

## THE CONCEPTS OF MAN AND NATURE IN MARXISM

It is very significant that the central theme of the 28th World Congress of Philosophy held at Brighton in 1988 was man. Due to the tremendous scientific credo, man has, perhaps, somewhere overreached his scientific ambitions, giving rise to what Alvin Toffler termed 'future shock'. The 'scientific age' is no more; it is the 'age of man'. It is time now to redefine the two categories—man and nature. And Marxism has something original to offer by way of explaining the two concepts. In this paper\* an attempt will be made to explain, from Marxian viewpoint, the concepts of man and nature, and also the desirable relationship between the two.

According to Marxism, man "is a unique phenomenon within the universe."<sup>1</sup> Man is not only a unique phenomenon, but also a complex phenomenon. The ancient naive or crude or vulgar materialistic man = machine theory (of Lao Tsu, Yang Chu, Wan Chung, Lokāyata school, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Epicurus and others) and the Cartesian automaton theory have been rejected by Marxism as simplistic. Marx did not jettison Hegelianism root and branch like Ludwig Feuerbach, but retained two of Hegel's most important concepts—the trilemmatic dialectic schema and the spirit. In fact, "Marx always remained in some sense a Hegelian."<sup>2</sup>, and consequently Lenin was right when he wrote: "It is impossible to fully grasp Marx's *Capital* and especially the first chapter,

Received : 6-4-89

if you have not studied or understood the *whole* of Hegel's Logic. Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past half a century has understood Marx!<sup>3</sup> What is wanting in the non-Marxian materialism is the 'movement'. This 'movement' brings out consciousness as well as self-consciousness from the womb of matter-in-motion, the primordial nature where motion is the mode of existence of matter.

Marxism has conceived of consciousness not quite materialistically, for like epiphenomenalism it does not admit of only one-way traffic between mind and body, but advocates that consciousness has relative independence and that consciousness can influence body. Further, Marx said that "conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men" are "the 'efflux', i.e., a *separate, non-material* outflow which originates and derives from material behaviour."<sup>4</sup> According to J. A. Shaffer, Marxism here deviates so much from materialism that Marxism is "not materialistic in our sense."<sup>5</sup>

The active nature of consciousness is clearly emphasised by Marxism. "As a product of matter and as its reflection, consciousness does not remain passive, but *actively influence* the world. It is in this sense that Lenin wrote that 'man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it'".<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Lenin here laid stress merely on the praxis of consciousness and not also on the cognitive aspect, and so if we could include the cognitive aspect as well, we could find that Marxism is not far from the intentionality of phenomenology which pleads that the object-world is the creation of consciousness. Consciousness operates on the external world or nature via the agency of the body and thus changes it, creating what is called in Marxism the 'second nature': "Since the advent of man and social material production, the environment increasingly ceased to be purely natural, elemental, or 'virginal'.

Since ancient times, a 'second nature' (or man-induced nature) established itself in the environment and was the material body of civilization."<sup>7</sup>

As we have seen above, man is a unique phenomenon. Man is a part of nature and yet he is not. He is part of it because his body is a part of nature, and his consciousness is a 'quality' of the matter that is his body. But he is not a part of nature because his consciousness has acquired *relative independence* of nature in so far as his relatively independent consciousness can change nature. Here Marxism rejects crude materialism and spontaneous materialism as well as scientism, the last believing that human sciences require no methods other than those of the natural sciences. Soviet scientific credo stops short, and very justly, of the mechanical view of man, handed down by Descartes and Co. There is an unbridgeable gap between man and machine. Soviet scientists "believe that there is a 'complexity threshold' [between man and machine—SKS] based on intellect's social nature, for man is a product of not only biological but of social evolution as well. His intellect's 'social component' is governed by will and motivation, as well as by the 'collective' nature of the cognitive process—a factor that makes man a system with a practically *infinite number of degrees of freedom* [which a machine does not possess—SKS]."<sup>8</sup> In spite of the long scientific strides, man will never be able to make man or rather a human being with a capital H: "It is clear that machines can imitate the activity of the human brain only to the extent that it can be described in algorithms and programmes, and only in corresponding areas."<sup>9</sup> The programmed function and the feedback process of even the super-electronic gadgets will never be able to vie with the free-functioning of the human brain. There is something more in the human intellect than the Pavlovian reflexology.

