate, geography and innate psychology.

The contribution of such historians to the mainstream historical tradition has been rather limited. It is the Rankean and Empiricist traditions which have proved crucial to the development of historiography. Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), the great German historian was a follower of Ranke. He became famous for his classic *Roman History* written in 3 volumes. This book was a prime example of his meticulous scholarship. He wrote about the history of Roman republic from its inception to its fall by using numismatic, philological and epigraphic sources. His other writings were *Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian*, and the *Roman Public Law* and he edited the *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions*.

Lord Acton (1834-1902) was another major figure in this tradition. His most lasting contribution was the editorship of the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*. Acton believed that in near future when all the facts would be accessible it was possible to write 'ultimate history'. He instructed the contributors to volume to 'meet the demand for completeness and certainty'. He wrote to them :

'Contributors will understand that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Libermann or Harrison took it up.'

J.B.Bury (1861-1927) was another important English historian in this tradition. He also firmly believed in the scientific status of history and exhorted the historians to be accurate, erudite and exact in their search and presentation of facts. He maintained that although history may provide material for writing literature or philosophy, it was different from both these because it was a science. He wrote many important historical works including the *History of Greece* and *A History of the Later Roman Empire*.

This view of history was summarised by an immensely influential textbook entitled *Introduction to the Study of History* written by C.V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos, published in 1898. The authors declared that the objective of history-writing was 'not to please, nor to give practical maxims of conduct, nor to arouse emotions, but knowledge pure and simple'.

Even though there were many critics of this view, this tradition dominated in the 19th century and even in the 20th century most of the professional history followed

this trend. Most historians believe in its central premises that facts have a separate and independent existence and that most of our knowledge of the physical world ultimately derives from sense impressions.

12.6 CRITIQUES

There has been widespread criticism of the positivist and empiricist views of history. Right since the Rankean era there have been historians who criticised this trend of history-writing. Johan Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), professor of History at Berlin from 1859 to 1884, described the objective approach of Ranke as ‘the objectivity of a eunuch’. The work of Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97), Professor of History at Basle from 1845, provided an alternative approach to that of Ranke. He was a disciple of Ranke, but reacted against his method of history-writing and followed the approach of Augustin Thierry (1795-1856) and Jules Michelet (1798-1874). Thierry and Michelet criticised the straightforward empiricism and gave rise to ideas which are associated with the school of ‘historical romanticism’. This trend of historiography stressed the points which the Rankean and Positivist schools had rejected. The historians associated with this trend emphasised the importance of historian’s intervention in the writing of history. They believed that the historian should be passionate and committed rather than detached. They also emphasised the moral side of history-writing in opposition to rational approach. The local and the particular were given more importance as against universal and general. The history of the community as a whole was emphasised as against the approach which gave prominence to the leaders. As Thierry said that his aim in writing history was to ‘envisage the destiny of peoples and not of certain famous men, to present the adventures of social life and not those of the individual’. This school believed in the importance of literary skills in the writing of history and stressed that history was as much art as it was science. They criticised empiricism for its cult of sources and its emphasis on neutral interpretation. They, in its place, stressed the role of sentiments and feelings in history-writing.

Although there were many historians even before 1914 who seriously questioned the possibility of a scientific, neutral and value-free history, the events of the First World War and their aftermath severely jolted the belief that historical accounts could be produced which would satisfy persons of all nationalities. In fact, the historians of many countries wrote histories which contradicted the ones written by those in other countries. They interpreted events which justified their respective nations. Even though there were exceptions to this rule, the overall tendency was to write nationalist histories rather than ‘scientific’ histories. In fact, the nationalist histories were flaunted as scientific histories. The Rankean and Positivist ideals of producing ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ history came under severe strain.

The Positivists believed in the methods and ‘truths’ of the natural sciences. They wanted to apply these methods to the study of society as well. Hence, they designated these disciplines as social sciences. They believed that, by the use of inductive methods, it was possible to predict about the future of society as in the natural sciences. But in the 20th century, the nature of the natural sciences also changed at theoretical level. Albert Einstein’s **General Theory of Relativity**, propounded in 1913, changed the very nature of research in natural sciences.

The thinking about history was also influenced by these developments. The Positivist certainty and Rankean objectivity now seemed a thing of the past. Many thinkers now emphasised the relativistic nature of history. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) in Germany, Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) in Italy and R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943) in England were among the more influential thinkers in this regard. Croce declared that ‘All history is contemporary history’ which meant that history is written always in the light of the present concern and is shaped by the ideological tool available to the historian in his/her own era. The American historian, Carl Becker, denied the existence of facts at all by saying that ‘the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them’. Collingwood went even further by provocatively stating that ‘all history is the history of thought’. What these thinkers were challenging was the usual distinction between fact and interpretation which most of the pre-First World War historians were prone to do.

Their views received wide acceptance among historians. The role of the historian now acquired huge prominence, as the role of sources had early on. The work of interpretation was always considered the prerogative of the historian. But now even the decision about what should be considered as facts was thought to be the privilege of the historian. As E.H.Carr states that ‘the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality of the facts themselves, but on *a priori* decision of the historian’. The facts no longer spoke for themselves, as was the case with the empiricists; they now have to be made to speak in the diction of the historian. To quote E.H.Carr again :

‘The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context....
a fact is like a sack — it won’t stand up till you’ve put something in it.’

E.H.Carr presents these views as the Collingwood view of history. He himself adopts a more cautious approach which gives equal weightage to facts and historians. Most of the working historians generally adopt this approach.

12.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have attempted to familiarise you with the Positivist tradition of history writing. This tradition is, in fact, constituted by three different traditions of thought — the Positivist philosophy enunciated by August Comte, the tradition of history-writing started by Leopold von Ranke and the Empiricist tradition predominant in Britain. The interaction of these three traditions tried to put the practice of history on a scientific basis. This tradition claimed that the sources were all-important, that the facts existed independent of the historian, that neutrality is a desired goal, that total objectivity is possible in the writing of history and that history can be considered as science. This view of history was criticised even during the 19th century by historians like Burckhardt and philosophers like Wilhelm Dilthey. However, more serious challenge came in the beginning of the 20th century. Thinkers like Croce, Carl Becker and Collingwood questioned the very foundations of such an approach of scientificity, neutrality and objectivity. They denied the existence of facts independent of the historian and gave overwhelming importance to interpretation in history-writing. Such views of total relativism were also not helpful to most practicing historians who tried to adopt a more balanced view which accorded even importance both to the facts and the historians.

12.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What are the differences and similarities between Positivism and Empiricism?
- 2) Who was Leopold von Ranke? Discuss his views on history.
- 3) Discuss the positive and negative points of Rankean view of history.

12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

E.H.Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, New York, Penguin,1977 (1961))

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 1998)

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 2004)

Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (New York, Palgrave, 1989 (1970))

Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History* (New York, Palgrave, 2003)

Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought – 1* (London, New York, Penguin, 1965)

Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason* (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins Press, 1971)

Kenneth Thompson and Jeremy Tunstall (eds.), *Sociological Perspectives* (Harmondsworth, New York, Penguin, 1984(1971))

UNIT 13 : CLASSICAL MARXIST TRADITION

Structure

- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Utopia and Science
- 13.3 Marx's Developing Ideas
- 13.4 Marx and Contemporary History
- 13.5 Classical Marxism and its Tradition
- 13.6 Summary
- 13.7 Exercises
- 13.8 Suggested Readings

13.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit you read about the Positivist / Empiricist view of history. Its main protagonists in history-writing were Ranke and Mommsen in Germany, Acton, Bury and Huckle in England and Coulanges and Taine in France, besides many others all over the world. It was the most influential school of historiography in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, its focus on political and administrative history was too narrow for later historians who wanted to explore other areas of human existence. Moreover, the historians in the twentieth century also visualised the past differently than what the Empiricist historians had done. This led to the adoption of Marxist view of history by a large number of historians. In fact, the Marxist approach to history became the most important in the twentieth-century historiography. In this Unit we will discuss the establishment of this tradition by looking at the works of Karl Marx himself apart from some others immediately following that tradition.

Karl Marx (1818-83) is famous for good many reasons. He is recognised as the founder of scientific socialism or communism. This is associated with his distinct philosophical position, which could yield an innovative understanding of history in terms of ceaseless interaction between the economic and non-economic forces of human social living and consciousness. Marx argued how the simultaneous action of all this would open up the probability of achieving a classless human society. Becoming free from all exploitation of man by man, a communist society ensures

the elimination of all social causes accounting for alienation and human degradation.

13.2 UTOPIA AND SCIENCE

The socialist ideal has a longer tradition than what we have from Marx and Engels. The bourgeois revolutions in history had often aligned a mass following of working peasants and labourers who looked beyond the abolition of feudal order to a transformation not limited by the capitalist seizure of power and property. To cite one or two examples, we may remember the role of John Lilburne and his followers in the English Revolution of 1647. They were known as the Levellers consisting of small Yeoman farmers, shopkeepers, the less wealthy tradesmen, artisans and apprentices who stood for equality along with the plea for a broad-based democracy. Another group known as 'Diggers' and led by Gerrard Winstanley struggled not for political rights alone and were unrelenting in their demand for common ownership of land. Again, during the French Revolution of 1789, there was the example of Babouvism led by Gracchus Babeuf (1760-97) as an effort to reach a republic of equals for improving the condition of the working people.

