

# **The Dialectics of Ambiguity**

**The Marxist Theory of History**

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# Contents

Introductory Note . . . . .	3
Historical Materialism: Marxian Summaries . . . . .	5
Marxian Ambiguity . . . . .	7
Historical Materialism: An Attempt at a Systematic Summary . . . . .	8
Two Definitions of Materialism . . . . .	11
Marxian Theory: Explanatory or Predictive? . . . . .	13
Tenets of Historical Materialism . . . . .	16
1. The Class Struggle . . . . .	16
2A. The Mode of Production . . . . .	23
2B. The Stages of History . . . . .	25
3. Base and Superstructure, and Social Existence and Consciousness . . . . .	28
A Summary of Points . . . . .	35
Marx and Hegel . . . . .	36
Marxist Messianism . . . . .	39
The Necessity of Utopia . . . . .	43

## Introductory Note

This article is the latest in a series of essays devoted to a critique of Marxism from the left. I began the articles in the early 1990s when I was affiliated with Love and Rage, a group that described itself as a revolutionary anarchist federation. Prior to that time, I had been a Marxist for many years and a member of two organizations that (in their distinct ways) opposed the then-extant Communist societies as representing the perversion of Marxism (and Leninism) and attempted to uphold what they considered the true interpretation of that worldview. During that time, I believed that Marxism and Leninism embodied an outlook that stood for the liberation of the working class and all other oppressed people, and the establishment of a truly liberated—democratic, cooperative and egalitarian—society, one that is directly governed in all aspects by its members. More specifically, I thought that the Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia in October 1917 represented a true proletarian revolution, one which was, moreover, supported by the peasantry, the vast majority of people in the Russian Empire. However, the circumstances in which it had taken place—particularly the nature of Russian society, the material destruction caused by World War I and the years of revolution and civil war that followed, the failure of other socialist revolutions in Germany, Hungary and elsewhere, and the viciousness of the attempted counter-revolutionary struggle—resulted at first in the bureaucratization of the revolutionary regime and ultimately in its total overthrow at the hands of a bureaucratic elite organized and led by Joseph Stalin.

After some years of study and consideration, I eventually concluded that this position was untenable. Rather than seeing the establishment of totalitarian, state capitalist (Communist) systems as the negation of Marxism, I came to believe that these societies in fact represented its fulfillment, although this had not been explicitly perceived, let alone advocated, by Marxist ideologists. As a result of reaching this conclusion, while still maintaining my opposition to capitalism and advocating the establishment of a liberated society, I became attracted to anarchism. I was particularly drawn to its hostility to the state and its opposition (in contrast to Marxism) to utilizing a state apparatus to achieve its goal. I was also intrigued by its understanding of hierarchy, which subsumes questions of class, national, racial and sexual oppression under a broader category without insisting on the primacy/determining nature of anyone of them. Lastly, I was impressed by what I believe to be implied by anarchism (if not always consistently adhered to by anarchists themselves): a philosophical skepticism that repudiates the belief in the Truth of any one political/philosophical orthodoxy, in other words, its commitment to a form of ideological pluralism. For this and other reasons, I participated in and joined what eventually became Love and Rage.

Once in this organization, however, I began to discern that some of its members, and one leader in particular, seemed to be attracted to certain authoritarian aspects of Marxism. Having been involved in Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, and having watched the evolution of its politics from a kind of libertarian social democracy in its early years to a form of militant Stalinism at the time of its split in 1969, I was concerned that Love and Rage not undergo a comparable life history. It was with this in mind that I began a series of articles that I called an anarchist critique of Marxism. Aside from offering the benefits of my own experience (such as they might be) to those younger activists in Love and Rage and elsewhere on the left who might be open to them, I also wanted to clarify my own thinking, in a kind of settling of accounts with past beliefs. I particularly wished to explain why the practical results of Marxism—the actual out-

come of Marxist-led revolutions—had been hideous totalitarian regimes rather than the liberated, democratic and egalitarian societies that Marxists proclaimed, and still proclaim, to be their goal. In the same vein, I wished to explore why so many Marxists (the vast majority, it seems to me) have been so bent on supporting, defending and justifying such regimes, as well as others that were not the result of Marxist-led revolutions, despite their obviously undemocratic and brutal character. Finally, I wanted to understand why so many people involved in radical politics, including anarchists themselves, have been drawn to this type of authoritarian thinking; why, for example, some young anarchists today view Che Guevara and the Weathermen, arch-Stalinists and elitists if there ever were any, as heroes.

I now believe that Marxism must be held responsible for the establishment of totalitarian state capitalist Communist regimes and that this, not its claim to stand for the creation of liberated societies, is its real meaning. In other words, Marxism leads to totalitarianism. Of course, the question of historical responsibility is a complicated one. State capitalism in Russia and elsewhere was established under specific historical circumstances, not all of which can be blamed on Marxism. But Marxism, which prides itself on being the true understanding of history, its dynamics, direction and outcome, can be held responsible for what Marxists did under these circumstances, and why so many Marxists supported and support, and even seek to replicate, the dictatorial regimes that Marxists established in the name of freedom. As I see it, Marxism was a necessary, if not sufficient, cause of such societies. If Marxism had never existed, Russia, the countries of Eastern Europe, China, etc., might well have experienced centralized, industrializing, so-called modernizing, governments intent on enabling these countries to resist colonialist domination and imperialist penetration and to compete on the capitalist world market. But the specific nature of the regimes that were established in these lands, including the official state ideologies, mandated atheism, one-party rule, ideological campaigns, leadership cults, purges and gulags, and particularly the extreme nature of the violence they practiced, must, I think, be held to Marxism's account.

In light of this, a critique of Marxism seems to me to be a preliminary step in the process of developing an outlook that consistently promotes the establishment of a free society. If we are to build a mass radical movement that really stands for what it claims to, we need to figure out what went wrong before.

When I initiated the series, there was some concern that I was wasting my time (and that *Love and Rage* was wasting space in its newspaper). Many people presumed that Marxism was dead, as it appeared to be in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union and the other state capitalist regimes in Eastern Europe, and in the light of China's evolution toward a more traditional form of capitalist economy. But since I had lived through the 1950s and early 1960s, when Marxism (at least in the United States) was also declared to be deceased only to revive with great vigor in the late 1960s, I believed that my efforts were not totally in vain. It was with this in mind that I was somewhat reassured (if that's the right word), to learn that one of the large and apparently influential anti-war coalitions to emerge in the buildup to the war in Iraq—the International Answer coalition—was dominated by the Workers World Party, the embodiment of a particularly virulent form of Stalinist Marxism. That this characterization of the group is apt was revealed in the fact that one of the key points of unity of this coalition was/is that no criticism of Saddam Hussein and his regime be allowed. Although the anti-war protests have subsided and the International Answer coalition has since kept a low profile, I believe it will be only a matter of time before some sort of oppositionist movement revives (which I am for), and the Workers World Party again raises its head (which I am against). So much for Marxism being dead. Of

course, there are other organizations that defend more democratic interpretations of Marxism, but I consider that efforts to contest the Marxist terrain with hard-line Stalinists are futile. This is because, as I've tried to show in these articles, I believe Marxism itself, in its fundamental philosophical assumptions and in other aspects of its outlook and program, is totalitarian.

Previous essays in this series have discussed Marx's theory of the state, his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat and his analysis of capitalism. In this article, I wish to take up his theory of history, what Marxists refer to as "historical materialism." Since the theory, in its claim to explain the totality of human history, encompasses a vast territory, I cannot even pretend to analyze it in its entirety. I do wish to discuss some of its key tenets and characteristics.

## Historical Materialism: Marxian Summaries

Significantly, nowhere in the huge corpus of Marx and Engels' writings is there a fully elaborated presentation and explanation of the Marxian theory of history as a whole. Instead, what we have are, on the one hand, a few frustratingly brief summaries of the theory, and on the other, detailed examples or, in more pretentious language, exemplifications, of their historical conception, that is, relatively worked-out studies of particular historical events that purport to be applications of historical materialism. I include in this latter category Marx's monumental analysis of one socio-economic formation in particular, *Das Kapital / Capital*. While some commentators, both within and outside the left, have discerned a contradiction between the theory of historical materialism and Marx's analysis of capitalism, it seems clear to me that Marx meant his theory of capital to be consistent with his broader analysis of history. If there are contradictions between the two, these are contradictions within the theory of historical materialism itself.

It might appear to be convenient that there exists only a handful of synopses of the Marxian theory of history from its originators. This way, various analysts who might disagree on other issues relating to Marxism might at least agree on what Marx and Engel's conception explicitly states. But, as we shall see, this is not the case.

In order to see why this is so, it is worth reproducing here two of those statements of the overall theory. I begin with what is generally considered, by both those who deem themselves to be Marxists and those who don't, to be the best—succinct but inclusive—presentation of the theory. I am referring to the passages in Marx's preface to one of his preliminary studies of capitalism, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Marx writes as follows (please forgive the length of the quotation):

The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, continued to serve as the leading thread in my studies, may be briefly summed up as follows: In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their

development, the material forces of production come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then comes the period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces, for which there is room in it, have been developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society. Therefore, mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from conditions surrounding the life of individuals in society; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation constitutes, therefore, the closing chapter of the prehistoric stage of human society. (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx, Charles H. Kerr & Company, Chicago, 1904, pp.11–13.)

I will also reproduce here another, briefer explication of the Marxian theory. This is from Friedrich Engels' 1888 preface to the *Communist Manifesto*:

The *Manifesto* being our joint production, I consider myself bound to state that the fundamental proposition which forms its nucleus, belongs to Marx. That proposition is: 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 is built up and from 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 ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; that the history of these class struggles form [sic] a series of evolutions 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 distinctions, and class struggles.

This proposition...is destined to do for history what Darwin's theory has done for biology... (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, International Publishers, New York, 1948, p. 6.)

## Marxian Ambiguity

Although these two passages are generally considered to be consistent, there is, in fact, a significant difference between the two presentations of the theory. This is that while Engels emphasizes what is often considered the most important proposition of Marxism—that the history of humanity (since the dissolution of primitive communism) has been a history of class struggle (this contention is also very prominently articulated at the beginning of section I of the *Manifesto* itself)—Marx doesn't explicitly mention the class struggle at all. This reveals what I consider to be a major characteristic of the Marxian theory of history and Marxism as a whole. This is its lack of precision and its resultant ambiguity: almost every category and concept is vague. Historical materialism in fact consists of a large number of broad generalizations that may appear to be valid at first glance, but which break down when subjected to serious scrutiny. In other words, despite its claim to be scientific (Engels, as we saw, compared it to Darwin's theory of evolution), the Marxist theory of history is ambiguous, even rubbery, and can be subject to a variety of interpretations, both of its overall meaning and of its specific tenets.

For a conception that insists on its scientific character, this is a serious weakness. After all, one of the crucial characteristics of a truly scientific theory is its precision. This enables it to be held to account, that is, proved or disproved, or, if one prefers, verified or falsified. (I don't wish to get into a discussion here of precisely how scientific theories are validated, to what extent they can be said to be proved or disproved. Suffice it say, that most people, particularly scientists and philosophers and historians of science, believe that theories that purport to be scientific can be held to some criteria of verifiability, and that this distinguishes scientific theories from those that are not.) Most theories in physics, such as Newton's laws of motion or Einstein's theory of relativity, are actually a series of mathematical equations. They also make very precise predictions, which can be verified or not to determine their validity. (This is true even of probabilistic theories such as quantum mechanics.) While the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution cannot be summarized mathematically, it can be expressed in precise terms, at least precise enough so that the theory can be tested: it makes predictions (such as the appearance of intermediate life-forms in the fossil record), that can be confirmed or not. Even hypotheses in the social sciences that aspire to the level of scientific theories (however few and limited in scope they maybe), must be stated in terms sufficiently precise to be subject to verification. Although historical materialism appears to make predictions, it is not, and cannot be, expressed precisely enough to be held accountable. From the point of view of Marxism, this (unacknowledged) ambiguity is useful, even necessary. On a whole range of questions—are historical events uniquely determined or not, is consciousness directly determined by socio-economic structures or just conditioned by them, is socialism inevitable or merely necessary in an amoral sense—Marxism tries to have it both ways, to walk on both sides of the street, as it were, and Marxists continually shift from one interpretation of the theory to another in both their use of it and their efforts to justify it. As a result, Marxism only appears

valid if it is given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, in order to believe that Marxism is true, one has to *want* it to be true, and to look for things that appear to confirm it, while denying or explaining away things that don't. If subjected to a truly skeptical and critical critique, Marxism does not hold up.

## Historical Materialism: An Attempt at a Systematic Summary

Before we proceed to a more detailed analysis of historical materialism, it might be worth summarizing its basic propositions in more systematic form for those who may find the passages from Marx and Engels cited above somewhat confusing. Here is my attempt.

1. The underlying motive force—the determining factor—of history is the development of human productive technology, the tools and other equipment that, along with human labor, enable human beings to transform the products of nature and nature itself to fulfill our economic needs. The material “means of production” are produced by labor and can be seen as material embodiments or “concretions” of it. Labor, for Marxists, is the unique and defining characteristic of the human species. As human beings transform their natural and social environments through their work, they transform themselves. A key aspect of this evolution is the development of the instruments of labor—tools, machines, etc., technology in general—that multiply its power. Over time, these means of production tend to become more productive. Taken together, this technology and human labor constitute the “forces of production.”
2. Any given type or level of productive technology gives rise to and requires a unique set of production relations, a specific arrangement of human beings (such as the ownership of property), through which this technology is controlled and utilized. These are called the “relations of production.”
3. A specific set of these forces and relations of production constitutes a “mode of production.” The mode of production constitutes what Marxists call the “material base” of society.
4. Modes of production are of two general types, exploitative and non-exploitative. Under exploitative modes of production, the level of technology is sufficient to make possible the production of a limited social surplus. This is the basis for the condition of “relative scarcity,” which enables some, but not all, members of society, to live without having to work. This, in turn, enables tiny, non-laboring classes, to rule over and exploit laboring classes, appropriating the social surplus both to maintain their dominant position and for their own personal consumption. The division of society into exploitative and exploited, ruling and ruled, classes gives rise to a conflict between them, the “class struggle.” For this reason, exploitative modes of production are said to be “antagonistic.” Under non-exploitative modes of production, society is not divided into ruling and ruled classes. There is no class struggle, and economic production and all aspects of social life are carried out in a cooperative manner. Such modes of production are “non-antagonistic.”
5. Each exploitative mode of production contains its own specific internal dynamics—its “laws of motion” and “contradictions”—which need to be investigated and analyzed in their own



right, while still embodying the general tendencies or “laws” of human society and history as whole. Such laws of motion/contradictions determine the nature and history of the societies based on the specific modes of production, so that in general it can be said that under exploitative modes of production the products of human beings, and particularly the means of production and the laws governing their growth and development, dominate human beings and determine their lives. Under exploitative modes of production, humanity is thus dominated by its products.

