

## **A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HISTORICISM IN KARL MARX AND ERNEST GELLNER**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the ways in which Marx's conception of history differs from that of Gellner. In doing this, their implications for development are highlighted. The study shows that Marx stood the vision of Mankind's history on its head; whereas, Gellner stood it on its feet. By this is meant that Marx rubbed the interpretation of human history of the human face that should characterize it; whereas Gellner, on the contrary, tried to restore this in his own interpretation. The aim of this study is to compare Marx's and Gellner's historicism in order to determine their inherent strengths and weaknesses in view of a better interpretation of contemporary human history. This research serves as a unique way of evaluating Marxism from critical theoretical standpoint. Through expository, critical and analytical methods, the study was carried out.*

**Key words:** Historicism, Historical Materialism, Abstract Social Structure, Neo-Enlightenment, Freedom and Determinism.

### **Introduction**

The social sciences study man and his society in one form or the other, from this or that perspective. All the different views held in this regard depend on the underpinning conceptions about the nature of society - the milieu within which the rational and existential being named man makes some meanings out of his seemingly chaotic world - and, by extension, the science that studies it, namely the social sciences. The outcomes of man's exploits, in this connection, are conditioned by his awareness of the powers he is capable of wielding as well as his awareness of the possibilities offered him by his social environment in totality. It makes some difference, for example, whether one sees the life of the society as static or dynamic. Again, it makes some great difference whether one conceives oneself, for example, as an agent (cause) of social development or as a product (effect) of the same. In short, it matters a lot whether the path of societal development is singular or plural. Historicism offers researchers the opportunity to explore such deeply rooted issues.

But, the question of knowledge in general is addressed according to either of two views: empiricism and rationalism. The one emphasizes experience whereas the other emphasizes reason. Karl Marx follows an empiricist orientation (historical materialist analysis) in presenting his theory of the nature of historical change. But, Ernest Gellner adopts a rationalist outlook in understanding the dynamic of socio-cultural development within historical narratives. In fact, the distinction between the historicism of Karl Marx and that of Ernest Gellner reflects the two-broad distinction in approach to the nature of social science and, by extension, the human society. Accordingly, social science is construed either as leading to a descriptive knowledge about the social world so that it may be more efficiently organized, or as aspiring to a communicative (interpretive) knowledge of the social world in order to provide a guide for action within it. As Preston says, "there are those who think that social science is or ought to be like natural science, and thus essentially concerned with describing how things are in fact. And there are those who think that social science is a variety of social philosophy, and thus concerned with the interpretive understanding of patterns of culture"<sup>1</sup>. Marx's and Gellner's historicisms are roughly divided along these lines.

Karl Marx and Ernest Gellner subscribe to different forms of historicism which have a far reaching implication on human and social development. Thus, their historicisms result in hugely different societal arrangements and systems. In what follows, their different view are examined, compared and evaluated. The researcher adopts Gellner's historicism in preference to that of Marx for the reasons that will be demonstrated shortly.

### **What is historicism?**

Historicism is simply a theory or model of historical explanations. Historicism is an ideology that says that every aspect of human experience and knowledge ought to be understood in the context of its historical development. Accordingly, true knowledge is held to be the one that is historical<sup>2</sup>. Historicism says, in a nutshell, that the meaning of any human science or any knowledge whatsoever is exhausted in its history. Hence, Lavine states that "the history of philosophy is philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Historicism is related to organicism which is the theory that holds that all genuine investigation must give primacy to the whole over its parts.<sup>4</sup>

Historicism emerged as a reaction against the anti-historical tendencies of Enlightenment epistemologies which place social laws and cognition at the same pedestal with natural laws and cognition. To this regard, Christopher Thornhil

comments thus: "Historicism is an insistence on the historicity of all knowledge and cognition, and on the radical segregation of human from natural history."<sup>5</sup>

