1. Compare and contrast Karl Marx and Max Weber’s approach towards the understanding of Capitalism.

Ans: Despite their undeniable differences, Marx and Weber have much in common in their appraisals of modern capitalism: they share a vision of the capitalist economic system as a universe where “individuals are directed by abstractions,” (Marx), where impersonal relations and objects [Versachlicht] replace personal relations of dependence, and where the accumulation of capital becomes an end in itself and, by and large, irrational.

Their analysis of capitalism is inseparable from a critical posture-explicit in Marx, more ambivalent in Weber. But the content and inspiration of the critique are very different. And, whereas Marx banks on the possibility of overthrowing capitalism by workers of socialist persuasion, Weber is a fatalistic and resigned observer to the mode of production and administration that seem to him to be inevitable.

The anti-capitalist critique is one of the main strong points extending throughout Marx’s work, and gives it its coherence. This does not prevent one from seeing a certain evolution in his thought: whereas the Communist Manifesto (1848) is insistent on the historically progressive role of the bourgeoisie, Capital (1867) is more prone to denouncing the ignobility of the system. Nothing could be more false than to oppose, as is so often done, a young “ethical” Marx to a mature, “scientific” Marx. Max Weber

Marx’s anti-capitalism is grounded in certain implicit values or criteria, the most frequent among them being:

(a) Universal ethical values: liberty, equality, justice, autonomy, selfaccomplishment. The articulation between different human values constitutes a coherent whole; that one can design a revolutionary humanism that constitutes a principle benchmark for the ethical rejection of the capitalist system. The moral indignation against the infamies of capitalism burst from every page of Capital; it is an essential dimension of that which makes the impressionable force of the work in its dual political and scientific dimension. As Lucien Goldmann has written, Marx did not “mix” the distinction between fact and value, but developed a dialectical analysis in which explication, understanding and valorization are rigorously inseparable.

(b) The point of view of the proletariat, a victim of the system and its fossilizing potential. This class-based perspective inspires-as Marx clearly recognizes in the preface to Capital-his critique of bourgeois political economy. It is from this point of view that values like “justice” are reinterpreted: their concrete meanings differ according to the situation and interests of different classes.

(c) The possibility of an emancipated future, of a post-capitalist society, of a communist utopia. It is by the light of the hypothesis-or wager-of a free association of producers that the negative traits of capitalism appear in all their vastness.

(d) The existence, in the past, of more human social or cultural forms destroyed by capitalist “progress.” This reference, of romantic origin, is especially present in the texts where Marx and Engels analyze primitive communism, a form of communal life without a market or state, and without private property and without the patriarchal oppression of women. The existence of these values does not mean that Marx takes on a Kantian perspective, opposing a necessary transcendence to existing reality: his critique is immanent, to the extent that it is made with reference to a real social force which is opposed to capitalism-the working class-as well as to the contradiction between the possibilities created by the impulse of the productive forces and the limitations imposed by bourgeois relations of production.

The anti-capitalist critique of Marx is organized around five fundamental themes: the injustice of exploitation; the loss of liberty from alienation; venal quantification; irrationality; and modern barbarity. Let’s examine each of these points, emphasizing their lesser known aspects.

1) Injustice and exploitation. The capitalist system is grounded, independently of this or that political economy, on the unpaid surplus labor of workers, giving rise to, through “surplus value,” all forms of rent and profit. The extreme manifestations of this social injustice are the exploitation of children, miserable wages, inhuman working hours, and the sordid conditions of working class life. But these conditions of the laborer are a matter of a specific historical moment; the system itself is intrinsically unjust because of the parasitic exploitation of the labor force by direct producers. This theme occupies a decisive place in Capital and was essential in making the Marxist workers movement.

2) The loss of liberty from alienation, reification, and commodity fetishism. In the capitalist mode of production, individuals-laborers in particular—are dominated by their own products which take the form of autonomous fetishes and escape their control. It is a long and developed problematic in the writings of his youth, but it also emerges in the celebrated chapter on the fetishism of commodities in Capital.

At the heart of Marx’s analysis of alienation is the idea that capitalism is a type of disenchanted “religion,” where objects in the market replace divinity: “The more the worker is externalized in his labor, the more the outside, objective world, which he himself creates, becomes powerful, the more he is self-impooverished and the more his internal world becomes poor, the less he possesses that is his own. It is the same with religion. The more man invests in God, the less he is able to retain his own self.” The concept of fetishism reinvents the history of religions in the form of primitive idolatry which itself already contains the same principle of all religious phenomena.

It is not an accident that in their writings the theologians of liberation- Hugo Assmann, Franz Hinkelammert, Enrique Dussel-draw largely on Marx against capitalist alienation and fetishism in their denunciation of “the idolatry of the market.”

3) The venal quantification of social life. Capitalism, which is regulated by exchange value and the calculation of profits and the accumulation of capital, tends to dissolve and destroy all qualitative value: use value, ethical value, human relations and sentiments. Having replaces Being, and consists of mere cash payments-the “cash nexus,” according to Carlyle that Marx appropriated for his own use-and the “glassy waters of egoistic calculation.”