Indeed, the goal of common land ownership featured as an ideal in the programmes of peasant uprisings even during the feudal period of Europe's history. The great peasant war (1515) in Germany found a leader like Thomas Munzer (1470-1525) who urged the rebels to establish "God's Kingdom" on earth, meaning thereby a classless society free of private property and without any government. Thomas More (1478-1535) wrote a book by the name *Utopia* in 1516 during the reign of Henry VIII in England. Perhaps, till the end of the eighteenth century, it remained the most important writing on socialist thought. The Greek word 'Utopia' means non-existent or no place. More chose this to emphasise a still unattained social ideal thriving on communism, universal education and religious tolerance. While the image of an ideal human society had been well presented in More's narrative, the ways and means of realising such an ideal were left, in the main, to the working of a noble prince. Utopia is then unhistorical and could happen only as a miracle. Thus, the very word 'Utopia' acquired the meaning of an imaginary society which was never attainable.

Along with the development of capitalism, utopian socialist ideas rising in opposition appeared in various forms and complexities. Among such thinkers were Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Fourier (1772-1837), Proudhon (1809-1865) of France, Sismondi (1773-1842), a German Swiss of French descent, who was familiar with the economic conditions in England, Italy and France, Robert Owen (1771-1859) of England, Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) of Germany. Despite their differences, a common socialist bias was evident in the emphasis on the need for a social approach as distinguished from the pursuit of individual self-interest to achieve

social well-being. Further, most of them shared some kind of distrust in politics and favoured different alternatives to ensure just and proper management of human affairs.

Their ideas about the nature of institutions for the conduct of such management were different. The Fourierists and the Owenites thought of covering the earth with a network of local communities, while the followers of Saint-Simon propagated for the transformation of nation-states into large productive corporations where scientists and technical experts should have effective power to do things for the widest social benefit. Wilhelm Weitling was a very popular figure among German exiles in places like London, Paris and Brussels. No less significant was his influence over German workers in their own land. He wrote a booklet by name *Mankind as it is and as it ought to be*. Weitling had no trust in intellectuals and depended, in the main, on poor-friendly homilies and adventurist anti-statism for his ideas of achieving socialism. Weitling had a preacher's style and his addresses to mass meetings were in quasi-religious terms.

Around 1845-46, when their manuscript of *The German Ideology* had been nearing completion, Marx and Engels took initiative for setting up a Communist Correspondence Committee to act as the coordinator of various communist theories and practices which were then being evident in the European capitals. At a time when Marx was engaged in his understanding of history as passing through stages related to the interaction of productive forces and production relations, the other expressions of socialist thought like that of Weitling would appear to be extremely puerile formulations of an ignorant mind. Their differences were sharply manifest at a meeting in Marx's Brussels residence where he stayed with his family during 1846-47.

P.V. Annenkow, a Russian tourist, who was present at the meeting on Marx's invitation, gave an account of its proceedings. (*The Extraordinary Decade*, Ann Arbor, 1968). In his opening statement, Engels emphasised the need for a common doctrine to act as a banner for all those devoted to improving the condition of the working people. It was especially necessary for those who lacked the time and opportunity to study theory. Engels was yet to complete his argument when Marx asked Weitling, 'Tell us, Weitling, you have made such a noise in Germany with your preaching : on what grounds do you justify your activity and what do you intend to base it on in the future?'

Weitling spoke for a long time, repeating and correcting himself and arriving with difficulty at his conclusions. He tried to make clear that his aim was not to create new economic theories but to adopt those that were most appropriate, as experience in France had shown, to open the eyes of their workers to the horrors of their condition and all the injustices which it had become the motto of the rulers and societies to inflict on them, and to teach them never to believe in any promises of

the latter, but to rely only upon themselves, and to organise in democratic and communist associations. (This summary is largely taken from David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, Macmillan, London (1973)).

Marx checked Weitling from speaking further and sarcastically commented that ‘in Germany, to appeal to the workers without a rigorous scientific idea and without positive doctrine had the same value as an empty and dishonest game at playing preacher, with someone supposed to be an inspired prophet on the one side and only asses listening to him with mouths agape allowed on the other.’

Pointing to Annenkov, Marx said that in the Russian motherland of their guest, a country not yet entirely free from barbarism, some people could still be found to care for ‘saintly’ observations like that of Weitling. But, ‘In a civilized country like Germany.... People could do nothing up to now except to make noise, cause harmful outbreaks, and ruin the very cause they had espoused.’

Here is a telling instance of Marx’s vehement emphasis on assimilation of socialist thought with what can be recognised as scientific understanding of history and society linked to their laws of movement and change. For Marx, unlike his utopian forerunners and also some contemporaries, socialism was not a morality play in which the virtues of love, kindness, and fraternity have to prevail over the vices of greed, graft and exploitation. Since the onset of the Renaissance in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, the growth of scientific knowledge and experiments had cumulatively added to human uses of nature and its objects for the expansion and improvements of social production. In Marx’s own world, science had already furnished the technical bases of the industrial revolution in west Europe. But the outlook for human consciousness and social relations was still subject to pre-scientific constraints.

On the other side the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality, though of immense importance for the demolition of the old order, were yet to satisfy the criterion of being really absorbed in the making of a society and state. The experience of the French Revolution could not fully uphold the theories and ideals of the Enlightenment philosophers. Nor did the Reign of Terror under the radical Jacobin leadership augur well for the foundation of popular sovereignty. Moreover, the transition from feudalism to capitalism and its economic climax in an Industrial Revolution brought about gross inequities and dehumanisation as they were manifest in the new form of capital-labour relationship.

An acute and intense awareness of those problems was expressed in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), also known as *Paris Manuscripts*. It was written in Paris where Marx was then living, exiled for his radical views and political position from Germany, his own homeland. The *Paris Manuscripts* was his first discourse linking up philosophical ideas and ideals with

an explicit presentation of the economic aspect of social being. It contains Marx's first analysis of alienated labour under capitalist exploitation. Subsequently, along with Engels, Marx was committed to a search for the laws of historical movement and changes. Some such discovery was essential for placing the socialist ideal on a scientific basis. We know how strongly the point was emphasised by Marx in his argument with Weitling. We should sift and explain the principal ideas of the subsequent texts by Marx and Engels to have an understanding of classical Marxism.

13.3 MARX'S DEVELOPING IDEAS

The century spanning the years 1760-1860 is known as the period of industrial revolution in England. It was distinguished by far-reaching cumulative changes in the technical bases of production and marked a peak point of Britain's capitalist transformation. The pace of capitalist development largely varied between the countries of Europe. To cite a few examples, the course of change was rapid in Holland and even more radical than that of England; while the French monarchy faced its doom in 1789, capitalist economic growth and political order did not come to have a sustainable pattern before the last quarter of the 19th century; prior to the unification of German territories in 1871, the course of capitalism in that land was subject to numerous obstacles and eventually its bourgeois transformation was mixed up with feudal residues and political autocracy, an experience which Marx described in his preface to the first volume of *Capital*.

‘Alongside of modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms. We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead, *Le mort saisit le vif!* (The dead holds the living in its grasp!)’

Born in 1818 in Trier, a prominent town in the Rhine province of Prussia, Karl Marx grew up amidst practically the last phase of capitalist transition in Europe. In the previous section of this study, we have taken note of the various socialist ideas and perspectives invoking mass support for the bourgeois struggle to supersede the feudal order, and later shaping into good many doctrines to defend the working people against the onslaught of capitalism in power. Along with the triumph and consolidation of capital's wealth and power in any country, its labouring people were inevitably ousted from any holding of their own means of production and had to seek their subsistence as wage-labour of capitalist entrepreneurs / employers.

While elaborating the nature and conditions of capital and labour in his *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx indicated three aspects of labour's alienation, viz. (1) that from the material, objective product of his work, (2) that from the labourer's work

activity itself, and (3) that from other fellow human beings. Considering the date of the *Paris Manuscripts*, it appears that Marx did not consider the effects of capital-labour production relation (the term production relation not used in *Paris Manuscripts*), only in terms of the sphere of production. He pointed to its envelopment of the entire framework of capitalist social relationship (i.e. alienation of human beings from one another). Thus, capitalism brings about a kind of alienation that violates the very nature of man as a species-being. For Marx, all this had to be comprehended not merely as an image of capitalist evils. He was bent on arriving at a theoretical understanding which would clarify the reality of capitalism as a historical stage subject to its own contradictions. Such contradictions have to be appropriately resolved for any transition to socialism.

