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Comparison of Platonic Communism to the Present Day Communism

Dr. Girish Singh

S.D. Government College, Beawar, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT: Modern Communism as practiced in erstwhile Soviet Union and China has been a collective philosophical predicament expounded by Karl Marx and modified by Lenin and Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao in China. Historically it owes its genesis to the ill-effects of nineteenth century industrial revolution.

In essence, Communists hold a materialist view of history. Whosoever controls the means of production controls the whole society. Thus society is divided into two classes, 'haves' and 'have not's'.

To Marx, "History of all hitherto society is the History of class struggle". They believe that final goal of class struggle will overthrow the capitalist system and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. In course of time, a classless society will emerge and the state will wither away.

A comparison between Platonic Communism and Modern Communism reveals more dissimilarities than similarities.

Differences:

1. Plato's communism is the outcome of conditions of Athens in the 4th century B.C. But, Modern communism is the result of the most complex conditions arising due to the industrial revolution in the Nineteenth Century Europe.

2. Plato's communism does not want total transformation of society. The producing class remains intact. It is applied only to the Guardian class.

But, Marxist communism is mainly concerned with alteration of economic structure of the society. It aims at abolition of private ownership of the means of production. All economic resources are centralised by the machinery of communist party.

This led Barker to remark that "Plato's communism was aristocratic; it is a way of surrender; and it is a surrender imposed on the best. It exists for the sake of the whole society, but not for the whole society."

3. While Plato's communism concerned prohibition of things that enabled Guardians to discharge their function, modern communism is concerned with common ownership of the means of production.

4. Plato's scheme of communism covered both; communism of property as well as wives. On the contrary, modern communism is concerned only with means of production.

5. Plato's communism aimed at making the Greek city state, a self sufficient properly governed unit. But, modern communism espoused a global vision to bring about a world revolution to usher in a communist society.

6. While Plato's communism was aristocratic; modern one is 'Proletarian'.

7. Plato's communism had high degree of abstraction with great philosophical rigor. Modern communism is more realistic combined with scientific rigor.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Plato's just State in the 'Republic' is one ruled by philosophers, by those with knowledge. However, Plato realises that overtime, the rule of philosophers is also prone to crumbling to desires and self-interest rather than public interest. Plato proposes to resolve this problem in a variety of ways. One of the mechanisms to ensure continuation of just rule is removal of objects of desire for the ruling class through communism. According to Sabine, Plato's communism takes two forms—First is prohibition of private property for rulers and auxiliaries (effect).¹ Second is the abolition of permanent monogamous sexual relationships, substituted by regulated breeding for the best possible offspring (cause). The auxiliaries and rulers will not be allowed to own property, nor will they have families of their own. Children borne out of regulated mating will be held in common, outside the family structure and will consider State their family (Nelson). This system of communism, thereby by depriving the guardian class of family and private property, believed Plato saved them from degeneration due to corruption and nepotism.² A comparison can be made in context of the private property with the idea of 'simple living, high thinking' attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. Despite evolving a system of communist principles, it is imperative to highlight the difference between Platonic idea and the contemporary concept of communism based on Karl Marx's work: Ascetism versus surplus production: While Plato's communism was based on depriving the ruling class of property to ensure their virtue, Marx sought to distribute the surplus equitably amongst all. Future guardians versus smashing class: Plato's communism of regulated mating and common care of children was meant to ensure future rulers to sustain guardian class while Marx's communism sought to end class. Sustenance of State versus end of State: Plato's communism of wives³ and property was directed for the unity and survival of State whereas Marx's communism was directed at creating a stateless society. Political versus Economic Objective: Plato's political philosophy viewed politics as a key to ensure justice and harmony in society. On the other hand, for Marx,⁴ economics was the base that provided foundation for superstructure including political system. Plato's system of communism while being revolutionary, was criticized not just by modern day scholars but his own student Aristotle as well. Aristotle criticised Platonic communism of depriving the rulers of basic happiness and motivation necessary for humans.⁵ Rather than creating unity and order, critics argue Platonic communism would only cause disorder, confusion as well as neglect. Karl Popper argues that Plato's system was not different from an idealised reproduction of tribalism of the past.

