

Class and Classless Communism: A Moral Critique

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Abstract

In an attempt to place society on a sound moral foundation, Plato advocated class communism. Marx in an effort to put to rest the injustice, inadequacies and inequalities engendered by class distinction among men, postulated a classless communism. Although the practicability of communism has made many to dismiss it as utopian, this paper undertook to re-examine the implications of these two types of communism from a moral perspective. It concludes that whether class or classless communism, a significant moral injustice is inescapable in an attempt to implement either of them in the community of men.

Keywords: Communism, Theory, Practice, Class, Classless, Society, Abstraction.

I. Introduction

The rationale for considering a topic as communism may be challenged by many on the grounds that the last has been heard and said about it. The conclusion therefore will be that communism is impracticable; a perfect theoretical system in an imperfect society with imperfect men as her emissaries. Even though this may be a very popular argument with proofs of validity, one can still raise issues of perennial concerns in the discussion of communism and that is 'the class war'. Hence, the study of communism affords us the opportunity to touch on sensitive issues which forms the basis of her importance. The question then goes: why is communism worth examining? The answers could be as varied as these:

- i. Because it is the ideal social and economic order
- ii. Because of the class issues it raises
- iii. Because it provides equity and balance.
- iv. Because economics play a pivotal role in men's lives in every society.
- v. Because it supposedly brings an end to every tension as far as materialism is concern.
- vi. Because it knocks out capitalism and dissolves socialism.

An economic system such as communism which is alleged to have the answers to some of the social issues which bedevils man must command some sort of attention and interest. This is one reason why the branches of communism may have been cut down, but her root still remains. Nations and kingdoms are still grappling with many of the issues that communism tries to proffer solution to.

Theorizing has always been a good option to problem solving especially as it has the tendency to open up a number of possibilities regarding any matter. Such was the attitude that led Marx into looking at the best way to cure the ills of the society especially the ones associated with the owners of the means of production (Bourgeoisie) and her exploitation of the workers (proletariat).

Capitalism is seen by Marx as the greatest economic evil and an instrument in the hands of the Bourgeoisie to exploit the vulnerable and less privileged workers. This condition led to socialism which handed over power and the means of production into the hands of the government so that by this, there can be equitable distribution of the wealth of the people with less emphasis on maximization of profits which happens to be one of the sole motivation of the capitalist.

However, the inadequacies of socialism necessitated the coming in of communism which is seen as the perfection of all economic system with the potential to actualizing the dreams of everyman. This has led to the slogan 'from each according to his ability, and to every man according to his needs'. But as we shall see, the polarization of man into classes is a reality that has physical reference frame. Men have different needs which put them into different classes; they also have different abilities which also put them into different classes. So for communism or any other economic system to work, the question of class must be dealt with. Also, man has not yet evolved into a morally perfect being that is able to transcend every limitation in order to do what is right; thereby destroying every foothold of class society in favour of a classless society. We shall examine these issues as we proceed, but let us at this juncture, look at the meaning of communism especially from the perspective of Marx and Engels, her most vocal precursors.

II. Communism Defined

Our focus in this section is to bring to the fore, an understanding of the philosophy of communism and not to really dabble into the historical antecedent of what led to its formation.

The communist philosophy is embedded in the work, *Communist Manifesto*, originally titled *Manifesto of the Communist Party* written in 1848 by the German political theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is

among the world's most influential political manuscripts that analyzes class struggle (historical and present), and the problems of capitalism. Thus Marx and Engels (1998) in their words opine thus:

That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which it is built up, and from that which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes (p. 8).

In continuation, the history of class struggles forms a series of evolutions and revolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class-the proletariat-cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles.

Engels writing in *The Principles of Communism* (1969) see communism as the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat. The proletariat in this context is that class in society which lives entirely from the sale of its labour and does not draw profit from any kind of capital. Her wealth and woe, life and death and sole existence depends on the demand for labour, hence, on the changing state of business and the vagaries of unbridled competition. They are simply the working class.

Depending on the understanding of Marx and Engels *Communist Manifesto*, definition of communism are proliferated but without losing its major concerns. Blackburn (2005) defines communism as:

A socio-economic system based on communal ownership and production of goods. Communal self government, and sometimes communal living. The slogan 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' encapsulates the disappearance of market mechanisms of exchange (p.68).

