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Marx on Historical Materialism

H.B. Acton
University of Edinburgh
Department of Philosophy

Revised by
Michael Baur
Fordham University
Department of Philosophy

Biography: Michael Baur is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Adjunct Professor of Law at Fordham University in New York City. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Toronto and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. His scholarly research focuses on the work of continental philosophers (including Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger) and on political/legal philosophy.

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Abstract

Marx’s theory of historical materialism seeks to explain human history and development on the basis of the material conditions underlying all human existence. For Marx, the most important of all human activities is the activity of production by means of labor. With his focus on production through labor, Marx argues that it is possible to provide a materialistic explanation of how human beings not only transform the world (by applying the “forces of production” to it) but also transform themselves in transforming the world (by entering into “relations of production” with one another). For Marx, the productive labor of human beings – and the resulting interplay between the forces and relations of production – function together as the engine which drives all historical change and development. By understanding how the productive activities of human beings give rise to the division of labor and class conflict, it becomes possible, according to Marx, to understand how different historical epochs succeed one another, and how the trajectory of human history points towards a communist society within which the division of labor and class conflict will be abolished.

Introduction

Karl Marx put forward what has been called an “historical materialist” theory of human nature and development. He articulated this theory as a result of his intellectual engagement with the work of German philosophers (e.g., G.W.F. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach), British economists (e.g., Adam Smith and David Ricardo), and French socialists (e.g., Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon), and as a result of his decades-long conversations with his friend and colleague, Friedrich Engels. Marx’s “historical materialism” was subsequently adopted by his intellectual followers and incorporated into several different varieties of Marxist political movements, including the Leninist, Stalinist, and Maoist varieties.

Marx and Engels first formulated the general outlines of their theory of “historical materialism” in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 and 1846; however, the intellectual sources of the theory, and many elaborations and applications of it, can be found in other works by Marx and/or Engels, including Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), and *Capital* (volume 1 published in 1867), as well in their personal and professional correspondence.

Origin and Foundations of the Theory

Marx’s historical materialist theory seeks to explain human nature and development on the basis of the empirically-knowable material conditions of human existence. Marx’s interest in materialist theories of reality can be discerned even in the earliest of his theoretical work, for example, in his doctoral dissertation (completed in 1841 at the University of Jena) on Democritus and Epicurus. Marx admired British and French thinkers who, by writing “histories of civil society, of commerce and industry,” sought to provide “a materialist basis” to historical understanding (Marx and Engels 1978, 156). Furthermore, he insisted that a materialist theory of human existence must not be naïve and unhistorical, but must instead recognize the dynamic and dialectical character of human labor, by means of which human beings produce their own means of subsistence. Along these lines, Marx criticized Feuerbach, noting that “as far as Feuerbach is a materialist, he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history, he is not a materialist” (Marx and Engels 1978, 171).

The arguments found in the writings of Marx that pre-date the *German Ideology* indicate that Marx’s later views arose out of a metaphysical prototype, a sort of “Ur-Marxismus,” which continued to exert an influence on Marx’s later work. Before he began collaborating with Engels in 1844, Marx sought to justify his views by relying mainly on philosophical and moral, rather than on strictly economic, considerations. But in 1844, Engels encouraged Marx to make an intensive study of economics. As a result of this study, Marx produced what has come to be known as the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” or the “Paris Manuscripts,” of 1844. These manuscripts combined the critique of political economy with a critique of the Hegelian philosophy that Marx had been studying at the time. Though incomplete and never published during Marx’s lifetime, these manuscripts constitute what might be regarded as a first draft of the comprehensive treatise which Marx spent the rest of his life writing, and which found subsequent articulation in later works such as *The German Ideology*, the *Grundrisse* or *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy* (1857-1858), the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), and *Capital* (1867).

In writing the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx brought his newly-acquired economic knowledge to bear upon views he had reached in criticizing the abstract, idealistic philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. Marx had noticed how Hegel described the process of human historical development as a process in which the human mind “externalized” its own ideas and, by means of such externalization, transformed and “humanized” the material world. According to Marx, Hegel correctly saw that human labor was not necessarily an obstacle to human development and liberation, but rather the means by which humans are able to become truly free and self-determining. With his famous “master-slave dialectic” (from the “Self-consciousness” chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*), Hegel argued, counterintuitively, that it is not the master who is able to be genuinely free, for the master does not produce the conditions of his

own existence but merely consumes products which have been provided to him by another (by the slave). Instead, it is the slave who is able to achieve genuine freedom, since the slave transforms the world by laboring on it, and in transforming the world also transforms himself (Hegel 1977, 111-119). The slave transforms himself through labor insofar as the slave cultivates his own productive capacities as a result of laboring on the world, and in doing so, the slave gradually develops and produces his own productive capacities – which, for Marx, means that the slave, over time, becomes self-producing or self-determining by producing his own means of subsistence.