6. The distinct modes of production tend to succeed each other in time, so that history in its broad outlines can be seen as a series of ever more productive modes of production. This succession is impelled by the tendency of technology and human labor (the forces of production) to become ever more productive as history progresses.
7. The material base of society gives rise to specific political and social structures—states/forms of government—as well as distinct patterns of culture and modes of thought, such as art, religion and philosophy. Taken together, these are referred to by Marxists as the political and ideological “superstructure” of society. As a result, any given mode of production creates and includes a unique superstructure that corresponds and is appropriate to it.
8. Although the material base of society is said to determine the superstructure, the superstructure is not a purely passive entity. It has its own relatively autonomous internal dynamics and, in its turn, reacts upon the material base, helping to shape its development. The base and superstructure are said to relate to and determine each other in a “dialectical” manner.
9. This dynamic between base and superstructure is a specific example of the more general fact that, for Marxists, human thought and consciousness in general—ideas, religious and philosophical conceptions, ideology—grow out of and reflect material conditions. As Marx puts it: “social existence determines...consciousness.” Yet here, too, thought or consciousness is not a mere reflection, a mirror or echo, of material conditions. Through its impact on human activity, the class struggle in particular, it has an effect on and helps determine the nature and development of those conditions. Thus, the relation between social existence and social consciousness, like that between base and superstructure, is “dialectical.”
10. The relationship of forces and relations of production is not always an entirely cooperative one. In the early period of the development of a given mode of production, the relations of production tend to encourage the development of the forces of production. However, at a certain stage in the history of that mode of production, the relations of production start to impede the development of the productive forces, turning into what Marx calls their “fetters.” This leads to an intensifying contradiction between the forces and relations of production. This contradiction is reflected in an increase in the class struggle between the exploited and exploiting, dominated and dominating, classes.
11. At some point, as the forces of production continue to grow, they break apart the old relations of production and, via a relatively rapid economic transformation, a new mode of production is established. This transformation is reflected in the political and ideological

sphere, that is, in the realm of the superstructure, as a period of violent class struggle, or social revolution.

12. Eventually, the forces of production develop to a point at which they are capable of overcoming relative scarcity altogether. This is the stage brought about by capitalism. Under this type of society, the dynamic under which the laws of motion of the mode of production dominate the lives and thoughts of those who live under it reaches its apogee. Here the market has become freed of extra-economic constraints and the means of production develop at a rapid rate. Because of this, the lives of human beings are governed by the laws of motion of the production and exchange of commodities, what Marx calls the “fetishism of commodities.” Living labor is dominated by dead labor. This situation leads not only to an increase in the oppression and exploitation of the laborers; it also leads to a colossal increase both in the power of the means of production and in the size and social weight of the laboring class. Taken together, these developments make possible the elimination of exploitation and the division of society into social classes and the creation of a fully cooperative, that is, communist, society.
13. This transformation from capitalism to communism is carried out by the proletariat, the working class created by capitalism and brought to its true—proletarian, socialist—consciousness by the struggles it has waged against the capitalist class. The necessary outcome of the class struggle is the establishment, in the course of the revolution, of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” the “proletariat organized as the ruling class,” that nationalizes the means of production in its own hands, suppresses the capitalist class and its hangers-on and proceeds to establish a planned and truly cooperative society.
14. Under communism, the means of production, rather than dominating the direct producers as they do under exploitative modes of production, are subordinated to and controlled by them. This will lead to an even greater growth of the forces of production, making possible the shortening of the working day. This will enable all members of society to participate in all aspects of the administration of society. The increase in the forces of production will gradually result in the elimination of relative scarcity and the social antagonisms that it engenders, and the establishment of truly equal and cooperative relations among all people. As this process proceeds, the state, the relic of previous class-divided societies, “withers away.”

In the above summary, I have tried to represent the Marxian theory of historical materialism in the fullest, most logically consistent way I have been able to, given the limitations of space. Since I have had to interpret their theory and to interpolate ideas found elsewhere in Marx and Engels’ writings, rather than in just the passages quoted above, some people may take issue with my rendition. Despite this, I believe I have done justice to the Marxist conception and have avoided setting up a straw man that will be easy for me to shoot down later. Let’s now proceed to a more detailed evaluation of their theory.

## Two Definitions of Materialism

I noted above that one of the chief characteristics of historical materialism (and Marxism as a whole), is its ambiguity. This pertains even in its title, specifically, its use of the word “materialism.” Although the term appears to be precise, it is in fact used in two distinct senses within Marxian theory. To Marxists, the two meanings are understood to be compatible—indeed, necessarily linked. But this is not the case. The first, and more basic, use of the term is its philosophical one; it pertains to that part of Marxist theory that has come to be known as “dialectical materialism.” This is the philosophical description of what Marxists believe to be their scientific outlook, both its specific propositions and its methods. In philosophical language, “dialectical materialism” is both an ontology, that is, a theory of being, a theory of the true nature and structure of reality, and an epistemology, a theory of knowledge. Non-Marxist philosophers would call this “metaphysical materialism,” a term Marxists usually object to since they deny that their world view is metaphysical at all; to them, Marxism is scientific, whereas bourgeois philosophy (that is, all other philosophical outlooks), is “metaphysics.”

In simple terms, this philosophical materialism asserts: (1) that the fundamental element of the universe is matter—molecules, atoms and their component parts—rather than spirit, ideas, or some other ideational substance; (2) that ideas are an outgrowth of matter, specifically, the motion and structure of material entities—the firing of neurons, the movement of atomic particles (molecules, ions, protons, neutrons and electrons)—in the human body, particularly the brain. For materialists, it is the impact of matter on and within the body, both over time and at any given time, that gives rise to ideas. Marx and Engels considered their outlook to be the extension and result of a long line of philosophical thought, beginning with the pre-Socratics (Greek philosophers prior to Socrates), particularly Democritus, who believed the world was made up of atoms. It also included the later Greek philosopher, Epicurus, and his Roman follower, Lucretius, the British empiricists, Francis Bacon and John Locke, the political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, the radical French materialists of the Enlightenment, such as Diderot, d’Holbach, and d’Alembert, and Marx and Engels’ immediate philosophical predecessor, Ludwig Feuerbach. For Marx and Engels, their own outlook is saved from what they considered to be the one-sided, mechanical flaws of these earlier philosophies by the contributions of the German Idealists, Fichte, Schelling, and particularly Hegel.

Although Marx and Engels used the same label (materialism) to describe their theory of history, the sense of the word as used in this realm is somewhat different. Here it refers to the production and distribution of what are commonly called “material goods,” that is, economic products. But this label, as applied narrowly and more broadly to the theory of historical materialism as a whole, is a bit of a misnomer since these entities are not the only elements or factors involved in historical development that can be considered to be material. What about factors of geography or climate? These are certainly material elements, but they are not, narrowly speaking, economic. One could, it seems to me, come up with a theory of history that bases itself on these phenomena, and one could legitimately, I think, call such a theory a form of materialism, say “climatological” or “geographical” materialism. Nor does this exhaust the possibilities of materialist theories of history.

To Marxists, the state and state structures are also material entities. Lenin, in his famous pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, describes the state as consisting of “special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command.” (*Collected Works*, Volume 25, Progress Publishers,

Moscow, 1964, p. 389.) These are clearly material entities, and by extension, one could develop a theory of history based on the changing nature of the states that have characterized different societies. Insofar as the state can be described, as Lenin did, in material terms, this theory of history might also be called a form of materialism. Such theories do exist. They are the ones that, for example, see human history as the story of the evolution of bourgeois, pluralist democracy. However, since the creators of such theories are not Marxists—indeed, they are usually opponents of Marxism—they do not describe their theories in materialist terms, but in idealist ones, such as *The Discovery of Freedom* (an actual book by Rose Wilder Lane, Laissez Faire Books, 1984). Yet one could legitimately recast these theories in materialist language. They would then be materialist theories of history, but they would not be what Marxists call “historical materialism.”

Conversely, a theory of history based on the progressive evolution of socio-economic formations (as Marx’s is), need not be materialist. As I discussed in my articles on Marx’s theory of capital, although technology exists in material forms—as factories, machines, tools, etc.—these entities do not fully describe what technology is. As the information and bio-technology revolutions have brought out more clearly than before, technology has an ideal component; it includes the scientific theories, designs, mathematical expressions, including computer programs, etc.—in short, the ideas—that such machinery and equipment are based on and express or represent. Indeed, one could argue, the ideal expressions are more fundamental than the material entities, and consequently, a theory of history based on the development of technology (which is really what Marx and Engels’ theory is), could be more accurately cast in idealist terms, that is, as a form of intellectual evolution. We would then have an economic (or technological) theory of history that is not materialist.

What I am trying to get at here is that Marx and Engels use the term “materialism” in two distinct senses—one philosophical, as a label for their ontology and epistemology, and the other more prosaic, meaning economic—and that the two are not necessarily connected nor implied by each other. There is no reason why metaphysical/ philosophical materialists must necessarily subscribe to what Marxists call the materialist conception of history, nor why those who defend a materialist conception of history must logically be required to be philosophical materialists. As we know, there have been materialist philosophers who were not Marxists and who defended other theories of history. Likewise, there have been Marxists, even within the organized Marxist left, who have held to Marx and Engels’ theory of history, but have not defended “dialectical materialism.” (Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg’s comrade in the left wing of German Social Democracy and in the Spartacus League, was one such figure.) Indeed, among Marxists, there has been a relatively long-standing trend of thinkers, such as the Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, who draw a distinction between the thought of Engels, supposedly the “scientific” inventor of (deterministic) dialectical materialism, and that of Marx, who developed the (non-deterministic) theory of historical materialism but supposedly gave little thought to metaphysical questions, or at least did not agree with his longtime friend and collaborator. (See Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1978.)

One result of this confusion of terms has been to allow the aura and prestige of philosophical materialism to accrue to historical materialism. In other words, since many people (including scientists, science writers and philosophers), consider science to be materialistic, calling the Marxist theory of history a form of materialism has helped Marxists maintain that their theory is scientific, and hence to give it an authoritative character that it has not earned on its own account. Since

the Marxist theory is a form of materialism, so the argument goes, and since science is materialist, ergo historical materialism must be scientific.

## **Marxian Theory: Explanatory or Predictive?**

This is not the only large-scale ambiguity that characterizes the Marxist theory of history. Another resides in the question of the purpose of the theory itself: is historical materialism simply a method of investigation and a corresponding mode of explanation/interpretation of historical and social events or does it have predictive value?

In Marxist theory, this question should not even arise. Since Marxism is, in its own view, scientific (and therefore correct), and since, according to Marxism, the development of human society follows certain objective laws that determine its history, Marxism offers both the correct explanation/interpretation of past events as well as accurate predictions about the future course of social development. Indeed, it specifically predicts that capitalism will be superseded by socialism, that this will occur through a proletarian revolution and, getting even more precise, that this will necessarily happen through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. (See Marx's letter to Joseph Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852, *Letters to Americans*, International Publishers, New York, 1953. ) This idea is central to Marxism, and specifically to its claim to be the "unity of theory and practice." It is key to its insistence that its variety of socialism is scientific rather than "utopian." Whereas the socialist thinkers on whom Marx and Engels pinned that label developed their conceptions of cooperative society as moral ideals, conceived of and to be implemented outside of the historic process (through the actions of humanistic individuals, such as Robert Owen, who established and managed model communities, or by convincing people with power to put them into effect), Marx and Engels insisted that their idea of socialism was grounded in history and the very structure of human society. It reflected the underlying dynamic of history and grew out of the historic process itself, rather than having to be inserted into it, as it were, from without. They therefore sought to base their notion of socialism, along with their strategy and tactics, on an understanding of history as whole, and more precisely, on an analysis of the dynamics of and the economic and social trends discernible within capitalist society (e.g., the concentration and centralization of capital, the growth of the proletariat, the expansion of state intervention in the economy, etc.). In their own eyes, Marx and Engels did not advocate socialism as a moral goal. They insisted that it would necessarily (that is, inevitably) develop out of capitalism itself. In short, in contrast to the utopians, who advocated socialism as a "good thing," Marx and Engels *predicted* socialism.

But, in fact, Marxism can be understood and embraced in two ways. The first is as it was explicitly propounded, complete with predictions, specific theses and strategic/programmatic goals. The second is simply as a framework for investigating, explaining and interpreting history and the nature and dynamics of human society more generally, without any claim to have predictive value, to advocate socialism or to be a guide to practical activity to attain such an end. While this ambiguity has existed within Marxism since its inception, it has become much more apparent as capitalism has developed. As a result, today Marxism can be viewed as consisting of two fairly distinct variants. The first is its traditional—ideological and programmatic—form, that is, as the world-view of avowedly Marxist organizations and individuals, those who advocate and carry out political activity to achieve socialism. The second is a largely analytical variety, which uses

Marxist theory, its conceptions and terminology as tools for investigating and interpreting social life.