### **Karl Marx's Historicism**

Marx's idea of history is dubbed dialectical materialism. Marx takes matter (or, more strictly, economic foundations) as the substance of reality.<sup>6</sup> He makes economic factors, the pivot of historical development. As Aja remarks: "For Marx, ... changes in the economic structure of society cause changes in class relations, and these influence the political, social, moral, and religions, customs and tradition."<sup>7</sup>

Based on this economic interpretation, Marx identified the following as the epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society: Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the modern bourgeois modes of production. Marx maintains that the relations of production at each of these epochs correspond to a definite state of development of the epoch's material forces of production. The economic structure of a society or simply mode of production of a society is just the sum total of these relations of production. In Marx's account of history, every epoch comes to a stage of transition when the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production.<sup>8</sup>

According to Marx's historicism, the driving forces of historical development are the masses, the classes and their social structures<sup>9</sup>. As Berbershrina expatiates, "The social forces that tackle the problems and tasks posed by the objective course of history are the *driving forces* of historical development. The concept of driving forces covers the totality of reason, stimuli, and motives that prompt the mass of the people, classes and parties to engage in historical activity. They include social requirements, interests, goals and ideals."<sup>10</sup> The social forces here could manifest in the form of a Social Revolution. A Social Revolution is "a radical change in the system of social relations resulting in transition from one socioeconomic formation to another."<sup>11</sup>

### **Ernest Gellner's Historicism**

Gellner's idea of history consists approximately in tracing the real nexus between the conspicuous and the obscure in any given society, between what is seriously under focus and what is ignored. Gellner sees modern societies as naturalistic/secularized. In this sense, He envisions the world as a continuity

rather than discontinuity. "A society is naturalistic," he says, "if it assumes that the events on the horizon are, and must be, similar in kind to the ordinary events of daily life."<sup>12</sup>

Gellner's idea of history is actually based, not on horizons, but on social structures which he describes as "successive and radically differentiated."<sup>13</sup> The social structure is what gives meaning to the arrays of historical events and makes intelligible the operative constraints. Thus, Gellner's notion of social structure explains how the individual or community comes to attribute unity to a sequence of events. It is the abstract structures that differentiate Gellner's sense of history from mere (accurate) historical narrative regarded by some other thinkers as the only legitimate form of history.

Gellner's historical vision has a fundamental sociological outlook. He has categorically asserted that "the problem of explanation in history is also the problem of the nature of sociology."<sup>14</sup> Social structures concern the games of social existence and a shared set of the rules for playing them. Gellner therefore observes that "naïve narrative history takes such rules for granted. Sociological history, at the very least, attempts to elicit and specify them."<sup>15</sup> In other words, sociological history of any society (which is the form of history Gellner is talking about in his historicism) attempts to make explicit, the implicit social structures of that society. The social structures ensure that there is a regular connection between an act and its consequences, or between the failure to perform it and another set of consequences.

But, how are these regular connections enforced? To answer this question, Gellner invokes the impelling powers of internalized concepts; although, he regards the answer as inadequate because of its empirical unreliability. "Concepts are so firmly internalized by members of given societies that they become in practice, just as compulsive as natural necessity...(Nevertheless), the socialization process is often less than homogenous in what it indoctrinates, and its effectiveness in ensuring the internalization of what it preaches varies a good deal."<sup>16</sup>

However, Gellner concedes to the logical fact that from similar premises, all things being equal, similar consequences must follow. Therefore, two or more societies with structural similarities could be defined by similar premises. For him, generalizations enter somewhat indirectly within historical explanations, by the application of 'ideal types.'<sup>17</sup> Gellner's historicism views a social system as system of constraints - a system of un-thinkables and un-do-ables. It tries to

show, though not with mathematical certainty, how the society regulates itself and how change is possible within the framework of such self-regulation<sup>18</sup>. The concrete nature of the sanctions within a society (whether they are stable or ever breaking down) is of central interest to the sociological investigation. The sociologist is quite concerned with the actual sequence of social actions as well as with the play of constraints within the system.