Plato's theory of communism was certainly a corollary of his conception of justice. He believed that without communism there would be clash of ideas and interests between reason and appetite. Plato's communism is based on the premise that property, family instincts and private interests would distract man's attention from his obligations to the community.⁶

He strongly opined that family and property are always impediments not only to philosopher king, but also to a commoner in his discharge of duties. As property and family relationships seemed to be the main source of dissension in the society, Plato stated that neither of them must be given any recognition in an ideal state. Therefore, a sort of communism of family and property was essential to offset the consequences of Plato's design of ideal state.⁷

Plato strongly believed that an economic division between the citizens of a state is the most dangerous political condition. This belief was mainly due to the widespread and frank opinions expressed by the Greeks that economic motives are very influential in determining political action and political affiliations.⁸

Long before The Republic was written, Euripides had divided citizens into three classes, viz., the useless rich—who are always greedy for more, the poor—who have nothing and are devoured by envy, and finally the middle class—a strong body of men who saves the state.⁹

An oligarchical state to a Greek meant a state governed by, and in the interest of the well-born whose possession of property was hereditary, while a democratic state was governed by and for the many who had neither hereditary birth nor property.¹⁰

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These economic differences were the key to the political institutions and it was no new idea, which the Greeks were following since ages. The cause for unrest that Plato was experiencing in Athens was mainly due to the troubles present since the days of Solon a statesman reforms in Athens.

II.DISCUSSION

This situation convinced Plato that wealth has a very pernicious effect on the government, but was dismayed at the fact that there was no way to abolish the evil except by abolishing the wealth itself To cure greed among the rulers, there is only one way and that was to deny them any right to call anything their own. Devotion to their civic duties admits no private rival.

The example of Sparta, wherein the citizens were denied the use of money and the privilege of engaging in trade, undoubtedly influenced Plato in reaching this conclusion. The main reason for Plato to emphasize on communism of property was to bring about greater degree of unity in the state.¹¹

Plato was equally vehement about the institution of marriage and opined that family affections directed towards a particular persons, as another potent rival to the state in competing for the loyalty of rulers.

He stated that anxiety for one's children is a form of self-seeking more dangerous than the desire for property, and the training of children at homes as a poor preparation for the whole and sole devotion, which the state has the right to demand. Plato was, in fact, appalled by the casualness of human mating which according to him would not be tolerated in the breeding of any domestic animal.¹²

The improvement of the race demands a more controlled and a more selective type of union. Finally, the abolition of marriage was probably an implied criticism of the position of women in Athens, where her activities were summed up in keeping the house and rearing children. To this, Plato denied that the state serve half of its potential guardians.

Moreover, he was unable to see that there is anything in the natural capacity of women that corresponds to the Athenian practice, since many women were as well qualified as men to take part in political or even military duties.

The women of the guardian class will consequently share the work of the men, which makes it necessary that both shall receive the same education and strictly be free from domestic duties. Plato's argument about breeding of domestic animals refers to the sexual relations between men and women.¹³

It is not that he regarded sex casually, but he demanded an amount of self-control that has never been realized among any large populations. According to him, if the unity of the state has to be secured, property and family stand in the way, therefore, they both must be abolished.

Forms of Communism:

Plato's communism is of two forms, viz., the abolition of private property, which included house, land, money, etc., and the second, the abolition of family, through the abolition of these two, Plato attempted to create a new social order wherein the ruling class surrendered both family and private property and embraced a system of communism. This practice of communism is only meant for the ruling class and the guardian class.¹⁴

However, Plato did not bind this principle on the third class, namely, the artisans. In other words, they were allowed to maintain property and family, but were under strict supervision so that they do not become either too rich or too poor. Though Plato structured the society in this manner, he never made any attempt to work out his plan that ensured such a system to function.

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III.RESULTS

The following is a brief description of each form of communism:

1. Communism of Property:

Plato's communism of property is in no way related to the modern communism or socialism because there was no mention of socialization of the means of production. Plato's approach was mainly concerned with one factor of production, that is, property that has to be socialized.

The land and its products were in the hands of the farmers. So, only the guardians were deprived of property. Plato deprived them of all valuables such as gold and silver, and were told that the diviner metal is within them, and therefore there is no need for any ornaments as it might pollute the divine thoughts.¹⁵

The guardians were paid salaries just right enough for their maintenance. They were expected to dine at common tables and live in common barracks, which were always open. Thus, Plato's communism was ascetic in character. Plato's communism existed only for the governing class. Therefore, it was political communism and not economic communism.

2. Communism of Wives:

Plato's scheme of communism deprived the guardian class not only of property, but also a private life or a family because family introduced an element of thine and mine. He believed that family would destroy a sense of cooperation that forms the basis for a state. To destroy family, it is important to destroy selfishness. Plato wanted the rulers of an ideal state not to get distracted from their work and get tempted towards self-interests.¹⁶

Plato opined that family was the great stronghold of selfishness, and for this reason it has to be banned for the governing class. This situation brings about a question of 'Did Plato deny his guardians class a normal sex life?' For this, Plato stated that mating was encouraged between those who can in the best possible manner produce children of the desired quality.