The historical course towards socialism would depend on discerning the nature of those contradictions and their bearing upon the negation of capitalism. There arises the need for a theory which can account for the experience of history passing through its various stages in terms of the relative weights of the actors and the factors influencing the pace, pattern and content of the changes. Our knowledge of how the present has emerged out of its past should enable us to recognise the incumbencies of acting for the future in an unceasing historical process. The truth of such knowledge can be constantly verified reference to the ever-growing evidence of men and women in society, their class positions and activities. Moreover, such knowledge can often gain in precision with more and more inputs from practical social experience. History is no independent metaphysical entity. It is purposeful activity of human beings. They make history on a creative understanding of circumstances surrounding them in real social life.

We have just noted the broad purport of Marx's view of history. It helps us to see the relevance of Marx's emphasis on scientific knowledge in his argument with Weitling. He places a large premium on the general character, universality, necessity, and objective truth – all this considered to be attributes of scientific knowledge – in the pursuit of historical reality. Before entering into further details of the Marxian theory, we may note the major influences of Europe's intellectual tradition (viz. German classical philosophy, especially of the Hegelian system, materialism of the Enlightenment philosophers, English classical political economy and the various versions of utopian socialism as already noted in the previous section of this study), which had their roles in the development of Marx's thought. Indeed, many of the components of Marx's theory can be best understood in the light of his acceptance/rejection of the ideas articulated by his forerunners/contemporaries about Europe's capitalist transition and the subsequent agenda of moving towards socialism.

During his student days at the Bonn and Berlin universities, particularly at the latter, Marx was largely influenced by the method and range of Hegelian philosophy. He joined the 'Young Hegelians' whose interpretation of Hegelian

philosophy and criticism of Christian thought presented a kind of bourgeois democratic thought and political interest. Friedrich Engels (1820-95) met Marx in 1844 and they became life-long friends and collaborators. Both of them were critical of the idealist philosophical position of 'Young Hegelians' and emphasised the need for investigating material social relations at the roots of the spiritual life of society. Earlier, Ludwig Feuerbach (1807-72) had pointed to the idealist weakness of the 'Young Hegelian' position. In his important book *The Essence of Christianity*. (First German edition in 1846, English translation in 1854), the formulation of human beings creating god in their own image was a significant step forward in materialist prevalence over idealist thought.

The Holy Family or the Critique of Critical Critique (1845), jointly written by Marx and Engels, launched a piercing attack on philosophical idealism. The 'Young Hegelians' were facetiously named the 'Holy Family'. The book upheld the position of the Enlightenment philosophers for their emphasis on empirical test of truth. At the same time, the dialectical method was rigorously applied to arrive at an adequate idea of changing social relations and also that of recognising the proletariat as the gravedigger of capitalism. Capitalist private property necessarily creates its own antagonist in the proletariat. And as private property grows, the proletariat develops as its negation, a dehumanised force becoming the precondition of a synthesis to do away with both capital and wage labour in opposition to each other.

The German Ideology was the next joint work of Marx and Engels. Though written in 1845, the book could not be published in their lifetime. It appeared for the first time in the Soviet Union in 1932. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx referred to *The German Ideology* (still unpublished) as an effort to settle accounts with their previous philosophical conscience. In addition to their critique of idealism, Marx and Engels exposed the contemplative nature of Feuerbach's materialism which failed to consider really existing active men as they live and work in the midst of any particular socio-economic formation. *The German Ideology* provided for the first time the ideas of historical stages in relation to class struggle and social consciousness to help our comprehension of movements in history.

Marx's *These on Feuerbach* (written in 1845) was found in his notebook and was first published as an appendix to Engel's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1888). Later it was also an appendix to *The German Ideology* when the latter had been released as a book. Altogether we have eleven theses commenting, step by step, on the limitations of idealism and earlier versions of materialism (that of Feuerbach included) for not properly understanding the kind of dialectical interaction between human social beings and their surrounding circumstances. The position of idealism is caught up in abstractions without appropriate cognisance of the realities of human social living. On the other hand,

earlier materialism could regard human beings only as creatures of their circumstances, failing to recognise the role of human sensuous activity in the making of circumstances. Marx's position was memorably expressed in his eleventh thesis, which was as well the last aphorism of the series, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it.'

We have already mentioned the Communist Correspondence Committee set up by Marx and Engels in 1845-46. Such committees started work in other places like London and Paris. A preliminary conference of those committees held in the summer of 1847 in London took the decision to unite in a body. A second meeting held in November-December, in London, named the united body as the Communist League and commissioned Karl Marx to prepare a manifesto of the Communist Party. It would then be published by the League.

The *Communist Manifesto* (1848) appeared to be jointly authored by Marx and Engels from the two names on its title page. Later, Engels pointed out that the basic thought belonged solely and exclusively to Marx and the actual writing was done by Marx. It has four sections. The first section, (viz. Bourgeois and Proletarians), gives a history of society as a succession of class societies and struggle. The laws of social development are manifest in the replacement of one mode of production by another. The second section, (viz. Proletarian and Communists), turns on the supersession of capitalism in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat led by the communists. The communists differ from other working class groups. But they are not opposed to such groups. The communists are distinguished for their being international and fully conscious of the role of the proletarian movement. Rejecting the bourgeois objections to communism, this chapter gives an outline of the measures to be adopted by the victorious proletariat after seizing power and mentions and need and relevance of the dictatorship of the proletariats. The third chapter, (viz. Socialist and Communist literature), contains an extended criticism of the doctrines of socialism. The reactionary, bourgeois types are merely examples of feudal atavism and bourgeois and petty bourgeois manoeuvres masquerading behind some pretensions of socialism. Some utopian socialists may be sincere in their moral sentiments and disapproval of capitalism. But they are misleading in their search for a way out of the realities of capitalist exploitation. The fourth chapter, (viz. attitude of the communists towards the various opposition parties) sets forth the communist tactics in their dealing with the various opposition parties. This would certainly depend on the position of a party in regard to the stage of development of its particular country and society. The Manifesto concluded with the slogan- 'Working men of all countries, unite!' The distinction of Marx's thought is clear from the contrast in the tenor of this slogan from that of the motto—'All men are brother'—used by Fraternal Democrats, and earlier international society including Chartists and European political exiles in London.

Marx wrote *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) in French. The book was directed against Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65), a French political figure, philosopher, sociologist, and economist, who considered the history of society as the struggle of ideas and believed in achieving 'just exchanges' between capitalist commodity producers through the device of an ideal organisation. The book gave a definite impression of Marx's unrelenting effort to have a fuller understanding of the capitalist mode of production. He was engaged in looking for a theoretical result that would combine the structural observations of classical political economy with dialectical comprehension of a society changing under the pressure of its contradictions in the process of history.

Among many other assignments and responsibilities including the day-to-day work of the Communist League to organise the working people of Europe, Marx never neglected his project for the critique of political economy. He could see its necessity for bearing out the rationale for scientific socialism. This is where the seven notebooks written by Marx in 1857-58, now known as *Grundrisse* (Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy) — first English edition in Pelican Marx Library, Harmondsworth, England, in 1973, trs. Martin Nicolaus — bring out the precious point that the question of historical transition from capitalism to socialism can be answered in all fitness by formulating Ricardo's ideas of political economy with Hegelian language and Hegel's ideas of historical movement with Ricardian language. (Martin Nicolaus, 'The Unknown Marx' in Robin Blackburn ed. *Ideology in Social Science*, Suffolk 1972, p. 331). In his analysis of capitalist economic development Ricardo discovered 'the disharmonious' tendencies in the processes. But for him, capitalism was an immutable natural system, which could not be changed under any circumstances. On the other hand, Hegelian dialectics had a dynamic view of society, but could not discern the real core of contradiction in the material life of society. Marx combined Hegelian dialectics with his critical study of political economy and arrived at an understanding of historical supersession of capitalism by socialism. For Marx, such a fusion of economic and philosophical thoughts started with the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844. In *Grundrisse*, it reached the point of articulating that the politico-economic interpretation of capitalism is fulfilled in the proletarian praxis of revolutionary transformation.

In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx made an elaborate statement of his creative theoretical comprehension of historical movement and social change. It was not very long, but immensely significant, as the following excerpt will bear out :

'My investigation led to the result that legal relations such as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in the material conditions of life, the sum total of which Hegel, following the example of the Englishmen and Frenchmen of the eighteenth

century, combines under the name of “civil society”, that however the anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy.....The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows: In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and, new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines, we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production as so many progressive epochs in the economic formation of society.

The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism.’

Following the point of arrival in his articulation of historical materialism, Marx’s immediate concern was to interpret the contradiction of the capitalist social formation. No doubt, the veracity of a new theory of social change is closely linked to the evidence of the present as history. The economics of the capitalist mode of production is the subject matter of Marx’s *Capital*, which Marx considered to be his lifework. Its first volume was published in 1867; the second and the third volumes were posthumously published in 1885 and 1894 respectively, under the editorial supervision of Engels. The first volume gives us a logical elaboration of capital-labour relationship at a level of abstraction and in analytical forms that can best crystallise the most significant structural characteristic and dynamic tendencies of the capitalist system. The second and the third volumes deal with the realities of capitalism on a much lesser level of abstraction and in terms of concrete things and happenings. Their areas are circulation of capital (vol. 2) and then the process of capitalist production as a whole (vol. 3). The *Theories of Surplus Value* (1862-63) (often mentioned as the fourth volume of *Capital*) turned upon the historical substantiation of Marx’s theory in the light of other earlier and contemporary writings on Political Economy.