Communism ordinarily evolves from socialism and it is the climax of the fall of capitalism. Socialism is a transitional period on which the dictatorship of the proletariat will gradually socialize natural resources and stamp out the last remnants of capitalism. Thus socialism is a system that upholds the virtue of fairness, equality and justice. It frowns at the exploitation of workers by the ruling class and seeks a level playing ground for all men. Hence, "Marxism, the philosophy of Karl Marx that culminates into communism "according to Waper (1973) is an optimistic doctrine of inevitable progress and the ultimate triumph of man" (p. 205).

Communism is a philosophy that birth revolution. With this revolution, the over throw of class distinction will be inevitable. The collective common wealth of all will be equitably produced and distributed; and the dignity of man will be reclaimed. This claim is predicated on the assertion by Waper (1973) that:

Man must eat to live. His very survival depends upon the success with which he can produce what he wants from Nature. Production is therefore the most important of all human activities. Men in association produce more than men in isolation, and society is thus the result of an attempt to secure the necessities of life (p. 203).

The importance of production as a human activity informs the need for a thorough assessment of the gains accruing from such production by the owners of the factors of production and by the workers who sweat mentally or physically to ensure it. The idea of "cheap labour" is synonymous with capitalism as the maximization of profits is her core concern. This situation is at the fore of the struggle for just and fair wage or gain and culminates into a battle. This is why Marx holds that the only way to resolving this tension such that all men will be satisfied is for communism to evolve because it takes care of the tussles and provide solutions that are just and fair.

One could only but conjecture about when this discrimination amongst men in society started. But Marx wrote at an age that was becoming increasingly rationalistic and materialistic; an age of individuality reasoned by the scientific temper and industrial revolution. Edim (2002) puts the picture this way:

In every society where productive forces or means of production are owned by a minority, the relations of production are exploitative because the majority is forced to work to sustain the minority. Such contradiction engenders a class war between those who want to preserve the old system and those who favour a new one (p. 20).

Hence, communism is identifiable by the cessation of the existence of class and whatever they represents; the abolition of the capitalist mode of production in favour of a communal controlled mode of production, and the equitable distribution of the benefits accruing to society on the basis of 'to every man according to his needs'. Let us now turn to class communism.

III. Class Communism

Let there be no confusion about the seemingly contradictory conjunction of class and communism perhaps, on the strength that the idea of communism abolishes class. In George Orwell's book *Animal Farm*, one of the characters said that 'All men are born equal, but some men are more equal than others'. A popular African proverb also lends its voice to this when it says 'All fingers are not equal'. The implication is that there are disparities amongst men such that society is replete with a lot of class instances that cuts across wealth, intelligence, opportunities and so on.

The idea of class communism was advocated and given impetus by Plato in an attempt to place society on a sound moral foundation. From his moral psychology, he was able to divide society into tripartite classes viz: the guardians, the auxiliaries and the artisans. Interestingly, Plato recommended Communism for the guardian class. This class was to share every thing in common without anyone laying claims to any personal belongings. In other words, Plato seems to believe that communism is possible even in a class structured society. Like Marx, Plato views justice as a very important element for the attainment of a peaceful and mutual co-existence; Plato opines that justice is when everyone does her job without conflict of interest. Barbet (2001) points out that "For justice to be exhibited in the State its existence is presupposed in the individual, who sees that to get on with his or her own work without interfering with others is just" (p. 80).

The polarization of the society for Plato is important in ensuring justice and does not prevent the practice of communism by the guardian class. Justice here becomes the corner stone of communism predicated on class structure. Here men are allowed to develop to their full capacity in their various fields. To this end, who rules the society is important in bringing about the ideal state. The communist element in Plato thought is x-rayed by Popkin and Stroll (1969) thus:

After all the tests had been passed, the rulers would take part in the active administration of the society. But in order to avoid any chance of their placing their private interests over the public welfare, they would not be allowed to have private families, or to possess private property or wealth (p. 60).

From the perspective of Plato, class polarization does not negate the very idea of communism as both can function harmoniously. Let us now examine also, classless communism.