Hence, a historian must seek to systematically explain the nexus between successive events in an historical sequence, and indicate what background factors sanctioned, so to speak, the particular connection. If this explanation is *ad hoc* or unsystematic, then it cannot be said to be a structural account. If it is a structural account, then it must be able to specify the constraining limits and their sanctions. These constraining limits, it must be noted, are not accessible to consciousness in general, though some undoubtedly are. Both those that are and those that are not, are mixed in an intricate, complex manner. This means that we cannot determine these limits and their sanctions prior to our living the social life. It is in the course of our encounter with the game of social life that these limits and their sanctions become manifest. The connections between historical events are not self-evident. When they appear to be self-evident, then they are certainly illusory. Social structure must, therefore, be discovered by carefully selecting and interpreting 'what really happened.'

No easy, direct and privileged access to the structure. Every sequence of events comes in a unique and fresh historical unit of which the structure will help us to understanding it. The structure helps us see the whole picture. It makes our understanding of history complete and rounded off. But deciphering the structure at play is a problematic task. Gellner maintains that "the whole notion of restricting history to an account of 'how it really was' is an absurdity... Profoundly alien and barely intelligible conventions and connections are not exotic and distant, but close to home and sometimes they envelope us."<sup>19</sup>

### **Marx's and Gellner's Historicism Compared**

The comparison between Marx's historicism and that of Gellner is here examined from the standpoint of the fundamental philosophical issues affecting the two visions of history. Seven of such issues have been selected and presented as follows:

#### **Freedom and Determinism**

Marx maintains a deterministic attitude to world history and social change. Gellner however adopts a rationalistic position. Marx believes that the productive base of any society determines both its structure and its future development. For Gellner, however, economic substructure or mode of production is irrelevant to development if the individuals do not rationally formulate effective and efficient principles for organizing their society. In terms of their approaches to development, Marx is an externalist whereas Gellner is an internalist.<sup>20</sup>

### **Human Nature**

Marx believes that man, like nature, is matter made up of atoms in motion, but that in man these atoms in motion have gained a high level of sophistication, perfection, organization and consciousness. Hence, man stands out among other matters to determine and to create other things in the course of history and be, himself, all the more perfected and developed in the process. But, the contradictions immanent in man's creative abilities mean that he becomes alienated from his creative products. And, it is this situation of man's alienation that Marx struggles to resolve.<sup>21</sup> Gellner, on the other hand, is liberal in his outlook on human nature. He conceives man as a free and rational being. Man's role in the course of history, for him, is to understand the social structures in order to be able to replicate the pattern we find very favourable and/or to devise a way of stopping the pattern we find unpalatable from being repeated or prolonged.<sup>22</sup>

### **Logic of Historical Explanation**

For Marx, the point of view for explaining history is on the (inter) relation between the economic foundation or economic substructure and the superstructure. He believes that human production is fundamental throughout history. Hence, his point of view in history is concerned with investigating the dialectics of material production at different epochs with emphasis on the impact it has on man and his society.<sup>23</sup> Gellner holds that the clue to human history lies in the general division of labour among coercion, cognition and production. He gives account of the status of these human activities within each of the three stages: hunting/gathering, pre-agrarian, and agrarian/industrial. As he says: "our concern will be with the transformation and interrelation of production, coercion and cognition. We shall follow them through the three stages, with all their internal varieties, and across the two great leaps."<sup>24</sup> According to him,

production, coercion and cognition were at their lowest ebb in the pre-agrarian society. And development was virtually absent. Agrarian era marked the emergence of the specialized agencies of coercion and of cognition and the development of the division of labour in production. Nevertheless, the dominant activity here is coercion or cognition or both. Yet, this age has been described by Gellner as “a period of stagnation, oppression and superstition,”<sup>25</sup> although it was the age that brought to mankind political centralization (state-formation) and literacy. The age of scientific/industrial production is the age of pervasive division of labour and social differentiation. It is the age when Reason enters history, being made manifest in single-strandedness, the neat and logical division of labour and the separation of functions. Here cognition occupies the central stage as a distinctive and dominant human activity with amazing result of technological and economic development across the globe. This age, according to Gellner, comes with a socially disconnected world.