The existence of this second variant, or mode, is in part the result of the fact that Marxism offers a fruitful framework for analyzing human society. This is particularly so when some of the extreme contentions of the theory are modified into more considered statements. Who denies that economic and social life conditions (rather than uniquely determines), human consciousness? Who denies that the economic and structure of any given society greatly influences the nature of its political system and the culture it manifests? Who denies that societies can be analyzed in terms of the social classes that constitute them, that there have been and are struggles between such classes and that these struggles significantly affect the evolution of those societies? Moreover, while emphasizing the preponderant role of economic and social factors, Marxism also attempts to integrate into its framework other phenomena, such as political structures, ideologies, religions, art and philosophy, and even the personalities of historically prominent individuals. As a result of these and other features, Marxism has had a major impact on the development of the social sciences as a whole, both through its own contributions and by provoking reactions to itself. Specifically, given its insistence on socio-economic processes and structures as the root causes of historical events, Marxism has played a significant role in opening up, or at least significantly expanding, certain fields of investigation, such as economic and social history generally and, more specifically, the study of the lives, conditions and struggles of members of the lower classes, subjects that were largely ignored before Marx and Engels began their work. And because of its effort to integrate political, ideological and cultural phenomena into its analyses, Marxism has also stimulated other areas, (e.g., the history of art and science, literary criticism), by supplying an alternative standpoint from which to analyze the issues involved.

This analytical mode of Marxism actually emerged within the Marxist movement itself. Explicitly Marxism-inspired research was carried out by individuals—political figures, theoreticians and academic researchers—who were avowed Marxists and were members of or loyal to Marxist organizations, such as the Socialist or Communist Parties. Much of it was also, at least in theory, pursued with the purpose of guiding the political struggles of individual Marxists and Marxist organizations. However, beginning in the 1930s, with the theoretical work of those who would eventually constitute the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and others), and at an accelerated rate in the late 1960s and the '70s, Marxism, no longer explicitly attached to Marxist organizations and consequently less dogmatic, diffused into the academic community at large. This development has given rise to what may be called “academic Marxism.” Not surprisingly, this variety of Marxism focuses on Marxist theory as a method of investigation and a mode of explanation/interpretation of history and other economic, social and cultural phenomena, and ignores or downplays claims that such theory has predictive value.

While this academic Marxism has grown and prospered, the more traditional version has continued to be the official ideology of avowed Marxist organizations, inspiring and, at least in principle, guiding their activities designed to promote social change and eventually to bring about socialist revolutions. Integral to this variant, as we have seen, is the insistence that Marxist theory has predictive value, that it can make accurate predictions about the future development of human society.

The emergence of academic Marxism and the de facto split between it and the traditional forms of Marxist “praxis” have brought the distinction between the two ways of interpreting

Marxist theory into greater relief. Yet, this division or ambiguity was present within Marxism from fairly early on in its history and remains a notable characteristic of traditional Marxism to this day. Among the manifestations of the analytical mode of Marxism were various works of Marx and Engels and later theoreticians that presented Marxist analyses of specific historical events without attempting to use these explicitly to prove the programmatic claims of Marxism. These efforts, such as Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany*, Marx's *The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850 and The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and Karl Kautsky's *The Foundations of Christianity*, were meant in part, if not primarily, to explicate the Marxist theory of history and to demonstrate its cogency. The idea, apparently, was that by revealing historical materialism's ability to provide compelling explanations of historical events, one thereby proved its overall validity, its truth value. Other examples of this analytical mode within what I have called traditional Marxism were attempts, embodied in letters, articles and books, on the part of Marx and Engels and their followers to explain why history was not unfolding in the way they had originally predicted: why, for example, the socialist revolution hadn't occurred, why the working class was not (at least not at that moment) revolutionary, why capitalism seemed more resilient than Marx's theory suggested, why it seemed (at least to some) to be over-coming its internal contradictions, etc. Although these analyses purported to orient Marxist practice in the present, there was very little strategic or programmatic about them. They had more the character of urging Marxists to hold on, for the time when the proletariat would, once again, be revolutionary and Marx's predictions be borne out. Still another example of such interpretive Marxism arose among Marxists active in or concerned about countries not deemed ripe for socialist revolution (such as pre-revolutionary Russia). Here researchers utilized Marxist theory simply to analyze their societies, and if the results were put to political uses at all, they were often intended to advocate policies that favored one or another type of capitalist development. Many of the contemporary Marxist theories of monopoly capitalism, imperialism, and related phenomena, such as "underdevelopment," also have this primarily explanatory or interpretive character.

Despite this, for Marx and Engels and virtually all Marxists in the heyday of the Marxist movement (Kautsky, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Martov, Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, et. al.), Marxism was, by definition, the "unity of theory and practice" and, hence, predictive; to them, a purely analytical, theoretical or academic Marxism was a contradiction in terms. Marx himself was explicit about this. As early as 1844, he wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: "Hitherto philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it."

Today, this position cannot be so easily maintained. Part of the reason for this is that Marxism has spread beyond the explicitly Marxist organizations and milieu, into academia and beyond; Marxism now speaks with many more voices than it once did. But equally important is the fact that so many of the predictions of traditional Marxism have not been borne out: capitalism has not evolved as Marx thought it would, the international proletariat has not become revolutionary, the global socialist transformation has not occurred, what many thought to be socialist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe have collapsed, China is no longer the bulwark of militant Marxian socialism, as Maoists once believed, etc. If anything, the working class has become less revolutionary, the industrial proletariat, on which Marx pinned his hopes, has shrunk relative to the size of the working population as a whole, the global Marxist movement has dwindled, and Marxism today has very few supporters even among its supposedly natural constituents, the workers. Yet, these developments are explicable in terms of Marxist theory itself. In other words, Marxist

theoreticians have been able to come up with reasonably convincing analyses that explain why the world has not developed as Marx and Engels believed it would. Ironically, then, analytical Marxism has enabled Marxism to survive, even to prosper, despite the collapse of its specific predictions and the severe decline in its traditional political and organizational manifestations.

The ambiguity of Marxist theory has thus turned out to be a source of strength. For if Marxism is merely a mode of explanation and interpretation, it is not refutable. As long as the crucial facts are successfully integrated into its analyses, and as long as these analyses seem plausible and logically consistent, Marxist interpretations of history, or of anything else for that matter, become almost a question of taste—does one find them compelling or not?—and Marxism can not be held to account. In any case, it is certainly a lot easier to come up with after-the-fact explanations than to be able to predict future social developments. Here, too, Marxism's ambiguities redound to its advantage: where any given historical or social event appears to violate specific Marxist tenets or predictions, Marxism can be given credit for its empiricist integrity, that is, its commitment to the facts and its willingness to recognizing the richness, the concreteness and the "dialectical nature" of history. As a mode of analysis, then, Marxism can be quite fecund. But the fact that Marxist explanations may "make sense" is not proof that Marxism as a whole is correct, that its theory of history is true, or that its claims be scientific are valid. Despite this, this is usually how Marxists argue. Indeed, as I have mentioned, Marxists have utilized Marxist theory to explain why other aspects of Marxism have not been borne out. This proves, so Marxists claim, that despite the failure of many of its prognostications, Marxism is still right.

This ambiguity works to Marxism's advantage in yet other ways. Even when Marxists defend the propositions of traditional Marxism, they constantly shift from "tighter" interpretations to "looser" ones and back again. Sometimes socialism is inevitable; at other times, it is merely highly likely or even just possible. Sometimes social existence determines consciousness; at other times, it just shapes and conditions it. Sometimes the material base of society determines the superstructure; sometimes it merely engenders its overall nature. The superstructure is both determined by the base and "dialectically" determines it. The structure and dynamics of capitalism explain both why the proletariat is revolutionary and why it is not. Etc., etc. Given such flexibility, Marxism can be made to provide equally valid Marxist explanations for entirely contradictory phenomena. As a result, it cannot really be proved or disproved, and it is not, therefore, scientific.

Let's look at some of the specific aspects of historical materialism in light of this.

## Tenets of Historical Materialism

### 1. The Class Struggle

In section I of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels write:

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (*Communist Manifesto*, p. 9) (Engels in his preface corrects this with the caveat "since the dissolution of primitive tribal society...")

This seems to be clear and definite enough, but we have already seen how Marx, in his summary of historical materialism in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, fails even to mention the class struggle, let alone to stress it. This suggests that the notion of the class struggle, however



important it may be to be to Marxists, may not be well integrated with the other aspects of Marxist theory. In any case, a look at the conception of class struggle will reveal that the idea is not as precise as it may seem at first glance.

The problem starts with the very definition of class. Given the centrality in Marxist theory of the question of economic production, for Marxists, social classes—probably the most important social category in Marxist theory—are defined by their respective positions in the productive process, specifically, by their relation to the means of production. Ruling/exploiting classes are those social groups that own the means of production. Ruled/exploited classes are those groups that do not own the means of production, but instead are under the domination of and are exploited by those that do. This seems simple enough, but it does not hold up consistently across the various types of society that Marxists have considered.

For example, under feudal society, the ruling class, the feudal nobility, did not actually own the land. Instead, the members of the nobility held tracts of land as fiefdoms, that is, in a kind of trust—use in exchange for (military) service—from those above them in the feudal hierarchy. Insofar as the land could be said to be owned at all (and even this is questionable), it was owned by the individual at the apex of the feudal aristocracy, the monarch, who in turn held the land in trust from God. It was only as feudalism declined, and capitalist commercial relations developed, that the land came to be considered the private property of those who had held it historically. At the other end of the social scale, the serfs are generally considered by Marxists to be tied to the means of production, bound to the land and to the lords immediately above them, and owing a variety of labor and other services (taxes and dues) to them. Yet, the serfs were in fact highly differentiated as to the degree of their enserfment and by the extent and nature of the services they were required to supply. In fact, some peasants were not serfs at all, some serfs were relatively well-to-do, while some feudal estates were worked by slaves. As a result, to make the Marxist definition of class “fit” the case of feudalism, we have to broaden the definition of ruling class to those who own or control the means of production, while we have to narrow the empirical range of the historical phenomena of serfdom toward an “ideal type,” a supposedly typical serf, and exclude or downplay those who don’t quite fit the category.

It is also worth noting here that the use of the term “feudalism” or the “feudal mode of production” itself is a misnomer. Feudalism, properly speaking, refers to the internal structure of the nobility and the state—the hierarchical relations of lords and lieges, the holding of land in trust from social superiors in exchange for service—rather than to the economic nature of the society. Feudalism, in this strict sense, only existed in parts of Western Europe—France, England and parts of Germany—and in Japan, a rather small section of the world. A better term would be “manorial economy.” (See *Europe Emerges*, by Robert L. Reynolds, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1961.) In an attempt to deal with this difficulty (as well as others), some Marxists, such as Samir Amin, have proposed to introduce a broader category, a “tributary” mode of production, into Marxist theory. This mode includes all societies between primitive communism and capitalism. (See Samir Amin, *Class and Nation, Historically and in the Current Crisis*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1980.)

There is a similar problem with the Marxist definition of class when we look at what Marxists call the “Asiatic” mode of production, or “Oriental Despotism” (a category Marx described and attempted to analyze but which he was not able to effectively integrate into his overall theory). In these societies, the dominant classes did not directly own the land, nor were the peasants serfs.

The land was owned and farmed by peasant families, who (along with artisans and merchants) were exploited by the ruling elites—primarily state bureaucracies—by means of taxation.

Even under capitalism, the Marxist definition of class is problematic. In an early stage of the industrial revolution, the definition seemed to fit the facts—capitalists owned factories, while workers were alienated from the means of production, that is, owned no land or tools, and were forced to sell their labor-power to the capitalists in exchange for wages. Yet, with the development of the modern corporation and the diversification of stock ownership among broader sectors of the population, the definition of capitalist becomes blurred. Many individuals in the middle class (and sections of the working class, even if only indirectly through their pension plans), own stocks; most corporate executives are salaried personnel (in addition to being owners of stock in their own and other companies), and the traditional capitalist entrepreneur who directly managed his own firm, has declined in social significance. Moreover, while small businesspersons do own the means of production, they are not part of the ruling class. And of course, there are significant sectors of the ruling class who are not capitalists at all; professional politicians, top military officers, government bureaucrats, corporate lawyers and other consultants, as well as wealthy artists, actors, film directors, and figures in the sports world, whose precise social position is harder to define. By the same token, the social differentiation of the working class, the proliferation of the service sectors of the economy and the expansion of the professional middle classes have made the definition of proletarian more difficult to pin down. In all these cases, we can maintain what we might call the spirit of the Marxist definition of social class only by broadening it and making it more flexible, in other words, by giving it the benefit of the doubt.

The conception of the class struggle is also not as cut and dried as it may initially seem. Engels defines class struggles as “contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes.” This, too, seems clear enough, but let’s ask some questions. We can all agree, I suspect, that when the majority of workers in a given country carry out a revolution or a general strike, this can properly be called the “class struggle.” This seems to be, as Engels’ definition implies, a contest between one class and another, meaning a struggle between each class as a whole. But how about when the workers in a particular industry, corporation or just one factory go out on strike? This is certainly not a contest between the capitalist class, as a class, and the working class, as a class. And what about when a worker calls in sick on a day he or she is not really ill, just to take a day off? Is this the class struggle? Or when a worker sabotages the assembly line or simply vents hostility at a supervisor? And what are we to consider a struggle in which white workers strike to prevent the hiring of Black or other minority workers, or men strike to prevent the hiring of women, or native-born workers strike to prevent the hiring of immigrants? Is this the class struggle? Marxists would most likely contend that all these actions are forms of class struggle, although “partial” or “distorted.” But more critical observers might disagree. And similar arguments can be made about all the other modes of production. How many peasants need riot before it is the class struggle? How many slaves need to break tools or run away for these actions to be the class struggle? Or are these actions the class struggle by definition? Here we can glimpse the tautological character of much of Marxist theory. Since, according to Marx and Engels, the history of humanity (excluding primitive communism), is a history of class struggles, everything that happens in society is either the class struggle, a manifestation of the class struggle, or an effect or reflection of the class struggle. As we saw in the case of the question of class, the Marxist conception of the class struggle can be sustained only if it is helped along.

This might be considered to be knocking down a straw man, but even bigger problems arise when we analyze Engels' claim that, apart from the era of primitive communism, "the whole history of mankind has been a history of class struggles." This is a bold statement. And, it seems to me, it can only be seriously maintained if one broadens the definition of class struggle to such an extent that it becomes virtually meaningless, or if one looks at history entirely a priori through the lenses of Marxist theory, or both. Because if one looks at history empirically and if the idea of class struggle is taken literally and seriously, Engels' claim is absurd. It makes some sense if it is taken to mean simply that class struggles (and here I mean a broad definition of class struggle) have occurred throughout history and have played an important role in influencing its direction and outcome. But Engels says much more than this.

