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Karl Marx's Theory of History

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Karl Marx (1818–1883) is one of history's most influential and controversial figures. He devoted most of his time to trying to understand the inner workings of capitalist economies.^[1] He was also a philosopher concerned with the alienation under capitalism of individuals from their social and creative potential.^[2]

On a broader canvas, Marx was a philosopher of history^[3] who outlined a theory of the development and transformation of human societies in general – a theory referred to as *historical materialism*.

This essay introduces this theory.

1. What is Historical Materialism?

Various theses have been advanced to explain the course of human history: for example, that history is shaped primarily by the actions of exceptional individuals.^[4] Or that it displays the unfolding of humanity's consciousness of freedom.^[5] Or that civilizations grow and decay like biological organisms.^[6] Or that history has no pattern but "is just one damned thing after another."^[7]

For Marx, the key factor determining the form and development of any society is the way it interacts with its material environment to sustain itself – that is, its *mode of production*. This comprises its technological powers ("forces of production") and the economic structure ("relations of production") used to harness those powers.

The forces of production include the means of production (tools, machines, and raw materials) and the labor power of workers (strength, skill, and knowledge). The relations of production are social relations of control over forces of production, both means of production and labor power. The division of

society into economic classes reflects the unequal distribution of power over the production process and the wealth created.

"The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general," says Marx.^[8] In particular, a society's economic structure ("base") determines the nature of its "superstructure" of legal and political institutions and prevailing ideology.

Marx argues that in time a society's growing technological capacities become hindered ("fettered") by its relatively invariant economic structure. This increasing dysfunction eventually results in revolution: the economic structure is replaced to allow for further technological growth, and society's political and legal institutions and its ideology undergo a corresponding change.

For example, when the feudal, land-based economies of the European Middle Ages became hindrances to the growth of society's productive powers, they were superseded by capitalist economies, based on private ownership of the means of production and the employment of wage workers. These economies were entrenched by the political dominance of the capitalist class and an ideology of acquisitive individualism that came to prevail.

2. Technological Determinism?

What ultimately drives historical change? One school of thought sees Marx's theory as a form of technological determinism "in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth."^[9]

Others, though not denying that technology may lay the groundwork for historical change, are adamant that Marx assigns the key role to the struggles among different economic classes.^[10] In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) proclaim, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."^[11]

3. Capitalism

Marx's general theory of history encompasses societies of all types, each type having certain unique features.

The capitalist mode of production is a self-expanding, unstable system, marked by a "boom-and-bust" cycle. Market competition has given unprecedented impetus to the development of technology while

undermining traditional social ties and values, and concentrating capital in the hands of the relative few who control the means of production. But it has simultaneously generated a working class that is increasingly integrated and made aware of its own potential power by the evolution of the very system that exploits it.

Originally Marx and Engels believed that the struggle to overthrow capitalist ruling classes would require violence; but by the 1870s they had come to believe that in certain countries with parliamentary institutions, the working class could win power by peaceful means. The transition from capitalism would allow the achievement of a truly democratic and classless society (“communism”), thus bringing an end to the history of class struggles.^[12]

Capitalism has proven far more resilient than Marx expected. Now, however, the addition of ecological crises to capitalism’s traditional challenges has the makings of a perfect storm, one that many think the system will be hard-pressed to survive in anything like its current form.^[13]

4. Is the Theory Coherent?

Some critics say Marx’s theory of history is either false or trivial. If it holds that society’s legal and political “superstructure” is merely an effect of the mode of production, then it is clearly false because politics, law, and ideology profoundly affect the latter. For example, a capitalist economy could not last a day without the laws and judicial system that protect private ownership and support markets, enable trade, guarantee security, etc.

On the other hand, if Marx’s theory is interpreted to mean that every aspect of the social system affects every other aspect, then it is true but trivial.

Defenders of Marx, beginning with Engels, have sought ways to reconcile the idea of the explanatory primacy of the mode of production with the fact of reciprocal influence. The works of scholars in recent decades include impressive attempts to show that the theory can be interpreted in a way that is coherent and non-trivial.^[14]

5. Conclusion

Marx’s theory of history claims to identify structural and developmental features common to all human societies, grounded in their need to employ their technological powers to wrest a living from their material environments.^[15] While rejecting the idea that the course of history is predetermined, it sees a

long-term progression of societal forms toward increased technological capacity to control this “metabolism” with nature.

Whatever the merits of Marx’s predictions about capitalism, historical materialism, as a more general theory of history, cannot peer into a future beyond capitalism with any assurance – though it may assist in understanding how, over the long course of history, we have got to where we are now.

Notes

[1] See Defining Capitalism and Socialism by Thomas Metcalf.

[2] See Marx’s Conception of Alienation by Dan Lowe.

[3] So-called *speculative* philosophy of history refers to theories of the course of human history, of which Marx’s theory is one. *Critical* philosophy of history examines the methods and kinds of explanations used by historians.

[4] Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). See Besner (2013). Carlyle is depicted in Ford Madox Brown’s painting *Work* at the right side, wearing a hat.

[5] G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). See Pinkard (2019).

[6] Oswald Spengler (1880–1936). See Gallant (2021).

[7] This phrase is commonly attributed to Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), though Toynbee’s own view is that the rise and fall of civilizations depends on whether elites can respond creatively to challenging circumstances. See Kumar (2014).

[8] See McLellan (2000), p. 425.

[9] See Cohen (1978), p. x.

[10] See the works of British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, e.g., Thompson (2013).

[11] See McLellan (2000), p. 246.

[12] Marx wrote little about this prospective post-capitalist society. The state, an instrument of class domination, would eventually be replaced by a cooperative community in which each person would be able to engage in creative, satisfying work and develop all sides of themselves, mental and physical. Each would contribute to society according to their individual abilities and receive according to their individual needs.

[13] See Benton (2018).

[14] Cohen (1978) argues that the economic structure determines, or selects, a particular type of superstructure precisely because of the latter's stabilizing effect on the economic structure, just as in turn that particular economic structure is determined by its effect on the development of the productive forces.

[15] Historical materialism is not the same as "dialectical materialism". The latter is a philosophy of nature that views human societies as components of a larger hierarchy of systems drawing energy from their environments and subject to common basic laws of development. Whether dialectical materialism is compatible with historical materialism has been the subject of considerable debate.

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[Marx's Conception of Alienation](#) by Dan Lowe

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