

Lecture 25: Marxist Theory of Population

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Marx was very critical of Malthus. He said that an abstract law of population did not exist for men (Marx, 1974). All historical modes of production have their own special laws of population which are valid only within their limits.

Marx discussed the law of population, applicable to capitalist mode of production in chapter XXV of *Capital*, entitled, “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”. Two books *An Outline Theory of Population* and *The Theory of Population*, both edited by Valentey and published by Progress Publishers, provide a lucid discussion of Marxist theory of population. To understand Marxist theory of population it is important to understand his concept of surplus labour. According to Marx, capitalist society consists of two basic classes:

- Capitalists who own means of production; and
- Workers who own nothing except their labour power

To Marx, in a capitalist society, production is controlled by the capitalist class. They earn from profit only. They hire workers and supply them the wherewithal of work – instruments of production and raw material. According to labour theory of value, it is only workers who create value addition through their labour, i.e., work done by the labourers only creates value and the means of production on their own cannot produce anything. The workers are, however, given wages which are always less than their contribution. The difference (surplus) is expropriated by the capitalists and added to fixed capital under their possession.

To put it in other words, capital consists of two parts: constant capital and variable capital. The part of the capital which is represented by the means of production, raw and auxiliary material, and instruments of labour is the constant capital. The part of capital represented by labour power is the variable capital. While the constant capital does not undergo any change of the quantitative value, the variable capital produces its own value and a surplus.

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Accumulation of capital, though originally appearing as its quantitative extension only, results eventually in the change in its composition, under a constant increase of its constant constituent, and a constant decline in variable constituent.

On several occasions when the total capital increases, its variable part may also increase, but it will increase in a constantly diminishing proportion. Technological development, rise in productivity of labour and centralization tend to decrease the ratio of variable capital further. Since in a capitalist society the demand for labour depends on the variable constituent only, it falls progressively, and the labouring population, therefore, produces, along with the accumulation of capital, the means by which it is rendered superfluous and surplus to an increasing extent. Accordingly, the advancement of modern industry leads to unemployment and underemployment.

For Marx, therefore, the correlation between accumulation of capital and rate of wages is nothing else than the correlation between the unpaid labour transformed into capital and the additional paid labour necessary for the setting in motion of this additional capital. It is not to be seen as a relation between two independent factors – population and capital. It must be seen as the relation between the unpaid labour and the paid labour of the same labouring population. Thus Marx shows that the existence of what has been considered as surplus population is a necessary product of accumulation of wealth on a capitalist basis. It is also a lever of capitalistic development (Ananyeva, et al., 1974).

If the quantity of unpaid labour supplied by the working-class, and accumulated by the capitalist class, increases so rapidly, that its conversion into capital requires an extraordinary addition of paid labour, then wages rise, and, all other circumstances remaining equal the unpaid labour diminishes in proportion. But as soon as this diminution touches the point at which the surplus labour that nourishes capital is no longer supplied in normal quantity, a reaction sets in: a smaller part of revenue is capitalized, accumulation lags, and the movement of rise in wages receives a check. To explain this Marx would use a simile: as in religion man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.

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With progressive advancement of capital, labourers are set free more rapidly than the reduction in the variable part of capital as compared with the constant because it enables the capitalists to exploit the labour power. It also leads to progressive replacement of superior labour power by inferior labour power. Ultimately, the overwork of labour, reduction in the variable constituent of capital, and greater exploitation expand the ranks of industrial reserve army and force the workers to subjugate under the dictates of capital, independently of the natural increase of population. The development in this way increases both the demand and supply of labour by setting them free.

There are four different forms of the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army: floating surplus; latent surplus; stagnant surplus; and paupers. Any member of the working class who is unemployed or partially employed belongs to this pool. In modern industries where modern division of labour exists, only a small number of workers continue to find employment in them, while the majority of them are regularly discharged. This majority constitutes the floating surplus and this sector is marked by contradiction: in this sector complaint of the want of hands and unemployment exist side by side. Latent surplus is associated with agricultural sector. Capitalist development of agriculture causes a latent surplus in the countryside and constant movement of pauperized agricultural workers towards centres of industries. The stagnant surplus forms a part of the labour with extremely irregular employment.

As some branches of the industries decay, handicraft leads to manufacturing and manufacturing to mechanization, it provides a large reservoir of stagnant surplus to capital, consisting of labourers with extremely irregular employment, low wages, and longer working hours. One example of this type of surplus is in domestic industry. Lastly, pauperism, consisting of the lowest sediment of the surplus population, consists of the so called “dangerous classes” of vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes. They consist of: (a) those who are able to work but have become pauper due to economic crisis; (b) orphans and pauper children; (c) the demoralised and ragged; and (d) those unable to work. The last category of people includes those who lack power to adapt due to prevailing division of labour, who have crossed the normal age of work, and the victims of industry (the mutilated, the sickly, and the widows).

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To Marx, pauperism is “the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army.”

On the relationship between development and employment Marx says:

The law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production, thanks to the advancement in the productiveness of social labour, may be set in movement by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power, this law in a capitalist society – where the labourer does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the labourer – undergoes a complete inversion and expressed thus: the higher the productiveness of labour, the greater is the pressure of the labourers on the means of employment, the more precarious, therefore, becomes their condition of existence, viz., the sale of their own labour-power for increasing another's wealth, for the self-expansion of capital. The fact that the means of production and the productiveness of labour, increase more rapidly than the productive population, expresses itself, therefore, capitalistically in the inverse form that the labouring population always increases more rapidly than the conditions under which capital can employ this increase for its own self-expansion.

While for Malthus the fundamental cause of poverty, unemployment, high mortality, malnutrition, and destitution is the tendency of population to grow beyond the means of subsistence available to it, for Marx the cause of these factors is the capitalist mode of production. From the Marxist perspective the changes in population dynamics are governed by the social systems that are created on the basis of relations of productions. The solution to the problems of underdevelopment from this perspective lies basically in the socialistic reconstruction of present day capitalist societies. When population is analysed from historical perspective, it is taken as a socio-economic category. Marx was of the view that population is an abstract notion if the classes of which it consists are disregarded. These classes are also empty sound if relations of production in general and wage, labour, and capital – three elements in production – are not explicitly considered.

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EVALUATION OF MARXIST THEORY OF POPULATION

The Marxist theory is based on the idea of history of class struggle. Those who do not believe in Marxist theory of change would also not accept his theory of population. Moreover, the population reality of today is complex and in many important aspects different from what it was during the times of Malthus and Marx. The two lived in an age in which both birth and death rates were high (death rates had only begun to fall in the industrially advanced countries) and the rate of population growth was very low. National policies of today are pragmatic and responsive to new realities.