Marx points to the source of profits in a competitive capitalist economy. The value of a commodity is determined by socially necessary labour time necessary to produce it. Labour power is a commodity as well as exchanged for wages. The value of labour power (i.e. wages) is equal to the value of what is needed for the subsistence and maintenance of a worker and his family. The peculiarity of labour power as a commodity is that it can create more value than what is paid in wages as its value. This difference between the values produced by labour power and its wages is surplus value. Surplus value accrues to the capitalist employer and here lies the source of profits. Larger and larger accumulation out of these profits is the main aim of capitalist production. More and more accumulation results in the advance of productive forces and increased productivity. It also leads to centralisation of capital. In Marx’s words, ‘one capitalist always kills many’. Many capitalists are knocked out by the working of competition. All this is associated with cumulative increase of misery, oppression, slavery and degradation. The conditions become rife for the revolt of the working class. The advance of productive forces can no longer be compatible with the insatiable urge of capital to maximise profits at the expense of the proletariat. The tendencies towards a falling rate of profit and also that of overproduction (i.e. inadequate market demand for what is produced) appear as symptoms of capitalist crisis. The issues relating to

profit rate and overproduction are analysed in some details in the third volume of *Capital*.

13.4 MARX AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Marx was not merely a theoretical philosopher. He was engaged in the foundation of the Communist League in 1847 and then in writing the *Communist Manifesto* (1948). Again, Marx was the most active and influential member of the International Working Men's Association (the First International) established in 1864. Around the 1850s, the countries of Europe were in different stages of reaching the capitalist system, indicated by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*. In his numerous appraisals of such historical situations, Marx put emphasis on the relative strength and weakness of a country's bourgeoisie. There were circumstances in which he had called upon the working people to help in the achievement of a bourgeois democratic revolution, since that would take a society nearer to the socialist transition.

Marx also encountered historical situations where the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class was not yet prepared to seize political command. The complex plurality of classes in such circumstances was the subject of Marx's incisive analysis in his essay on 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' – the instance of French history when Louis Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon I, assumed the position of an emperor as Napoleon III after his *coup d'etat* in 1851.

Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune in 1871 is important in many respects. A large number of manual workers were among its elected members. Most of them were also members of the International. It was not a revolution that would fit in with the Marxian theory of historical change actuated by the advance of productive forces outpacing some existing production relations in a society. Still Marx underlined its significance and highly appreciated its democratic and decentred exercise of political power.

Marx's comments on not-European countries (e.g. North America, China, India) were for the most part influenced by his thoughts on Europe's historical experience of passing from feudalism to capitalism and then, as Marx saw it, to socialism achieved by a class conscious proletarian revolution. His ideas about the Asiatic mode of production were largely derived from ideologues of British empire. They were often emphatic in their portrayal of India as a static, barbaric society whose only means of redemption obtained in submission to the 'civilising' rule of imperial Britain. Marx considered that the forced inception of capitalism in India would act as an unconscious tool of history for bringing the country up to the path of its capitalist transformation. Despite all the sordid consequences of all this, the conditions would open up the perspective of a socialist transformation in the

subject country. Its probability must have a necessary connection with socialist transformation of the ruling country. For China also Marx wrote of the need for the assertion of western civilization by force. (Introduction and notes by Dona Torr, *Marx on China 1853-1860*, London, 1851). In the last decade of his life, Marx appeared to go for newer investigations, perhaps with a view to further probing into the issues of non-European countries and their paths of social change in history. We shall come to that point at a later stage of this presentation.

As regards America, Marx interpreted the civil war (1861-65) as a struggle between two social systems – slavery versus free labour. All his support was for the north and betrayed no concern for the popular element in the resistance of the southern small holders. No doubt, the favourable attitude of the English ruling classes towards the southern slave owners and efforts to cast the same ideological influence on their own workers as well had influenced Marx's position in the matter.

13.5 CLASSICAL MARXISM AND ITS TRADITION

By now, we should have formed an idea of the content of Marx's thought. Admittedly, it has been a summary presentation avoiding some complexities of the theory and practice of Marxism, which have been a part of the historical experience over nearly two centuries. For our present purpose classical Marxism consists of ideas received directly from the writings of Marx and Engels. The point of any divergence between Marx and Engels are set aside for the present. It is well-known that Marx and Engels worked in close collaboration for a long period and often engaged in jointly writing such important texts like *The Communist Manifesto*. Let us make a point by point resume of the content of classical Marxism.

Marx adopted the logic of Hegelian dialectics as his method for understanding the dynamics of social change and transformation in history. He did not go by Hegel's philosophy of idealism. Marx held that in the relationship of being and thought, the former is the subject and the latter the predicate. Hegel inverted this relation to its opposite, setting thought as the subject and being its predicate. The materialist philosophical position taken by Marx was however different in a very important sense from the mechanistic materialism of the Enlightenment and other earlier types. It focused on the reality of mind and consciousness and did not consider human action as being a passive product of material circumstances.

Economic structure and activity are to be understood in terms of its conditions, productive forces and production relations. The **conditions of production** are set by a society's geographical location, its climate and demographic features like the size and composition of its population. **Productive forces** comprise tools, machinery, technology and skills. **Production relations** refer to the nature of

property in a particular society and its forms of social existence of labour which, in their interaction, conduct what to produce, how to produce and for whom to produce, thereby deciding upon the items and quantities of production, technology deployed, and the distribution of final output.

All this goes to constitute the economic structure of a society, its **mode of production**. Marx considered the legal, religious, aesthetic, philosophic and other ideological elements as being rooted in the economic structure of society. So is the state and the political disposition of a society. Class conflict is a common feature of all social stages (excepting the primitive communist formations) indicated by Marx in regard to the history of Europe. Such stages are ancient slavery (Greece and Rome), the feudal order and capitalism. Class conflicts and struggles result from the social division between those who own the means of production and those who do not. There is the key to the contradictions within a mode of production and for that matter the thrust for changes from one mode to another.

A mode of production can be sustained as long as its relations of production are compatible with the advance of corresponding productive forces. In course of time, a mode of production may reach the stage when further advance of productive forces is no longer workable within the existing relations of production. Thus, the property systems allied with the particular pattern of production relations and enjoying the legal sanction of the state in power, become a fetter on the growth of productive forces. This, in Marx's words, marks the beginning of an epoch of social revolution whereby a new class, which can act as the protagonist of newer production force, comes to achieve its social hegemony and political command. Equally posed against any utopian leap or shoddy conformism, Marx put some decisive emphasis on the sufficiency of material conditions for the transformation of a socio-economic order :

‘No order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured, in the womb of the old society itself’.

In Marx's comprehension, the revolutionary triumph of the proletariat leads to the beginning of a classless society free from alienation of man from man. As a propertyless class (i.e. proletariat) brings about the abolition of capitalism, society no longer harbours private property of any kind. The root cause of alienation is removed. The success of the proletarian revolution liberates all men/women from alienation and absence of real freedom.

As already noted, this study has taken the theories, ideas and comments found in the works of Marx and Engels as classical Marxism. It marks a departure from the usual sense of the word ‘Marxist’ to comprise thoughts and practices supposedly

derived from the ideas of Marx. The ideas which can be directly found in the works of Marx and Engels are then earmarked as ‘Marxian’. Such a distinction was evident even during Marx’s own lifetime. We may recall what Engels wrote to Bernstein, a leading figure in the German Social Democratic Party, in a letter of 3 November, 1882, ‘The self-styled “Marxism” in France is certainly a quite special product to such an extent that Marx said to Laforgue “This much is certain, I am not a Marxist.”’

There are reason for our present decision to treat only the body of thought developed by Marx and Engels as classical Marxism. It should better enable us to discern the subsequent influences of a tradition set forth by classical Marxism with its combination of historical materialism and proletarian class struggle for abolition of capitalism. On account of the very methods of classical Marxism, it could never endorse an absolute submission to the set of all its original propositions in their entirety. We must be ready to face the hard fact that a sound inference and direction valid for one particular historical context, may lose its veracity in a different situation, although in both cases, the phenomena of class struggle, capitalist contradiction and the need for cohesive oppositional move towards socialism remain quite pertinent. Let us then look at some directions of classical Marxism, as we have indicated its position, and the issues coming up during the late nineteenth and the entire twentieth centuries, in respect of policies and praxis of socialist movement (e.g., the strategy and tactics of a socialist revolution, the maturity of conditions for a socialist revolution, the kind of party necessary for the movement of the proletariat, nature and working of imperialism)

In the wake of the defeat of the Paris communards in 1871, the workers movement in Europe was subject to confusing pushes and pulls from a number of ultra-left sects and anarchists. This was the background of the move to shift the headquarters of the International to New York. It was eventually dissolved in 1876. The statement regarding the dissolution contained, among other comments, the following remark, ‘Let us give our fellow workers in Europe a little time to strengthen their national affairs, and they will surely be in a position to remove the barriers between themselves and the workingmen of other parts the world.’ During the period between 1848 and 1876, there were many twists and turns of the European history. All said and done, the main feature of this complicated process appeared in various instances of consolidation of capitalist power, in some countries even by forging alliance with feudal elements, against the forces of toilers’ revolt having the perspective of moving to the goal of socialism.