The Marxian conception of man repudiates the biologization of human beings. In the contemporary scientific world, there is a tendency to reduce human spiritual elements to biological factors. Thus Edward O. Wilson in his *Sociobiology* opined that "ethics cannot be constructed through logical means alone, for it is associated with interpreting human behaviour, a phenomenon rooted in the biological evolution of man primates."<sup>10</sup> Richard Dawkins in his *The Selfish Gene* also expressed the same view. Huxley, Freud and Foss are all advocates of biological reductionism. But Jacques Monod, a prominent nuclear biologist, perhaps, went farthest in this regard. He reduced all the spiritual heritage of human beings to genetic codification: "man possesses an inborn, genetically encoded need to search for the meaning of existence, a need that has brought to life all know myths, religions, philosophic systems, and even science itself."<sup>11</sup> This is an extreme example of bio-reductionism [ which Monod and others could not establish — SKS ] against which Marxism raises its vociferous protest, because "To Marx it was clear from the outset that the essence of man is not 'its abstract physical character, but its *social quality*'".<sup>12</sup> To emphasise this social moment in the human, Marxism differentiates between an 'accidental individual' or 'abstract individual' and a person or 'real man'. The abstract individual is the biological datum-line of a human being whose real essence lies in his social moment or dimension. Marx said that the essence of man " ' is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations ' ".<sup>13</sup>

The social essence of man originates in human activities—in labour; because it is in labour that man " really proves himself to be a species-being. " <sup>14</sup> Marxism has emphasised the integral aspect of man. A. G. Myslichenko in his essay " Man as an Object of Study in Philosophy and Applied Sciences "

said that so far man has been viewed from different perspectives—anthropological, biological, psychological, and social, and he advocated “joint efforts of all natural sciences and Humanities” (*infra*) in an endeavour to understand man and that “philosophy must provide the basis.”<sup>16</sup> What Myslichenko had in mind has some relevance to what Lenin wrote in his *Philosophical Notebooks*: “The one-sidedness of one philosophic principle is generally faced by its opposite one-sidedness, and, as everywhere, totality at least is found as a dispersed completeness.”<sup>16</sup>

The concept of man in Marxism is not devoid of the ‘movement’—the essence of dialectics, because human nature changes continually coming into interaction with nature and society. Marx said that “all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature.”<sup>17</sup> The relationship between man and nature is organic: ‘Humanity is organically linked with the natural environment in which it exists, above all with the planet Earth and its biosphere’<sup>18</sup> Man has two sorts of relation with nature. “A biochemical metabolism started between man and nature, but, with the advent of man, a qualitatively new relationship between living things and nature came into existence, which is man’s work or material production.”<sup>19</sup> The relationship between man and nature is dialectical via labour. “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. *By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.*” (emphasis added)<sup>20</sup>

Nature will not allow man reign supreme over herself. Engels cautioned us : " Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us... Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly." <sup>21</sup> So we can control nature only by obeying it.