IV. Classless Communism

Communism by the verdict of Marx and Engels is in tandem with the elimination of class antagonism which puts to rest the history of class struggle. Here the issue of class will not even be heard as the factors of production will be collectively owned by all with no need for a state apparatus as the state will have withered away. Engels declared as quoted by Waper (1973) that the state: "as a result of the social revolution of the future, would vanish, because all public functions would simply be changed from political into administrative ones" (p. 208).

Even though what this is supposed to imply is not clear, we could deduce that, the manipulation of the bourgeoisie which is precipitated on political intrigues, insincerity and suppression will be extinct as man will only be concerned about equitable distribution of goods and services administratively, without any ulterior motive or interest. By this, man will have also evolved into a 'Superman' to use Nietzsche's words and would have attained that 'Open society' that will drive away all its enemies to use the words of Popper.

By this transition, all men will be equal in their humanity with freedom as an ensign. There will be no conflict of interest, no strife, no tussle, no ambition, no envying, and no antagonism. Everything then will be owned communally. The reason why there are strifes and contention in the society is because of the presence of capitalism which will be eliminated by the revolutionary uprising of the workers.

To this end, class struggle will vanish creating a kind of harmony between the owners of the means of production and the workers who mix their labour to produce such product but do not own them. There will be no need for surplus value as the small number of business owners cannot match the vast majority of workers. Hence, the alienation of the workers will cease and there will be socialized conditions of production where class will disappear, and this will mark the end of the struggle and of political power.

V. Evaluation and Conclusion

Marx is highly revered because of his mission statement of ending the seeming injustice of the Bourgeoisie over the proletariat thereby creating and entrenching fairness and justice to all in the distribution of the wealth of nature. Little wonder, Marxism is a philosophy that is still relevant even in this century as the issues of Marx's days are still very much with us, cutting across barriers, poles, tribes and ethnic regions. In the same vein, Plato remains one of the greatest political moralists in his bid to eliminate chaos and corruption in the society and enthrone justice.

In evaluating class and classless communisms, therefore, certain ontological issues will have to be brought to the fore in view of their desire to entrench justice as the ultimate goal of society. The most

important will be the issue of equality of all men and the will of all men to do what is morally right. In what sense might it be said that “all men are equal?” Is it in the sense of our birth processes or our features? When we talk about the dignity of man, what do we really mean? If all men are equal, can this claim be corroborated in nature? Where then did the idea of superiority of men emanate from especially as it has to do with race, gender and colour discrimination?

Besides can all men come together to accept a single course of action without conflict whether in a class or classless communism? Based on Machiavelli’s (1999) claim that the first law of nature is the law of self preservation, will a man be comfortable to give up his life, intellectual property, invention free of charge for the enjoyment of other men and gladly so? Is this part of man’s internal make up? If these questions can be answered sincerely and practically, then we may be in a position to determine whether Marxism as an economic and social theory may or may not be workable.

It is a truism that man has an economic dimension that he tries to accentuate by his grasp on political power. This is evident in political formations and association. The sole aim therefore of political association is to lay hold on power in order to be able to control the resources of the state. Thus the ruling elite promulgate and enact only policies that will be of benefit to their continuous relevance economically and socially. The masses who are at the lower wrung of the economic ladder would want to upgrade and climb higher, while those who are high up the ladder would want to preserve their balance. At the end of the day, self interest becomes paramount and the motivating factor for actions thereby breeding conflict of interest and strife. One wonders then how communism whether class or classless type will eliminate this fundamental defect in man. Hobbes as quoted by Copleston (1964) corroborates this claim thus:

Now, this fact that every individual seeks his own conservation and his own delectation leads to competition and mistrust of others. Further, every man desires that others should value him as he values himself; and he is quick to resent every slight and all signs of contempt. So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition, secondly, diffidence (that is, mistrust), thirdly, glory (p. 41).

The three principal causes of quarrel which are competition, mistrust and glory as outlined by Hobbes are undeniably present in human relationship. Hence, it follows that, there is a fundamental defect in man that showcases his ineptitude and inadequacies. The subject of human rights is also of an important consideration here. The idea that humans have certain inalienable rights affects a great deal of issues of which decisions becomes critical as far as man is concern. Even the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaims a declaration of human rights in her article with the preamble affirming her faith in the fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.