Normally, when one uses the term class struggle in the Marxist sense, one means struggles between the chief classes—the ruling class and the exploited class—that constitute any given mode of production. Under supposedly slave modes of production, say, slavery during the Roman Republic and the Empire, this would mean struggles between slaves and slave owners. Thus, Engels' statement would imply that the history of Rome was, or was dominated or determined by, the struggles between these two classes. But, unless one means by the "class struggle" things like working slowly, breaking tools or running away (or the mere fear of a slave revolt), there really wasn't that much of a class struggle between slaves and slave owners during this period. Most significantly, there were (unfortunately) very few substantial slave uprisings. I know of only three: two in Sicily, ca. 135 and 100 BC, and the revolt led by Spartacus in 73–71 BC. It's possible there were more but that I, in my ignorance, don't know about them, or that the Romans, for a variety of reasons, didn't write about them. But surely if the history of Rome can seriously be said to be "a history of class struggles," there ought to be more than this. This relative lack of significant slave revolts is perfectly understandable given the nature of slavery (the fact that slaves were from many areas and spoke different languages, that they had little opportunity to communicate with one another beyond relatively small groups, let alone to organize themselves, that the owners held out the possibility of manumission to obedient slaves, that slaves were subject to cruel punishments, including torture, maiming and execution, for even slight infractions, etc., etc.), and the military skill of the Romans. But the fact remains, there wasn't that much of an ongoing class struggle between slaves and slave-owners in Rome. (See Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World 140 B.C.-70 B.C.*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989.)

Perhaps if we include the conflicts between the Roman patricians and the Roman peasantry and other lower classes, what Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* refer to as the "plebeians," Engels' contention might seem to be a more accurate description of Roman history. This may have been true at various times under the Republic, but by the end of that period, this was no longer the case. This was largely because by then the Roman/Italian peasantry had been destroyed, not by a struggle between it and the patricians, but largely as a result of the wars by means of which Rome expanded (both the depredations of the conflicts and the long-term service of the peasants in the army, which prevented them from working their farms). By then, the Roman army had become one of professionals who owed their loyalty to their immediate commanders, and the social conflicts of Rome had morphed into conflicts among these generals and the various cliques among the ruling class that supported them. Unless this entire process is seen as somehow *representing* the class struggle, Engels' claim, in relation to this period too, seems forced indeed.

As for the other major component of the lower classes, the “proletariat,” it was hardly a class in the Marxist sense of the term, and the proletarians were not a chief element in the mode of production. They were a mass of mostly unemployed people who survived on periodic public distributions of food. They certainly played a role in the internal struggles of Rome, but mostly as pawns of various factions and groupings within the elite classes. That there were struggles among various social groupings in Rome is true. That these struggles constituted “the class struggle” in the Marxist sense of the term, or that they defined the history of Rome are highly dubious propositions. In this light, Marx and Engels’ discussion of the class struggle in the *Communist Manifesto* has more of the character of a rhetorical device than a scientific analysis. Unless one means by the class struggle every struggle waged within and between the various social groupings in the ancient world, including struggles among elites, city-states and ethnic groups (e.g., Greeks versus Persians, Athenians versus Spartans, Romans versus Carthaginians, Greeks, and Jews, Jews versus Egyptians and Philistines), the Marxist dictum that human history is the history of class struggle is, when applied to that period, either a gross exaggeration or down-right false.

Much the same can be said about the class struggle under feudalism. There certainly were peasant uprisings, but there were not that many, and it is stretching things to say that the history of feudalism is simply the history of the struggles between “lord and serf” or, in the same vein, between “guild master and journeyman,” as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it. There were also periodic struggles between towns persons and the feudal nobility, but I doubt the history of feudalism as a whole can legitimately be described as the history of this conflict. Certainly, at the end of the feudal period the struggle between the emerging bourgeoisie (primarily merchants) and the feudal nobility becomes increasingly important (although, insofar as the monarch tended to ally him/herself with the bourgeoisie against the rest of the nobility, this has as much the character of an intra-elite conflict as the class struggle), and might plausibly be characterized as dominating the history of feudalism (if society can truly be said to be feudal) during this period. But taking feudalism as a whole, it is simply not true that the history of feudalism is the history of class struggles.

Nor can the history of capitalism simply be described as the history of class struggle. What is true is that in the early period of capitalism and throughout much of its history, the class nature of society became much more obvious, class lines more definite, and the struggle between the classes more open—less ensnared, as it were, in the various non-economic trappings of previous societies—and in general more powerful and socially salient. In short, with the advent of capitalism, the class struggle did become an increasingly important factor on social life. It is this, I think, that had such a profound effect on Marx and Engels. In particular, they were most likely influenced by the fact that the French Revolution (and the succeeding Napoleonic period), which had turned French society upside-down and had dominated the political and social life of Europe for over 15 years, had occurred relatively recently; that there had been a revolution in France in 1830 and a substantial uprising of agrarian workers in England in the same period; that they had lived through, indeed, had participated in, the revolutions of 1848; that they had witnessed the Chartist agitation in England, etc. Given the size, social impact and relative frequency of these events, it was natural to generalize to the history of capitalism as a whole and, more daringly, to the entire history of humanity (excluding primitive communism). In other words, Marx and Engels, it seems to me, looked at the most recent history of European society, during which social classes and the class struggle between them did play a paramount role, and generalized from there. Their generalizations were of two kinds. First, from the idea that the class struggle was a crucial fac-

tor in the history of early modern Europe, they assumed that it was determinant. Second, they decided that what was true of this period was true of all past history (except the era of primitive communism), and would be true of the future. But these generalizations do not necessarily follow. Thus, while it may be true that in much of the history of capitalism the class struggle, in the narrow sense of the term, has played a crucial role, it is not true that the history of capitalism is the history of the class struggle, or that it has been *determined by* the class struggle, let alone that *all history* is or has been determined by the class struggle.

In fact, in the period after 1848, the outbursts of militant and revolutionary class struggle that had occurred so regularly in the previous 60 years gave way to a long period of relative inter-class quiescence. There were wars between states (the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars), as well as struggles to unify nation states (Germany and Italy), but rather few mass outbreaks of the class struggle (lower classes against upper classes) within states. The Paris Commune, which occurred in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and which has assumed considerable importance in Marxist theory because of Marx's (not quite accurate) account of it as representing the dictatorship of the proletariat, was much more the exception than the rule. This long-term lull in the class struggle was the cause of considerable chagrin on the part of Marx and Engels, which is reflected in their correspondence. The period did see the rise of mass working class organizations—trade unions and political parties—and the growth in the influence of Marxism and socialist ideology in general, but these organizations showed far more tendencies toward accommodation with the capitalist state than revolutionary opposition to it. And by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reformist trends in socialism (including within formally Marxist organizations), were far more powerful than the revolutionary ones. Nor was any significant sector of the working class consciously and consistently revolutionary. As a result, a major concern of Marxist theorists at this time (and in fact the entire period up to the outbreak of World War I), was to explain why there wasn't more class struggle and to assess the meaning of this for Marxist praxis. This was the origin of the openly revisionist, reformist point of view, put forward by Eduard Bernstein among others, in the Second (or Socialist) International in the late 1890s. It was also, in part, the purpose of the various theories of state capitalism and imperialism, aside, of course, from the need to explain the post-1885 scramble on the part of the major European powers to carve up Africa. Lenin's theory of imperialism (much of it derived from the English theorist, J. A. Hobson), is, to a considerable extent, intended as an account of how imperialism serves to displace the class struggle from within modern capitalist societies and to transform it into a conflict among national states, that is, among the imperialist powers, and one between those states and the colonized peoples.

This concern of Marxist theorists continued throughout the 20th century. Despite periods of radical class struggle, including the Russian Revolution of 1917, the wave of abortive revolutions that followed it, and the Spanish Revolution (1936–39), these revolts appeared to be overwhelmed by conflicts between different nations and would-be nations: the Balkan Wars, World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and struggles for national liberation generally. Certainly since the 1950s, theories of imperialism (“monopoly capitalism,” “late-capitalism,” the “permanent arms economy,” etc.), most of them indebted to Lenin, have been invoked to explain the relative absence of the class struggle, as traditionally defined, within the imperialist/capitalist countries and the corresponding quiescence and political conservatism of the working class. All these theories represent variants of the notion that the class struggle was “displaced” from the imperialist “center” to the “periphery” and transformed into national liberation/anti-imperialist struggles. It is to

Marxists' credit that they championed and often led these struggles. But this has also served to hide the theoretical maneuvers that this has entailed. These inter-imperialist and imperialists-vs.-colonized conflicts certainly included class struggles. Some may even be accurately described as representing the class struggle in national forms, but to say that all these struggles simply were the class struggle, or that the history of this period was determined by the class struggle, is a gross simplification.

In light of this, we can discern two closely related ways of defending the Marxist insistence that all of human history (since primitive communism) has been the history of class struggle (beyond the tendency to exaggerate the importance of the class struggle at any point in time). One is to claim that all of the events that have occurred in history, including the struggles between sections of the elite, wars between national groupings and states, etc., even if they are not, narrowly speaking, class struggles, really are the class struggle, although in distorted in form. The other is simply to contend that all these events somehow *reflect* the class struggle, that is, that underneath everything, the class struggle makes everything else happen, even if it is not actually discernible. Both of these have the advantage of greater flexibility than the bald insistence that history simply is the history of class struggles. But they are, in fact, fudges. They both broaden the definition of "class struggle" to such an extent as to render it meaningless, while at the same time defining history tautologically in Marxist terms: in other words, since, according to Marxism, the history of humanity is the history of class struggles, everything that happens either is, or reflects, or is caused by the class struggle, even if this is not apparent.

This reveals a kind of mystical tendency that underlies Marxism. History is impelled by a hidden force—here, the class struggle—that is not always obvious, but always makes itself felt. It works in a mysterious, underground way, and only those with special knowledge—those initiated into the intricacies of Marxist theory—can comprehend it. In a previous article, I described this notion at work in Marx's theory of capital, in which the logical development of value/labor—its dialectical evolution—defines and governs the development and internal workings of capitalism. In either form, this idea reveals the truly idealist nature of Marxist theory underneath the materialist trappings.

Aside from imprecision and resultant flexibility, the ambiguities of the Marxist notions of class and class struggle suggest another, and much profounder, ambiguity that resides both within the theory of historical materialism and within Marxism as a whole. This is the question of whether history is a deterministic process or merely a contingent one. Is history determined and therefore predictable, or is it "open" and hence unpredictable; are various outcomes possible? This question is at least implied by the difference between the two presentations of historical materialism cited above, specifically, the fact that Engels' presentation stresses the class struggle, while Marx's doesn't even mention it. This is because the notion of struggle, and therefore the class struggle, implies contingency; the outcome of any given struggle is not determined; either party can win or lose. Thus, a historical conception that stresses the class struggle is a contingent or "open" one, while one that stresses the inexorable development of the forces of production and omits or downplays the question of class struggle is deterministic and "closed." Some commentators have seen this ambiguity as a contradiction between Marx's theory of capital and the theory of historical materialism. Others have viewed it as a conflict between Marx's and Engels' worldviews: in their interpretation, Marx, the real Marxist, defends a contingent theory of history while Engels, a mere "positivist," puts forward a deterministic one.

To me, the answer is obvious. The contradiction underlies Marxist theory as a whole. It is another example, perhaps the most fundamental one, of the fact that Marxism, in regard to all the crucial questions it addresses and claims to answer, wants to have it both ways: history is both contingent and determined; consciousness is determined by material conditions, but not entirely; the base and superstructure interact dialectically, but the base “ultimately” determines the super-structure; socialism is inevitable, but not exactly.

We shall see similar ambiguities in Marx’s theory of the mode of production, to which we now turn.

## 2A. The Mode of Production

According to Marxism, the various forms of human society that have existed throughout history have been based on a series of modes of production that determine the nature, the internal dynamics and the resultant history of those societies. To paraphrase Marx, each mode of production consists in part of the relations of production—“definite relations” that are “indispensable and independent of their [men’s] will”—that they “enter into” when they engage in “social production.” These relations “correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production,” or what Marxists call the “forces of production,” and their “sum total constitutes the economic structure of society.” This structure, made up of the forces and relations of production, is the “real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social conscious.” “The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.” A bit later on in this passage, Marx lists these modes of production:

In broad outline, we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society.

Here, once again, instead of the precision required of truly scientific theories, we get vagueness and ambiguity.

To begin with, there is the matter of definitions. What exactly does Marx mean when he refers to these different “methods of production” that represent or correspond to different “epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society”? Although these “epochs” are generally taken by Marxists to represent distinct modes of production (which, with their corresponding “super-structures,” represent distinct forms of society), the nature and defining characteristics of each of these epochs/methods/modes are not specified. Marx seems to assume that his readers will understand what he means by them. Thus, when Marx refers to the “ancient” methods of production, Marxists have generally assumed that he was talking about an economy based upon slavery as it existed among the Greeks and the Romans, what they call a slave mode of production. But the “ancient” world consisted of far more than just Greece and Rome: Egypt, the societies of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, Persia, leaving aside more distant areas, such as the civilizations in the Indus Valley and in China (let alone the “uncivilized” parts of the world). In addition, slavery was never the predominant form of labor in the ancient world as a whole. It always existed side by side with other forms, including free labor, so that the majority of the direct producers were not slaves. Indeed, even at the height of the Roman Empire, when slavery and the slave trade were

in full flower, and in the political and economic center of that imperium, that is, Italy and Sicily, where slavery was strongest and where, conceivably, it might be said that an actual slave mode of production existed, slaves constituted no more than one-third of the population. (See Michael Grant, *The World of Rome*, The New American Library, New York and Toronto, 1960.) Moreover, slavery was primarily a juridical category that obscured a wide variety of types of work and workers. Aside from those slaves who worked large agrarian estates, some slaves were granted the right to own property, tools, machines, etc., and worked independently. Many of these were highly skilled, such as architects, artists, and scholars. They kept at least part of the profits of their work/enterprises, which they could use to purchase their freedom. (See M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973.) Thus, even slave-based economies did not simply conform to what is commonly understood as a slave mode of production. Given all this, what exactly does Marx mean when he refers to the “ancient methods of production”?