Man interacts with nature not only singly but also collectively. The 'society-nature interaction' is also very important. Society has so far not been monotonous but dichotomous—the bourgeois or the exploiter class (not necessarily the rich) and the exploited or the expropriated class (not necessarily the poor). The two classes are in continual conflict over the shares of the productions of nature. "It is because of class antagonism that the practical mastering of natural forces and new natural sources culminates in the new social disasters, such as wars, the enslavement of nations, mass unemployment, poverty, and the development of more and more powerful weapons of mass destruction of people and the fruits of their work." <sup>22</sup>

Three relatively unknown elements of Marxism are spiritual production, ethics and humanism. By spiritual production Marx meant artistic and cultural elements of the 'immaterial sphere' <sup>23</sup> which is ultimately dependent on the material sphere that is historically determined. Marx in his *Theories of Surplus-Value* wrote : "In order to examine the connection between spiritual production and material production it is above all necessary to grasp the latter itself not as a general category but in *definite*

*historical* form... Further, from the specific form of material production arises in the first place a specific structure of society, in the second place a specific relation of men to nature. Their state and their spiritual outlook is determined by both. Therefore also the kind of their spiritual production." <sup>24</sup>

In the sphere of ethics, Marxism rejects absolutism, and proposes that the ethical value is also dependent on the mode of production of the material condition of life or society. Nikolai Lenin's (not V. I. Lenin) reading of communistic morality may not be tantamount to Marxian concept of morality. According to Nikolai Lenin, "A communist must be prepared to make every sacrifice and, if necessary, even resort to all sorts of schemes and stratagems, employ illegitimate methods, conceal the truth, in order to get into the trade unions, stay there, and conduct the revolutionary work within..." <sup>25</sup> Marxism does not believe in approbative, evolutionary, normative or theological morality. Marxism does not speak of any moral specifics, but says that communist morality is "the aggregate of principles and standards of conduct based on the ideals of communist society." <sup>26</sup> Ethical principles are applicable only within the confines of the society. Morality is an affair between one conscious being and another. But Soviet communism or Marxism-Leninism has surpassed this limit in the ethical sphere. It assumes some ethical norms even between man and 'potentially conscious' or even unconscious objects. Thus, Soviet scientists have objected to inhumane biological experiments: 'The first area concerned experiments in introducing genes of oncogenic animal viruses and toxins into bacteria. The second concerned the cloning of genes of higher organisms in bacteria.' <sup>27</sup>

This same attitude bespeaks of the humanness of Marxism. It is different from non-Marxian humanism in that "It is based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy and the theory of scienti-

fic communism, which postulates liberation of the working people from social oppression and the building of communism as an essential condition for the allround and genuine freedom of the individual.”<sup>28</sup> In recent times this human value of Marxism is emphasised by Mikhail Gorbachev who aspires after a “truly humanitarian system serving and elevating man” and “a society for people, for the flourishing of their creative work, wellbeing, health, physical and spiritual development, a society where man feels he is the full-fledged master and is indeed that.”<sup>29</sup>

Marx did never turn his eyes away from “the meaning of life” and ‘humanness’. He believed in the richness of human nature and set as our task “*the development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself.*”<sup>30</sup> Lenin, in his “*Conspectus of Hegel's Science of Logic*”, also wrote : “The notion (=man), as subjective, again presupposes an otherness which is in itself (= nature independent of man). This notion (= man) is the *impulse* to realise itself, to give itself objectivity in the objective world through itself, and realise (fulfil) itself.”<sup>31</sup> (nosce teipsum, know thyself). But Marx perhaps did not give us an idea of the *ideal man*. And this was so because in a continually dialectic scheme no finality or no idea of a finality is possible. This failure of Marx was compensated by Lev Tolstoy who said that the meaning of life, or, to make it more precise, the ideality of man lies in the relationship of man with the infinity whence man is to seek ‘guidance for his acts.’<sup>32</sup> Tolstoy said that the knowledge of this infinity and that of man’s relationship with this infinity is the supreme knowlege : “that knowledge has universally been perceived as the most important knowledge, and has been viewed with the greatest respect. Most often it has been called religion but sometimes wisdom.”<sup>33</sup> Marxism has spoken of humanness but perhaps has failed to

definitely define what humanness is or where it lies. It has also failed to define the ideality of life. But Tolstoy is outspoken. He said that love is "life itself; but not a mindless life that is perishing, but a life that is serene and infinite... It is life's most joyful activity."<sup>34</sup> Tolstoy said that the movement of life is towards harmony—all-compassing harmony—and that harmony is the highest good.