Another question that was raised was related to those children who were born out of this union. According to Plato, they would be the property of the state. Immediately after their birth, they would be taken to a nursery and nursed and nurtured there. This method would make sure that no parent would have any affection upon one child, and thus love all the children as their own.

Further, the guardians, instead of caring for the welfare of their progeny, would thrive for the welfare of all. Thus, guardians of the state would constitute one great family wherein all children would be treated equal and common. Bound by common joys and sorrow, there is personal or exclusive relation to one family and in the process the entire state.¹⁷

Plato further stipulated the age for both men and women for begetting children. He stated that the proper age for begetting children women should be between the age of 20 and 40 and men between 25 and 55 because at this time, the physical and intellectual vigor is more. If anybody flouted the rules, they were treated as unholy and unrighteous beings.

Thus, Plato's communism of wives provided social, political and psychological bases for the ideal state. Plato believed that such a communism of family would remove the conflict between the personal interests and the objectives of the state.¹⁸

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IV.CONCLUSIONS

Plato was the first philosopher who said about the communism. But, his communism was called the half-communism. His communism did not cover all sections of people in society. Plato applied the principles of his communism only on one section of people i.e. the guardians. Again, his communism is also known as the communism of wives and property. Plato did not support that the administrators should retain private property and family. According to Plato there is close relationship between private property and family. There is every possibility that persons having family will involve in corruption. For ideal state a corruption free society is most essential condition.¹⁹

The communism of property and wives are elaborately explained as follows:

1. Communism of Property

According to Plato private property is the stumbling block in the way of unity and integrity of state. Hence, he sought to eliminate the retention of private property through communism. His concept is that the possession of private property would create selfish motive in the mind of guardians and it would hinder them to serve for the community. So, he deprived of the ruling class from the possession of private property. Plato viewed that the guardians would live in a common barrack and would take meal in common table. Plato applied the communism of property only on the ruling class and the common people were debarred from that system.

2. Communism of Wives or Family:

Plato in his book The Republic mentioned some logical grounds for the abolition family for the guardians. Firstly, Plato abolished private property because private property is needed for maintenance of family. So, if there is no private property, there will be no need of family. Secondly, the family creates narrow affection. If the guardian had their family it would be not possible for them to consider that the state as their own family and the citizens as their own children. It would promote the selfish motive and then it would be the causes of all social evils. Thirdly, Plato wanted to emancipate the women of Athens. Fourthly, the production of children is so important to the state that it cannot be left to the unregulated private enterprise or individual affection. Fifthly, the communism of wives brings unity in the state²⁰

Principles of Plato's Communism

1. **Result of Social Justice:** Plato communism is the direct result of his concept of justice. He believed that without communism there would be conflict among the different classes of society, the guardians and producers. The existence of property and family would debar the philosopher king to give attention for the welfare of the community. Therefore, Plato provided his concept of justice and justice results the communism of property and family.
2. **Separation of Political and Economic Power:** Plato believed that union of political and economic power in one man is the fatal to political purity and it leads to corruption. The holder of political power forgets the needs of the common people. He only tries to fulfill his own needs. So it is disastrous for the state. Therefore, Plato viewed that separation of political and economic power is essential condition for communism.
3. **Half Communism:** Plato's communism was half communism. It did not cover all section of society. Plato applied his communism on only one section, the guardians. The guardian was debarred to retain property and wife. The peasants and artisans were free from that restriction. He did not apply it to the vast of the people. The guardians to whom the system was applied were few in number.²¹
4. **It does not Affect Economic Structure:** Plato's communism does not affect the economic structure of state. The individualistic economic system was untouched by his communism. The

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peasants and artisans produced the goods without any restriction. There was no any state intervention on their economic system.

5. Abolition of Permanent Marriage: Plato was deeply interested in the preservation of racial stock. He believed that precious sperm should be used for the procreation of fine progeny. Therefore, in his communism he prepared temporary marriage to produce healthy children and it is possible only if children are born from healthy couples. Immediate after the business over they must depart. For that Plato viewed that marriage is not personal affair. It is social and should be arranged by that state.²²
6. Communism is the way to reform minds: According to Plato state is the product of mind. So, to change the state it necessary to change the mindset of the people. Then justice can be realized. Plato said that communism is the best way to change the mindset and then from pure mindset the desired ideal state is possible.
7. Nourishment of Children by State: The children born in barracks will be common to all. They will have no separate parents of their own. They will be the property of the state. The state will bring up the babies under the nourishment of nurse. No one would know who is brother and sister, who is father and who is father.
8. Preservation of Racial System: Plato was deeply interested in the preservation of racial stock. He believed that precious sperm should be used for the procreation of fine progeny. Therefore, to produce healthy children healthy couples is essential. By this process Plato tried to preserve the healthy race and sacrifice the physically disabled citizens.