Questions also surround Marx’s reference to the feudal methods/mode of production. We have already seen that the term feudalism refers primarily to the social/political structure of the nobility—its manner of holding land in return for services—rather than to a specific form of economic production. Moreover, within feudalism in this more precise sense there also existed other forms of labor besides that of serfs, e.g., that of the artisans organized in guilds in the towns and cities, and that of slaves. And what about other agricultural societies, such as Tsarist Russia, which were similar but not identical to feudal societies, properly speaking? Here, too, Marx never specifies.

Beyond problems of definitions, there are other issues. For example, has all of humanity passed through, or is all of humanity destined to pass through, each of these “epochs?” This question was to become a major point of contention within the Marxist movement itself, specifically, within the Second and Third Internationals, when it came to discussing the nature of Marxists’ strategies in those countries which were not deemed to be fully capitalist. For example, was the revolution in Russia (and, later, China) to be a bourgeois revolution leading to the establishment of a democratic republic and a fully capitalist economy, or could the revolution pass through the “bourgeois democratic” stage rather quickly (or skip it altogether), and become a socialist revolution? Or, in another Marxist mode of expression, is the feudal mode of production inevitably succeeded by the capitalist mode of production or can it be transformed, under appropriate circumstances, into the socialist mode of production? Marx himself never really answered this question, and Marxist theory on this point, as on many others, is subject to a variety of interpretations.

Also, have these methods/modes of production existed in pure form or have they always been intermixed, as it were, with each other? If we take the world as a whole, it is obvious that, with the exception of capitalism (and this only relatively recently), each of the methods/modes of production listed by Marx existed in the context of, or surrounded by, other methods/modes. In fact, for much of human history, as Marx well knew, these other modes (hunting/gathering, nomadic herding, free peasant agriculture), taken together, predominated. Even if we take each of the modes that Marx mentions as self-contained wholes, they rarely existed in pure forms. As we saw, although slave production may have dominated in parts of the ancient (so-called “civilized”) world, it was not the pre-dominant form throughout. Likewise, under feudalism, not all of the productive laborers were serfs—we have already mentioned slaves, while Marx himself referred to the masters, journeymen and craftsmen in the guilds, leaving aside the relations found in the



incipient commercial and merchant capitalist sectors that existed alongside, or, better put, in the interstices, of feudal society, narrowly conceived.

There are still more questions. For example, do each of these epochs succeed each other in time? Marx's use of the term "progress" and his discussion of the forces and relations of production imply that these methods/modes/epochs occur in order of ascending productivity, reflecting the growth of humanity's "material powers of production," and this is consistent with the rest of his theory. Unless this were so, why would the "material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production," converting the latter "from forms of development of the forces of production" into "fetters"? This only makes sense if the forces of production have a general tendency to increase, in other words, if technology tends to develop and to increase labor productivity throughout history. And, if the forces of production do tend to grow, the various methods/modes/epochs of production that Marx names ought to represent distinct stages based on ever more powerful technology, and they should therefore succeed one another in order of increasing technological development. But he never actually says this.

Further, are the transitions from one mode of production to another necessarily accompanied by "social revolutions"? As elsewhere, Marx's discussion of this point is ambiguous. He never fully and precisely describes what he means by "social revolutions." Nor does he explicitly state that the transition from each of these methods/modes of production to another entails such a revolution, although his discussion implies that it does. Thus, after mentioning that the relations of production eventually turn from being forms of development of the forces of production into their fetters, he writes, "Then comes the period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed." From their other writings, we do know that Marx and Engels believed that this pattern was an accurate description of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and, by extension, the transition from capitalism to socialism, but they never elaborated this conception in relation to the other modes of production. Indeed, from Marx's limited discussions of the ancient world, one can infer that in his view feudalism resulted from the fact that the class struggle in Rome resulted in the "common ruin of the contending classes," the fact that the class struggle in Rome was, in effect, unconsummated. Was this a social revolution?

## **2B. The Stages of History**

Integrally related to the concept of the mode of production in Marxist theory is the question of the "stages of history." Despite the lack of clarity in Marx's presentation and the myriad questions it raises, Marx and Engels' writings have generally been understood, certainly within the Marxist movement, to mean that they believed that human society has developed, in whole or in part, through distinct stages, namely, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and, ultimately, socialism, in that order, with the Asiatic mode of production constituting a kind of evolutionary dead-end or detour (waiting on the sidelines until capitalism or socialism liberates it from its torpor). This interpretation is certainly consistent with other tenets of Marxian theory, particularly the claim that the forces of production tend to grow over time, as well as the corresponding contention that labor evolves through increasingly productive forms: slave-labor, serf-labor and the (formally) free labor of capitalist society. In other words, the idea held by many Marxists that human society has evolved through such precise stages, based on increasing labor productivity and distinct forms of the exploitation of labor, seems to be implied by and is consis-

tent with Marx's discussion, but Marx himself never explicitly said this. Despite this ambiguity over the Marxian provenance of the theory of the stages of history, let's look at it to see whether it can withstand scrutiny.

First, the schema implies that primitive communism was generally succeeded by slave-based societies; in other words, that when class-divided, state-based societies were first established, these societies rested on slave modes of production. Was this the case? I don't think so. Many early state-dominated societies, such as those established in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, in Egypt and in the Indus Valley were not primarily based on slavery and the laboring populations did not consist entirely or even mostly of slaves. Moreover, as we saw, even in Greek and Roman societies, which Marxists generally describe as being based on slave modes of production, slavery was not the only, or even the dominant, type of labor.

Second, the Marxist conception implies that slave-based modes of production were replaced by feudalism. We've already seen that feudalism, properly speaking, only existed in parts of Western Europe and Japan. If so, what about the people who did not experience feudal society? They appear to be left out of the schema altogether. Even if we just focus on the relation between the Roman Empire in the western Mediterranean and northwestern Europe (the lands of feudalism proper), the theory has problems and can only be made to fit into the Marxian schema with a great deal of fudging. Thus, in the later periods of the western half of the Roman Empire, in various regions and for a variety of reasons (particularly the decline of trade in general, and therefore of slaves), slave labor was replaced by the labor of coloni, essentially tenant farmers bound in a variety of ways to the land. Although Marxists may see these laborers as forerunners of feudal serfs, they weren't serfs; nor was society in this part of the world feudal. Feudalism is generally thought to have been established much later, beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the time of the Viking invasions, and in a far different location, namely northwestern Europe and England (and under different circumstances, Japan). This is an awfully long and geographically attenuated transition, and can only be made to correspond to the Marxian view by omitting entire regions and historical periods from consideration.

Third, even assuming that Marx and Engels' description of the ancient world and feudalism is correct, (that is, that the Roman Empire can be described as a slave-based society and that it was replaced by feudalism), it is not true that the change from a slave mode of production to a feudal mode of production represented the replacement of a less economically developed society by a more economically advanced one. While in theory the labor of serfs might be assumed to be more productive than that of slaves (insofar as serfs, in contrast to slaves, have some positive incentive to work—a portion of the crop they cultivated belonged to themselves), it is not true that feudal agriculture was generally more productive than the large, slave-worked estates during the Roman Empire. And, taken as a whole, feudalism was by no means a more advanced form of society, even in the Marxist sense of the term, than what it had replaced. There was considerably less trade, the social division of labor was less developed and the standard of living, certainly for the upper and middle classes, was not as high. In what sense, then, can feudalism be described as more advanced or as being based on more developed forces of production? At the very least, the question is debatable. And if this is so, the succession of slavery by feudalism cannot simply be described as occurring because the forces of production grew to such an extent that they could not be contained by the relations of production (slavery) so that the latter became their fetters. Nor can the transition between the slave and feudal modes of production be accurately described

as occurring through a social revolution, except in the most general sense of that term, that is, that social conditions changed significantly.

Fourth, and what about the rest of the world's peoples/societies whose histories in general cannot be characterized by the Marxian schema? None of the methods/modes of production listed by Marx, with the exception of the "modern bourgeois" (and that only relatively recently) ever existed on a truly international scale. They were all relatively localized, and many, if not most, of the world's people's lived outside them. What happens to their history, or don't they have any, or doesn't it matter? Specifically, what about those peoples and parts of the world that experienced the various forms of the Asiatic mode of production (sometimes called "Oriental Despotism"), whose internal dynamic, moreover, cannot be described in Marxist terms? In Marx's view, the Asiatic mode of production was economically—but not politically—stagnant: the forces of production did not tend to develop within these societies. And what do we make of the people who lived in state-dominated societies in the Americas, or those who lived in hunter-gatherer, herding, and other types of communities. Where do these people fit in Marx's schema? And what does this imply about the Marxist theory of history? As this suggests, Marx's historical schema is militantly Eurocentric in character. The history of the world is seen entirely from a Western European point of view. The history that matters, the history that, for Marx and Engels, has real meaning, is the history of "Western Civilization," as that civilization (the capitalist societies of Western Europe, Great Britain and North America) sees itself. The history of those parts of the world lying outside the mainstream of history, as defined by Marx, doesn't matter. This is a question we will return to later.

Fifth, do the forces of production that are to characterize the later and more productive societies necessarily develop within the societies that precede them? For example, did the forces of production characteristic of the state-dominated, class-divided societies that succeeded primitive communism necessarily develop within primitive communism itself? It may have been true that such primitive societies were economically advanced enough to produce a relative surplus. But what if the capacity to produce that surplus was the direct result of the establishment of a state? Specifically, what if the existence of the state itself was the source of the ability to produce the surplus through its power to mobilize the large masses of labor needed to build the structures—dams, dikes and aqueducts—required to irrigate fields and make agriculture more productive? In this case, new forces of production need not have existed beforehand within the previous society.

Moreover, even where this contention of Marx's seems to holdup, as in the development of capitalist methods and relations of production within feudalism, the truth is not so simple. In some sense, the expansion of trade and the growth of the mercantile class that carried it out (the forerunner of the modern capitalist class), occurred outside the bounds of feudal society, properly speaking, rather than within it. This was particularly true of the "putting out" system that is generally considered, and described by Marx, to be the origin of the so-called free labor contract and the specifically capitalist method of production. This took place, and necessarily so, outside the restrictions of the system of guilds, that is, in some sense outside the feudal system, rather than within it. Indeed, the very growth of towns and cities, particularly after the so-called "communal revolution," through which the towns won their independence from the feudal lords, had this characteristic.

What this discussion reveals is that the schema we have been considering is just that, a schema. Empirically, it doesn't fit the facts. As we have seen, the epochs/methods/modes of production that Marx lists did not in fact succeed each other in ascending order of economic/technologi-

cal progress. The transitions between each of these societies were not always motivated by the growth of the forces of production and their eventual conflict with the relations of production, nor did they necessarily entail social revolutions, except in the most general sense of the term. Not to mention the fact that the characterization of some of the modes of production don't accurately reflect the nature of the societies they are meant to denote: the ancient world (even the so-called civilized part of it) was not based on a slave mode of production, the term feudal (or feudalism) doesn't denote a distinct mode of production at all, while it isn't at all clear that all or even most societies in Asian are accurately described by what Marx refers to as the "Asiatic" methods of production. The entire conception is obviously a very abstract and arbitrary construct into which a great many historic developments are uncomfortably crammed, while a large number of others are ignored altogether. It may seem plausible at first glance, especially if one doesn't know too much about history, but it falls apart upon further scrutiny. For more sophisticated Marxists, it can only be made to work by being manipulated—stretched, tightened, pushed, prodded, re-defined, etc.—as needed. Like much else in Marxist theory, the schema only makes sense if one wants to believe it, gives it the benefit of the doubt and tries to fit historical developments into the prescribed pat-tern. It is a daring generalization that provides much material for thought and a framework for historical investigation and interpretation. But it cannot sustain the claim to be scientific, let alone to be able to base predictions of future social development on it.

Of course, it can be argued that it is I who have set up this schema and so made it easy to criticize. Marx, as we saw, merely "designated" in "broad outline" the "Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the economic formation of society," and he never assembled them in precisely the form that I've presented and criticized. Yet, the schema is consistent with, and a reasonable interpretation of, Marx's overall theory. It is also how most Marxists have understood it. And if it is not what Marx and Engels intended, just what did Marx have in mind when he wrote the passage?

Some commentators have seen it as a kind of program for research, a starting point for further investigation. But if it is merely this, then it can only have a highly tentative character until it is verified by that investigation. And, in fact, most research since Marx's day refutes, rather than confirms it, which is why some Marxists, such as Samir Amin, have sought to modify it. As such, it cannot be used to prove any-thing. It doesn't demonstrate the validity of historical materialism and it certainly doesn't demonstrate that socialism is inevitable. In fact, this passage (Marx's schema, list or what-ever it is), has the same ambiguous characteristic and plays the same rubbery role that all his major concepts do. Sometimes it is presented as an accurate description of the main contours of human history; at other times it is simply part of Marx's method, a program for research or something else equally as vague. It is whatever any particular Marxist wants it to be, as long as it serves to justify Marxist theory. (I know, it's dialectical.)

But let's leave this question and turn to another central issue in the theory of historical materialism. This is the relationship between the base and the superstructure, along with the closely related question of the relation between social existence and consciousness.

### **3. Base and Superstructure, and Social Existence and Consciousness**

According to Marx and Engels, all societies can be understood as being divided into two parts: (1) an economic, or material, base, consisting of the forces and relations of production, which is the foundation of any given society; (2) apolitical and ideological superstructure, made up of the

state, religion, art, philosophy and cultural in general, which is built upon the economic base and is determined by it. At first glance, this seems clear enough, yet here, too, as in the rest of the Marxian theory, it doesn't withstand close analysis.

For one thing, the state does not fit clearly and comfortably into either of the two categories. Generally speaking, Marxists have considered the state to be part of the super-structure. This implies that it is a secondary phenomenon, something that is based on something else that is more fundamental. Yet, even according to Marxist theory, the state is in many ways primary; it is a prerequisite of and necessary for the establishment of the mode of production on which it is supposedly based. For Marxists, the state is first and foremost an instrument of oppression, a tool by which a ruling and economically exploiting class maintains its domination over the subordinate class or classes. Without the state, the ruling class would have no means to maintain those classes in subjugation. If there were no state, there would be no exploitative modes of production, no class-divided societies and no ruling classes. It would seem, then, that rather than being part of the superstructure, and hence secondary, the state is even more fundamental, more basic, than the economic base.