Marx died in 1883. Six years later the Second International opened in Paris in July 1889. Bringing together 391 delegates from 20 countries, it was still then the largest international gathering in the world labour history. Almost as a parallel event, there was another international labour conference in Paris at the same time. This was a gathering of those trade unionists and legal Marxists who believed in

achieving socialism through some alteration of the bourgeois legal framework. Any coalescence of such forces was opposed by Engels, even though there were proposals for such a merger in both the conferences. In any case, the merger was effected in 1891 at the Brussels conference.

Following the historical twists and turns we have already mentioned, the growth of capitalism resulted in increasing number of wage labourers in more and more countries of Europe. Similar trends were seen in North America and later by the end of the century in Japan. Correlatively, a big expansion of the trade union movement occurred throughout the capitalist countries. Moreover, in the more advanced capitalist countries, especially in Britain, the rise in productivity and also the gains appropriated from imperialist exploitation prompted a new kind of manoeuvre among the bourgeoisie to differentiate a part of the workers from the rest of the proletariat through payment of higher wages and some other concession. Reflecting on this tendency, Engels wrote in a letter of 7th October, 1858 to Marx, ‘.....the English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois.....For a nation which exploits the whole world, this is of course to a certain extent justifiable.’

The *Communist Manifesto* declared the path of realising its aim by a forcible overthrow of the whole obsolete social order. Armed struggle may not be a necessary element of forcible overthrow. Marx held the view that in countries like Britain and Holland where the working people constituted the majority of the population and capitalist transformation was associated with the inception of democracy, the attainment of universal adult franchise might provide a sufficient measure for having political power to achieve socialism. In the *Principles of Communism*, Engels commented that the abolition of private property by peaceful methods is extremely desirable. Communists always avoid conspiratorial methods. However, if the oppressed proletariat is goaded into a revolution, communists will immediately rush to their support.

In his preface to the 1895 edition of Marx’s *Class Struggles in France*, Engels remarked that the new techniques of military operations put up larger obstacles to the ways of barricade fighting in the traditional manner of people’s revolutionary action. This was a note of caution against adventurist actions, and not an advice to abjure armed insurgency in all circumstances. But in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Engels’ formulation was time and again used by a section of the leadership in support of gradual, peaceful, and parliamentary tactics for achieving socialist objectives.

Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) was a leading proponent of peaceful methods. He rejected the classical Marxist position regarding armed revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Also, Bernstein disagreed with the classical Marxist views on industrial concentration, inevitability of economic crises and increasing working class misery. He was inclined to upholding the cause of socialism on

ethical grounds. As a social democratic member of the Reichstag, he voted against war credits during the First world war and called for peace settlement. Another important leader of the German Social Democratic Party and a leading figure of the Second International was Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), whose understanding of historical materialism was cast along the lines of a natural evolutionary scheme of things analogous to Darwin's theory of biological evolution and natural selection. Accordingly, he believed that capitalism would collapse for its own inability to make efficient use of the growing productive forces. The rationale and feasibility of a proletarian revolution was therefore ruled out, since by its decrees and violence no dictatorship of the proletariat could prevail over the objective economic laws. Bernstein and Kautsky, though having differences among themselves, were branded as 'revisionists', implying their alleged departure from classical Marxist position of class struggle and revolution.

Kautsky viewed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 in Russia as an event not in keeping with classical Marxism. This was connected with the antecedent circumstances of insufficient capitalist development in Russia. Kautsky raised the point emphasised by historical materialism as regards the maturing of economic conditions sufficient for the collapse of a mode of production ('No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.'). Vladimir Ilych Lenin (1870-1924), on his part, had analysed the development of capitalism in Russia in a well-documented analysis (*Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 1899). He did not deny its backwardness. Indeed, the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie was among the factors eventually obliging the Bolshevik seizure of state power. Expressed in simple words, though perhaps a little bizarre, the bourgeoisie appeared to be incapable of defending their own position against Tsarist autocracy, thereby making it incumbent on the leadership of the proletariat to thrust for socialist command of the state. As Lenin observed,

'It has been Russia's lot very plainly to witness, and most keenly and painfully to experience one of the abruptest of abrupt twists of history as it turns from imperialism towards the Communist revolution. In the space of a few days we destroyed one of the oldest, most powerful, barbarous and brutal monarchies. In the space of a few months we passed through a number of stages, stages of compromise with the bourgeoisie and stages of shaking off petty-bourgeois illusions, for which other countries have required decades.' (V.I.Lenin, *Selected Works* Vol. II, Moscow, 1947, p.308).

Lenin mentions Russian imperialism in the foregoing excerpt. A very important feature of capitalism was analysed by Lenin in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). In the first volume of *Capital* Marx indicated the inevitable direction of competitive capitalism towards more and more centralisation of capital and emergence of monopolies. This was the process which, Marx argued, would

swell the masses of the proletariat and bring about the doom of capitalism. Such a classical Marxist position was extended by Lenin to the discovery of links between monopoly capitalism and imperialism bent on international division and domination of the world. The subordinate territories are the targets for export of capital to make use of cheap labour and raw materials. The first world war was an imperialist war of such aspirations and conflicts. Indeed, Tsarist Russia and its not so developed capitalism was the weakest link in this imperialist nexus. Lenin cited this factor as one of the reasons for hastening the course of Russian revolution in 1917 to the socialist supersession of capitalism. It was likely to contribute to the international collapse of capitalism in the face of a world revolution.

Kautsky's analysis of imperialism was different. He argues that the imperialist era is free from conflicts between the advanced capitalist countries. There would be conflict only between the advanced and the underdeveloped countries of the world. The process of exploitation of the underdeveloped countries was not necessarily through capital exports from the imperial rich to the colonial poor and surplus appropriation in an economic context of cheaper labour and raw materials. It could happen as well through the terms of exchange between the commodities of the more or less capital intensive production. Indeed, after the Second World War, the components of Kautsky's analysis have in a way influenced the formulations of the *dependency theory* focusing on the imperialist domination over backward countries and that in a historical context where the United States stood supreme among the capitalist nations of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the final decade of the last century, the scope of such supremacy has been even more strengthened and, at any rate, there are no historical laws either in classical Marxism or its later development to obstruct the co-existence of profits from both production and circulation on an international scale.

Marx and Engels stressed the need for organising a political party without which 'the working class cannot act as a class'. During the years of the Communist League and the First International they were mostly engaged in the presentation and clarification of the Marxist perspective of history, class struggle and abolition of capitalism. The Second International had the experience of national Social Democratic Parties coming to operate in the different capitalist countries of Europe.

Before entering into some details of the principles in question concerning the period of the Second International, it should be noted that the Paris Commune, however short-lived, was a major event happening during the phase of the First International. In its measures of decentred, democratic treatment, the Paris Commune was estimated by Marx as setting a sound example of the ways and means of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There lies the question of mediation by the party of the proletariat both in its leading the revolution to victory and then in its revolutionary governance.

Despite their many critical differences, Lenin and Kautsky agreed on the point that political consciousness had to be brought to the proletariat from outside. It would not mechanically follow from their economic hardship and struggle, which was limited to the scope of trade union consciousness. Earlier, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels referred to the role of bourgeois ideologists who had achieved a theoretical understanding of the historical movement as a whole. They would have the role of endowing the working class with revolutionary consciousness. No doubt such a process of building up consciousness adds to the complication of mediation and of the kind of party which could fulfil the commitment.

Considering the condition of illegality and autocracy then prevailing in several countries of Europe, especially in Russia, Lenin thought it proper to build a narrow, hierarchically organised party of professional revolutionaries (*What is to be done?*, 1902). After the Russian Revolution of 1905, he favoured broadening the organisation into a mass party, but with strict provisions for democratic centralism. The division between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia started on the issue of centralism. Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) did not support centralism. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) of the German Social Democratic Party was against Lenin's idea of tightly centralised vanguard party. She strove to uphold the workers' own initiative and self-activity and had immense faith in the capacity of the working class to learn from its own experience.