For Hegel as well as for Marx, the laborer is at first necessarily unable to recognize the genuinely self-determining and emancipatory character of his own labor. At first, the laborer cultivates his own productive capacities but without recognizing that he is doing so. For Marx, this happens because the laborer's productive activity makes its appearance within the laborer's world of experience only insofar as it is embodied in products (commodities) which are consumed and enjoyed by others, thanks to the division of labor within society. Hegel himself had recognized that, with a division of labor in society, some jobs became trivial and even degrading. But Hegel also thought that the division of labor was a necessary accompaniment to all human progress since it made possible, through the differentiation of society into orders or classes, the production of works of mind that would have been beyond the power of less differentiated societies. By contrast, Marx held that the division of labor represented just one stage (albeit a necessary stage) of progress within human history, and that the division of labor would itself be abolished with further progress in history. More specifically, Marx held that human labor, by being turned into wage labor within the capitalist social order, had itself become a commodity that was bought and sold on the market, thus subjecting the laborer to impersonal market forces that appeared to operate entirely beyond his own control. The wage system thus perverted the laborer's own productive activity so that the natural world was not positively transformed into a transparent manifestation of human productivity, but was rather turned into a strange and alien force that appeared quite hostile to workers. A truly human existence would be possible only when the division of labor, and along with it private property and wage labor, had been abolished through the establishment of a communist social order. Communism, Marx wrote, is "the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution" (Marx and Engels 1978, 84). The idea that communism would solve the riddle of history by releasing men from the unwilling, unwanted servitude to their own, seemingly alien products is the metaphysical precursor to Marx's later idea that planned but non-coercive communism would necessarily result from the dissolution of capitalism.

Outline of the Theory

Historical materialism consists, in the first place, of an analysis thought to be applicable to all but the most primitive of human societies. On the basis of this analysis, Marx sought to give an account of the rise and fall of various social systems within history, and he predicted that capitalism – the penultimate stage of human history – will eventually collapse and be succeeded by a communist society, in which there will be no division of labor, no private property, no wage labor, no money, no class distinctions, and no state. As part of his analysis, Marx distinguished several different elements at work within developed societies. These were: (1) "the forces of production," which include the tools, skills, machinery, technology, and techniques by which human beings labor and thus obtain the wherewithal for life; (2) "the relations of production,"

which are the social systems or structures or frameworks within which human beings, in the midst of their laboring on the world and making use of the “forces of production,” also enter into relations with one another; (3) the political and legal institutions of society which are the derivative or “superstructural” expressions generated by the more fundamental or “basic” forces and relations of production; and (4) the ideas, habits of thought, ideals, and systems of justification, in terms of which the members of the society think of themselves and of their relations to one another. Marx thought that these ideas and habits of thought represented distorted pictures, or ideological representations, of the underlying material or economic reality. For Marx, such ideologies find expression in various forms of religion, theology, speculative philosophy or metaphysics, morality, ethics, art, and political theorizing.

Analysis of Social Structure

According to Marx, the “material conditions” of human life include, most importantly, the “forces of production” and the “relations of production.” The primary social activity of human beings is production through labor, and such production involves relations with other humans, both in the labor itself and in the distribution of the product. It is upon these relationships that the political and legal superstructure and the ideological superstructure are formed. To understand the politics, law, religion, morality, art, or philosophy of any given society, it is necessary to ascertain the nature of the society’s forces and relations of production. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx expressed moral outrage over the way in which human labor, in a capitalist economy, wrongly enslaves human beings to the products of their own making. By the time he wrote his *Critique of Political Economy*, he had gone beyond moral condemnation in order to offer an explanation of how, in a capitalist economy, the forces of production inescapably compel human beings to operate within a social framework that appears not to be of their own making. Thus Marx came to emphasize how human individuals always find themselves existing within structures of society which pre-exist the individuals themselves and which misleadingly present themselves as “natural” or even immutable frameworks that humans are powerless to alter through their own activity.

Division of Labor, Property, and Power

According to Marx, a division of labor exists when individual human beings produce products which they themselves do not consume, and consume products which they themselves do not produce. Where human beings produce products which they themselves do not consume, and consume products which they themselves do not produce, there must also be some system for the exchange and circulation of such products. And where there is a system for the exchange and circulation of products, there must also be – even if in rudimentary form – some (political and/or legal) system of property relations. For Marx, however, the real driving forces at work in all human history and development remain to be found at the level of production, and not in the resulting systems of exchange or circulation, and not in the legal and political arrangements which are wrongly thought to govern property relations. Property relations, and the accompanying legal and political institutions, are themselves based upon the more fundamental productive activities at work in human society (involving the forces and relations of production). According to Marx, the division of labor in human productive activity makes it possible for human beings to transform the natural world in ways that would be quite impossible for humans if their labor remained undivided and undifferentiated; and the division of labor also makes it

possible for human beings to transform and develop their own productive capacities in ways that would be quite off limits to undifferentiated labor. But the division of labor – since it also involves a division between those who produce certain products and those who consume those products – also makes it possible for some human beings to accumulate property at the expense of others, and therefore opens up the possibility of exploitation through the use of accumulated property and power. Marx did not believe, however, that property was all of one type. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels distinguished four main types of property that play an important role in their theory of history and society: tribal property, which exists in primitive societies where there is only a minimal division of labor; state property, such as the roads, public buildings, and stores of grain under the ancient forms of despotism; feudal property, consisting of lands and services controlled by military landowners whose needs are supplied by serfs; and capital, which rests on the separation between production and commerce and results in the employment of laborers who work for wages and produce goods that are sold in wider and wider markets to make profits for the capitalist (Marx and Engels 1978, 151-154).