But this harmony is not absent in Marxism. Marxism is an 'integral system'. It is a lie to tell that Marxism speaks of only economic determinism—this is only the half-truth. Though Engels, in his essay *Karl Marx*, emphasised two factors of Marxism—class conflict and exploitation,<sup>35</sup> Marxism means much more. Frolov wrote that the opponents of Marxism and reformist bourgeois 'Marxists' "have always either sought to represent Marxism as a strictly '*economic teaching*' devoid of independent philosophical foundations, to juxtapose it to its inherent practical revolutionary content (particularly with regard to the Leninist stage of Marxism) or else to 'discover' Marx as a 'utopian prophet' who, allegedly had addressed the problem of man and humanism in his early works and then assertedly reversed himself and developed a teaching from which man simply 'vanished', to be replaced by a rigorous 'economic determinism' and an absolutization of the 'socium'. It is true that at various stages of Marxism's historical development numerous genuine proponents of Marxism, for a number of reasons, occasionally *interpreted it in such a way that only one of its facets would appear, thus distorting its nature* as an integral system."<sup>36</sup> Frederick Engels was very clear on this point. In his letter of 21 September, 1890, to J. Block in Königsberg, Engels wrote that according to the materialist conception of history "the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx

nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase."<sup>37</sup> In fact, Marx was not so much interested in economics as he was in ethics, law and politics, as is evident in his Paris Manuscripts. "He complained frequently to Engels of the time he was forced to spend studying economics."<sup>34</sup> Engels candidly arrogated the cause of this misunderstanding about Marxism partly to Marx and partly to himself: "Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it."<sup>39</sup>

To sum up, Marxism emphasises the following points regarding the concepts of man and nature, and regarding relationship between man and nature. Firstly, Marxism deems man as a unique phenomenon. Man is a part of nature and yet he transcends her limitations. Secondly, Marxism protests against biologisation of man. Thirdly, Marxism also protests against scientism. Marxism says that the methodology of natural sciences is not applicable in the sphere of ethics and spirituality. Fourthly, Marxism does not say that man is absolutely an economic being. And lastly, Marxism holds up humanism high.

However, inspite of its flawless complexion, Marxism lends itself to the following important criticisms. Firstly, consciousness came into being from unconscious matter, through several antosse, to use a term of Schelling. If this is so, we can conceive of something higher or superior to consciousness (superconsciousness or something like that) coming out of consciousness in the future through the future succession of antosse. But Marxism stops dead at the stage of consciousness only. Secondly, Marxism conceives of a "complexity threshold" between man and the rest of the biosphere. But the promising progress in

cybernetics speaks against this shyness of Marxism. Thirdly, Marx and Engels frequently spoke of the 'real man' and the 'abstract man'. The 'abstract man' is a man from whom his *free* endeavour towards production has been abstracted (or deducted). Marxism looks forward to a society of real men. But the real man is not necessarily a human man. Further, what does humanness consist of? Marxism is not clear about this. Fourthly, the concept of labour is very important in Marxism. Man accosts nature and via labour changes it for his benefits, and thereby changes himself as well. But we think that the concept of 'communist labour' is pious but unrealistic. Communist labour is "labour performed gratis for the benefit of society, voluntary labour, irrespective of quotas; ... labour performed ... without reward as a condition, labour performed because it has become a habit to work for the common good, and because of a conscious realisation (that has become a habit) of the necessity of working for the common good .. labour as the requirement of a healthy organism."<sup>40</sup> This has an unearthly air! And lastly, according to Marx, philosophy is *partisan*. But if the task of philosophy is to disclose truth and if truth is unitary, how can philosophy be partisan?

Philosophy Department  
Raiganj College  
Raiganj - 733135 (W. B.)