The experience of the communist movement all over the world through the twentieth century, of its triumphs and failures, of Lenin's own apprehensions at his death bed about bureaucratic excesses within the party, and finally of the collapse of Soviet Communism in the last decade of the last century, cannot but raise questions regarding the appropriate principles of organisation for the party of the proletariat. It should be relevant to note that the historical role attributed by classical Marxism to the proletariat 'was assigned by an invisible intelligentsia, by an intelligentsia that never made an appearance in its own theory, and whose existence and nature are therefore, never systematically, known even to itself.' ('The Two Marxisms', in Alvin Gouldner, *For Sociology*, Pelican Books, 1975, p.419.)

Classical Marxism conceived of capitalism as a world system with all its nexuses of trade, capital exports and imperialist domination. In real history, the conquest of capital, its universal role, results in a differential impact on pre-capitalist structures. The differences are manifest in many types of amalgam of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. Such formations make room for capitalist surplus extraction, even though the former productive systems and power institutions remain largely unchanged. In those circumstance, classical Marxist position regarding the sequence of stages has to reckon with newer possibilities of historical transition.

It is no longer enough to move from feudalism to capitalism. Indeed, no such movement can have much meaning in terms of progress when capitalism and pre-capitalism are historically interlocked in their modes of exploitation and power. Marx and Engels did not lack in their clarification of historical conjunctures characterised by a compounding of the old and the new in the emergent complexes of exploitation and power. This situation has appeared time and again in the countries outside Western Europe and North America. It may well happen that the course of bourgeois democratic revolution cannot be pushed ahead by a weak and timid bourgeoisie. The task then falls to the proletariat and they have to proceed immediately from abolition of the feudal order to a struggle aimed at eliminating the bourgeoisie. Such a revolutionary reality was named as ‘permanent revolution’ and the idea was presented by Trotsky. The expression was first used by Marx and Engels in their Address of the General Council to the Communist League in 1850.

We have not yet given any clue to what happened to the expected solidarity of the international (universal?) working class revolution against capitalism. After 1917 this vital action parameter of Marx’s theoretical scheme of history has never articulated in any historical change of decisive significance for transition to socialism. The Bolshevik leaders believed that the October revolution in Russia would open an era of international proletarian revolution. Defeated in the world war of four years duration, crisis-torn Germany was expected to be the first among the advanced capitalist countries to go for its socialist revolution. The facts of history were different. Bolshevik Russia had to bear the burden of building socialism in one country, an agenda which could receive little help from the classical Marxist tradition. The twentieth century witnessed another major socialist transition in China where the peasantry acted as the principal motive force of revolution. Its course of development after the communist seizure of power presents many questions that have no direct answer in classical Marxist tradition. The instances of Cuba, Chile, and Vietnam are also in the nature of exceptions to the classical Marxist views on the historical perspective of socio-political transformation.

Significantly, in the last decade of his life, Marx was involved in some critical study of the pre-capitalist village communes in Russia. This was in response to questions put to him by Russian Narodnik leaders like Vera Zasulich, Danielson and others regarding the potential of those communes to act as mass agencies for socialist transformation, even though the country had no maturity in capitalist development and growth of the proletariat. Marx made it clear that his theoretical position in *Capital* was valid only for the experience of western Europe, especially that of Britain’s capitalist development, and it would be utterly wrong to apply those formulations for understanding situations in a different context. As for the realisation of socialist potential of Russian communes, Marx emphasised the need

for abolition of Tsarist monarchy and on the probability of being correlated to socialist revolutions in countries of west Europe. Marx distinguished the two historical tendencies inherent in the communes, viz. the private ownership principle eroding the communes and the collective principle rendering viability to the commune and making it suitable for socialist transformation. Marx elaborated these ideas in three drafts of a letter to Vera Zasulich.

During 1880-82, Marx took to studying a large amount of literature on pre-capitalist communal land ownership. It appears that Marx read in them ‘an index that modern man was not without an archaic communal component, which includes a democratic and equalitarian formation, in his social being.’ (Lawrence Krader, Introduction to *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, Lawrence Krader (ed.), Amsterdam, 1974, p.4).

13.6 SUMMARY

As things have turned out, the record of Marxism from its beginning to the end of the twentieth century has been replete with many twists and turns, contradictions even within its own following and subject to numerous interpretations and developments in response to the variations of capitalist strategies from one country to another as well as in different stages of capitalism. Marx had his own awareness about challenges to be faced by his premises and method of historical comprehension. It was manifest in the wide diversity of his analytical subjects ranging from the wonderful reflections on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), relating to an awful stalemate of bourgeois transition in France, to the ethnological notebooks written in the penultimate years of his life, searching for the characteristics of pre-capitalist Asian villages.

Thus the historiographic implications of classical Marxism are immense. Nothing is arbitrary or dogmatic about the premises of historical materialism. The future of historical changes envisaged by classical Marxism may not have been fully borne out by the subsequent course of events. But the clues to such points of departure can also be found in classical Marxism, its ways of exploring historical experience in all its relations of social, economic and cultural dimensions.

An intense sensibility for those manifold dimensions is evident in the major historical writings of Marx and Engels. Moreover, historical materialism points to the relevance of the parts and the totality of any phenomenon, since a proper understanding of their relationship sets the key of the dialectical method. Indeed, the *Annales* school of France, perhaps the most innovative of the new types of history-writing that emerged through the last century, shows a kind of concern for micro-studies reminding us of the attention for both forms and fragments in Marxist historiography.

13.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the differences between pre-Marxist socialist thought and Marxism.
- 2) Write a note on the historical and other ideas of Marx's immediate successors.
- 3) How did Marx's ideas develop over time? Discuss with examples.
- 4) What is your evaluation of Marxist theory of history?

13.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Tom Bottomore, et al (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Blackwell Reference, Oxford, 1983) (see entries Karl Marx, Marx, Engels and Contemporary Politics Parties, Rosa Luxemburg, V.I.Lenin, Capital, Leon Trotsky, Karl Kautsky, Historiography, Historical Materialism).

David Riazanov, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, (Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1973).

Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. 1. (Oxford University Press, 1978).

T.Z. Lavine, *From Socrates to Marx : The Philosophic Quest* (Bantam Books, New York\London, 1984, Parts Four and Five).

P.N. Fedoeyev et al, *Karl Marx A Biography* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973), Chapter 15.

G.D.H. Cole, *Socialist Thought : The Forerunners 1789-1850* (Macmillan, London, 1955).

For the writings of Marx and Engels mentioned in the notes *vide Early Writings, The Revolutions of 1848, Surveys from Exile, Grundrisse, The First International and After* (all in the Pelican Marx Library) and Karl Marx, *Selected Works* Vol. 1, (Moscow, 1946).

UNIT 14 : THE *ANNALES* SCHOOL

Structure

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Social and Intellectual Context
- 14.3 Foundation of the *Annales*
- 14.4 New Trends in Historiography
- 14.5 Contribution of the *Annales* School
- 14.6 Summary
- 14.7 Exercises
- 14.8 Suggested Readings

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Annales* School of historiography, widely considered as one of the most important developments in the twentieth-century history-writing, formally emerged with the foundation of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (Annales of Economic and Social History) in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. In terms of thematic range and methodological innovations, this School remained foremost in France and influenced history-writing in many other countries for decades and had followers all over the world. In this Unit you will learn about the context of its emergence, its contributions to history-writing, and the various new historiographical trends it gave rise to.

14.2 SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The decade of the 1920s witnessed two paradoxical developments in France: The First World War had ended and its formal conclusion had occurred at Versailles, near Paris, under the Presidentship of the French Prime Minister, Clemenceau. Symbolically thus it was the victory of France over its traditional rival Germany, much more than the collective victory of the rest of Europe. The great French Impressionist painter, Claude Monet, had done the most renowned of his works, *Les Nymphéas*, the Water Lilies, ‘as a bouquet of flowers presented to France after the victory’, and a special museum structure, *L’Orangerie*, was built in the heart of Paris to display them. There was therefore an aura of celebration in the French air.

The air, however, was also beginning to show traces of gloom in the latter part of the decade with the spectre of the Great Depression gradually extending its shadows over it; the Depression was soon to overwhelm societies and economies around the world, the more so the ones that had most to lose. France was among them.

There was thus a palpable restiveness around, a puzzle that perplexed everyone: How could it be possible that a nation, which had vanquished an old and powerful enemy sorecently, could stare helplessly before a debilitating circumstance? This was an entirely new situation, which posed an encompassing question and waited for a new and encompassing answer. Old answers would by their nature be inadequate. New answers demanded new perspectives and new methodologies. If history was to contribute to this quest, it must first renew itself by self-questioning. This was the social context of the discipline's self-renewal, marked by the founding of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*.

There was besides an intellectual context. The Nineteenth Century had witnessed the birth of several new disciplines, notably social and cultural anthropology, human geography and psychology. Young and energetic as these were, their practitioners looked at the old discipline of history sceptically. Durkeheimian sociology in particular was expansive and ambitious, claiming the capability of a totalising explanation, explaining, in other words, the entire spectrum of societal dynamics. Human geography too was not far from extending similar claims, focusing on social, cultural and institutional forms of organisation.