The equality question as the basis for affirming a classless communism and society is still on the precipice. Since communism of the Marxian-Engelian type denounces the idea of class, it becomes needful to probe the basis for this position, and its possibility. The subject of equality seems to always go contrary with rights. So that when we talk of persons being equal, we may mean they also have different rights. Peter Singer, as quoted in Bowen (2008) puts the point this way:

There are obviously important differences between humans and other animals, and these differences must give rise to some differences in the rights that each have. The differences that exist between men and women are equally undeniable, and the supporters of women liberation are aware that these differences may give rise to different rights. The extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way or grant exactly the same rights to both groups (p.702-703).

One idea that is evident from Singer’s opinion is the fact that equality has many sides. Even if we accept that all men are equal, the right they enjoy differs. A man may be equal to other men but may not enjoy all the rights the others enjoy due to several disadvantageous factors. Perhaps this may account for Hobbes assertion that “men are by nature equal in bodily and mental capacities; not indeed, in the sense that all possess the same degree of physical strength and of quickness of mind, but in the sense that, by and large, an individual’s deficiencies in one respect can be compensated by other qualities” (Copleston, 1964: p.41).

The communist slogan which is ‘from each according to his ability and to everyman according to his needs’ lay credence to the different shades of equality and rights. Since abilities are not the same, it also follows that needs will be different. For example, if a person by virtue of his ability can perform more work than another person, it is given that such a person would exert more energy and on the basis of this would require more food for more energy than the other.

Admittedly then, the notion of ‘ability’ and ‘need’ in the communist slogan perpetuates a kind of class. Certainly everybody’s ability will not be the same and this is true of everyone’s needs. So do we give men what

their ability does not require or meet certain needs which are not in tandem with their abilities? If we do these how will justice be entrenched especially if we go by the ancient understanding of justice as giving every man his due? Are we going to be fair and just in giving a man his due even when he needs something more than that? These it seems are some of the questions that must be answered if we must do away with 'class' communism and move towards classless communism especially with Marx's assertion as enumerated by Moore and Bruder (1999) that:

The ideal society has no-economic classes, no wages, no money, no private property, and no exploitation. Each person will not only be provided a fully adequate material existence but will also be given the opportunity to develop freely and completely all physical and mental facilities ... this type of society will ultimately arise as the result of the historical process (p. 315-316).

In this vein, Plato's class communism appears to be more realistic even though its challenges are equally insurmountable. Furthermore, if Marxian communism is a product of a historical process derived from Hegel's dialectical movement of the spirit from thesis, antithesis to synthesis and giving a material base by Marx, then it must be noted that this dialectics is not static and there is a possibility of reversal.

Invariably then, we see a situation where communism, whether class or classless by its very constitution, presents to man an ideal that looks theoretically perfect but practically, non-implementable. This is true of Platonic and Marxian communism. The moral problems envisaged from the practice of Plato's class communism would leave the society worse than Plato had anticipated, in the same way that Marx communism founded on moral injustice will. Thus we may be forced to conclude that communism still breeds class distinction and moral trauma's whether or not this is apparent.

Man is yet to evolve to the height of moral perfection and such will never obtain in any social arrangement instituted by man. Moral deviants will always have a place in society. Thus nowhere and no time will we find a perfect system not because we lack good political and economic theories but because of the constitution and make up of man who is struggling against the tide of moral corruption and limitation.

Marx and Engels then were right when they stated that all hitherto existing history has been the history of class struggle. This is what has been the case and is still the case, without sounding pessimistic. This truth is anchored on the issue of equality, rights and the moral disposition of man. Communism may be anticipated by virtue of the dialectic; but that it seems to waiver between utopian and theoretical construction without having a concrete ramification is not in doubt. Class society is what is dominant and will remain so except some divine re-moulding of man's consciousness and nature were to occur. A classless society that will usher in the spirit of communism appears a fantasy. Thus, whichever way we want to look at it, we cannot have a class or classless communism as far as these concerns humans.

As we close, let us reinstate some fundamental lapses in Plato's class communism. Plato disregards the question of right whether conceived politically or morally. This is exemplified in his suggestion that placement into the class structure in the society be done by the state in the first instance, and his failure to make room for geniuses (that is, individuals who can fit excellently into more than one class) to choose which of the social groups they want to belong. By denying the fundamental requirement of responsibility through choice, it brings to the fore the moral deficiencies of his postulation. Hence some kind of injustice cannot be ruled out either in class or classless communism.

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