According to Marx, the main power or influence in a society belongs to those who own and control the main type of property in it. In tribal society the property is jointly owned; hence power is diffused throughout the society and there is no dominant class. The other types of property involve a distinction between those who control property and those who do not. Those who control a predominant type of property hold the predominant power in society and are able to make arrangements benefiting themselves at the expense of the rest of the population. In feudal society, for example, the feudal lords are the ruling class. They are able to get what they want from the serfs who work for them, and even from rich merchants, whose type of wealth is subordinated to the landed interests. The interests of serf, merchant, and lord are not the same; indeed, they necessarily conflict at certain points. But while the forces of production and the type of property are predominantly feudal, the feudal lords are able to settle these conflicts in their own favor. As long as the feudal system operates, any frictions and tensions are dealt with within its terms. The political ideas and movements within a feudal society merely express, or “reflect,” these more fundamental, underlying conflicts between differing classes and their differing interests.

Historical Epochs

For Marx, since “the material conditions of life” are fundamental in the structuring of a society, it follows that important changes in the material conditions of life sooner or later bring with them important changes in the legal and political superstructure and in the ideological superstructure. Marx also held that important changes in superstructural institutions (such as political and legal institutions) are not brought about by human thought or reflection on those institutions, but only by means of changes at the level of the more fundamental (economic) basis of those institutions. For Marx, all important social and historical changes originate only through changes at the level of human productive activity (through changes to the forces and relations of production), and not through changes at the superstructural or ideological level of human existence.

This theory of historical materialism is also a theory of historical epochs. The original state of primitive communism was succeeded, according to Marx, by the ancient forms of slave-owning society; these were succeeded by feudalism, and feudalism by capitalism. In ancient slave society, it was the labor of slaves that made possible the art and science of ancient Greece, as well as the cities, the commerce, and the bureaucracy of ancient Rome. The slave system broke

down largely because of its wastefulness, and it was replaced by the feudal system, in which features borrowed from the social system of the barbarian invaders were utilized. The basis of the feudal system was the ownership of land by feudal lords, whose dependents had to render them services of various kinds.

The feudal system was fundamentally an agricultural society, but in the towns (where there was a greater division of labor and thus more accumulation of wealth), some individuals were able to enhance their wealth and power by organizing the production of goods in large workshops where they employed large numbers of wage laborers. These bourgeois, as they were to be called, were the forerunners of the capitalist system. They attracted laborers from the countryside to work for them in producing goods sold in widely expanding markets. In this and other ways, they acted in opposition to the predominant feudal arrangements that had previously confined serfs to the areas of their birth. Finding themselves hampered by the feudal laws, the bourgeois endeavored to change such laws and thus entered upon a political struggle with the aristocracy. They justified their actions by arguing that aristocratic distinctions (based, for example, on birth and family connections) were contrary to the “immutable” and “natural” order of universal freedom and equality.

As the new methods of production and the new modes of life that went with them were extended, a new order of society was gradually formed within the old. New types of production and trade had been adopted that could come to fruition only if the laws and customs that hampered them were abolished. When, therefore, the bourgeoisie were strong enough, they took political action to achieve this and gained political power by a series of revolutions, including the American and French revolutions. From being a progressive class, the bourgeoisie became the ruling class, and their landowning opponents declined from being the ruling class into being a reactionary class, which, however, could not return society to its earlier state, since the new forces of production were superior to the old ones.

This interpretation of the change from feudalism to capitalism illustrates the Marxist analysis of political revolutions. Marx and Engels regarded such revolutions as the means by which a progressive class, that is, the class that controls some newly emerging forces of production, brings about changes in the relations of production which allow the new forces of production to become effective and proliferate. Feudal institutions and, in particular, feudal property laws would have stifled the development of the capitalist forces of production. In seizing political power, the bourgeoisie succeeded in establishing relations of production which enabled the expansion of capitalistic forces of production.

In all historical epochs leading up to and including capitalism, innovations in the forces of production – much like new wine in old wineskins – lead to social revolutions which burst the prevailing relations of production and thereby call forth a new set of relations which are capable of containing and sustaining the new forces of production. The cycle of innovation and revolution in history will be concluded when humans establish (communistic) relations of production which will be fully adequate to the forces of production and which will be recognized by humans as transparent manifestations of their own productive activity, rather than as an alien, dehumanizing framework imposed upon them beyond their own control.

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