**SUNIL KUMAR SARKAR**

NOTES

- \* Raed in the UGC Seminar on "Man and Nature" (1989) Raiganj (University) College, Raiganj, West Bengal.
- 1. Frolov, Ivan; *Man-Science - Humanism: A New Synthesis*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, p. 171.

2. McLellan, David; *Marx Before Marxism*, Macmillan, 1980, p. 216.
3. McLellan, p. 216.
4. Shaffer, J. A.; *Philosophy of Mind*, Prentice Hall of India, New Delhi, 1982, p. 40.
5. Shaffer, p. 40.
6. Afanasyev, V.; *Marxist Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968, p. 83.
7. Progress Publishers, Moscow. *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism* 1984, p. 151.
8. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 200.
9. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 200.
10. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 162.
11. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 131.
12. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 13.
13. Frolov; *op. cit.*, p. 13.
14. Marx, Karl; *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 36.
15. Progress Publishers, Moscow. *The Philosophical Conception of Man*, 1988, pp. 126-127.
16. Lenin, V. I.; *Collected Works*, vol. 38, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1981, p. 156.
17. Marx, Karl and Engels, F.; *Collected Works*, vol. 6 Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976, p. 192.
18. Progress Publishers, Moscow, *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism*, 1984, p. 150. ( henceforth *Dict. Comm.* )
19. *Ibid.*
20. Marx, Karl; *Capital*, vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 173.
21. Engels, F.; *Dialectics of Nature*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, p. 180.
22. *Dict. Comm.* p. 151.
23. Frolov, I; (ed), *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980, p. 399. ( henceforth *Dict. Phil.* )
24. Marx, Karl; *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Part 1, trans. Emile Burns, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p. 285.
25. Snyder, Louis L.; *The World in the Twentieth Century*, Eurasia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1955, p. 163.

26. *Dict. Phil.* pp. 276-277.
27. Frolov, I; *Man-Science-Humanism : A New Synthesis*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, p. 210,
28. *Dict. Phil.* p. 178.
29. Progress Publishers, Moscow, *Big Changes in the USSR*, 1988, p. 10.
30. Marx, Karl; *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 2, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, pp. 117-118.
31. Lenin, V. I.; *Collected Works*, vol. 38, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1981, p. 212.
32. Frolov; *Man-Science-Humanism*, p. 247. ( henceforth *Man-Science* )
33. *Man-Science*. p. 247.
34. *Man-Science*, p. 248.
35. Marx, Karl and Engels, F.; *Selected Works*, vol. 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, pp, 78-87.
36. *Man-Science*, pp. 241-242.
37. Marx, Karl and Engels, F.; *Selected Works*, vol. 3, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1977, p. 487.
38. McLellan, David; *op. cit.*, p. 218.
39. Marx, Karl and Engels, F.; *Selected Works*, vol. 3, Progress Publishers Moscow, 1977, p. 488.
40. Lenin, V. I.; *Collected Works*, vol. 30, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 517.

## OUR LATEST PUBLICATION

REGULARITY, NORMATIVITY AND RULES OF  
LANGUAGE AND OTHER ESSAYS IN  
PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

pp. 310

**Prof. Rajendra Prasad**

Rs. 100/-

In this volume twenty essays of Prof. Rajendra Prasad, published earlier in different journals in India and abroad, are collected. In these essays philosophical analysis is brought to bear upon such themes as nature of language, relation between language and philosophy or that between modern logic and philosophy. There are essays in the collection which consider such issues as practical relevance of philosophy, the distinction between apriori and empirical propositions etc. In addition, some essays deal with concepts of substance, mind and religious belief, while some other discuss problems connected with objectivity of historical judgements, relation between man and god, role of reason and sentiment in human life. The last four essays in the collection discuss difficulties connected with philosophical synthesis and consider relation between tradition, progress, freedom, reverence and creativity

The essays would be immensely helpful to both students and teachers of philosophy.

For further details contact :

The Editor ,  
Indian Philosophical Quarterly ,  
Philosophy Department ,  
University of Poona, Pune 411 007.