Criticism

1. Ignored the Majority People: This is one of the most drawbacks of Plato's communism. Plato applied his communism on only one class of society i.e. the guardian. Majority of the people, the peasants, workers and the artisans were excluded from communism.²³
2. May Lead to Revolutionary Condition: In Plato's communism the guardians sacrifice more. They have to take education for a long period of time. They provide much labor for the welfare of the community. But, in comparison of their labor they get nothing. This situation may create discontent among them, which may lead to revolutionary condition.
3. Property does not Brings Evils: According to Plato Property brings evils. Therefore, the guardians should not have private property. But, Aristotle strongly opposed this view of Plato. He said that not property but it is the human wickedness which brings evils in society.²⁴
4. For Unity Communism is not Necessary: For Plato, Communism of property would bring unity in the ideal state. But, his disciple, Aristotle criticizing Plato said that it is not communism of property but means of education that good society can be achieved.
5. Contradictory View on Richness: Plato debarred the guardians from the right of property on the ground that it is the richness that create prolific ground of dissension. He allowed this right only to the third class i.e. the producers..
6. Money and Family is Basic Psychological need: Acquisition of money and family is the natural and psychological need of human being. Without these two basic needs no incentive will grow in the mind people to do hard work for community. But, Plato deprived of the guardians from these basic human needs.²⁴

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7. Abolition of family has weakened the community: Plato on the one hand deprived the guardians from the family life; on the other hand, he excessively permitted the woman to participate in the affairs of state. Women always render valuable service to family life. But, Plato introducing concept of communism indirectly weakened the community.
8. Offence may Increase in Society: There are some of communism of wives and children. It may lead commit offences against father and mother or relatives because nobody knows what the relationship among them is.
9. Human being cannot be compared with Animals: In Plato's communism no permanent marriage was allowed. Plato desired that the citizens of ideal state should be healthy and for that Plato said that healthy man and woman should be selected to produce healthy children.. This view of Plato is fully based on animal instinct.
10. Children can be Better Cared by Mother than Nurse: In Plato's communism of family the responsibility to brought up the children are given to state appointed nurse. After birth the children would be handover to the state and the father and mother nothing to do anything. This view of Plato is quite unnatural. It is only mother who can take better care of their children than the nurses.²⁵

Difference between Plato's Communism and Modern Communism

- Plato's communism is called half communism. Plato did not cover all sections of people within the fold of his communism. It was only the guardians on whom Plato imposed the principles of communism. He left the vast majority of the people from his communism. The peasants and artisans had not followed the communism. On the other hand, the modern communism covers all section of people. It is not applied on particular class of society.
- Plato's communism believes on the existing of classes in state. He classified the people into three classes – the guardians, soldiers and producers. For making ideal states remaining of these classes are most essential. On the other hand, the modern communism does not believe on the existence of classes in society. It believes on the classless society.²⁶
- Plato gave importance on making an ideal state. He viewed that it is only ideal state where people can get a proper justice. But, the father of modern communism, Karl Marx viewed that the state is an institution of exploitation. Therefore, he said that the state should be withering away.
- Plato's communism was political in nature. He wanted that the philosopher guardians should not have private property because possession of private by them will be detrimental for the common interest of the people. He allowed private property for the producers. This is fully antagonistic to modern communism. The modern communism does not believe holding of private property any section of people.
- Plato's communism said about only the production system leaving the consumption untouched. It does say anything how goods produced by the workers should be distributed. But, modern communism emphasized both on the production as well as the consumption system.²⁸
- The modern communism believes the state should be ruled by the peasants or by the proletariat. It does not support the rule absolute monarchical system or the rule king. On the other hand, Plato said that the rule of philosopher king is the best one to establish ideal state.
- Plato did not believe any drastic change of the existing social system. He only wanted to bring change in the ideal through his reformed education system. Modern socialism, on the other hand wants drastic change in all sphere of life through revolutionary method.²⁹
- Plato's communism was for only the Greek city state. Plato's communism did touch the suppressed and exploited workers of the world. On the other hand, modern communism not only concern with national state. It is a worldwide movement.^{30,31}

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Despite the above criticism of Plato's theory of communism of property and wife we cannot deny that Plato seems to quite logical in emphasizing that the state could not get undivided loyalty unless the institution of property and family was done away with. But his theory is completely unrealistic and devoid hard realities of life. According to Barker, "by abolishing family and private property Plato destroys that instrument by which an individual can be known as individual."³²

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