### **What Constitutes Social Facts**

Social facts are constitutional and structural events that ultimately constitute the social world. These events may either be intended or unintended behaviour of individuals.<sup>26</sup> Marx promotes the unintended behaviours as constitutive of social facts. Marx, for example, believes that it is the economic forces that bring about historical change. These economic forces are called the economic foundations or economic substructure of the society. They set up a structure which (dialectically) explains historical change irrespective of the intended behaviours/actions of the members of the society.<sup>27</sup> Gellner, in his turn, believes that it is the intended behaviour of individuals that constitute social facts. According to Gellner, the intended behaviour is made manifest in innovation through the individual's employment of instrumental rationality. The observed social facts may not be a direct consequence of the individual's intentions and actions. But the point, for Gellner, is that it is ultimately traceable to individual's purposeful actions. These purposeful human actions blend with the prevailing natural and social conditions to give rise to social change and progress.

### **The Question of 'the End of History'**

Marx opines that the social classes are the vehicle of dialectical historical progress and not people as such, or the spirit of peoples. For him, history essentially is the history of class struggles. In perfect communism which will be a class-less society, therefore, history will have to come to an end. The idea of the end of history connotes cessation of ideologies with their concomitant socio-

political and economic systems. Gellner's description of the structure of human history especially the modern scientific/industrial stage, on other hand, does not make any allusion to the end of history and neither is it supportive of the idea. In fact, Gellner believes that there is an ideological market in modern (developed) societies parading both secular, religious, as well as irrational cultures and faiths<sup>28</sup>.

### **Centralization versus Decentralization in Politics**

Karl Marx regards absolute and strong centralization of authority and administration as a virtue of social order. Communism is organized in this manner: all the different classes converge (dissolve) in allegiance and loyalty to the centre. Weak centralization or non-centralization, on the contrary, encourages re-grouping of the different classes and interest groups. And Gellner aligns his preferences to this sort of political organization. According to him, loosely centralized polities tend to be more powerful than the strongly centralized ones. As he said: "A strong civil society, conjoined with a relatively weak or at least non-dominant central state, constituted a unit more powerful than more thoroughly centralized polities."<sup>29</sup> Gellner spurns Marx's solution of abolishing all sorts of coercion altogether in an industrial society. Instead, he thinks that we could learn, from our historical past, to avoid, overcome or at worse endure the consequences of capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

### **Speculative Versus Critical Philosophy of History**

In general, Marx's historicism and that of Gellner neatly divide into the two broad branches of philosophy of history namely speculative philosophy of history and critical philosophy of history respectively. The speculative philosophy of history is concerned with discovering the meaning and purpose of the entire historical process. Critical philosophy of history, on the other hand, is concerned with examining and analyzing philosophical problems that relate to the concepts or categories that practicing historians employ in composing history. The former is metaphysical, whereas the later is epistemological. Speculative philosophy of history is metaphysical in that it looks for the essence, the true significance, and the unity of all historical events. Critical philosophy of history is epistemological in that it looks for the philosophical justifications of the historian's cognitive claims and methodology.<sup>31</sup>

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Marx's vision of history is to the effect that there are fixed laws of development which are economically determined. Gellner, on his part, considers history from a rationalistic knowledge driven perspective, viewing development as something that is a function of the principles of innovation which include experimentation, dynamism, and relativism. According to him, modernity became possible because for the first time cognition and production merged/fused into one by a near miraculous concatenation of events. Karl Marx believes that instrumental rationality is the sufficient and necessary magic wand for development. But Ernest Gellner holds that instrumental rationality is the sufficient but not necessary condition for development.