It is also not as easy to draw a clear line between economic and political structures as the base/superstructure dichotomy suggests. In many, if not most, societies, the state plays a direct economic role, beyond its general function of maintaining the subordination and exploitation of the lower classes. For example, in the societies in the ancient Middle East (the Tigris-Euphrates Valley) and Egypt and elsewhere, the state was directly responsible for the irrigation of farmland—maintaining the dams and waterways, calculating the seasons, predicting the onset of seasonal rains and the flooding of the river basins—and mobilizing labor to carry out these tasks (as well as to build monuments to the rulers/gods). If this isn't an economic function, what is? It was the basis for the agriculture of these societies, on which these civilizations as a whole were erected. Were these states just part of the super-structure, or were they part of the base or part of both? In Rome, the state was responsible for the recruitment, organization and maintenance of the Roman army, as well as for the construction of the roads, bridges, aqueducts, etc., all of which were necessary not only for the Roman conquests, but also for the famous Pax Romana (Roman Peace), that was the basis for the expansion and maintenance of trade (including the slave trade), throughout the Mediterranean region during this period. In some sense, then, the entire economy of the civilized world under the Roman Empire rested on this foundation. These functions were economic ones. Was the Roman state not, therefore, part of the economic base?

The question of the state under feudalism presents similar problems. In feudal societies, political authority was so fragmented that it is not clear whether there truly was a state at all, while the feudal hierarchy was so integral to the structure of society as a whole that it is difficult to distinguish between it and the rest of society. As a result, it is hard to draw a distinction between economic and political (and religious/ideological) realms, and hence, between base and superstructure, at all (leaving aside the question of the Catholic Church, which directly held up to one-third of the land).

It is only under capitalism, and laissez-faire capitalism in particular, that the base/superstructure, economic/political distinction can readily be drawn. And it is no accident that it is as only capitalism emerges as a distinct form of economy that the field of economics, initially called "political economy," itself develops; and no accident, either, that many of the representatives of the new field were advocates of laissez-faire policies. Indeed, in their theorizing about the capitalist economy and economics in general, they virtually exclude, as an a priori assumption, the state

from their purview. In other words, the early theoreticians of the economics of capitalism (and this includes Marx), conceive of the capitalist economy as an isolated phenomenon, that is, as distinct from the state.

Yet, this act of abstraction, while perhaps necessary for the development of the field and the continued elaboration of its theoretical models, is in fact an arbitrary one that distorts the reality it is intended to elucidate. Because even under capitalism, and particularly as capitalism has evolved, the state has not been independent of the economy, but has been and is heavily involved in its management and direction. Even in the United States, where state intervention has lagged relative to, say, European countries, the state is integrally involved in the entire economy: the national banking system capped by the Federal Reserve system, the regulation of the stock market and much other economic activity, federal subsidies of agricultural and other industries, the intermeshing of government and industry in arms production, the development and maintenance of the infrastructure, public education, social security and other “welfare state” programs, etc., etc. In other words, even under capitalism, the distinction between base and superstructure, particularly when it comes to the role of the state, is not nearly as clear-cut as the Marxian dichotomy suggests.

But perhaps even more problematic than this is the entire question, in Marxist theory, of the precise relationship between base and superstructure and the closely related question of social existence and consciousness. Here, we will see, once again, the ambiguous nature of so much of Marxian theory. In fact, Marxism makes two competing claims about this relationship. On the one hand, we are told that the base determines the superstructure, both its nature and its evolution. On the other hand, we are told that the superstructure has its own internal autonomy and helps determine (“reacts upon”) the development of the base. This issue has given rise to a great deal of confusion in the Marxist movement, and it is not easy to tease apart the issue. Not the least reason for this that Marx and Engels’ formulations of the question are hedged at every turn.

For example, in the passage from the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx insists: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.” This, particularly the word “determines,” is a very definite (and very bold) statement. But right before this sentence, Marx writes: “The mode of production in material life determines the *general* [my emphasis—RT] character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.” Here the word “general” undercuts the apparent precision (and the audacity) of the overall contention. Does the mode of production determine the social, political and spiritual processes of life or merely condition/influence them? Does it determine all of them or only some of them, all of them to some degree, some of them entirely, but the others not at all? And just what exactly is the “general character” of the social, political and spiritual processes of life?

That this is not just my personal reaction is revealed in the fact that Marx and Engels were never quite able to clarify what they meant, even to their own followers. Indeed, as their correspondence shows, they were frequently frustrated by how often they were “misinterpreted.” It got so bad that in reference to those whom Engels calls the “French ‘Marxists’ of the late seventies” (who apparently produced what Marx and Engels considered to be simplistic Marxist analyses), Marx used to comment: “All I know is that I am not a Marxist.” (Engels, Letter to C. Schmidt in Stuttgart, August 5, 1890, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, p. 415.)

The problem, I think, comes from the fact that Marx and Engels use the word “determines” in two different, but not clearly delineated, ways, and that they shift back and forth between them without so indicating and without, I suspect, even being aware that they are doing so. On the one hand, they use “determines” to mean “greatly influences or conditions”; on the other, they use it to mean “uniquely causes” or “is uniquely responsible for.” But these two meanings are, in fact, qualitatively different. It is one thing to say that a given force or “factor” conditions or helps, along with other forces or factors, to cause a given social event or development, even if that one factor is overwhelmingly dominant. It is another thing to claim that that one force or factor is necessarily—solely and uniquely—responsible for that event or development. I suspect that many people would agree that economic processes, taken broadly, that is, the way a given society is organized and functions socio-economically, what happens in the economy, etc., greatly influence or condition how people in that society think and act and, in so doing, shape history. Yet, very few would sign on to the notion that these socio-economic processes uniquely cause or are responsible for people’s consciousness and social evolution as a whole.

To pose all this somewhat more broadly, the ambiguity of the word “determines,” as used by Marx and Engels implies, as we mentioned above, two entirely different types of theory. To say that a given force or factor participates, along with other forces or factors, in shaping particular events reflects a theory of “contingency,” according to which the outcome of a given process is not predictable beforehand but is explainable after the fact. On the other hand, to say that a given force or factor uniquely determines specific events reflects a theory of necessity or inevitability, according to which the outcome is predictable, at least if the precise state of the antecedent conditions is known. Thus, the Marxist conception of history embraces (uncomfortably) and vacillates between a contingent theory of history and a theory of historical necessity.

The two meanings of the term “determines” reflect, I think, the fact that Marx and Engels were pulled in two different directions concerning the subject matter they were dealing with. As serious intellectuals and students of history, they knew that historical events are extraordinarily complex, that history is the outcome of a multitude of events, processes, and influences (including the consciousness of its participants), and that a unidimensional, monofactoral interpretation of history could not do justice to this complexity. At the same time, they were concerned to develop and defend a theory of history that they believed to be scientific, one that reduces history to an analog of a natural process. This ambiguity—this contradiction, to use Marxist phraseology—is the counterpart of the two variants or modes of Marxism we discussed above: Marxism as a method of investigation/interpretation versus Marxism as predictive. As interpreters of history (and contemporary developments), Marx and Engels wished to develop sophisticated analyses that did justice to the complexity of events and, consequently, encompassed a multiplicity of factors—economic, social, political, ideological. Yet, as proponents of “scientific socialism,” they wanted their theory to be predictive. This requires that one “factor” be deemed determining, so that the line of historical development is traceable.

In other words, the two types of theory served two different purposes in the Marxian worldview but were not really integrated; nor could they be. As a result, the deterministic theory seems simplistic and “mechanical” when applied to historical interpretation. If the economic base uniquely determines the superstructure, how do you explain, for example, the fact that the various Greek city states, presumably sharing the same technology, organized their economies differently and had different types of government? Or that modern capitalist societies have experienced different types of government: presidential republics, parliamentary republics, various

types of dictatorships, etc.? Or that, more arcanelly, different tribes in Papua New Guinea, sharing the same technology but each living in a deep gorge separated from the others by impassable mountains, developed completely different types of number systems? (See *What Counts*, by Brian Butterworth, The Free Press, New York, 1999.) Or that some individuals—say, workers of the same age, from the same ethnic group, with similar educations and background experiences, working in the same factory, etc., might have entirely different political outlooks? Sophisticated answers to these questions require a lot more than the claim that the base uniquely determines the superstructure, and that “social existence determines consciousness.” Obviously, the superstructure is influenced/conditioned by the base and, over any period of time, needs to be appropriate or adequate to it if a particular society is to survive, but to say that the superstructure is uniquely determined by, and reducible to the dynamics of, the base is absurd. It leads to a kind of historical reduction-ism which so many Marxists articulate and of which Marxism as a whole is often accused.

On the other hand, if history is indeed multifactoral and contingent, how can one maintain the claim to be able to base a socialist program on the projected future evolution of society? To be able to predict future social developments requires both that one facet of the social structure (for Marxism, the economic, the material base, the mode of production) be the determining element in historical evolution and that its own evolution be predictable. In the case of the socialist revolution, Marx locates the determining factor as the internal dynamics of capitalist development, the so-called “contradictions of capital,” and purports to delineate, through an analysis of these contradictions, the specific circumstances—the growth of the forces of production and the rapid technological change it entails, the expansion of the world market, the concentration and centralization of capital, the elimination of the middle class, the ever-increasing size of the industrial working class, and the supposedly concomitant development of internationalist revolutionary socialist consciousness—that point toward the socialist revolution, that make it, in a word they use so frequently, inevitable. But if history is truly multidimensional and contingent, for example, if some apparent accident of history, some autonomous phenomenon within the superstructure, can unpredictably change history’s course, how can such a projection of social trends be possible?

Marxists have engaged in various efforts to bridge the gap between these two poles of their outlook. Yet, none is successful. One is to hide behind the “dialectical” nature of the relation between base and superstructure. “Dialectical” in this sense means that two or more aspects of a given social process are, despite their apparently distinct identities, integrally connected, totally intertwined, both conflicting and mutually reinforcing and determining; indeed, they can only be distinguished analytically. But if the relationship between two aspects of a contradictory process is truly dialectical, then neither can be said to be determinant vis a vis the other. If one aspect/factor determines the other, the process is not truly dialectical.

Another way Marxists have attempted to finesse this and other contradictions in their worldview is by claiming that Marxism is simply a method. (See Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, Abacus, London, 1999.) But they never say precisely what this method consists of, nor do they distinguish it from the other aspects of Marxism. Clearly, historical materialism is more than a method; it makes very strong claims about society, history and the nature of humanity, as well as proclaiming programmatic goals. For Marxists, the alleged method actually assumes as true the other tenets/contentions of their worldview, e.g., that social existence determines consciousness, that the base determines the superstructure, etc. In other words, it assumes that Marxism as a whole



is true. But by insisting that Marxism is only a method, Marxists attempt to evade responsibility for demonstrating the truth of those other propositions.

For his part, Engels often tries to square the circle through the use of the words “ultimately” and “finally.” As in: “According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life” (emphasis in original—RT); and “amid all the endless host of accidents...the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary”; and “We make our history our-selves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive.” But who determines when this “ultimately” and “finally” actually occurs? What this comes down to is that when analyzing any given event or period of history, Marx and Engels and Marxists in general tend to concede autonomy to the non-material spheres of social life, i.e., the superstructure, and therefore to a contingent theory of history whose outcome is not determined nor determinable. But arbitrarily, that is, when it matters to them, when, for example, it is a question of analyzing the transition from one mode of production to another, and specifically, the transition from capitalism to socialism, they assert that the material/economic dynamic is “ultimately” decisive. This way they can have their cake (a sophisticated multidimensional analysis) and eat it too (maintain their claims of the predictive character of their theory and the scientific nature of their program).

The unresolved and in fact unconscious contradiction in the Marxian outlook we have been discussing is apparent in all of Marx and Engels’ attempts to explain themselves. Perhaps the most famous of these is Engels’ letter to J. Bloch, of September 21–22, 1890 (*Selected Correspondence*, as above, pp. 417–419), from which the above quotations were taken. In this letter, Engels comes close to recognizing the contradiction in the theory, but never quite gets there. He writes: “Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize the main principle vis a vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give due to the other elements involved in the interaction. But when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error was permitted.” (*Selected Correspondence*, as above, pp. 418–419.)

The problems Marxism has had in attempting to integrate certain social phenomena, such as racism/white supremacy, sexism/the patriarchy, nationalism, religion, etc., into its theory reflect this ambiguity in the Marxist conception. Are these phenomena part of the superstructure or part of the base? Can they be explained in terms of, and hence be reducible to, questions of (economic/social) class? If class and the class division of society are fundamental, why hasn’t class consciousness come to predominate among the workers, as Marxism predicts? Where is the international proletarian solidarity Marxism exalts? Why are the workers so prone to racism, sexism, national chauvinism and religious sectarianism? Why, indeed, have we not experienced the international socialist revolution and the establishment of global communism? Over the decades, many Marxists have ascribed the failure of socialist revolutions (either to occur or to be successful) to problems with the workers’ consciousness, such as their contamination with racism, sexism, nationalism and religious ideas. In such explanations, these phenomena outweigh questions of class. But if these factors are truly super-structural and hence secondary, why do they appear to be determinant? Here, as elsewhere, Marxism is caught between its desire for interpretive sophistication, what might be called its empirical scruples, and its dogma, its desire to maintain the predictive nature of its theory and the specifics (the inevitability of socialism, the proletariat

as the revolutionary class, the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat, nationalization of the means of production, etc.) of its revolutionary program.