History came in for a degree of derision for its exclusive concern with 'the event' – the unique, short term, the immediate and transient. This was how history was studied then: focusing on change of a reign or a dynasty, wars, battles, administrative measures. As John Seeley had put it pithily: 'History is past politics and politics is present history.' No long term dynamics interested historians. What then was the point of studying history if all it explained was how one ruler replaced another and how one battle added or deleted a little bit of land from the territory ruled by him? The 'event' was like the surf in the ocean, ephemeral and therefore insignificant; the real 'movement' in the ocean was invisible to the naked eye, below the surface. This, the anthropologists and the geographers felt, was ignored by the historians.

A second question was the use of historical sources. Archives had acquired a sanctity for the historians that became almost a moral precept. All statements made by them must be traced back to some or the other empirical evidence stored in dusty archival files. Anything short of it failed to constitute 'facts', so sacred for the historian. Even as late as the 1970s, historian Jacques Leonard questioned the legitimacy of philosopher Michel Foucault's intervention in the problems of history by threateningly demanding if he had ever soiled his hands in the dust of archival

files ('The Historian and the Philosopher') and Foucault responded by making fun of the sanctity of archival dust ('The Dust and the Cloud'). The historian accepted as true whatever was on the surface of the documentary evidence; that the document itself was a cultural construct, a highly subjective construct never bothered the historian. The objective reality lay hidden in the very long drawn formation of human behaviour, their habits, value systems, and their responses to situations in life. All these were formed at the subconscious level within the family, the community, the neighbourhood. None of these was either the result of, or recorded in written documents, nor was any of it obvious. These subtleties were missed out in the discipline of history in its preoccupation with the 'event', the immediate and the obvious. A sort of vision of 'Social Science' was emerging from which history was excluded.

14.3 FOUNDATION OF THE *ANNALES*

The lambasting of history left two friends, young historians in a far away corner of the French academia, Strasbourg, very restless. Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were unhappy with the kind of history they had learnt and were forced to teach; they were sensitive to the insights the younger disciplines could provide. They were dissatisfied that disciplines that were such close kin should be at war with each other and each had erected impermeable boundaries around itself. In January of 1929 they launched a new journal, *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale*. Initially, the journal focused on issues of contemporary concerns to seek to understand the genesis of the emerging crisis; as time passed, it turned increasingly to medieval and early modern history, the ones practiced by Bloch and Febvre.

In the all too brief Editorial in the journal's inaugural issue, the editors movingly emphasised the necessity and the benefits of what later came to be called interdisciplinary research, even as one remained firmly grounded in one's own discipline. 'Of course, nothing would be better than if each one, absorbed in his own legitimate specialisation, assiduously tilling his own patch of land, made at the same time the effort to understand the work of his neighbour. But the separating walls are often so high that they block our view. And yet, what a host of valuable ideas on method and interpretation of facts, what insights into culture and advances in intuition would germinate through more frequent intellectual interaction amongst all these different groups! On this depends the future of economic history, as also the right knowledge of facts which shall tomorrow constitute 'all history.'

'All history' was what *Annales* was keen to constitute, in place of partial history; this will also be the 'true history.' True history was not being counter posed here to false history but to any form of partial history. 'All history' and 'true history' would comprise an ever expansive domain for the discipline; no part of the past and

no aspect of it was beyond its purview. Space was thus being created for meeting the challenge of other disciplines as well as incorporating their insights.

Consequently, newer themes opened up for the historian's exploration. Marc Bloch himself created a comprehensive and grand structure in his study of feudalism by looking at all its aspects in one book of two volumes, *The Feudal Society*, 1936. He spent a considerable time living in the French countryside in order to sensitize himself to the remains of that society, whether as abandoned agricultural fields or as cultural attitudes and values. Lucien Febvre on the other hand was more keen to explore the area of emotions and beliefs. His book, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: the Religion of Rabelais* (1942) dwelt upon one central character, François Rabelais, critical of Christianity to the point of unbelief. The character was however a point of entry for Febvre's study of religion in all its myriad aspects in the context of society in the sixteenth century. His celebrated essay, 'Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past' was a watershed in extending history's concerns into new domains. Indeed it starts with the assertion: 'Sensibility and history – a new subject: I know of no book that deals with it. I do not even know whether the many problems which it involves have anywhere been set forth. And yet, please forgive a poor historian for uttering the artist's cry, and yet what a fine subject it is!' In some ways the essay was to set the tone for what was later to be explored on a very large scale by *Annales* historians, i.e. the history of *mentalités*, mentalities.

History was thus beginning to become part of the Social Sciences. In 1903 François Simi and had visualised Social Science in the singular and history outside it, though he had also shown the way for it to enter the arena of social science in his essay, 'method historique et science social':

'If the study of human facts wishes to establish itself as a positivist science, it must turn away from the singular facts and address itself to recurring facts, that is set aside the accidental for the regular, eliminate the individual for the social.'

It was an invitation to historians to learn from Economics, Sociology, Anthropology and Geography to focus on what was then conceived of as the 'laws' of social movement and change which are inherent in the general rather than the particular. The essay was reproduced in the *Annales* in 1960 by Fernand Braudel 'for the benefit of young historians to enable them to gauge the distance travelled in half a century and to comprehend better the dialogue between History and the Social Sciences which remains the objective and the raison d'être of our journal.'

The first responses to the invitation to study the long-term regularities were a merger between Economics and History and the emergence of economic history as an autonomous discipline. Ernest Labrousse's work, *La crise de l'économie*

française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution (The Crisis of the French Economy at the end of the Ancient Regime and the beginning of the Revolution, 1944) and Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, 1949), both sought out the long term trends in history that would help us understand, and to an extent predict, social and economic change. Unlike in the sphere of industrial economy, where overproduction leads to economic crisis, in agriculture underproduction of food grains lies at the base of a crisis situation which then spreads to other sectors of economy and society, was Labrousse's conclusion. Braudel on the other hand had studied the extremely slow change in the ecology around the Mediterranean and the long term and long distance impact of intercontinental trade. Braudel's interest in these themes remained abiding, though through his later works he constantly kept extending their frontiers. The three volume study under the general title, *Civilization and Capitalism* and the titles of individual volumes, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, *The Wheels of Commerce* and *The Perspectives of the World* both continues with his earlier concerns and incorporates new ones, such as the history of the diet, into them. One branching out from the long-term history was the history of the climate, which spans several centuries. Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie was among the early historians of the 60s who introduced this new theme into European historiography.

A new territory was being explored here, the territory of long-term history of the economy and its ramifications in society. The new problematics also demanded new visions of history, new sources and new methods of investigation. Economic changes were not left to general impressions: they had to be based upon quantitative data, a new concept, further buttressed by the coming of computers in the 1960s. Of sources too, Lucien Febvre had reacted to the assertion of Fustel de Coulanges in another context, 'History is written through the use of texts', by declaring: 'texts, certainly, but all kinds of texts... and not texts alone...' Marc Bloch, as we have noted above, lived in the French countryside in the mode of an anthropologist to get insights into the working of the feudal system.

Fernand Braudel had taken seriously the criticism of the historians' preoccupation with the 'event', the immediate and therefore with the single, unidimensional conception of Time. His own studies took him a long distance away from the immediate. He was therefore able to conceptualise different rhythms of historical time in different problematic contexts. In an influential essay, 'History and the Social Sciences: the *Longue Durée*', 1958, Braudel earmarked three temporal rhythms: the *long term*, or the structure, which moves ever so slowly as in writing the history of ecology and social and economic systems, such as capitalism; the *conjunctures*, which provide the method for mapping the history of medium term change such as inter-decennial change in patterns of long distance trade; and the *event*, the immediate.

14.4 NEW TRENDS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Three offshoots of these new ventures were the history of mentalities, the history of groups at society's margins and comparative history.

Lucien Febvre had already embarked upon the territory of mentalities in his essay on 'Sensibility and History'. Marc Bloch himself had explored the theme of royal thaumaturgy in *Le rois thaumaturges* in 1924, the healing powers of kings, translated into English as *The Royal Touch*, 1973. The early explorations had ignited enough interest and the study of mentalities began to grow substantially. Michel Vovelle extended the quantitative method to the examination of testamentary wills preserved in church records to map the changing attitudes towards death in medieval and early modern France. Jacques Le Goff looked at how attitudes towards Time were changing in the Middle Ages in his highly celebrated essay, 'Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages.' Church's time was cosmic, immeasurable, extending from the Creation of the Universe to the Day of Judgment; merchant's transactions on the other hand required Time that was precise, measured to the day and was a commodity open to sale through commercial transactions. The conflict between the two was a major social conflict in the Middle Ages in Europe. Le Goff is a towering figure in the *Annaliste* historiographical tradition, extending its boundaries far into the field of the history of mentalities.

So too was Georges Duby until his death in 1996. Beginning with the history of land and labour in the medieval European context, (*Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*) Duby went into the study of marriage, family and women, the Cathedrals and the study of medieval imagination, especially the values that guided the working of the medieval society.