Moreover, Marx says that there is only one way to development namely state control of economic activities. But, Gellner believes that there are diverse ways to societal development depending on what actually works. What works for one state or society may not work for another. In other words, every society should follow the path to development that is actually working for them. Nevertheless, he gives some development prerequisites, namely that these diverse ways should be amenable to **instrumental rationality, division of labour, a relatively autonomous economy, dependence on literary and formal education, unpredictability of outcomes and to singleness and separation of aims**. The researcher prefers Gellner's historicism to that of Marx because the latter easily leads to authoritarianism and its tendencies whereas the former leads easily to liberal democracy and its associated practices. The former is, therefore, considered more humane than the latter.

More so, Marx's historicism is prone to ideological distortions due to its prevailing authoritarian and deterministic character; but Gellner's historicism, given its avowal to liberalism, tends to accommodate diverse outlooks and values in a harmonious and intelligent manner thus promoting development, justice and peace in the society. Marx's historicism "charted the destiny of Western civilization in an ideology that revealed the shaping forces of which men were part but which gave little freedom to mankind to deflect the material forces."<sup>32</sup> For example, after his thorough and scrupulous investigation of the law of the development of capitalism, Marx confidently declared that the bourgeois class must inevitably collapse and the proletariat triumph equally inevitably, forming a socialist system.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Marx's historicism is unfortunately limited to the law of development of capitalism, which is why he designated social development ultimately as a transition from capitalism to socialism.<sup>34</sup> However, Gellner's historicism focuses on the entire spectrum of human history.

Furthermore, Marx's scientific postulations about the laws of social change preserve a sense of meaning and purpose in history by assuring his followers happiness and harmony in the society of the future (communism).<sup>35</sup> Marx believes that real historical development is compatible with universal salvation of mankind. This salvation, it should be noted, is not of a religious sense. For Marx regarded religion as the opium of the people, the sigh of the oppressed creature and called for its abolition. According to him, religion consoles the oppressed or exploited by offering them in heaven what they are denied upon earth. Marx believes that the essential mark of later-day religion is its other-worldliness: it places "far-off" salvation that socialism brings near. His future (communist) society would have one fundamental goal: "that human beings develop rather than mutilate themselves in their activity."<sup>36</sup>

Gellner, on his part, has no such laws of social change different from our common experience of solving problems that beset us now and again by making choices from options that are available to us and learning from our choices. Hence, happiness and harmony are to be sought and found in the present rather than in the future society. He does not despise religion; his openness to the multiplicity of routes to development means that religion could well be one viable route to the people's progress. The researcher finds his position to be more realistic and congenial to human experience than that of Marx.

Gellner associates his historical visions with the Neo-Enlightenment view. It is a view which became fashionable since after the end of World War II. It classifies societies based on industrial/pre-industrial dichotomy, and relegates to the background such classificatory categories as democracy, capitalism and socialism. The Neo-enlightenment view offers a unique insight into the nature of 'development' process, which it characterizes as complex, manifold, and multi-stage.<sup>37</sup> 'Development' can be attained in various ways depending on the different choices made and the order in which they were made.

In other words, the social pattern which a society assumes eventually depends on the options they have selected and the sequence of appearance of those options on the social stage. The crucial points about the Neo-Enlightenment view can be summarized as follows: (1) there are complex network of routes to development. (2) The state of development in each case cannot be determined ahead of taking and completing that route. (3) The outcome of development process is a function of our individual decisions and actions. (4) There is always the possibility of getting more or less than we bargained for in our quest for development.<sup>38</sup>

Note that Neo-Enlightenment view of history locates the crucial transition somewhere near the present rather than at the beginning or the end of time. Within the New Enlightenment vision of history, the question of value is provisional since the choices are made prior to having the relevant informations, and based on the accidental forces operating at the very period of making the choices. We move with such provisional answers until we are able in the future, to rationally formalize and codify what happened. Whatever elements (or combination of elements) that are found to be favourable and actually productive of desired development could be reinforced by repeating them over and over again. Hence Development process, by and large, tow the path of what Gellner called 'viable, habituation-hallowed cultures'<sup>39</sup>. The foregoing points, in the consideration of the researcher, make Ernest Gellner's historicism more humane, cognitive, reliable and acceptable than that of Karl Marx.

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