The contradictory nature of Marxian theory can also be discerned in Marxists' attempts to explain consciousness within in any given social/historical situation (leaving aside the fact that Marx and Engels never even try to explain the precise mechanisms by which economic processes create ideas or thought in general). As we've seen, according to Marxist theory, "social existence determines consciousness." This might suggest, for example, that under capitalism, all members of capitalist society, including the working class, would have bourgeois or capitalist consciousness, since their social existence is bourgeois. Yet, Marxism simultaneously insists that the working class, at least after a certain point in capitalist development, will be revolutionary, that is, that its consciousness will be militantly anti-capitalist and socialist. Presumably, the new, revolutionary consciousness reflects new, material characteristics of capitalism, but Marx never quite says what these are. Marxists often contend that the working class becomes revolutionary when the contradictions of capitalism become greatly intensified, but intensity is a quantitative determination. Just how intense do they have to become? Marx's exposition of his theory in the preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* implies that the contradictions of capitalism will reach a qualitative point when the relations of production turn from beings forms of development of the forces of production into their fetters, but when precisely did this occur, or hasn't it yet occurred? Here, too, Marx is not specific. At times, it seems as if Marx and Engels believed that this qualitative stage in capitalist development would manifest itself as a virtually permanent state of economic crisis, but Marx's analysis of capitalism doesn't actually demonstrate the necessity or inevitability of this.

The result, it seems to me, is that for any given social class in any given society at any given state of development, different, even opposite, forms of consciousness can be explained consistently by Marxist theory. When and where the working class is revolutionary, this just reflects the working class's central position in capitalist society and the intensified contradictions of the system at that stage in its development. When and where the working class is not revolutionary, this might reflect the "hegemony" of the capitalist class (in the language of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci), or the influence of the labor aristocracy or opportunist "misleaders" of labor over the rest of the workers (as Lenin might say), or the effects of racism, sexism or national chauvinism, the role of religion or, more generally, the cultural history of the country in question. All these interpretations of the workers' consciousness are consistent with the Marxian conception of history, specifically the claim that social existence determines social consciousness. But taken together, they add up to the fact that social existence does not actually determine social consciousness after all.

This problem with Marxist theory is apparent even in Marx and Engels' broader theoretical considerations. For example, they considered Great Britain to be the model for capitalist economic development, while France to them was the epitome of political developments. But how can this be if social existence determines consciousness? The logic of the theory is that the country that is the model for capitalist economic development ought to be the model for its political development. If one refers to the concrete historical circumstances and cultural traditions, etc., that have made Great Britain a different country from France, as Marx and Engels do, one is tacitly admitting that the basic claim of the theory, that social existence determines consciousness, can't be sustained.

In sum, Marxist theory is so broad, so vague and so ambiguous that it is capable of generating entirely opposite interpretations of any given social phenomenon. All that is required is that the terminology be used correctly, that a variety of factors be considered and that the economic and social structure of society and the class struggle be accorded a central role in the analysis, in terms of which the other factors are explained. However useful a heuristic device the Marxist theory of history may be, scientific it is not.

## A Summary of Points

Let's summarize some of the points I've made about the Marxian theory of history and draw some other conclusions about the theory as a whole.

First, the Marxist theory of history, despite superficial appearances, is extremely imprecise, the opposite of a scientific theory.

Second, despite its claims to represent a unified outlook, it straddles two different standpoints that are philosophically distinct, even opposed—an interpretive, contingent one; and a predictive, deterministic one—between which Marxists shift when applying or defending their outlook.

Third, the theory is an abstract construct that does not stand up to factual scrutiny. Definitions and categories are stretched and fudged depending upon what is analyzed, while those facts that cannot be crammed into the theory are ignored. Plausible claims (that economic factors affects consciousness and are influential in historical processes) are stretched and “absolutized” into contentions (that social existence uniquely determines consciousness) that are not, and cannot be, substantiated. As I have argued in other articles, the theory is in fact idealist, without identifying itself as such or even being aware of it. Despite its claims to be materialist, it really argues that the fundamental, meaningful and determining facets of history are its own definitions and categories, along with the “laws of motion” that these definitions and categories, when set in motion according to the precepts of the theory, create. Even the factors it believes to be material are abstractions, that is, idealist categories: labor, the forces and relations of production, etc.

Fourth, as I have suggested, the definitions, categories and various tenets of the theory make most sense, and most accurately fit the facts, when applied to the capitalist society of Marx and Engels' day: the definition of class, the centrality of the class struggle, the distinction between the economic and the political/ideological realms, the apparent determining role of the economic, the growth of the forces of production (technology on the one hand and the working class on the other) as underlying propulsive dynamic of society. What this suggests (and this tends to be confirmed when looking at some of Marx's early writings, particularly the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, is that the theory was developed by analyzing what Marxists call the transition from feudalism to capitalism and then generalizing forward (to the predicted transition from capitalism to socialism), and back-ward (to the entire history of humanity). In the Manuscripts, Marx explains that the internal logic of the concept of private property leads, when elaborated, to the development of all the categories of political economy, that is, the structure and internal dynamics of capitalism. If we change the concept of “private property” to the concept of “labor” and project the theory backward (into the past) and forward (into the future), we get the Marxist theory in a nutshell. Marx's conception then, interpreted in terms of itself but in contradiction to its other claims, represents the standpoint of competitive capitalism, the system in which it was developed. The theory is, by this judgment, bourgeois rather than proletarian.

Fifth, the Marxist conception of history is Eurocentric. History is described as if it were simply the “history of Western Civilization,” a teleological conception in which the direction, goal and purpose of history is the emergence and flowering of Western European—and its offshoot, North American—society. Everything that can be is explained in terms of this development, while everything that cannot is discarded as not meaningful (non-historic) or ignored altogether. Most of us have heard all this before, in our high school and college history classes. Although Marx and Engels claimed to have transcended the historical outlook of the Western Europe and North American bourgeoisie, their theory is merely another version of the same thing, only with the claim that the bourgeoisie and its economic system, capital-ism, will themselves be transcended. For Marxism, the proletariat and socialism are really the fruition, the true culmination, of Western Civilization.

## Marx and Hegel

Beyond reflecting this general, almost classical, West European standpoint, Marx and Engels’ historical conception, like much else in the Marxian worldview, is directly indebted to that of Hegel. (See *The Philosophy of History*, Dover Publications, New York, 1956) Hegel saw history as representing the development of human consciousness toward freedom, a spiritual state in which human beings recognize themselves and each other as being embodiments of the mind/spirit of God, the Absolute. This evolution goes through distinct stages, which are represented by distinct forms of society. Each type of society embodies a characteristic ethos, or ethnic/cultural worldview or “spirit,” which in turn contains internal contradictions that impel it to evolve and, except for the last stage, to transcend itself. Meanwhile, the actual agents of history are so-called “world historic” individuals, such as Alexander the Great, Napoleon, etc., who embody the specific cultural ethos of their societies. In Hegel’s schema, there are three stages in this evolution, each stage representing a different conception of freedom. In the first of these, embodied in the societies of what Hegel called the East—the societies of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, Persia and Egypt—only one man is free: the king, presumed to be or to represent God. In the second, embodied by the Athenian and Roman republics, some men are free. In the third and final stage, represented by the Prussian monarchy of Hegel’s day, or at least as he thought or hoped it would evolve, all men are free. For Hegel, this society was a dialectical combination of unity and plurality. It was a kind of corporate state structure, with an internal differentiation of classes and sectors, dialectically pursuing both their self-interest and that of the nation as a whole, that reflected the unity-in-difference/difference-in-unity that characterizes Hegel’s idea of freedom and the Absolute (God) itself. (*Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1967.) In Hegel’s conception, not only do we see an upward progression, essentially, from slavery to freedom, through a dialectical process, we also see that the political (or material) form of each society reflects the particular notion of freedom on which it is based. Not least, we can also discern the implication that only the history of some societies, those encompassed in this schema, is philosophically significant. The others fall outside the scope of “real” history.

Here we can clearly see how much Marx and Engels’ conception owes to Hegel’s. History goes through distinct stages, these stages occur in an order of ascending progress, this evolution occurs through a dialectical process, and the outcome of this evolution is human freedom. Moreover, as in Hegel’s conception, this evolution traverses a series of distinct levels of freedom, in which the

material (for Hegel, political; for Marx, economic) and the spiritual forms correspond. But unlike the avowedly idealist construct of Hegel, in which each stage embodies an ever broader idea of freedom and corresponding political structure, for Marx and Engels, each type of society (mode of production) is based upon a distinct form of labor, which (aside from primitive communism), represents a stage in labor's progressive emancipation. Thus, we first have slave-labor, in which human beings are fully bound to the means of production and are seen as being part of the means of production; then serf labor, in which the laborers are partially tied to the means of production, the land, and are therefore partly free; then capitalist labor relations, under which the workers are juridically free and totally divorced from the means of production, but still subordinated to them, then; finally, the socialist mode of production, under which the laborers are fully and truly free; as a freely associating, self-consciously cooperating group, they dominate and control the means of production themselves. Not least, the Marxist conception of history embodies the same Eurocentric outlook as Hegel's. The history that matters, the only history that is truly significant, is the history that is encompassed in the Marxian schema: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism. Everything that falls outside its scope is dismissed as meaningless and ultimately irrelevant.

This latter thesis was given concrete form in a series of articles by Engels, written during the revolutions of 1848. In these pieces, whose purpose was to explain why the south Slavic peoples, the peoples of the Balkans, i.e., Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Albanians etc., played what he considered to be a reactionary role in the events of 1848–49, and to argue against their demands for national rights and independence, Engels referred to these ethnic groups as “non-historic.” (For a fuller discussion of this, see Roman Rosdolsky, *Engels and the “Non-historic” Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848*, Critique Books, Glasgow, 1986.) In other words, they were outside the main (and meaningful) course of human history, and their history (and political demands), didn't matter. Elsewhere, Marx, for similar reasons, referred to these people as “ethnic trash.”

As I see it (and as I've discussed in previous articles), Marxism is a type or variant of Hegelianism. To both Hegel and Marx, history, at bottom, is a logical process that leads, via a series of contradictions, through various stages to human freedom. Where Hegel saw this as occurring through the dialectical development of human consciousness toward its recognition that all human beings, indeed, all reality, are manifestations of the mind or spirit of God, Marx sees it as occurring through the dialectical evolution of human labor and its dialectical interaction with human consciousness (as in the contradictions between base and superstructure), toward a fully cooperative society, in which humanity comes to control both the products of its labor and its own destiny, and in which all human beings recognize and treat each other as brothers/sisters. In both theories, history is progressive: it has a meaning, a direction and a goal; it occurs dialectically and through defined stages. Moreover, the goal/out-come of history is present, although implicitly, at the beginning, as the underlying logic of a fundamental principle or category: for Hegel, human consciousness; for Marx, labor. In both theories, humanity has an essence, a kind of philosophical substance, whose trajectory underlies and defines history. For Hegel, this essence is consciousness or spirit (itself a piece or manifestation of the mind or spirit of God), which creates the material conditions of our lives and history. For Marx, the essence of humanity is labor, which gives rise to consciousness. But the apparent opposition between Marx and Hegel on this point is more apparent than real, because the Marxian essence, labor, is just as much a category of thought, an abstraction, as consciousness. It just seems to be, or can be claimed to be, material.

For Marx, labor is a logical category, almost a metaphor, that has a life of its own. This is Idealism. It may not be a self-conscious form of idealism, and its central category may seem, in contrast to explicit forms of idealism, relatively poverty stricken, that is, lacking internal differentiation (despite Marx's efforts), but it is idealism none the less.

As I discussed earlier, Marxism's claims that its theory of history is materialist were meant to give the theory scientific credentials, to eliminate socialism's utopian character, to make it more than an abstract moral appeal for social justice. Hegel also considered his philosophy to be scientific, but he meant it more in the sense of true, logically consistent and complete, rather than in the sense of conforming to the natural sciences, which he saw as mechanical, one-sided, and lacking in self-awareness. But Marx and Engels were anxious to develop a theory that was scientific in the sense of being analogous to the natural sciences, a quest that was stimulated by Darwin's theory of evolution. Since they considered the natural sciences to be materialist, they attempted to develop a materialist theory of socialism, which in turn required materialist theories of history and capitalism, etc. Hence their attempt to meld together, as they often admitted, French socialism, British political economy, and Hegelian philosophy, under the philosophical banner of materialism. Despite their efforts, their conception remained merely a restatement, in materialist terms, of Hegelian philosophy.

Of course, where Marxism is different from Hegelianism, where its claim to be materialist expresses itself most palpably, is in its insistence that social reality be radically transformed, that a totally just and liberated society—the true kingdom of Heaven on Earth—actually be established on Earth. For Hegel, freedom is only partially realizable in social/material terms; to him, true freedom is a spiritual state. For Marx, freedom was to be fully achievable in material reality. This, I believe, is to Marxism's credit. But while Marxism gains something in its attempt to restate Hegelian philosophy in materialist terms, it also loses something.

To see this, it is necessary to recognize that Hegelian philosophy is, at its core, a philosophical restatement of Christianity. Hegel saw his philosophy as the truth of the Christian outlook, an exposition/explanation of Christianity in its true, philosophical, form. To him, Christianity, as a theology and an organized religion, is merely a metaphorical or picturesque representation, designed to appeal to ordinary people, of a deeper philosophical truth, of which his philosophy is the true rendition. The Holy Trinity, to Hegel, is a metaphor for the fundamental triadic structure of the cosmos, conceived meta-physically: subject, object and the unity of the two that simultaneously preserves the distinction between them; Creator, created and their dialectical unity-in-difference/difference-in-unity. The Absolute, which, as self-consciousness, requires another consciousness, creates the Other, which then comes to recognize itself as one with the Absolute. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. In this light, human history represents the Cosmic Spirit or Mind reemerging through the development of human consciousness to recognize spirit/mind in the universe and itself as a part of that spirit/mind. The telos or goal of history is thus this developing self-recognition of spirit or the cosmic consciousness. This is why Hegel's philosophy, both its method and its content, takes a triadic form, and it is why, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel places Christianity at the apex of religious development, as "Consummate Religion."

Yet, something is lost in Hegel's version of Christianity. This is much of its emotional content: God/Jesus as love. Hegel, as a philosopher (and as a certain type of individual), celebrated thinking, and especially philosophical speculation, as the highest form of existence. As a result, his philosophy has a highly cerebral character. Although Hegel talks about love, it is quite clear that

he considers love, as an emotion and hence pre-reflective, to be inferior to consciousness. This is why, for Hegel, philosophy, which is an act and a reflection of consciousness, is for an elite, while religion, picturesque and emotional as it is, is for ordinary people, the masses. Despite this denigration of love (and the emotions in general), love remains as an element, albeit very subdued, almost repressed, in Hegel's philosophy.