Philippe Ariès loved to call himself 'an amateur' historian, for even as he was a practicing historian, he was yet outside the profession. He was the initiator of some major new themes in history. He constituted the notion of death and the attitude towards children as veritable subjects of historical investigation. He brought the history of the family centrestage, with the issues of sexuality, the household and interpersonal relationships at the core. His works, *Centuries of Childhood*, 1962, traced the history of the recognition of childhood and its separate needs, for the child had hitherto been treated merely as a young adult; and *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981, dwelt upon the perceptions of death. These were major interventions in redefining social history. The renowned Cambridge group on the history of the family led by Peter Laslett and Jack Goody in the 1970s and 80s followed up these breakthroughs and published some astoundingly innovative research works: Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time*, 1972; Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations*, 1977; Richard Wall,

J.Robin and P.Laslett, eds., *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, 1982; Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, 1983.

Three sets of recent collaborative endeavours have taken the history of mentalities further: Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, general eds., *A History of Private Life*, 5 vols., Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, general eds., *The History of Women*, 4 vols., and Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt, general eds., *A History of Young People*, 2 vols. A large portion of each of these works dwells upon mentalities.

G. Vigarello followed up the theme of mentalities in his delightful book, *The Concepts of Cleanliness*, Cambridge, 1988, while Jean-Claude Schmitt had edited a special issue of the journal *History and Anthropology* on the theme of gestures in 1984.

The groups at society's margins had been a point of attraction for the historian for long; what was lacking until the 1960s and 70s was a conception of marginality and its relationship with mainstream society. The marginals were not merely those who were poor, without means; they were the ones living not only at the mainstream society's territorial margins – at the borders of the village, in hermitages or hideouts in the forests or the hills etc. – but whose norms of life were at variance with the mainstream norms whether perforce or by choice: The beggars, the lunatics, hermits, thieves and robbers. It was Michel Foucault, the philosopher, who set the parameters of this problematic especially in his *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization*. The study of marginality, he argued, was important because it was the 'other' of the mainstream; the study is an entry point into mapping the contours of the mainstream itself. Foucault introduced the central concept of the relation of power in the study of social phenomena. The creation of marginality was an emphatic expression of the relation of power in that the elite values at the mainstream determined the notion of marginality. Whoever does not conform to those values gets excluded into the margins as prisoners or lunatics or whatever. The birth of Psychiatry for him was the chief expression of the creation of marginality as a relation of social power.

In setting up this perspective, Foucault was questioning a fundamental assumption of the discipline of history, i.e. that the 'facts' recovered from the archives possessed an unassailable objectivity. For Foucault 'facts' were culturally constructed: they expressed a relation of power. The objectivity of history was then at one go relativised. This was a serious challenge to *Annales* as much as to positivist history. Some of the *Annalistes* incorporated Foucauldian insights into their study of marginality. The Polish historian Bronisław Geremek's major work, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, originally published in Polish in 1971, in French in 1976, and in English in 1987 was written under Foucault's influence.

The comparative history framework was implicit in the *Annales* vision from the inception. Comparative history was not quite an invention of *Annales* historiography as Marc Bloch had emphasised in his famous essay, 'A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies' (1928). For him the comparative method rested on dissimilarities underneath apparent similarities between two phenomena or situations. A comparison between these two would highlight the salient features of each and therefore become a very useful tool for developing each one's profile. However, the study of phenomena such as feudalism or capitalism as a large, comprehensive theme itself makes it comparative inasmuch as their conceptualisation could only result from a comparative study of their vast and varied structures.

14.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE ANNALES SCHOOL

Any assumption that *Annales* historiography has since its inception over seven decades ago has proceeded along a straight line and a single strand, without much variation and without much inner conflict and contradiction, would clearly be quite mistaken. Indeed, the several alterations in the subtitling of the journal during its life are pointers to both its innate tensions and its dynamism. Even as the term *Annales* gave the journal a permanent identity, its original subtitle, *histoire économique et sociale* gave way to *economies, sociétés, civilisations* and lately to *Histoire et sciences sociales*.

Some of the major tensions arose from the *Annales'* own project. In some important ways *Annales* historiography was on one hand opposed to the legacy of Positivism as well as Marxism and on the other inherited this legacy. Positivism as well as Marxism envisioned a dichotomy between an objective truth in history and a subjective perception of it by the historians. Positivism predicated the unveiling of the objective truth upon scientific rationality: the objective truth is embedded in historical records; through the employment of reason the historians will be able to uncover it bit by bit and this will bridge the gap between the observer, the historian, and the observed, the objective reality. Marxism reached the same end through the prism of class struggle. All history can be explained thus.

Annales historiography too dreamt of some day capturing 'total history', which will be 'true history'. But the telling difference between them was that if Positivism rested all historical explanation on scientific reason and Marxism on class struggle, in *Annales* historiography there was no such permanent structuring of historical explanation. That is, not all historical phenomena or episodes or movements were 'in the last instance' brought down to either economic base or politics or psychology or whatever. It rather preferred to study moving conjunctures, each phenomenon, episode or movement with its own causal hierarchy. Yet, however

muted, the very vision of the ability to compose a total and a true history some day was not without the underpinnings of Positivist and Marxist assumption of objective reality.

Indeed, the *Annalists*, with their professed antipathy towards teleology, have nevertheless shown an astonishing, if implicit, long term hierarchisation of historical explanation. The early works in this genre mostly pertain to what might be located broadly in the area of socio-economic history, barring of course Lucien Febvre's precocious explorations in the history of sensibilities and unbelief etc. Once the 'foundation' had been laid, the 'superstructure' of the history of mentalities followed in its wake. Nothing evokes this implicit structuring more forcefully than the assertion of one of the most celebrated practitioners of *Annales* historiography, Georges Duby, that he had turned to the study of marriage, women, the family etc. of medieval Europe, *since* he had already established his grasp over its economy, production process, distribution and so forth.

Annales historiography has remained somewhat ambivalent too with regard to a problem it had itself raised, that of history's ties with chronology. If it intended to transcend the temporal bounds in its search of a true history, it implied rethinking on the conception of time and chronology: History dealt with time, for sure, but was not, and should not be, led on the leash by chronology. Indeed, if chronology was artificial, time itself was fluid. Fernand Braudel's conceptualisation of differing rhythms of historical time and Jacques Le Goff's demonstration of time as culturally constructed and therefore relative as well dynamic, rather than absolute and fixed, constituted major landmarks in redefining the dual relationship of the discipline of history to time and chronology. Inherent in the conception of 'total history' or 'history in its entirety' was a suspicion of the sanctity of strict chronological divides between antiquity, medieval and modern, for many of the themes are hard to tie down to these divides. The rhythm of change in mentalities, social values or family structures transgresses virtually any temporal boundaries set around it. Implied in the investigation of these themes was the assumption that the historian needs to rise above the terror of evidence, especially archival evidence and depend upon imagination and anthropological insights, much as Marc Bloch had done. Yet, most practitioners of this genre of historiography have adhered rather tightly to the chronological boundaries set by their evidence. Nothing expresses this tension more evocatively than the title of Fernand Braudel's major book *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. On one hand, Braudel seeks to cover a vast canvas of history in the two volumes; on the other, the temporal boundaries are tightly set 'in the Age of Philip II'. The diktat of evidence exercises as much terror for them as it did for their predecessors in the nineteenth century and keeps them forcefully on chronology's leash, their ambition under considerable restraint.

Nevertheless, the explorations that could be encapsulated within what has virtually become an umbrella term, the *Annales* historiography, have opened to the historian's craft vistas that allow the discipline an all-encompassing domain. At the heart of its concerns are human beings with all their life's tensions, struggles, their ambiguities, indecisions, conflicting and competing emotions, thoughts, experiences and mentalities; the study of the structures of life is subordinated here to the study of human beings rather than as self-contained, impersonal phenomena, as the subject of study themselves to which human beings relate merely as programmed actors. The expanse of the domain itself, and the complexities of explorations of its ever-growing dimensions, should ensure the relegation of any teleological project deep into the background, whether or not the *Annalistes* have confronted it with deliberation.

14.6 SUMMARY

As we have learnt from the foregoing discussion that the *Annales* School established one of the most important historiographic traditions in the twentieth century. Historians such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Robert Mandrou, Jacques Le Goff, and many others redefined the historical practice time and again by constantly innovating in themes and methods. History of economic structures, of long-term developments, of mentalities, micro-history and cultural history have all benefited by significant contribution from the historians of this School.

14.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the context which led to the establishment of the *Annales* School.
- 2) Who are considered as the founders of this School of historiography? Discuss their works.
- 3) What are the thematic innovations made by the historians of the *Annales* School over the years? Discuss with examples.

14.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Peter Burke (ed.), *Economy and Society in Early Medieval Europe: Essays for Annales* (London, 1972).

Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, 1975).

T. Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, 1977).

M.Harsgor, 'Total History: The Annales School', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.13, 1978.

Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds.), *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1985).

Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia (eds.) *French Studies in History*, 2 vols. (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1988 and 1990).

Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Oxford, 1992).