But in Marxism, this love or spiritual content is virtually eliminated, banished, and exchanged for the soullessness of a would-be materialism. The underlying philosophy remains idealist, since, at bottom, labor functions as a category or concept whose development in a (dialectically) logical manner underlies and determines human history. Yet, the idealism is denied and the spiritual content—clearly present, although in attenuated form, in its Hegelian progenitor—is repressed even further. This is not to deny that Marxism has emotional content, that it is inspired by concern for, or even love of, humanity. But in Marxism, this emotional content coexists very uneasily with its insistence on its scientific character. As would-be materialists, Marxists are vehement in their denial that fundamental reality is spiritual or has a soul. To them, “soul” or “spirit” (words with which, as atheists, they are very uncomfortable) are primitive and picturesque substitutions for “consciousness,” which itself is secondary phenomenon, a reflection of the real stuff of the universe, matter. Marxism thus is a kind of soulless idealism. Despite its materialist pretensions, its fundamental reality is made of up abstract categories—labor, social classes, modes of production, laws of motion, etc. But these categories are without spirit, blind and pitiless. This combination of idealism and soullessness is one of the reasons, I think, why Marxism tends to think about and be concerned with humanity in the abstract, as Humanity, rather than with human beings in the concrete, why social classes are seen as more fundamental than specific human beings, and why individuals have been treated as so expendable (literally) by Marxist practitioners, especially when they do not belong to the right class or have the appropriate consciousness (that is, the “correct” politics). It is this unconscious idealism that makes Marxism and Marxists so uncomfortable with the concreteness, the “grittiness” of history. Like Hegelianism, Marxism seeks to unify the concrete phenomena of history (the uniqueness of specific events, the quiriness of individual personalities), with the noumena of its supposedly underlying laws, logic and hence meaning. But despite Hegel and Marx and their respective dialectics, this can't be done. The result, for both Marxism and Hegel, is to subordinate the concrete, the unique, the individual, to the lawfulness and the logic. The laws and logic of history become more important than the events; the categories of theory become more important than the phenomena they are meant to explain. Marxism and Hegelianism are thus both reductionist; they seek to reduce the concreteness of reality to the smooth, logical and ultimately comfortable laws of history.

## **Marxist Messianism**

As this discussion suggests, Hegelianism and Marxism are expressions, in somewhat different forms, of the Judeo-Christian view of history and outlook on the world. In this worldview, in contrast to others, such as many of those from the East, history has a beginning, an end or goal toward which it is heading, and therefore a meaning. If anything, Hegelianism, with its spiritual, other-worldly content, its insistence on the supremacy of thought and its belief that true reconciliation/unity with God occurs in spirit, is the more Christian variant (at least as Christianity has come down to us, rather than in what may have been its original, and probably

more revolutionary, version). For its part, Marxism, with its materialist claims and this-worldly character, its stress on the supremacy of matter and its insistence that the transformation required by the goal of history actually occur in reality, not just in thought, is the more Judaic.

More specifically, Marxism, as others have suggested, is a statement, in modern, secular terms, of the Messianic vision of Judaism, with the proletariat as the Messiah, the fully human (although anointed by God), savior of the Jews and all humanity, and with Marx and, by extension, the Marxists, as the prophets of the coming apocalypse. Marxism's emergence reflects the secularization of the modern world, brought about by, among other things, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions and the development of modern capitalist society, which called into question the tenets of the historic religions of the West. Despite this secularization, which affected intellectuals more than others, the basic Judeo-Christian outlook remained, and still remains, as a kind of "deep" structure, a sort of primordial collective consciousness, of modern culture and psychology. The effects of two thousand years of history do not disappear overnight. Thus, most people find it hard to exist in a world that has no meaning. They need to believe that humanity and our history are significant, that we and our story are not just minuscule accidents in a vast cosmos that is indifferent to us. This includes intellectuals, many of whom find the dogmas and mythologies of traditional religion quaint, somewhat embarrassing and in conflict with science. So, filling the need for certainty in an increasingly secular world were radical ideologies that preserved the broad, underlying assumptions of the Judeo-Christian outlook, while recasting them in modern, purportedly scientific terms. Marxism is one of these.

One of the things that remained of the old religions, but without the humility that is at least taught as required of created beings, is the sense of certainty that so often accompanies dogmatic beliefs: we are right and everybody else is wrong. This sense of certainty is very apparent in (indeed, is an almost defining characteristic of), the Marxist movement. Marx and Engels engaged in the most strident polemics with all those who dared take issue with them, and this practice has continued throughout the history of Marxism. Opponents are denounced in the most vicious terms. To Lenin, let alone Stalin, political opponents, even (or especially) within the Marxist movement, represented the "class enemy," non-proletarian, pro-capitalist elements infecting the working class and subverting its movement, and therefore worthy of destruction. And where Marxists have held state power, they've used the coercive instruments of the state to their utmost to effect this; virtually all opponents are jailed, sent to labor camps or "liquidated." Although Marx insisted that his personal motto was "Doubt everything," this doubt does not actually exist within, that is, truly internal to, the Marxian worldview; it remains private, as a drive to continually prove the validity of Marxism, where it exists at all. Marxism has an almost Kabbalistic character, in the sense of being a kind of esoteric knowledge that unlocks the secrets of the cosmos, which only a few, the true elect, are able to understand. Most Marxists secretly enjoy this sense of superiority, even when they themselves have not read, let alone mastered, the crucial texts. I suspect that not many members of the Communist Parties of the 1930s and 40s actually read *Capital*, let alone understood it. But even those who didn't knew that it was true.

This belief that they hold the key to the mysteries of the uni-verse, the answer to all the philosophical questions that have bothered humans from the beginning of our existence, gives Marxists a tremendous arrogance and often results in unbridled fanaticism. It was such fanaticism that characterized the ethos of the Bolshevik Party and led, via the establishment of a massive, all-powerful state, to the unspeakable atrocities of Stalinism, which so many well-intentioned



Marxists supported, excused and justified, and to the decades of repression and violence that have always been the products of Communist regimes, down to Castro's Cuba today.

This sense of certainty often leads Marxists to adopt a Messianic self-conception, especially when it becomes clear that the proletariat does not respond as Marxist theory predicts. When the workers are not revolutionary, or when they do not specifically embrace Marxist policies, Marxists denounce them as being infected with petty bourgeois ideas, or even, as Lenin did when faced with the revolt of the sailors of Kronstadt and the general strike of the workers of Petrograd in early 1921, as not really being proletarians at all. From being prophets of the coming proletarian Messiah, Marxists take on the Messianic role themselves. As carriers of the Kabbalistic mysteries, they become the saviors of humanity. This substitutionalism, in which Marxists think and act in the supposed interests and name of the proletariat, emerges, as almost a logical implication of Marxist theory itself, under circumstances in which key Marxist prognostications (that the proletariat will be revolutionary), are not borne out.

In contrast to what Marxists believe, Marxism does not represent the true consciousness of the working class. Most workers, like most people in society, are not ideologists; they do not think in consistently ideological terms. Ideologies are primarily diseases of intellectuals. Marxism as a worldview is an outlook of sections of the radical (mostly middle-class) intelligentsia, alienated from contemporary society, angry at its injustices, and frustrated by their own powerlessness. Without property and without power to influence the world, they identify themselves with the proletariat, (or at least Marxism's image of it), which is also without property and power. Longing to escape this condition, they embrace a theory that ascribes the future and the power to create it to the proletariat and, by extension, to themselves as representatives of the proletariat and as embodiments of its "true" consciousness. Marxism is therefore not the worldview, the supposed true consciousness, of the working class. It is the worldview of intellectuals who wish to reorganize society along what they consider to be more rational, and more just, lines; who hope, in fact, that they or people like them, might rule society in the name of reason and social justice, and who see in the proletariat or some other large social class the vehicle through which they might achieve this goal.

This character of Marxism explains why so many Marxists are not truly committed to democracy. To Marxists, democracy has more of an instrumental than a substantive value. Despite their protestations, they generally value democracy only insofar as it facilitates their activity, their ability to fight for their program. When they or other Marxists with whom they agree seize control of the state, democracy no longer matters; once they, who have the "correct" politics and are the "good" people, are in power, democracy can only be a vehicle for counterrevolution. Yet, here, too, Marxists delude themselves. They believe that they are the true democrats and define their own rule as inherently, intrinsically democratic. "When you have the substance of democracy" (meaning their own rule), their argument usually goes, "the forms are unnecessary." It is for this reason that the brutal, dictatorial nature of self-proclaimed socialist regimes has never prevented Marxists from supporting them. Beneath the rhetoric, Marxists really don't believe the majority of people, at least as presently constituted, are able to run their own lives and govern society. (If they were, they would all be Marxists and wouldn't be duped by capitalist propaganda.) Instead, they need a political and moral elite, in possession of the true nature of society, history and the universe, to make those decisions for them, at least until after a long transitional period during which they are taught (by that elite) how to do so.

The elitist nature of Marxism is occasionally clearly expressed in the writings of Marxists themselves. In his book, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981, 1990), a rather desperate attempt to save Marxism by jettisoning a great deal of it, Stanley Aronowitz is much concerned with what he calls the question of “agency,” in other words, who (what social class or group), is to carry out the socialist transformation of society. Specifically, Aronowitz believes that Marx was wrong to “privilege” the working class as the agent of the socialist revolution. To me, Aronowitz’s very language (his use of the term “agency”) inadvertently reveals what Marxism really is. It is the outlook of certain radical intellectuals, painfully aware of their own powerlessness, looking for some social grouping that possesses the requisite muscle (an “agency”) to implement their worldview.

Of course, this characteristic of Marxism is fundamental to all forms of utopian thought, including anarchism. They all represent the consciousness—the projected hopes, visions and dreams—of socially powerless intellectuals. This is why all utopian ideas contain the potential for totalitarianism, the drive to impose a social schema on recalcitrant individuals. But Marxism is particularly dangerous form of utopianism, for several reasons. One is its self-deluded character: it denies that it is utopian at all. Marxism, Marxists insist, is scientific, and therefore true. The socialist revolution has been scientifically predicted and ordained. Marxism and Marxists represent History. Like the religious utopians that preceded them in history, although without realizing it, Marxists believe that they are doing God’s will. Ironically, they who think they have access to the truth, as opposed to those who suffer from “false” consciousness, are the most deluded. To put it in Marxist terms, they become the victims of the fetishism of theory.

Another reason why Marxism is so dangerous is its commitment to the use of the state (indeed, a state whose power has been exponentially expanded by its nationalization of the means of production and its monopolization of the means of the exchange of ideas), and its virtually unlimited capacity for violence and coercion, to realize its vision. Yet, here, too, Marxists are taken in by their own theory: they believe that the state they aim to use to transform society, the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, is not really a state (it is no longer a state “in the proper sense of the term”) and is destined, moreover, to wither away. But the dictatorship of the proletariat is a myth and a contradiction in terms. Where society is truly, radically democratic, where the vast majority of people actually do govern themselves, there will be no state. And where there is a state, whatever it may be called, society is not governed by its members. Communist regimes are not, and never have been, proletarian dictatorships. They are, and have always been, dictatorships of tiny elites claiming to rule in the name of the proletariat. And Marxists’ belief that their rule represents that of the proletariat, and therefore the interests of all humanity, and the specific nature of the regimes that Marxism mandates that they establish—characterized by the nationalization of property and the repression of all opponents as inherently bourgeois and counterrevolutionary—virtually guarantees that such dictatorships will be totalitarian and brutal.

Yet a third reason for Marxism’s perilous character is its radical opposition to all forms of traditional morality. Although Marxism is extremely moralistic, its worldview studded with good and evil (individuals, classes, social systems and ideologies), and is itself rooted in the Judeo-Christian worldview, its insistence on its scientific character forces it to deny or repress this aspect of its outlook and to denounce traditional morality as an illusion and as a tool of ruling classes (like religion as a whole). To Marxists, true morality is the historic process itself, as they understand it. The moral thing to do is to further that process. If that means the liquidation of entire social classes, as the historic process ordains, then the moral thing to do is to encourage that outcome, however

difficult that might be to one's conscience (a hangover from one's upbringing under-capitalism). Engels himself said it (quoting Hegel): "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." As a result, the demands of traditional morality go out the window, or, to put it more technically, are subsumed under the exigencies of the laws of history. As many have charged, Marxism does insist that the end justifies the means. But for many who make this accusation, this is hypocritical. In fact, most people in the political world, and particularly those at the head of governments or with other access to powers of coercion, believe that the end does justify the means and act accordingly. But they are usually constrained by their own public commitment to traditional morality, by their own limited power, and by the relatively limited nature of their goals. What makes Marxism different is that: (1) it militantly repudiates traditional morality; (2) it advocates the establishment of a state whose power is virtually unlimited; and (3) for it, the stakes are always set at the highest level. The goal of Marxism is to save humanity. Where this is the issue, what weight can a few lies, the repression of dissent and the jailing of some recalcitrant (undoubtedly petty-bourgeois) individuals, or even the killing of a few million people really have. These things become, as some Marxists have described them, mere "bureaucratic excesses" or "distortions," unfortunate "birth pangs" in the emergence of the future communist society.

## **The Necessity of Utopia**

The totalitarian potential of utopianism does not mean we should eschew all utopian thought. In fact, utopias are necessary, as visions and goals toward which we would like society to develop, and as guides for our day-to-day activity and behavior. Without utopias, we would have nothing but tepid liberalism, which accepts the brutal realities of capitalism, wishing only to ameliorate its most egregious aspects (and even liberalism is guided by a utopian vision, however attenuated it may be), or, even worse, conservatism, which objects to much of the achievements in material progress and the growth of civil liberties that have been made. But we must be aware of the dangers of utopian thinking, particularly the tendency to wish to impose utopian schemes on individuals who do not accept them. As an essential part of this, we vehemently reject the use of the state and other vehicles of mass coercion as instruments to promote our desired goals. We should aim to lead primarily by example, not by coercion or deception.

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The Dialectics of Ambiguity  
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